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Tolkien's Calques of Classicisms: Who Knew Elvish Latin, What Did the Rohirrim Read, and Why Was Bilbo Cheeky?

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Tolkien's Calques of Classicisms: Who Knew Elvish Latin, What Did the Rohirrim Read, and Why Was Bilbo Cheeky?

Cover Page Footnote

I am indebted to Dr. Christopher Vaccaro for the invitation to deliver this address, and to him and Prof. John Holmes for comments on earlier drafts.

“Classicism” as a term of literary criticism is, ironically, an invention of the Romantics. Samuel Johnson’s 1755 *Dictionary* has: Class (n. s.), to Class (v. a.), Classical and Classick (adj.), and Classick (n.)—but for “classicism,” you may look in vain (p. 385). *Romanticism* first shows up in 1803, but Classicism not until 1830 (Harper, “Romanticism,” “Classicism”). This curious order reflects, I think, the fact that Johnson, Pope, Dryden and the other Augustans did not see themselves as practicing some distinct school of literary composition. On their own understanding of things, they were, simply, endeavoring to write—or, to put a somewhat finer point on it, to write *well*. One of the student body leaders during my time at The Hill School used to urge his peers on by saying, “Stay classy, Hill!”—and that was the Augustans’ project in a nutshell: to stay classy.

“Classy,” a word which itself dates back as far as 1891, and “class,” and “classic,” and “classicism,” all trace their origins back to the Latin word *classis*, and thus ultimately to the ancient Roman militia in the legendary times of the kings. *Classis* is related to a verb meaning to call, from a PIE root which lies behind modern words as different as “acclaim,” “calendar,” and “eclair” (Harper, “*kele”): and the idiom is the same one we use today, when we talk of “calling out the militia.” So the *classis* is at root the adult male population of Rome called out as its army, but more specifically one of six *subdivisions* of that Roman populace. Later on, in the Republic, certain forms of legislation, and the more important elections, could take place only in a body called the *Comitia Centuriata*, the Centuriate Assembly. This assembly *also* followed the militia model, as the “centuries” from which it took its name correspond roughly to “companies” in a modern army, and (subject to various reorganizations) the 193 centuries themselves were again organized into *classes* from the patricians among the officers all the way down to the unarmed supporting troops:¹ Each century got one vote, starting from the top and working down, and once 97 centuries had voted for or against something, the polling stopped. Thus the officers’ opinions would always be heard on any question, while the unarmed hangers-on would rarely get to vote at all. The Latin adjective *classicus*, then, even in Roman times, already meant, whether literally or metaphorically, to be upper-class in the sociological sense, to belong to one of the wealthy centuries that got to vote first, and that always got its opinion heard.

Thus English authors who described Homer and Virgil as “classic” were implicitly picturing the ancient authors as patricians who would always get the first vote in the great Centuriate Assembly of the arts, and themselves as members of one of the lower centuries—if not, perhaps, quite at the bottom end amongst the literary equivalent of cooks and mule-hostlers. And, just to underline the point, the very act of adopting a Latin term for this privileging of Latin and Greek authors is *itself* a minor instance of what the Romantics would later label classicism.

So, then, in the narrow sense, “Tolkien’s classicism” would refer to his adoption of antique authors and their works as models and standards. We’ve been seeing some very interesting work on that topic over the last few years, including two sessions I myself organized at the International Medieval Congress at Western Michigan University; the first four essays in *Tolkien and the Classics*, edited by Roberto Arduini, Giampolo Canzonieri, and Dr. Claudio A. Testi; several chapters in *Tolkien and the Classical World*, edited by Dr. Hamish Williams, and a forthcoming collection of essays on *Echoes of Ancient Greek Literature in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Work*, edited by Dr. Dimitra Fimi and Dimitris Kolovos. I anticipate that we’ll have even more insights in this area from the papers we are hearing today. With Dr. Vaccaro’s permission, however, I would like to press a bit further afield in my own remarks, building on Dr. Fimi’s discussion of “Middle-earth Sociolinguistics” in Chapter Three of her 2005 dissertation, *The Creative Uses of Scholarly Knowledge in the Writing of J. R. R. Tolkien* (pp. 191-195) and, less

1 In the officer *classis*, 18 centuries, of which the first six were reserved exclusively for patricians; 170 centuries divided between five classes of enlisted men; and 5 centuries for the support *classis*. See Taylor, “Centuriate Assembly.”

directly, on Dr. Sandra Bailif Straubhaar's "Myth, Late Roman History, and Multiculturalism in Tolkien's Middle-earth," an essay originally given at a Kalamazoo session on "Tolkien and the Classical" in 2002.

If we follow what I take to be modern practice and expand our definition of "classicism" to include not only the specific adoption of Greeks and Romans as the models for "classy" art, but, more generally, *the acceptance of the art of some earlier period of one's own or another culture as exemplary for one's own artistic creation*,² then it seems to me, first, that we can find, *within* Tolkien's invented world, suggestions of the presence and absence of fictive classicism and, second, that these calques of Primary World classicism are made more complex by the existence within the *legendarium* of the all-but-immortal elves. Virgil himself might have seemed cheeky if not only deep-browed Homer but also pious Aeneas and wily Ulysses had still been available to comment on his work.

I should make one procedural comment as I begin. Though I've defined classicism in terms of art, we don't have all that many examples of literature from the various cultures of Middle-earth, so I propose to consider language use as a proxy. This seems to me to be reasonable: in the Primary World, at least, I think we would find a high correlation between use of Latin, on the one hand, and vernacular emulation of Latin models, on the other.

I. The Hobbits

"Cheeky," of course, is what Bilbo Baggins says that Strider has said about his poem, "Eärendil was a mariner"—or, at least, about the prospect of Bilbo's reciting it in the home of Eärendil's son (also, as we know, Strider's own 62-times-great uncle and prospective father-in-law).³ In this, the Hobbits are, as usual, anachronistic (Harper notes, *s.v.*, that "cheek" as a synonym for insolence dates from 1840).

The exemplars for hobbit classicism are the elves: though *perhaps* 'classicism' is too strong in this case, as the level of knowledge of Sindarin and Quenya in the Shire (much less artistic emulation of literature in those languages) seems to be roughly like the knowledge of Latin in Victorian Britain—or perhaps even in our own day.

Before we get back to Bilbo, who is something of a special case, consider the situation of Frodo. We see that Frodo knows some polite words and phrases, such as Quenya "Elen síla lúmenn' omentielvo!" (*FR*, I, III, p. 94), but his Elvish education has its gaps. We are told, for instance, that he understood little of the poetry he heard in Elrond's hall,⁴ and that the Silvan-accented Sindarin of Lothlorien, along with "his own limited acquaintance with Sindarin" confused him (*RK*, F, p. 1161n1).

Sometimes these gaps have serious consequences for Frodo. To take a modern parallel, all of us could manage the slightly unfamiliar words "caniform" and "feliform," for things in the shape of our faithful household companions—possibly even "leporiform," if, like one of my good friends, we happen to have an interest in bunnies. But I had occasion a few years back, in writing for the *Tolkien Encyclopedia*, to use "araneiform," and I don't imagine that most of carry *araneus*, the Latin word for "spider," around in our heads—so perhaps we should not be too quick to blame Frodo for not seeing

2 I am conscious that under this expanded definition there is a prominent strain of Classicism within Romanticism itself.

3 "[. . .] he obviously thought the whole thing rather above my head, and he said that if I had the cheek to make verses about Eärendil in the house of Elrond, it was my affair." (*FR*, II, I, pp. 253-4)

4 "At first the beauty of the melodies and of the interwoven words in elven-tongues, even though he understood them little, held him in a spell, as soon as he began to attend to them." (*FR*, II, I, pp. 249-250).

the inherent menace of Cirith Ungol, Sindarin for “Spider Pass.”

Samwise Gamgee, of course, is regularly depicted as less-well-educated than Frodo—he knows little or no Elvish at the start of his adventures. He does, though, know *about* elves, and, indeed, knows and recites part of a poem, “The Fall of Gil-Galad,” as translated from the Elvish by Bilbo. In this, he is rather like an English schoolboy who has memorized the opening of Dryden’s—or perhaps William Morris’s—translated *Aeneid*.⁵ Though the analogy isn’t as close, Sam’s actual performance *feels* to me a bit more like a recitation of “Horatius at the Bridge,” or one of the other poems from Lord Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome* (a book which Tolkien not only read but imitated, as has often been pointed out, most recently by Prof. Shippey⁶). There is, of course, a significant difference between Dryden or Morris, on the one hand, and Macaulay, on the other: the former are making real translations of a classical text, whereas Macaulay, like a good philologist, is writing asterisk poetry, reconstructing the lost verse that the Romans *ought* to have preserved. In Sam’s recitation text, Bilbo takes the translator role—but in “Eärendil was a mariner,” he is pure philologist.

But this brings us for the first time to the complicating factor of the Elvish longaeivity: it seems as though there would have been relatively little room for Bilbo, as a hobbit Macaulay, to fill in literary gaps with asterisk poetry when not only all the past elvish *poets* but also all but one of their *subjects* were either still alive or in the Halls of Mandos awaiting reincarnation. Surely, over the course of scores of millenia, even *Elves* must have lost track of *some* things: but their perduring lives don’t lead us to imagine them, like Tolkien’s friend R. W. Chambers, lamenting the lost lays “chanted at the feasts of Gothic and Burgundian, Frankish and Lombard, Danish and Anglian, chiefs” (Chambers, p. 2⁷). But this is a point to which we will return.

II. The Rohirrim⁸

In a speech which (as Straubhaar points out) paraphrases Tacitus, Aragorn, who had served King Thengel of Rohan (r. TA 2953-2980) incognito, says that the Rohirrim are “wise but unlearned, writing no books but singing many songs, after the manner of the children of Men before the Dark Years”⁹. Faramir, speaking to Frodo and Sam, says at more length:

Of our lore and manners they have learned what they would, and their lords speak our speech at need; yet for the most part they hold by the ways of their own fathers and to their own memories, and they speak among themselves their own North tongue. [. . .] Yet now, if the Rohirrim are grown in some ways more like

5 I suppose that Dryden was more popular than Morris, whose translation apparently has various inaccuracies (*see* Riddehough, “William Morris’s Translation”).

6 “William Morris,” p. 234.

7 An earlier part of this paragraph is cited by Shippey, *Road*, p. 21

8 In this section, I consider much of the same territory as Juliette Harrisson’s “Escape and Consolation”: Gondor as the Ancient Mediterranean and Rohan as the Germanic World in *The Lord of the Rings*’ (Williams, p. 329-348): I believe, however, that I am pursuing a different argument, based on narrower equivalences for both Gondor and Rohan.

9 *TT*, II, ii, p. 451; the Tacitus parallel is from *de Origine et Situ Germanorum* 2.3: “Celebrant carminibus antiquis, quod unum apud illos memoriae et annalium genus est, Tuistonem deum terra editum. [In their *ancient songs*, their *only form of recorded history* the Germans celebrate the earth-born god, Tuisto.] (emphasis added)” (Straubhaar, p. 103, citing the translation by H. Mattingly).

to us, enhanced in arts and gentleness, we too have become more like to them”
(*TT*, VI, V, p. 678)

Finally, we are told, in Appendix A, that during the reign of Thengel, the “speech of Gondor” (presumably Westron and/or Sindarin¹⁰) was used in the royal household. That fact in itself might suggest the possibility of courtly poetry in Gondorian form, but the notice is notably backhanded: “he proved a good and wise king, though the speech of Gondor was used in his house, and not all men thought that good” (*RK*, A, p. 1106). These three comments are not much evidence, but they seem to point away from classicism among the Rohirrim.

Tolkien notoriously depicts the Rohirrim with a sort of cultural short hand, rendering their language by Mercian and modeling the protocol of Theoden’s doorwards on those depicted in *Beowulf*. At the same time, Tolkien works to prevent pushing this association too far, writing in Appendix F:

This linguistic procedure does not imply that the Rohirrim closely resembled the ancient English otherwise, in culture or art, in weapons or modes of warfare, except in a general way due to their circumstances: a simpler and more primitive people living in contact with a higher and more venerable culture, and occupying lands that had once been part of its domain [*RK*, F, p. 1170n1].¹¹

But, for me, the exception in this caution raises a question of its own about the absence of classicism in Rohan, the question of time scale. Tolkien sets up a general analogy: the Rohirrim are to the Gondorians as the “ancient English” are to—well, to what? He must surely mean Rome, the only culture of whose domain Britain had once been part: but then the period of direct contact would be less than 40 years—the traditional date of the *Adventus Saxonum* was A.D. 449, while the Emperor Zeno recognized barbarian control of the western empire in 480, and Clovis the Frank conquered the surviving Roman enclave of Soissons in 486. In addition to this short span of direct contact, the ancient English interacted to some degree with elements of Roman culture through architectural remains (“eald enta geweorc”), through the Romanized British, and through Roman survivals in the Frankish and Gothic realms. Yet all these things taken together seem to have done relatively little to pull the ancient English toward Roman culture, and to that degree the non-classicizing situation of the Rohirrim seems parallel to theirs.

So, no problem so far. *But*, after this early non-start, ancient English culture did in fact come to be *highly* Romanized, and in that sense classicist, in writing, music, art and architecture. Let me cite two famous examples. The first is Benedict Biscop (c. 628–690), the 7th Century founder of the twin monasteries of St. Peter and St. Paul at Wearmouth and Jarrow in Northumbria, who not only built his churches in the Roman style, but made five trips to Rome itself, equipping the monastic library with ancient manuscripts including (probably) a Bible that had once been in the library of Cassiodorus, Master of the Offices to Theoderic, the Gothic king who became Dietrich von Bern after a few years in

10 “[. . .] at the time of the War of the Ring the Elven tongue [*sc.* Sindarin] was known only to a small part of the peoples of Gondor, and spoken daily by fewer. These dwelt mostly in Minas Tirith and the townlands adjacent, and in the land of the tributary princes of Dol Amroth” (*RK*, F, p. 1163).

Thengel’s queen Morwen was from Lossarnach, arguably one of the “townlands adjacent.”

11 I take it that Tolkien means the comparison here to be internal—that is, I think he is saying that the Rohirrim were simpler than the Gondorians, not simpler than the ancient English, and that the Gondorians were higher and more venerable than the ancient English, not higher and more venerable than medieval Rome (though the latter might also be true).

“the cauldron of story.”¹² My second example is Alcuin of York (~735-804), who, having been invited to Aachen by Charlemagne as schoolmaster to the royal family, became a major figure in the late-8th-century classicizing movement we call the Carolingian Renaissance. An early life tells us that Alcuin was a reader of Virgil even in childhood, though as an adult he recommended the Song of Songs in preference to the “lies of Maro.”¹³

The classicizing spirit that Benedict and Alcuin represent did not come from their culture’s brief encounter with the dying Empire: it was, rather, *Papal* Rome that had this transformative influence on the ancient English. But when it happened, it happened quickly. Saint Augustine of Canterbury and his missionaries arrived in Kent from Italy in 597, so it was only about 75 years from them to the intensely Romaiophile Abbot Benedict.

Whether we consider the length of the early period of relatively non-transformative direct Anglo-Saxon contact with the Western Empire or that of the later period of radically-transformative evangelization from Rome, the elapsed time in the primary world is far shorter than what Tolkien depicts in the *Lord of the Rings*. Appendix B tells us that from the Oath of Eorl to the day when Aragorn remarks on the culture of Rohan is 509 years (T.A. 2510-3019), and, in the main narrative, Legolas, on the way to Edoras, remarks that “red leaves have fallen in Mirkwood” five hundred times since the building of the Golden Hall (*TT*, III,VI, p. 529). These five centuries are more than ten times the minimally influential period of direct contact, almost seven times the span between the revolutionary arrival of Augustine and the founding of Wearmouth and Jarrow. Indeed, in the primary world, 509 years from the traditional *Adventus* would take us all the way to the late tenth century reign of King Edgar the Peacable (943-975, r. 959-975). That strikes me as rather a long time for the Rohirrim to remain a people whose only art is their native song. Moreover, just to make the situation more improbable, over this extraordinarily long period, the Rohirrim are by no means isolationist: they occupy Gondorian spaces such as Helm’s Deep, fight alongside the Gondorians¹⁴, and even intermarry with them.¹⁵

Having gone to so much trouble to sketch this improbability, however, I have finally to say that I think it is simply a given of the plot, as inexplicable in Primary World terms as taters or Long-bottom Leaf. While it seems to *me* that Rohirric culture certainly *ought* to have displayed at least some high-status Gondorian borrowing, if not full-fledged classicism, over the course of half a millenium, it simply didn’t, and that’s that.¹⁶

III. The Númenoreans

On the other hand, the Númenoreans and their Arnorian and Gondorian successors developed a

12 Some months after first writing this comment about Theoderic, I discovered that my friend Prof. John Holmes had written virtually the same thing while discussing Cassiodorus’s more famous predecessor in the position, Boethius, in an excellent essay (also touching on Tolkien and classicism) published in 2005 (Holmes, p. 45).

13 Cf. Long, “The Attitude Of Alcuin Toward Vergil.” For recent reflections on the use of Vergil in medieval schools, see Chapter One, “Memory, Emotion and the Death of Queen,” in Woods, *Weeping for Dido*.

14 E.g. at the Crossings of Poros, in T.A. 2885

15 Cf. Thengel—though his marriage does lead to the adoption of Westron (or Sindarin) mentioned earlier.

16 It could be argued, of course, that the very stability of Rohirric culture constitutes a *sort* of classicism of its own.

culture as indebted to the Eldar as ever Dr. Johnson was to Greece and Rome. Being descended from the Three Houses of the Edain—that is to say, the Men who had been closely allied with the Noldor during the War against Morgoth—they gave the Noldorin tongue high status. Tolkien writes in the *Akallabêth*:

the lore-masters among them learned also the High Eldarin tongue of the Blessed Realm, in which much story and song was preserved from the beginning of the world; and they made letters and scrolls and books, and wrote in them many things of wisdom and wonder in the high tide of their realm [. . .] So it came to pass that, beside their own names, all the lords of the Númenóreans had also Eldarin names; and the like with the cities and fair places that they founded in Númenor and on the shores of the Hither Lands.¹⁷

And again in *Unfinished Tales*

Quenya was not a spoken tongue in Númenor. It was known only to the learned and to the families of high descent, to whom it was taught in their early youth. It was used in official documents intended for preservation, such as the Laws, and the Scroll and the Annals of the Kings [. . .] and often in more recondite works of lore. It was also largely used in nomenclature: the official names of all places, regions, and geographical features in the land were of Quenya form (though they usually had also local names, generally of the same meaning, in either Sindarin or Adúnaic). The personal names, and especially the official and public names, of all members of the royal house, and of the Line of Elros in general, were given in Quenya form (*UT*, p. 216).

Indeed, the use of Quenya was of such significance that when the Fall of Númenor began in earnest, the most obvious outward sign of the increasing shadow was the accession, in S.A. 2899, of the 19th king under the Adúnaic name Ar-Adúnakhor, and his outlawing of both Quenya and Sindarin: but his name was nevertheless entered in the records in Quenya, as Tar-Herunúmen (*S*, p. 267-8).

The founders of Gondor and Arnor were the most elf-friendly of the Númenoreans, and carried the attachment with them to Middle-earth: Elendil the Tall declared his arrival in a Quenya sentence repeated by Aragorn—now using the Quenya regnal name Elessar Telcontar—31 centuries later: “Et Eärello Endoreнна utúlien. Sinome maruvan ar Hildinyar tenn’ Ambar-metta!” (*RK*, VI, V, p. 1003). Strider also collaborates with Bilbo on the asterisk Eärendil poem, though only to slip in a round-about reference to himself; and, also like Bilbo, he makes at least one verse translation into Westron, though apparently from Sindarin rather than Quenya.¹⁸

IV. The Elves

Tolkien explicitly invokes Latin as an analogue to Quenya. He writes in a letter to Naomi Mitchison: “The archaic language of lore is meant to be a kind of ‘Elven-latin,’ and by transcribing it

¹⁷ *S*, p. 262; Christopher Tolkien says that “High Eldarin” here equals “Quenya,” *S*, p. 346

¹⁸ Aragorn says that the song of Tinuviel is a translation from “the mode that is called *ann-thennath* among the Elves” (*FR*, I, XI, p. 210). As both “Tinuviel” and “ann-thennath” are Sindarin, it seems legitimate to conclude that Aragorn has in mind a Sindarin original.

into a spelling closely resembling that of Latin [. . .] the similarity to Latin has been increased ocularly” (*L*, p. 176). Or, again, in Appendix F:

The High-elven was an ancient tongue of Eldamar beyond the Sea, the first to be recorded in writing. It was no longer a birth-tongue, but had become, as it were, an ‘Elven-latin’, still used for ceremony, and for high matters of lore and song, by the High Elves, who had returned in exile to Middle-earth at the end of the Fourth Age (pp. 1161-1162).

Sindarin, then, would seem to be *functionally* a sort of Elven-Italian or Elven-French, clearly related to the older language and widely spoken even by those whose native tongue was something else. (Linguistically, however, the relationship is, Tolkien specifies, like that between *British* [Celtic] and Latin [fn., *L* 219].¹⁹)

From all of this it follows that, hypothetically, we might see, in Quenya literature, an occasional movement to return to the standards of an earlier period, roughly parallel to the revival of Ciceronian Latin at the Renaissance. Alongside that, given Tolkien’s comments about elven drama (*OFS*, ¶ 70, p. 63), we might find in Sindarin some equivalent of an *Academie Francaise*, enforcing Quenya rules about the dramatic unities on a Sindarin version of Pierre Corneille.

I am not sure, however, that evidence actually gives us reason to expect that the Elves had such classicizing moments. Indeed, I believe that there are two fundamental reasons for suspecting that they had not so much classics as “Golden Oldies”: one of these is a simple matter of plot related to Quenya specifically, while the other relates more complexly to Tolkien’s basic conception of the Elves—and thus more broadly, as well.

The plot-related reason, which requires the less exposition, is simply that Tolkien says Quenya is like Latin *among the Noldor*. For the Sindar, however, it is hardly a prestige language, likely to serve as a literary exemplar: if anything, it is associated rather with the betrayal of the Kinslaying at Alqualondë and with the ban on its use pronounced by Elu Thingol. As Tolkien points out in a letter to Richard Jeffrey, even the Noldor themselves stopped using Quenya names on their return to Middle-earth (p. 425).

The conceptual reason, if I may circle back to Augustan Classicism in the Primary World, is that Tolkien’s Elves are not *struldbruggs*. You’ll remember that those immortal inhabitants of the Island of Luggnagg in Chapter 10 of Part 3 of *Gulliver’s Travels*, like Tithonus and the Sibyl of Cumae in classical myth, have immortality *without* eternal youth. Dean Swift sketches a number of drawbacks to this situation, one of which is linguistic drift. Gulliver reports that:

The language of this country being always upon the flux, the struldbruggs of one age do not understand those of another; neither are they able, after two hundred years, to hold any conversation (farther than by a few general words) with their neighbours the mortals; and thus they lie under the disadvantage of living like foreigners in their own country.

In Swift’s conception, the few immortal struldbruggs born in each generation continue (unless, like Swift himself, they simply become demented) to speak their birth dialect, while the language *as spoken by mortals* continues in flux. Had Tolkien adopted this model, there would have been no Quenya or Sindarin at all, as the undying and unaging first speakers of Proto-Eldarin would have taught that

19 I am indebted for this reference to Dawson, 107.

language to their children, grand-children and so on, down through endless generations *tenn' ambar-metta*, until the ending of the world.

So why would the language of immortals change? Partly, Tolkien suggests, as a result of their immersion in the changing stream of time. As Fimi notes (pp. 183-4), Tolkien tends to see Valarin as unchanging, or virtually so (*LR*, p. 168). In contrast, he describes the development of Eldarin languages as accelerating greatly once the Years of the Sun and Moon begin (*LR*, p. 177)—years which pass on a vaster scale than seem to be involved in Swift's conception. (Consider, for purposes of comparison, that from the tentative date of the early Germanic sound shift described by Grimm's Law to the present is about 2500 years, which is roughly how old Arwen is at the birth of Thorin.) In addition to these temporal factors, however, Tolkien also posits that Elvish languages developed simply because Elves, whose endonym Quendi designates them as pre-eminently "The Speakers," enjoyed changing them (*S*, p. 49). As Fimi points out (p. 189), in the 1950s era document "The Teachings of Pengolod," Tolkien even considers the theory that Elves remember their older languages but think only in the newest one.²⁰ Granted all this, the classicizing instinct, the instinct to value earlier times *more* than one's own, would seem to run precisely contrary to Elvish nature.²¹

Still, all this being said, Quenya did continue in literary use among the Noldor, not only for lore, but also, as our longest example of the language shows, for lyric, specifically for lament. And that continued literary use of a language no longer used for ordinary speech at least approaches classicism. But I think the case of Galadriel may in fact illustrate why it is actually something *slightly* different. In "Namarië," Galadriel, a Noldo older than the sun and moon, does *not* use Quenya as a way of following an otherwise distant stylistic example. Rather, it serves her for reminiscence, nostalgia, perhaps even for recovery, to use a term of Tolkienian significance. Admittedly, Galadriel is the last of the Noldorin exiles in Middle-earth, and thus the last to have Quenya as a birth-tongue; but it seems to me that even for later generations of the High Elves, the language never occupied that *particular* distance which would have made it a model, rather than a memory.

And this, finally, is what is I think particularly cheeky about Bilbo's poem. Partly, perhaps even mostly, Strider is warning Bilbo, who is, as Gandalf once reminded him, "only quite a little fellow in a wide world" (*H*, p. 317) against ordinary presumptuousness. But consider Lindir's comments that "it is not easy for us to tell the difference between two mortals [. . .] Mortals have not been our study" (*FR*, II, I, p. 253). These words are jesting, and indeed are *provoked by* a jest on Bilbo's part, since, as we noted, he actually wrote virtually the whole poem. Yet there is a nugget of truth beneath the jokes. Mortals writing for an audience of immortals would constantly have to remind themselves of what would be an unconscious assumption, indeed a *given*, among *immortal* poets: that is, *that sooner or later the subjects of one's poems could be expected to hear them*. William Faulkner wouldn't have gotten quoted in Rivendell for saying that "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (p. 73): to an audience of reincarnatable immortals, that's not wry wit, just fact. Elvish poets introducing a new epic of Gondolin would instinctively expect that they might have Glorfindel in the front row—an expectation which mortal poets, in the unlikely event of their *having* an immortal audience, would need

20 "[. . .] the Eldar readily learn to use other tongues skillfully, and are slow to forget any that they have learned, but these remain as they were learned, as they were written in the unchanging ages of a book; whereas the *coirëa quenya*, the language of thought, grows and lives within, and each new stage overlies those that went before, as the acorn and sapling are hidden in the tree" (*Peoples*, 399-400)

21 There is, admittedly, also the elvish desire, displayed in the three rings, to make time stand still: but that is still different, I think, from the classicizing attitude that takes the past as an exemplar for the present.

to cultivate. So far as we know, the son of Eärendil does not actually find Bilbo's poem cheeky—so it appears that mortals *can* cultivate the immortal attitude: but it is not natural for them.

V. Conclusions

So, in summary, we see, in the *legendarium* suggestions of:

- predictably Victorian attitudes toward Elvish classics among the hobbits;
- a somewhat surprising resistance to Elvish and Gondorian culture among the Rohirrim;
- enthusiastic emulation of Elvish models by the Númenoreans and their successors in Middle-earth; and
- an immortal immunity to classicism among the elves.

As I said at the beginning, despite the copious detail of Tolkien's world-building, we don't have the sorts of cultural items that would support a rigorous analysis of all of this. Moreover, I don't think there's a case to be made that Tolkien *sets out* to depict these various aspects of classicism: they are, so to speak, emergent properties of other things he wants to accomplish.

But perhaps a focus simply on the emergent properties of Tolkien's work considered in itself is *not* in fact quite the right way to speak. Indeed, the very process of invoking Classicism amounts to a positioning of Tolkien himself *with respect to* the Augustan period. And the high Modernism of the early twentieth century, which was also a classicizing movement, has something to say about this sort of positioning. T. S. Eliot, for instance, famously stated in 1928 that his point of view was "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (*Andrewes*, p. ix). And Eliot's great manifesto from 1919, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," would suggest that, on a classical view of the matter, emergent properties grow not only from Tolkien's own intentions, but from the web of literature itself:

The historical sense [Eliot declares] compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. [. . .] No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. [. . .] The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted [. . .] Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. (¶ 4)

Though they had a mutual friend in Charles Williams, Tolkien apparently found little to admire in Eliot's work.²² But whether through scholarship which transformed the reading of *Beowulf* or through

²² Writing about Lewis after his death (in April, 1964), Tolkien says, "That [Lewis's] literary opinions were ever dictated by envy (as in the case of T. S. Eliot) is a grotesque calumny. After all it is

fantasy which reinvigorated both the medieval and medievalism, Tolkien would serve Eliot's classicism well as an example of a highly individual talent with a capacious sense of tradition who did indeed by his present work alter the past.

possible to dislike Eliot with some intensity even if one has no aspirations to poetic laurels oneself' (*L*, p. 350).

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