

Letter to the Editor,

In response to the article by Jean Chausse (*Mallorn* No. 59, Winter 18), one may indeed see in the healing of Théoden “a glimpse of the Final Victory”. I wonder also if Tolkien’s use of material in LotR is even more subtle and nuanced than has been suggested so far.

That striking phrase “through fire and ...”, spoken by or of Gandalf, morphs through three variations across two chapters:

First Mithrandir himself: “I have passed through fire and deep water” (The White Rider – my emphasis)

Then Aragorn: “He has passed through the fire and the abyss”

Gandalf again, waiting on Théoden: “I have not passed through fire and death to bandy crooked words with a serving-man till the lightning falls” (The King of the Golden Hall)

The vocabulary of fire and water prompts in my mind too thoughts of baptism in water and the Holy Spirit – alongside the straightforward meaning of the narrative. This is what good fiction does: suggests, alludes, nudges? A Church-minded person or a medievalist (Tolkien was, of course, both) may also notice the dominant pigments in the story-line at this point: white and gold – in the Western Church, liturgical colours of Eastertide.

In the first formulation, “I have passed through fire and ... water”, one might detect an echo of another bible text, Isaiah 43:2, which in Church is often read during the Paschal season. The addition of the adjective “deep” may bring to mind waters plural in scripture and liturgy: the psalmist’s lament of having come into “deep waters” (Psalm (68)69); and the phraseology of traditional orders of service for Easter (and obsequies) about going “through the deep waters of death”.

In the second iteration, “the abyss” could suggest not only the chasm beneath Durin’s Bridge, where “the deep water” temporarily extinguishes the fire of the Balrog, but also the story of Christ’s descent into hell. It would be only an oblique reference, for unlike the scriptural “bottomless pit” (Revelation 9:11), the great rift in Moria does have a bottom, albeit one “beyond light and knowledge ... where time is not counted” (The Bridge of Khazad-Dûm).

Third time round, death is named; but still the reader is kept waiting to be told explicitly that Gandalf had fallen in the military sense of the term. For that we have to wait until he pays a visit with a very different outcome, to an erstwhile colleague (The Voice of Saruman). There, on the steps of Orthanc, before witnesses, he states in plain words: “I am Gandalf the White, who has returned from death.”

Jennifer Brooker

Dear *Mallorn* Editor,

May I make a few comments regarding Nancy Bunting’s ‘Checking the Facts’ (*Mallorn* 59, pp. 52-6)? She has much to criticise certain Tolkien scholars for in their ‘relationship to the facts’, but I feel that although in certain cases she may well be correct, in others the evidence is ambiguous, and in yet others she is plainly wrong.

Dr. Bunting quotes Tolkien as saying (Flieger & Anderson, *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*, p. 56 [not 71]): ‘A real taste for [fairy-stories] awoke after “nursery” days, and after the years, few but long-seeming, between learning to read and going to school.’ However, she disagrees with Flieger & Anderson’s interpretation of this as meaning the period following his mother’s death, when Tolkien was 12. Instead she considers that the time referred to is sometime before he was eight. But the language here is quite ambiguous. Tolkien isn’t saying that he got a taste for fairy-stories right after learning to read, but after (not ‘between’) the years between learning to read and going to school. This could place the beginning of his particular interest in fairy-stories anywhere from, say, mid-way between learning to read and going to school to even some time after starting school, which latter he did when he began at King Edward’s school in Birmingham at the age of 8 in 1900. Tolkien’s reminiscence in later life of the years he lived at Sarehole (1896–1900) as ‘the longest-seeming and most formative part of my life’ is possibly, but by no means necessarily, the same as the period in which he developed a taste for fairy-stories.

Another ambiguity is what is meant by ‘a real taste’ for fairy-stories. Undoubtedly Tolkien was well-acquainted with such things from an early age: witness his early liking, as Carpenter notes, for Andrew Lang’s Fairy Books, and his attempt to compose a story about a ‘green great dragon’ at about the age of 7. But that may or may not be the same as his getting a ‘real taste’ for them.

This might seem to be making heavy weather of the specific point. For all we know, the infant Tolkien first heard the horns of Elfland at the age of 4. All I am saying is that the available evidence admits of enough ambiguity to give the editors of TOFS some benefit of the doubt in their own evaluation of the matter, and surely yields no justification for Dr. Bunting’s castigation of those reviewers of the book who looked favourably upon it.

John Garth (*Tolkien and the Great War*) and Raymond Edwards (*Tolkien*) are taken to task by Dr Bunting for claiming that the subjects of the poem ‘You & Me and the Cottage of Lost Play’ are Tolkien and his fiancée Edith Bratt, rather than Tolkien and his younger brother Hilary. The poem was written on 27-28 April 1915, when Tolkien was 23. Certainly it is about childhood, but is it about Hilary? Vairë’s remarks to Eriol in ‘The Cottage of Lost Play’ (c. 1916-17) reveal a tender concern for the welfare of young children: ‘Ever and anon our children fare forth again to find the Great Lands, and go about among the lonely children and whisper to them at dusk in early bed by night-light and candle-flame, or comfort those that weep’ [BoLT1, p. 20]; so Tolkien was

not insensitive to such matters. And, of course, Tolkien and Edith didn't first know each other as children, but only later, as teenagers. Yet, is the poem specifically about the Tolkien brothers? Perhaps, but this reader simply cannot see that it is plainly and obviously about them, any more than it is plainly and obviously about Tolkien and Edith. Possibly it is a sort of retrojection of the latter pair into an imagined shared childhood. In any case, the ambiguity (sorry to use that word again!), in the absence of further evidence, frustrates a definitive identification. A Scotch verdict is appropriate here.

The dating of *Leaf by Niggle* raises some concerns with Dr. Bunting. She criticises Raymond Edwards for casting doubt on Tolkien's dating of *Leaf by Niggle* to 1938-9, arguing that other evidence for a date in the early 1940s is inconclusive. One particular piece of evidence she considers to be crucial comes in a postcard of Tolkien's, dated April 21, 1943, to the poet Alan Rook, where Tolkien promises to send Rook a story relevant to 'pictures' that Tolkien 'wrote this time last year'. Hammond and Scull consider this to be conclusive evidence for dating *Leaf*, but Dr. Bunting says, 'The Chronology documents that in the spring and summer of 1942 Tolkien was working on *The Lord of the Rings* and that time frame matches the reference in the Rook postcard.' But this really won't do. Tolkien was indeed working on *LotR* in 1942, but he was also working on it in 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940, 1941 etc. Note that the form of words 'wrote this time last year' gives an impression of something written and finished the year before; *LotR* was very much an ongoing and unfinished process at that time. Also, Rook would have to have read *Leaf* in the first place (impossible at that time) even to understand *LotR* as a 'picture'. (We should note that Tolkien was not always a reliable guide to his own chronology. In *The Return of the Shadow* (p. 461), Christopher Tolkien considers that his father 'erred in his recollection of the year' in which a certain point in the writing of *LotR* was reached.)

Dr. Bunting concludes this section with a list of reviewers of Edwards' book on Tolkien who, doubtless wrongly, praised it.

On the basis of the omission of a paragraph gap in Douglas A. Anderson's obituary notice of Humphrey Carpenter in *Tolkien Studies* II (2005), Dr. Bunting deduces that there were three drafts of Carpenter's biography of Tolkien: one which takes an initial, rather flippant, 'slapstick' view of Tolkien, a more serious draft which was the one submitted to the family, and finally the one that was published. Anderson quotes from a transcribed interview with Carpenter in which Carpenter discusses the writing of his biography. The part quoted by Anderson consists of the end of one paragraph as printed in the original printed source, and the beginning of the next. However, Anderson omits the paragraph gap, and prints a continuous text of Carpenter's quoted speech, an action which is of concern to Dr. Bunting. She considers that a new paragraph 'signals a new thought indicating that the "first draft" submitted to the Tolkien family was not the same as the "first draft" in

which Carpenter struggled with learning how to write his first biography and which contained that initial "slapstick" treatment of Tolkien.' But this is wrong on two counts. First, this interpretation indicates that there were three drafts of the biography: a 'slapstick' one; a more serious one, as presented to the family; and the final one, as approved by the family and published. Now, nothing that I have ever heard about Carpenter's biography, including what Carpenter said in publications, in lectures, or even in conversation, leads me to conclude that there were three drafts. There was the original first draft as submitted to the family, and the final, published version. Doubtless, in writing the first draft, which, as noted, was a learning experience for Carpenter in writing biography, Carpenter did a great deal of re-writing, and we might not be too surprised to see that the earliest writing indeed belonged to the 'slapstick' approach; but such writing, in itself, hardly constitutes a draft in any real sense. However, there is another flaw – a fatal one, I think – in Dr. Bunting's argument. Carpenter's reminiscences were not written by him: they were spoken by him and then broken up into paragraphs for easier reading by the transcriber of what Carpenter said. Hence the paragraphs in fact have no 'authority' in the first place, and criticism of the omission of paragraphing and of what that might imply carries no weight.

Dr. Bunting is suspicious of the excuse that the published *Letters of Tolkien*, in Douglas A. Anderson's words in his Carpenter obituary, 'proved too large from the publishing point of view, and cuts were made for reasons of length.' She contrasts this with the demand for Tolkien material at that period, and the many and varied publications – 'posters, calendars, and cards,' as well as books such as *The Father Christmas Letters and Pictures* by Tolkien – with which that demand was satisfied, and wonders if the cuts to the original selection of letters were due to censorship rather than size. But perhaps this isn't a valid contrast. I would put forward two considerations here: (i) the actual size of a published book involves considerations of publishing economics which outsiders might not always appreciate. It was doubtless for such reasons that those volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* devoted to the composition of *LotR* took up three-and-a-half volumes rather than just three slightly larger ones; (ii) the *Letters of Tolkien*, I would suggest, was plainly not intended to be a 'complete letters' of Tolkien, more a selection mainly to keep the readers happy. Doubtless we will one day get such a desideratum as the *Collected Letters*, but not, I imagine, for some time yet.

I'm not quite sure I follow Dr. Bunting's animadversions about Verlyn Flieger's writings on *The Story of Kullervo*. She considers that Professor Flieger's 2012 essay "Tolkien, Kalevala, and "The Story of Kullervo" in *Green Suns and Faërie* contains revisions from her 2010 essay "The Story of Kullervo" and *Essays on Kalevala* in *Tolkien Studies* VII which she does not acknowledge and which the reviewers of the latter largely fail to pick up on. (It's tough being a reviewer these days.)

In the 2012 essay and in her commentary in the published

*The Story of Kullervo*, Professor Flieger remarks that ‘the tradition that physical mistreatment of an infant could have psychological repercussions is an old one’. But this is incorrect, Dr. Bunting points out: in the nineteenth century (and before), ‘physical abuse and beating of children by strangers, educators, and parents was common, acceptable, and unremarkable.’ But the writer of the *Kalevala*, in a passage spoken by Väinämöinen, remarks that ‘Children brought up crookedly, Any infant cradled wrongly ... Never acquires a mind mature.’ Dr. Bunting considers that since such brutal attitudes were common in Tolkien’s childhood (he was born in 1892), such an affirmation in a poem which had an enormous impact on Tolkien would have resonated with him. However, I’m not sure I altogether grasp the point that Dr. Bunting is trying to make here. Is she criticising Professor Flieger for not giving due weight to the possibly brutal regime in which the young Tolkien may have been brought up in her appreciation of Tolkien’s response to the *Kalevala*?

Doubtless much more could be said on these matters, but I shall not burden the reader who has got this far with any further ramblings.

Yours truly,  
Charles Noad

Dear Rosalinda,

Just received this year’s *Mallorn*, and what a bumper issue it is too!

Sorry to hear that you’ll be moving on. It’s hard to believe that it has been four years, and where those four years have gone, but whatever you do I wish you all the best for the future.

Regards,  
Gordon Palmer

