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A Journey Down the Rabbit Hole of the OED in Search of the Meaning of “Master” Elrond

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Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to Nicholas Birns, Jenny Curtis, and Andrew Peterson, for the helpful discussions.

In *The Lord of the Rings* we read about *Lady Galadriel*, *Lord Celeborn*, the *Elven-king Gil-galad*, and *Master Elrond*. Despite what our ears hear in Peter Jackson's film adaptations, in the novel Elrond is either directly called or referred to as *Master Elrond* by Glóin, Bilbo, Boromir, Gandalf, Pippin, Gilraen, Aragorn, and the narrator, among others. In fact, he is not referred to as "Lord Elrond" in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or *The Silmarillion*.

While the designation "Master" Elrond seemed a minor slight to my teenage mind when I first read Tolkien's works in the 1970s, as a seasoned student of Tolkien's imaginary world I find it difficult to consider Elrond as somehow inferior to the rulers of Lórien, given his pedigree and life experience. Not only is he the son of Eärendil the Evening Star but was also the trusted lieutenant of Gil-galad for 1600 years (to whom said king entrusted Vilya, one of the Elven Rings of Power). His realm of Imladris (Rivendell) withstood the forces of Sauron in the Second Age (and the Third), succeeding where Eglarest, Nargothrond, and Gondolin had failed. Why, then, is he termed the "Lord of Rivendell" only once, in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1994, 221)? While not as ancient as either Círdan or Galadriel, he carried the blood of the Maia Melian, through her daughter Lúthien. Indeed, not only does the blood of the three kinds of the Eldar flow through his veins, but that of the three great houses of humans (as the genealogy trees included in *The Silmarillion* make perfectly clear to even the most casual reader). Elrond is the thread that ties together all three of the great tales of the *legendarium*: Beren and Lúthien, the Fall of Gondolin, and the Children of Húrin¹. So central is Elrond to the history of Middle-earth that Tolkien notes that "the *Fourth Age* was not held to have begun until Master Elrond departed" Middle-earth (*Ibid.*, 1057). Why, then, was he merely "Elrond," "Master" Elrond, or "Elrond the Half-elven"²?

Like any Tolkien scholar, I learned fairly early in my studies of the Professor's works that this philologist selected his terminology with excruciating care. While one might be tempted to excuse curious wording (like problematic phases of the moon) in *The Hobbit* as an idiosyncrasy of a mere children's tale that initially had meager connections to the *legendarium*, the choice of appellations in *The Lord of the Rings* and post *LOTR* revisions to the *legendarium*³ are certainly intentional. It is important to remember that it is the appearance of Elrond himself — described by Tolkien in a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman as "an important character, though his reverence, high powers, and lineage are toned down and not revealed in full" — and his identification of the troll hoard swords as coming from Gondolin that provide the undeniable link between Bilbo's journey and the greater *legendarium* (Tolkien 2000, 158; Rateliff 2007, 121-2).⁴ While one could (correctly) argue that honorific titles to describe the Elves are largely absent from *The Silmarillion* (with the exception of the revolving door that is the office of the High-king of the Noldor in the

¹ In "The Sketch of the Mythology" Tolkien notes of Elrond "Through him the blood of Húrin (his great-uncle) and of the Elves is yet among Men" (Tolkien 1986, 38). Christopher Tolkien points out that Húrin is actually Elrond's great-grand-uncle (Tolkien 1986, 39).

² Tolkien is inconsistent in the precise form of this epithet, as one can find Elrond Halfelven, Elrond Half-elven, Elrond Half-elfin, with and without the word "the" between his name and the designator.

³ In *The War of the Jewels* and *The Peoples of Middle-earth* Elrond's only titles are Elrond the Half-elven, Master Elrond and Elrond son of Eärendil. Most often he is simply referred to as Elrond.

⁴ Curiously, in a 1964 letter to Christopher Bretherton, Tolkien calls this connection to the mythology "a fortunate accident due to the difficulty of constantly inventing good names for new characters" (2000, 346). Given the philological pains the names of Elrond, his brother Elros, and mother Elwing, apparently caused Tolkien (as noted in the late essay "The Problem of Ros," published in *The Peoples of Middle-earth*), I view this comment with some suspicion.

First Age), the fact that the rather un-Elvish sounding term “Master” is included makes it all-the-more curious.

In the name of scholarship, I decided to check my defensiveness concerning my favorite Elf Lord at the door, and do what any reputable Tolkien scholar would do – delve into the philology. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the noun “master” (Old English forms including *mægster* and *magister*) has a complex origin. The Latin etymology comes from *magistr*, which was “reinforced in Middle English by Anglo-Norman ... and Old French *maistre*” (“master, n.1 and adj.” 2019). The *OED* notes four main usages, to describe (1) “a person or thing having control or authority”; (2) “a teacher; a person qualified to teach”; (3) “a title or rank or compliment”; and (4) “a specific title of office,” including Master of Ceremonies and Master of the Mint, for example (“master, n.1 and adj.” 2019). While important examples of the last of these do occur in Middle-earth (for example, the Master of Laketown and the Master of Buckland), there is no connection with Elrond that I can see.

There are also two rather problematic uses of the term “master” in *The Lord of the Rings* that do not easily fit the remaining tripartite classification, the first being the rather unhealthy relationship between Frodo and Gollum, which I will not consider here. The second is the use of the term as applied to Tom Bombadil, a character so singular that achieving an unambiguous analysis of his true nature has not only eluded the Tolkien scholarly community, but perhaps even the Professor himself (Tolkien 2000, 192). Goldberry describes Tom as the “Master of wood, water, and hill” but rebukes Frodo’s assumption that the land therefore “belongs to him.” In her words, that responsibility “would indeed be a burden” (Tolkien 1994, 122). Instead, Tom is somehow the “Master” because no one has ever “caught old Tom walking in the forest, wading in the water, leaping on the hill-tops under light and shadow. He has no fear” (*Ibid.*).

At first glance, the remaining three categories can be (perhaps over simplistically) described as titles based on power, knowledge, and respect. The first includes, among other subcategories⁵, leaders/rulers of humans, owners of animals, captains of ships, and “the male head of a house or household” (“master, n.1 and adj.” 2019). While Celegorm as the master of the hound Huan and Sam as the master of Bill the pony are certainly important examples of animal masters in the *legendarium* (among many others, of course), Elrond is not connected with any particular animals. Similarly, while there are references to the Númenóreans as the masters of ships (and Elrond’s father, Eärendil, was perhaps the most famous mariner in all of Middle-earth), Elrond’s feet were planted firmly on terra firma until the end of the Third Age.

The title “lord” is apparently Tolkien’s preferred term to describe the leader of an Elvish realm (for example Finrod, lord of Nargothrond) as well as the great human houses (such as Bregolas lord of the house of Bëor). The term is also rather loosely tossed around to describe leaders of all ranks, including Faramir, Denethor, Aragorn, and Elfstone (remember him?). Then there is the Dark Lord, Sauron. “Master” is certainly applied to leaders and rulers of human(oids) in Middle-earth, but often with palpably negative connotations. For example, the term “master” is frequently applied to Melkor and Sauron throughout the *legendarium* (in reference to their thralls, including orcs, Ring Wraiths, and evil men).

Less ominous are descriptions of the Valar as the masters of various aspects of Arda, for example, Irmo as “the master of visions and dreams” (Tolkien 2001, 28). Indeed, Tolkien is clear to note that the Valar are to Elves and humans “rather their elders and their chieftains than their masters” (Tolkien 2001, 41). A distinction is likewise made between Fëanor, who was “masterful”

⁵ The possibility that the sadomasochistic usage of the term applies to Elrond will be left to the imagination of fan fiction writers.

(Tolkien 2001, 64) — according to the *OED* meaning “having a master’s character or disposition... imperious, willful, overbearing” (“masterful, adj.” 2019) — and his wife Nerdanel, who was “more patient than Fëanor, desiring to understand minds rather than to master them” (Tolkien 2001, 64).⁶ It is telling that just before swearing his “terrible oath” and damning his family (and many of the other Noldor) to misery and exile, Fëanor proclaims that once he has wrested the silmarils from Melkor “we and we alone shall be lords of the unsullied Light, and masters of the bliss and beauty of Arda. No other race shall oust us!” (Tolkien 2001, 83). Similarly, Frodo explains to Faramir that Gollum is “allured here by a mastering desire, stronger than his caution,” namely his desire for the ring (Tolkien 1994, 670).

As Tolkien explained in a 1951 letter, “‘power’ is an ominous and sinister word in all these tales, except as applied to the gods” (2000, 152). Likewise, in a 1956 letter draft he noted that *The Lord of the Rings* is “not an allegory of Atomic power, but of *Power* (exerted for Domination)” (2000, 246). Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in a 1930s name-list that gives the etymology of Morgoth as “formed from his Orc-name *Goth* ‘Lord or Master’ with *mor* ‘dark or black’” (Tolkien, *BOLT II*, 1984 67). Likewise, in “Akallabêth” the beginning of the downfall of the Númenóreans is signified by their returning to the western lands of Middle-earth “rather as lords and masters and gatherers of tribute than helpers and teachers” (Tolkien 2001, 267).

There are also false pronouncements of mastery, the most important being, of course, Nienor’s horrified and ironic realization concerning her brother/lover Túrin Turambar — “Master of Doom” — upon learning the truth of her identity: “master of doom by doom mastered!” (Tolkien 2001, 223). And then there is the One Ring, presumed mastery of which guarantees one a first-class ticket to self-destruction (ironically even for its supposed true Master, given the fact that his physical destruction was ultimately tied to the Ring’s). Certainly none of these ominous uses of “master” (tied to the use of power to dominate) fit the wise and kindly founder of Imladris.⁷

Perhaps it is in his role as the head of a household that Elrond is most commonly thought of as a “master.” It is said of “Last Homely House west of the Mountains” in the “fair valley of Rivendell” that Elrond was the “master of the house” (Tolkien 2007, 44; 48). Similarly, the dwarves thanked Beorn for his hospitality, calling him the “master of the wide wooden halls” (Tolkien 2007, 124). Gandalf makes a point of telling Frodo that he has become the “master of Bag End” after the long-expected party (Tolkien 1994, 36), while Goldberry also refers to her husband Tom Bombadil as the “Master of the house” (Tolkien 1994, 122). These designations appear to be simply domestic in nature and require no further discussion, although certainly do little to bolster Elrond’s heritage as an Elf-lord of importance.⁸

Returning to our tripartite classification we find that the appellation “master” is used out of respect (in place of the word “mister”) by numerous characters, from Butterbur addressing the hobbits in Bree to Faramir consistently referring to Sam as Master Samwise. Of course, Sam’s constant use of “Master Frodo” encompasses respect, affection, and cognizance of a difference in social status, and could be the subject of an essay of its own (but certainly not by this author). The

⁶ Similarly, Gandalf describes Boromir as “masterful” to his father, explaining that he was “one to take what he desired” (Tolkien 1994, 738).

⁷ Elrond’s one obvious exhibition of physical power (outside of the battle-field) was defensive rather than offensive. As Gandalf explains to Frodo, the Bruinen “is under his [Elrond’s] power, and it will rise in anger when he has great need to bar the Ford” (Tolkien 1994, 218).

⁸ As Jenny Curtis pointed out to me, it is interesting that Bombadil and Beorn are largely unpolitical characters, and she suggested that the use of “Master” rather than “Lord” for Elrond may reflect a similar neutrality. However, upon further reflection, I find it difficult to consider Elrond a neutral party in Middle-earth politics, given his central role in protecting the Heirs of Elendil (who are, admittedly, his kin), leading to Aragorn’s eventual ascension to the throne.

term “master” is often used by the members of the Fellowship towards each other, occasionally with a hint of playfulness. For example, after escaping from the Uruk-hai, Merry and Pippin refer to each other as “Master Took” and “Master Brandybuck” (Tolkien 1994, 448). During the orc-killing contest between Gimli and Legolas at Helm’s Deep, Gimli notes “Now my count passes Master Legolas again” (Tolkien 1994, 523). In contrast, the term is also sometimes used sarcastically, with feigned or tempered respect, for example in the initial exchange between Gimli and Éomer, “horse-master” and “Master Dwarf” respectively (Tolkien 1994, 422), or Wormtongue referring to Gandalf as “Master Stormcrow” (Tolkien 1994, 502).

Finally, we return to the second of the three classes of “master,” to mean a “revered artist ... respected scholar; an authority” (“master, n.1 and adj.” 2019). The dwarves are termed the Gonnhirrim, the “Masters of Stone” (Tolkien 2001, 91), while the Rohirrim are repeatedly called the masters of horses (referring to their horsemanship rather than a simple ownership of horses). Beleg was a “master of healing” (*Ibid.*, 206), and Gandalf calls Radagast a “master of shapes and changes of hue” (Tolkien 1994, 250-1). Gildor Inglorion compliments Bilbo by calling him a “good master” in terms of his instruction of Elvish to Frodo (*Ibid.*, 79).

Where do Elrond’s skills primarily lie? He is called a “master of healing” by Gandalf (Tolkien 1994, 215), but more importantly, after the fall of Gil-galad he gathered in Rivendell “many Elves, and other folk of wisdom” (Tolkien 2001, 297). Chief among these is, of course, himself; as Tolkien explained in the 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, “Elrond symbolizes throughout the ancient wisdom, and his House represents Lore — the preservation in reverent memory of all tradition concerning the good, wise, and beautiful” (2000, 153). Specifically, as Boromir explains at the Council of Elrond, his father Denethor named “Elrond Halfelven” the “greatest of lore-masters” (Tolkien 1994, 240), a compliment that is strengthened in the context that Denethor openly considered himself to be the “master of the lore” of Minas Tirith (Tolkien 1994, 246). Gandalf is also a lore-master of note, as well, as demonstrated by his ability to translate obscure records in Gondor “that few even of the lore-masters now can read,” presumably including the dreaded Black speech of Mordor (*Ibid.*). However, Tolkien makes a point of demonstrating Gandalf’s fallibility as a lore-master, as he is initially unable to open the Gates of Moria, noting that the password was too “simple for a learned lore-master in these suspicious days” (Tolkien 1994, 300).

In Tolkien’s last revisions to the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings* (included in *The Peoples of Middle-earth*) it is said that Elrond “chose to be of Elvenkind, and became a master of wisdom” (1996, 257), while a handwritten note in the margin of the late essay “Of Dwarves and men” calls Elrond “half-elven and a master of lore and history” (1996, 319). This emphasis on Elrond as not only a lore-master, but, recall, in the words of Denethor, the “greatest of lore-masters,” is of central importance, given a seismic shift in the *legendarium* during the last decades of Tolkien’s life. In his post *LOTR* return to the *legendarium*, Tolkien was particularly bothered with astronomical difficulties in the mythology, especially the creation of the sun and moon from the Two Trees of Valinor. As he noted in a late 1950s essay, Tolkien realized that the “High Eldar living and being tutored by the demiurgic beings must have known, or at least their writers and loremasters must have known, the ‘truth’” about astronomical bodies (1993, 370). This was especially important because, as Christopher explains, there was a “rise in importance of the Eldarin ‘loremasters’” in the post *LOTR* writings (1993, 371). For example, we see this emphasis on learning and lore in general in the late (1969 or later) essay Christopher Tolkien named “Of Dwarves and Men” in which it is explained that the ancient Dwarvish language Khuzdul “was carefully preserved and taught to all their children at an early age” as it was “a written language

used in all important histories and lore” (1996, 297). Tolkien’s solution to the problem was to call the mythology of *The Silmarillion* “a ‘Mannish affair’,” in that the stories were handed down by the Númenóreans and in the process became “blended and confused with their own Mannish myths and cosmic ideas” (Tolkien 1993, 370). As Charles Noad (2000, 64-5) explains, the tales ultimately ended up in the *Red Book of Westmarch* thanks to the work of Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam. How Elrond, who had witnessed firsthand the end of the First Age and all of the Second and Third, would allow such fiction to be written under his roof is nowhere explained, nor is the lingering problem of Elrond’s celestial/seaman father in this scenario.⁹

If lore-masters in general were gaining importance within the post *LOTR* *legendarium*, it was the Noldor in particular who were well-known as playing a central role. A glossary accompanying the essay “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth” notes that the name Noldor “means ‘lore-masters’ or those specially devoted to knowledge” (1993, 350). The late (1968 or later) essay Christopher Tolkien named “The Shibboleth of Fëanor” explains that the lore-masters “were mostly even as Fëanor, the greatest, kings, princes, and warriors” (1996, 358). If Elrond (who, again, had every right to claim the throne of High-king of the Noldor based on his bloodlines) truly was the greatest lore-master of the Third Age, as *The Lord of the Rings* suggests,¹⁰ then Tolkien’s post *LOTR* ruminations seem to suggest that Master Elrond — the Master of Elf-lore — was mighty indeed, despite not taking on the official mantle of kingship. His mixed “Half-elven” heritage also uniquely positions him at a singular moment in time when the rule of Middle-earth passed from the First Born to the Second Born of Ilúvatar. His mixed Elvish blood also provides a bridge between Galadriel, the Noldo, and Círdan, the Sindar, as the three bearers of the Elvish rings of power sail into the Blessed Lands and out of recorded history.¹¹ Therefore, regardless of the fact that the Last Homely House west of the Mountains and its Master might have been known by more humble names than most, their importance in the history of Middle-earth are without equal. That is this author’s masterful claim.

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⁹ Galadriel was living in Valinor at the death of the Two Trees, and would presumably have had something to say to Frodo or Sam, at the very least, about this as well.

¹⁰ In the “The Shibboleth of Fëanor,” Galadriel is said to be the “greatest of the Ñoldor, except Fëanor maybe” and was a “match for both the loremasters and the athletes of the Eldar in the days of their youth” (1996, 337). While her “wisdom increased with the long years” (*Ibid.*), a cloud hangs over her, namely her role in the rebellion of the Noldor and the pride that led her to abandon the Blessed Lands in her youth. Perhaps the term “masterful” applies to her, although to my knowledge Tolkien did not himself use it in this context. Tolkien himself was apparently troubled by Galadriel’s part in the rebellion, and as Christopher noted “her story underwent continual refashioning” (1980, 228).

¹¹ An interesting, albeit apparently aborted, parallel to Elrond can possibly be seen in the 1959-60 essay “Quendi and Eldar” in which “much of the knowledge of the Elder Days was preserved” by the lore-master Pengolodh, “an Elf of mixed Sindarin and Ñoldorin ancestry... who lived in Gondolin from its foundation” (Tolkien 1994, 396). This is particularly intriguing given Elrond’s descent from survivors of the fall of Gondolin.

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