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“Fruit of the Poison Vine”: Defining and Delimiting Tolkien’s Orcs

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In an interview in New Politics in 2003, the author China Miéville discusses J.R.R. Tolkien's created species and asserts that "people really are defined by their race. If you are an Orc in Middle-earth you are, definitionally, a shit; if you are an elf, you might be difficult to deal with but you are, definitionally, noble" (Bould 2003) Whereas I might quibble with Miéville over the Elves – some of them are more than a bit difficult to deal with and some of their actions are not noble – his point about Orcs is one that merits further exploration. This paper examines how Orcs are defined by their origins and their presentation in the text, and what that means for how we perceive them as a race.

Dimitra Fimi addresses race in Tolkien's works in her article "Was Tolkien Really Racist?" (Fimi 2018). She discusses how Orcs are traditionally monstrous, representing corrupted, twisted versions of elves and men, made by Morgoth. In other words, they were made, constructed, as something that is essentially Other, causing disgust and horror and fear, just to suit Morgoth's purposes, and without choice in the matter.

In the text, Orcs are usually presented as an amorphous mass, perceived as uniform and treated as uniform. This alone is enough to make a critical reader pause, but Tolkien complicates this by the fact that some of them have names, dialogue, and individual personalities. How do we reconcile this with the scenes where the Orcs are an anonymous host, killed in their thousands just because they're Orcs? Is what Miéville says true, that Orcs are "definitionally a shit" and are therefore treated as such, with no regard for individuality?

On her website page 'From the Mailbag', fantasy author NK Jemisin offered a response to a letter from a fan who asked: "When are you going to write some real fantasy, y'know, with orcs?" The writer had assured her that they do like her work but do not like that it is labelled 'epic fantasy' when it does not "resemble Tolkien much," and they would prefer it contained "orcs, a dragon, some runes and maybe elves...set in a nice comforting medieval Europeish setting" (Jemisin 2013). Jemisin begins by questioning what this fan meant by 'real fantasy'. To be counted as 'real' fantasy, must it contain creatures like Elves and Orcs? Jemisin describes herself as "orc-averse, you might say; even orcophobic;" she doesn't write about Orcs as, she says, "Orcs are fruit of the poison vine that is human fear of 'the Other'. In games like

Dungeons & Dragons, orcs are a 'fun' way to bring faceless savage dark hordes into a fantasy setting and then gleefully go genocidal on them. In fiction, even telling the story from the dark hordes' PoV, or explaining why they're so... orcish... doesn't change the fact that they're an amalgamation of stereotypes" (Jemisin 2013). The fact that these are creatures who can be massacred without guilt or consideration for individuality lies at the heart of a sense of discomfort in reading them.

If orcs are indeed the fruit of the poisoned vine, this does reveal our human tendency towards instinctive fear of the Other but also points to what is commonly designated as being Other – especially if we question who it is that has the privilege of establishing the 'norm'. Unhelpful stereotyping, as Jemisin points out, confirms the Orcs as a race presented as a non-distinguishable mass rather than a group of individuals, thus returning us to Miéville and their being "definitionally a shit."

This becomes increasingly problematic on encountering the Uruk-Hai in *The Two Towers*, when skin colour becomes one of the ways in which Orcs are defined. These Orcs are described as "black," "dark," and "swart, slant-eyed;" for example: "a large black Orc, probably Uglúk, standing facing Grishnákh, a short crook-legged creature, very broad and with long arms that hung almost to the ground" (Book 3: Ch III 437). So: big, dark-skinned, with crooked legs, and long arms - like an ape, of course, which is a descriptor that has long been used to denigrate people of colour. Underpinning this is the fact that the Uruk-Hai refer to the Rohirrim as "white skins", thus establishing the 'good guys' as white, and the bad guys as black. Later, a smaller orc, a tracker in Mordor, is described as "black-skinned" (Book 6: Ch II 903).

Writing about *The Lord of the Rings* in The Guardian newspaper, John Yatt complains that "White men are good, 'dark' men are bad, orcs are worst of all" (Yatt 2002). Tolkien's language, using "light" and "white" vs. "dark" or "black," does seem to invite this reading, that everything that is white is good and everything that is dark, is bad but the lines are not that simple. There are characters who are coded as white, who do not do good, like Saruman, and Tolkien often blurs boundaries between good and evil. Boromir's actions in attempting to take the Ring by force are hardly good, but would we really designate him as evil for this action alone? The Orcs, though, are certainly positioned as the worst of all.

In Letter 210, written in June 1958, Tolkien describes Orcs as “...squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes; in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types” (*Letters* 274). While Tolkien's statement comparing orcs to ‘Mongol-types’ can be read as racist, he does put a disclaimer (to Europeans) before “least lovely.” It appears that he is acknowledging a western cultural bias, and also pointing out that they were degraded and repulsive versions of Mongol-types, not actual Mongol-types. Is this better or worse? It is worth noting that some orcs use crooked or bent swords, and in the chapter ‘The Departure of Boromir’ Tolkien also uses the term ‘scimitar’, which is historically associated with the Middle-East and resonates with his use of the terms “sallow-skinned” and “slant-eyed,” commonly-used Oriental descriptors.

Some critics have attempted to defend Tolkien, with varying success, against accusations of racism. Robert Stuart's recent monograph on Tolkien and Race, which aimed to examine Tolkien's work “for its conceptions of race, whether racist or anti-racist . . . searching out the good readings that Tolkien's works empower...and discrediting the bad readings that have been inflicted on him” (Stuart 13) only serves, as Fimi points out in her review, to privilege “good” readings, and reject “bad” ones, with judgment lying solely in the hands of this white author (Fimi 2022, 1). Andrew O'Hehir agrees that Orcs are “a subhuman race...that is morally irredeemable and deserves only death. They are dark-skinned and slant-eyed, and...inherently evil.” But this, he says, “is also the product of his background and era, like most of our inescapable prejudices. At the level of conscious intention, he was not a racist” (O' Hehir 2001). This is perilously close to an argument that Tolkien was a man of his time or, as Jenny Turner phrased it, “an Englishman of his time” (Turner 2001). This is, I would contend, a rather lazy way to dismiss concerns and shut down conversation as it is hard to argue, with any evidence, that there was no discussion of racism or racial anxiety in 20th-century Britain.

Perhaps instead we should judge on intention and consider that Tolkien believed he was not racist but was, in ways that are built in from society, from culture, from being raised as a straight, cisgendered white man in a society that has always prioritised that identity. One example of this defence is O' Hehir's suggestion that Orcs are “by design and intention a northern European's paranoid caricature of the races he has dimly heard about” (O' Hehir 2001). However, I'm not convinced

that this argument is persuasive, given that Tolkien spent a few childhood years in South Africa, with black servants he did remember. We also know that, upon their return, his mother addressed the idea of apartheid and taught him about its evils. Again, we must look for greater subtleties than this.

In his article “Demonizing the Enemy, Literally: Tolkien, Orcs, and the Sense of the World Wars,” Robert Talley describes the Orcs as being “a demonised enemy...despite Tolkien’s own objections to demonisation of the enemy in the two World Wars” (Tally 2019, 54). This cognitive dissonance is further evidenced when Tolkien spoke out against the demonization of a people, responding to the view that all Germans should be killed by declaring:

There was a solemn article in the local paper seriously advocating systematic exterminating of the entire German nation as the only proper course after military victory: because, if you please, they are rattlesnakes, and don't know the difference between good and evil! (What of the writer?) The Germans have just as much a right to declare the Poles and Jews exterminable vermin, subhuman, as we have to select the Germans: in other words, no right, whatever they have done.” And yet he himself creates a demonized enemy race that is put to the sword in their hundreds, if not thousands. (*Letters* 93)

It is inescapable, though, that Tolkien himself creates a race that is a demonized enemy, one that he gleefully puts to the sword in their hundreds, if not thousands.

The origins of Tolkien’s Orcs, whose name he derives from ‘demon’, are worth considering here. In letter 144, Tolkien says that “Orcs...are nowhere clearly stated to be of any particular origin. But since they are servants of the Dark Power, and later of Sauron, neither of whom could, or would, produce living things, they must be ‘corruptions’” (*Letters* 177-178). In Letter 153, Tolkien says “They would be Morgoth’s greatest Sins, abuses of his highest privilege, and would be creatures begotten of Sin, and naturally bad” (*Letters* 195). Note here that Tolkien immediately has a crisis over the Orcs and their evil, as “by accepting or tolerating their making – necessary to their actual existence – even Orcs would become part of the World, which is God’s and ultimately good” (*Letters* 195). In reference to Orcs originating as

tortured and ruined Elves, the version found in the published *Silmarillion*, he describes the Orcs as “pre-existing real beings on whom the Dark Lord has exerted the fullness of his power in remodelling and corrupting them, not making them” (*Letters* 195). Even within this one letter, we see Tolkien wrestling with the problem of the Orcs.

Of course, this is not the only origin story. Tolkien struggled with the idea of Orcs being irredeemably bad; that in the moment of their creation, they become, in Miéville's words, “definitionally a shit.” As Dimitra Fimi points out, “the thought that the hideous and malicious Orcs were once Elves - the highest beings of Middle-earth, became increasingly unbearable to Tolkien” (Fimi 2009, 155). An additional dilemma arises from his own religious beliefs clashing with this concept and he attempts to resolve this by proposing several semi-contradictory theories for their origins. In ‘The Tale of Tinúviel’, orcs originate as “foul broodlings of Melko” (*The Book of Lost Tales II*, 14). In *The Silmarillion*, orcs are East Elves (Avari) tortured and mutilated by Melkor until their bodies were corrupted; for breeding purposes, they “had life and multiplied after the manner of the Children of Ilúvatar” (*Silm.* 50). Tolkien stated in a 1963 letter to a Mrs. Munby that orc-females must have existed (see Gee, 2004). In other words, orcs procreate via the usual sexual methods. However, every orc we see in the text is presented as male.

In *The Fall of Gondolin*, “all that race were bred by Melko of the subterranean heats and slime” (*BoLT II* 159). Or, as Tolkien wrote in the essay ‘Myths Transformed,’ they were “beasts of humanized shape”; possibly Elves who were mated with beasts, and later Men (*Morgoth's Ring*, Text VIII). Another idea was that Orcs could have been fallen Maiar, perhaps a kind called Boldog, like lesser Balrogs (*Morgoth's Ring*, Text X). Another rejected idea was that Orcs are like automata, lacking any kind of individuality or agency. Finally, also in *Morgoth's Ring*, Christopher Tolkien concludes that his father's final view on the matter was that “Orcs were bred from Men” (*Morgoth's Ring* 421).

In *The Road to Middle-earth* Tom Shippey writes that the orcs in *The Lord of the Rings* were almost certainly designed to provide Middle-earth with “a continual supply of enemies over whom one need feel no compunction” (Shippey 265). This echoes Jemison's thoughts about the Orcs in *Dungeons and Dragons*, that here is a

group of creatures on whom you can inflict a genocidal attack because that's what they're there for. However, Tolkien complicates this blanket view by revealing their origins as also to be found in the primary world. In Letter 153, for example, Tolkien wrote that orcs were “fundamentally a race of 'rational incarnate' creatures, though horribly corrupted, if no more so than many Men to be met today” (*Letters* 190). Further complicating the issue, Shippey points out that, despite the way in which the text presents them as evil personified, orcs do have a concept of good and evil, even their own understanding of ethics. As Robert Tally argues, despite the consistent presentation of orcs as “loathsome, ugly, cruel, feared, and especially terminable...Tolkien could not resist the urge to flesh out and 'humanize' these inhuman creatures from time to time” (Tally 2010, 17). Shippey notes that in *The Two Towers*, the orc Gorbag criticises what he calls a “regular elvish trick” when he believes that Frodo, whose limp form has been discovered still wrapped in Shelob’s webs, has been left behind by his companions – seemingly forgetting that he and other Orcs had similarly abandoned the unfortunate Ufthak to his fate (Bk 4: Ch X, 722 – 723).

So where do we go from here? How do we confront the idea that Tolkien presents us with a race that is fundamentally bad, othered from the point of naissance, the physical representation of evil within Middle-earth that is otherwise often incorporeal, an amorphous mass to be slaughtered, whose name means ‘hell-devil’ (Hammond & Scull 762) – yet presents some of them as individuals with thought and agency? A race Tolkien describes with language such as ‘corrupted’, ‘bred’ or ‘constructed’, all of which removes any sense of humanity. There are no easy answers, but we can complicate a simplistic reading, and challenge assertions that Tolkien’s work cannot be racist because he was ‘a man of his time’. Orcs are creatures of a secondary world but drawn from primary world ideas and stereotypes. Tolkien may have written them as innately evil, but that doesn’t mean we can’t question this, and read them as more complex than that in a world where divisions between good and evil are more nuanced than a surface reading might suggest. wreak

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