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Falling Stars: Canonicity and ‘Meteor Man’ in Amazon Prime Video’s *The Rings of Power*

Slightly revised and updated from a virtual presentation at the Northeast Popular Culture Association annual conference, October 22, 2022.

While much of the vociferous online fan controversy surrounding the Amazon Prime Video series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* has centered on the inclusive casting choices (Barraclough 2023; Young 2022), another sort of potential canonical gatekeeping emerged in response to the early trailers, concerning the appearance of a brilliant fireball seen flying across the skies of Middle-earth. A mysterious character (dubbed ‘Meteor Man’ by fans, officially named ‘The Stranger’ in character listings [IMDB 2022]) is seen emerging from the meteorite’s apparent impact. Fan discussion boards were quick to note that this was, in their view, yet another example of Amazon playing loose and fast with canon, as there was, to their stated knowledge, no significant meteorite fall in the historical records of the Second Age of Middle-earth (at least as chronicled by Tolkien himself). Putting aside the possibility that Meteor Man was a red herring (or clever editing trick) of epic proportion, some fans sought to somehow integrate what they considered a jarring non-canonical addition into their personal conception of Tolkien’s universe. In the process we witnessed in real time how fan communities share research into the source material, struggle with definitions of canon, and negotiate sometimes conflicting rumors. In the process, some fans learned for the first time that there *are* examples of meteors and meteorites in Tolkien’s works.

This paper considers fan reception/controversy concerning Meteor Man between December 19, 2021, and September 1, 2022, just before the airing of the first two episodes of *Rings of Power*. For the sake of this qualitative analysis, I reviewed a random selection of 25 discussion threads on the *Lord of the Rings on Prime* subreddit that specifically focused on Meteor Man theories, totally over 1600 individual comments. Many of the posts were simple “good job” or “me, too” posts, which were ignored in this analysis. Satirical and other humorous posts, while clever, were also largely set aside. Despite the well-known online backlash about the diverse casting, there were refreshingly few ‘anti-woke’ comments in these discussions, although there was the usual selection of nasty ‘you’re stupid’ posts, which were likewise discarded. The remainder were hypotheses as to who Meteor Man might be, the nature of the meteor itself, and thoughtful back and forth about the strengths and weaknesses of these hypotheses, many of which referred directly to Tolkien’s writings.

It should be noted from the start that there is no universally agreed upon canon in Tolkien fandom (Larsen 2022, 1). It appears that the vast majority of fans accept the second editions of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* (which were

revised by Tolkien) as canon; a smaller subset accepts *The Silmarillion*, the grand history of the early ages of Middle-earth, a posthumous work published by his son, Christopher, that had been cobbled together from decades of revisions and rewrites. *Unfinished Tales* and *The History of Middle-earth* comprise over a dozen volumes of essays, revisions, and various scraps of information later published by Christopher that show Tolkien's lifelong struggle to craft a self-consistent mythology. For the sake of this discussion, the term *canon* will mean anything written by Tolkien that has been published, whether a complete essay or story or not, whether published in his lifetime or not, and including all of the *Silmarillion* drafts. It is also important to note that the Amazon series takes place thousands of years before the events in *The Hobbit* (here the Harfoots, portrayed as the ancestors of the Hobbits, live as nomads), and the showrunners do not have the rights to *The Silmarillion* or its drafts (Robinson 2022). They are therefore working from mainly summaries and timelines included in the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*, which gives them a lot of room for creative license in filling in the gaps. In this way, the Amazon series can perhaps be seen as well-funded fanfic. There was a diversity of opinion voiced online in the fandom as to how faithful they expected such an adaptation to be to the source material, as well as what actually defines 'faithfulness' – for example, contradicting a statement by Tolkien that a specific, very important Elvish kingdom was destroyed in a historic battle would be looked upon far more unfavorably than saying that a particular character did such and such during a period of time for which Tolkien was silent about that character's actions or whereabouts.

For the sake of this paper, we begin with the December 19, 2021, episode of the Fellowship of Fans, The Second Age Show podcast (posted on YouTube) that was billed as an "EXCLUSIVE: CRAZY Character Moment Revealed." Host "Strider" (Strajder10) offers to the audience that "We have an unconfirmed rumor. So there is a character that arrives from the sky in a meteor or a comet and is found by Harfoots. So this sounds very interesting." Cohost Lakhitia calls the idea "pretty out there.... I can't imagine the purpose of this scene being other than introducing a character in the most spectacular way possible and imaginable. I think this will certainly make for a very grand entrance, so I'm thinking whoever it is it's gotta be somebody really important." Cohost Kyle agrees, noting "It's hard to make anything of it because there's nothing really in the canon that we can point to be like this makes sense...." They also mention the fact that "this character can't easily communicate and often forgets things," which leads them to speculate that it could be the powerful elf lord Glorfindel, one of the few individuals in Tolkien's canon specifically said to reincarnate; the character's amnesia was suggested as a possible side effect of this reincarnation (Fellowship of the Fans 2021). Lakhitia draws a connection to Gandalf's struggles with his memory in the Jackson adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* after being brought back from his deathly battle with the

balrog. Another guess of hers is Sauron, who was already known to play a major role in this adaptation, although she points out that having the innocent Harfoots finding the evil Sauron made no sense except for irony. Kyle votes for Gandalf's colleagues, the mysterious Blue Wizards, which is interesting since they are most widely discussed in the essay "The Istari" included in *Unfinished Tales*, which the showrunners do not have the rights to (Tolkien 1980, 388-402).

Comments posted to this YouTube video cracked jokes at this seemingly outlandish rumor, with one comparing it to the fall to Earth of Clark Kent/Superman and another checking their calendar to see if it was an April Fool's joke. A reply to a tweet from the Fellowship of Fans Twitter account (@FellowshipFans) posted on that same date introduced another possibility from Tolkien's peripheral canon, the Man in the Moon, specifically as described in the poem "The Man in the Moon Came Down Too Soon" in which he comes to Earth to drink and be merry "And he tripped unaware on his slanting stair, and like a meteor,/ A star in flight, ere Yule one night, flickering down he fell" into the ocean (Tolkien 1966, 223).

The *Lord of the Rings on Prime* subreddit immediately jumped on the 'unconfirmed rumor' with user MTLTolkien reposting the aforementioned @FellowshipFans tweet in a discussion entitled "This. Is. a wild one." While several comments in this thread made jokes about the meteor being the famous character Eärendil the mariner, the driver of the Evening Star across the sky, going rogue after a night of drinking, commenters immediately plunged into serious discussions on the merits of the various suggestions made in the Fellowship of Fans YouTube video. They also offered additional possibilities for the character's identity, such as the mysterious Tom Bombadil (whose nature and backstory Tolkien himself never clearly explained), and the wizard Saruman. User WanderingWriter89 suggested possible motivations of "prequel fan service" and "the presence of recognizable faces," both of which were seen to favor Meteor Man (portrayed by Daniel Weyman) possibly being Gandalf (including pointing out the physical similarities between Weyman and Ian McKellan). Some comments were fixated on what they considered the irrationality of the meteor itself. User Celeborn2001 hoped it to be "a metaphor and not an actual meteor" and user FoolofaTook expressed a desire that it be "removed in post-production," but user Willpower2000 brought up the fact that a famous sword in *The Silmarillion* (Anglachel, carried by Túrin) had been fashioned out of a meteorite (Tolkien 2001, 201).

On February 4, 2022, a tweet by the Fellowship of Fans (@FellowshipFans 2022) teased "major character-actor revelations" on their Council of Fans live podcast to air that night, the tweet illustrated by the image of a meteorite/asteroid entering the atmosphere and beginning to form a meteor.



Screen capture of a tweet by @FellowshipFans.

This immediately led to renewed interest on the subreddit (JohnBeLucky 2022), featuring more detailed discussion of the two meteoritic swords crafted by Eöl the Dark Elf in Tolkien’s canon, including one (Anguirel) whose fate is left unclear (Tolkien 2001, 201-2). Again, the meteor itself seemed to rankle fans as being ‘uncanonical’ although the possibility that it brought meteoritic iron that could be used in a weapon (like the canonical swords) was deemed more palatable than having an actual person arrive that way. In this thread user Olorin_the_white also brought up another potential canonical meteorite from *The Lord of the Rings*, the mysterious Stone of Erech which was rumored to have fallen from the sky (Tolkien 1993, 62) and which appears in the *Lord of the Rings Online* computer game. Surprisingly, I did not see additional follow-up on this possibility from other fans in subsequent discussions; the original comment by Olorin_the_white was no longer visible when I recently returned to the subreddit while preparing this article (JohnBeLucky 2022).

The advertised Fellowship of Fans: Council of Fans live podcast reviewed the unconfirmed rumor from December about Meteor Man’s arrival but added some tantalizing details to the mix, namely the possibility that “it’s a villain, so basically the meteor guy is looking like a villain,” which appeared to argue for the character not being one of the Blue Wizards, Glorfindel, or Gandalf, and bolstering claims that he was Sauron (Fellowship of Fans 2022).

The following day a subreddit discussion entitled “‘Meteor Man’ theory to make it less disturbing” was initiated by Olorin_the_white, offering a detailed expansion of the possibility that the meteor is supposed to be delivering meteoritic iron for a weapon, perhaps even the rings of power themselves (Olorin_the_white 2022). The thread author explained “To me this idea seems much less ‘un-tolkien’ and would be a cool way to put the Hobbits in the story” (Olorin_the_white 2022). While many commenters found it an intriguing possibility what is more interesting is a demonstrated increase in the suggested connections between the meteorite fall and Sauron, which I posit is a direct reflection of the Fellowship of Fans’ suggestion that Meteor Man was a villain. This interpretation is supported by several comments which directly referred to him as a villain (as if it were firmly established in canon).

The official teaser trailer that dropped during the Superbowl on February 13, 2022, showed a brief glimpse of what appeared to be a low-flying meteor and a naked man being helped out of a fiery pit by a Harfoot (Prime Video 2022a).



Cropped screen capture of the ‘meteor’ from the Superbowl teaser trailer. All rights belong to Amazon Prime Video.

The fact that neither Meteor Man nor the Harfoot are affected by the fire associated with his apparent fall was later repeatedly invoked in subsequent subreddit posts, interpreted alternately as either a sign of the character's good or evil nature.



Cropped screen capture of a Harfoot helping Meteor Man out of the crater in the Superbowl teaser trailer. All rights belong to Amazon Prime Video.

As expected, there was a flurry of Meteor Man theory posts in the days directly after the trailer dropped, leading to a “temporary mega thread” among numerous less voluminous discussions (VarkingRuneSong 2022). While a variety of identities for Meteor Man were suggested and debated by fans (mainly those already mentioned), it is interesting to note that the suggestion that Meteor Man was evil largely dominated the discussion, leading numerous posters to try and explain how, within canon, he could be Sauron, despite the fact that fans generally agreed that Tolkien’s writings supported Sauron already being in Middle-earth in the Second Age rather than arriving (especially in such a dramatic way). The connection between Sauron and fire in canon (especially volcanoes) was commonly brought up, including the possibility that the meteor was Sauron being shot out of a volcano. There were also suggestions that since there was a balrog in the trailer, Meteor Man might evolve into a balrog over the course of the series.

Other fans invoked canon by highlighting the fact that like the wizards, Sauron was one of the Maia. A common suggestion was that since Sauron was established in canon to be a master manipulator, an amnesiac Sauron pretending to be a ‘good guy’ (instead of his being Gandalf, for example) was a logical way to fool both new and seasoned Tolkien fans. Again, two of the chief mysteries of the

series before its airing were the identity of Sauron (who he was posing as) and the identity of the Stranger/Meteor Man. Many fans seemed willing to conflate the two as the most likely resolution to these mysteries. A line from one of Tolkien's later, incomplete writings, "Concerning Galadriel and Celeborn," was quoted in support, "Sauron posed as an emissary of the Valar, sent by them to Middle-earth" (Tolkien 1980, 236-7), despite the fact that this line is found in material that the showrunners do not have official rights to use directly. Other fans combined research into Tolkien's writings with a detailed analysis of the teaser trailer visuals. For example, user pttimpterodactyl noted that the elven High King, Gil-galad, had written a letter warning the human island kingdom of Númenor (featured in *Rings of Power*) that a new shadow had arisen in the east of Middle-earth, and suggested that the apparent west-to-east trail of the meteor was suggestive of this (VarkingRunesong 2022). In response, user DarrenGrey countered that in Tolkien's imagined world, the West is the realm of the Valar, so why would something evil travel out of the West? Again, appealing to Tolkien's actual writings, other fans noted that since it was already known that the Amazon series would be greatly compressing the timeline of events in the Second Age of Middle-earth, it could be interpreted as Sauron fleeing from the Valar back to Middle-earth after the fall of his boss, the Satanic character Morgoth, at the end of the First Age. Other arguments included the Valar's placement of the Sun and the Moon into the sky in defiance of Melkor's destruction of the Two Trees of Valinor, as well as having Eärendil, the Evening Star, also patrolling the skies against evil. Therefore, they deemed it counter-canonical to have something evil coming from the sky. Again, note the interesting back and forth here, with fans offering bits of canon that supported their argument that were countered by other fans offering their own Tolkien factoids, generally done in a respectful tone and spirit.

This stands in contrast to the sometimes nasty online battles between book and film fans following the release of Peter Jackson's adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* (Siikilä-Laitila 2022). As a result, a moderator post on the LOTR subreddit labeled "Of film fans and film non-fans" warns "The divide between film fans and non-film fans in Tolkien-related fandom is about the deepest fandom divide I've ever seen, and it's unlikely to go away soon," further warning "Do not attack other people personally because of their opinions. We will aggressively moderate personal attacks" (ebneter 2014). Some of this 'books versus films' dissension spilled over into the *Rings of Power* discussions. For example, some book fans voiced concerns that the Amazon adaptation was taking the Jackson films as canon rather than the written source material, for example in the amount of effort seemingly paid in making sure that *Rings of Power* actors looked like younger versions of the Jackson characters (e.g., Elrond, Gandalf, Gil-galad, and Galadriel). It is therefore not surprising that conversations of canon in these subreddit discussions sometimes featured the interjection of a scene from a Jackson

film, such as the suggestion by user pearlsandplumes that “we’ve already briefly seen Sauron in meteor form in *The Hobbit* after Galadriel banishes him from Dol Guldur” (VarkingRunesong 2022).



Series of screen captures from Peter Jackson’s The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies showing Sauron fleeing from Dol Guldur in a meteor-like form. All rights belong to New Line Cinema.

One particularly interesting comment by user Yxklyx directed fellow fans back to Tolkien’s well-known sources, in particular the Finnish national epic, *The Kalevala*, which also features a meteor. The poster links information connecting the meteor reference to a historical meteorite fall and craters in Estonia (VarkingRunesong 2022). In the name of full disclosure, I had previously published about this same event in connection to Tolkien (as well as the meteoritic swords of Eöl and the Stone of Erech as a potential meteorite), although I have not seen my work referenced in any of these discussions (Larsen 2006; 2009). It should be noted that while ‘Meteor Man as Sauron’ seemed to dominate the discussions, there were fans who still argued for Gandalf, the Blue Wizards, or Glorfindel, as well as an original character, probably an original wizard, because as posters noted, Tolkien himself noted that their total number was unclear (Tolkien 1980, 389).

Discussion continued in a similar vein, ramping back up again in July in anticipation of San Diego Comic Con, and the release of a longer, final trailer on July 22, 2022 (Prime Video 2022b). ‘Meteor Man as Sauron’ continued to dominate discussion, with some of the subreddit users offering lengthy, well-referenced hypotheses explaining how this choice could be consistent with the canon and could reflect a lengthy character arc for Sauron in which he might fleetingly seek redemption only to fall into evil again. Again, fans were not

monolithic in this identification and a minority continued to argue for other identifications, largely based on various references to Tolkien's writings. An official character poster released by Prime Video showing the bearded stranger in a simple grey robe led many fans to draw visual connections with the wizards, especially Gandalf, which some fans considered evidence that he was NOT Sauron; interestingly others claimed this was proof that the Stranger WAS Sauron (who was a master deceiver and shapeshifter in canon, after all).



Official image of the Stranger. All rights belong to Amazon Prime Video.

It should be noted that there were some minor flames raised in a July 22, 2022, discussion concerning this image, entitled “New Meteor Man Image – he sure does look like a wizard to me.” Here some fans voiced exasperation at other fans’ apparent ‘slavishness’ to canon, as well as noting the ‘squishiness’ of defining Tolkien canon, as previously described. User ThereminLiesTheRub flippantly noted “If we took everything the man wrote on a notepad as canon eventually his grocery list would appear in a book” (vecnamite33333 2022).

Interestingly fans persisted in using the unofficial nickname ‘Meteor Man’ instead of the official character designation ‘The Stranger,’ continuing to draw attention to what they apparently considered to be one of his most important attributes – his method of arrival in Middle-earth – an attribute that some fans still

continued to voice discomfort with in the subreddit. Post Comic Con fans seemed to separate into two main camps with respect to Meteor Man's identity, either as Sauron (bolstered by an image of the meteorite crater that seemed to resemble Jackson's depiction of the eye of Sauron) or a Wizard (largely split between Gandalf or one of the Blue Wizards), although a small minority of fans continued to argue for their own pet hypothesis (Glorfindel being a sympathetic favorite, not the least reason being that he has been left out of every previous tv/film adaptation).



Screen capture of Meteor Man's crater, which can be interpreted to have a resemblance to Peter Jackson's depiction of the eye of Sauron. All rights belong to Amazon Prime Video.

These discussions continued to be largely guided by reference to canon, including a particularly lengthy and detailed August 12, 2022, book-based discussion that attempted to aggregate all of Tolkien's thoughts on the wizards in one place (HM2112 2022).

As August unfolded and sneak peak screenings allowed additional information and images to be revealed to the fandom, there was no significant change in the debate, although anticipation for an ultimate resolution was certainly strong. The most original of the new hypotheses I found on the subreddit was attributed to an 8-year-old girl and posted by her father. She looked at the

constellation drawings in the book belonging to the Harfoot elder Sadoc and felt she could identify one as Ursa Major the Great Bear (the constellation that contains the Big Dipper). Based on this identification she asked if Meteor Man was one of the class of shapeshifters in *The Hobbit* known as the Beornings (Bunaone 2022). While replies to the discussion gently pointed out problems with her analysis (as the Big Dipper has very specific mythologies in Tolkien's world [e.g., Tolkien 2001, 48]), the amount of encouragement paid to this young Tolkien fan in taking her seriously and treating her and her ideas with respect was endearing, and serves as a potent counterpoint to the poisonous anti-diversity rhetoric associated with some online fan discussions of *Rings of Power*.

In the Season 1 finale, Sauron was revealed to be Halbrand, and the Stranger to be a wizard, strongly insinuated to be (but not definitively identified as) Gandalf. Therefore, what have we learned through this exercise?

- While many online Tolkien fans are canon-driven, their ability to use and adapt their definitions of canon demonstrates a high level of creativity, although I must admit to being surprised that no fans in this sample recognized that the fall of the dragon Ancalagon from the sky in his battle with Eärendil is described as similar to a meteor (Tolkien 2001, 252).
- Despite the battle scars from the online wars between book and film fans of the Jackson era (and the anti-diversity campaign waged by some self-described “true fans” online during the months running up to the *Rings of Power* release), respectful disagreement is possible and is highly valued by a segment of the fandom.
- Rumors given oxygen by bloggers and other social media influences can have a huge impact on the fandom, as seen in the Fellowship of Fans suggestion that the Stranger was an evil character.

In conclusion, as we wait until Season 2 of *Rings of Power* is released, it will continue to be interesting to analyze where the fandom goes in terms of analyzing this adaptation with respect to its relationship to an admittedly nebulous definition of canon.

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