

Friendship in Tolkien's world

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In some degree friendship is present in all of Tolkien's writings, but it is never so vivid and developed as it is in *The Lord of the Rings*. The overall importance of friendship in the War of the Ring is hinted at even by the subtitle of the first volume, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Yet we must keep in mind that a title is usually a result of argument between the author and the editor or publisher in which the latter's word has greater weight, because he knows better what would attract the readers. So the choice of 'the fellowship' may and may not indicate how big a role friendship played in Tolkien's imaginative world of Middle-earth. But knowing what a pedantic writer Tolkien was, it can be assumed that there must have been some reason why he agreed upon this particular subtitle.

It is certain that the problem of appropriate subtitles for the three volumes of the book was a matter of lengthy discussion between Tolkien and his publisher and friend Rayner Unwin, that lasted about half a year as it is briefly mapped out in Carpenter's *Letters* (2006, pp. 165-170). The first subtitles Tolkien suggested, after his intention to publish it as one volume failed, were more closely related to the Ring and its actual position during the journey. There were originally six, one for each book. These were later dropped when the publisher wanted only one title for each volume. Only after Rayner's personal visit did Tolkien settle on the current subtitles. "The Fellowship of the Ring will do, I think; and it fits well with the fact that the last chapter of the Volume is The Breaking of the Fellowship" he reasoned (*ibid.*, p. 170).

Apropos of *The Breaking of the Fellowship*, a remarkable fact is that the word 'company' in reference to the Nine Walkers was used in the text over 130 times, whereas the term 'fellowship' appeared only in 9 cases apart from the title of the chapter and the volume, plus once in the Prologue and three times in the Appendix B. And out of that, in one instance they are both used in the same sentence as equal synonyms (Tolkien, 2011, p. 955). Moreover, the phrase 'the Fellowship of the Ring' with capital first letter in 'fellowship' is used only once! It is when Aragorn said farewell to his friends at the end of the story: "*Here then at last comes the ending of the Fellowship of the Ring*" (*ibid.*, p. 981).

Why then did Tolkien prefer 'fellowship' rather than 'company' for the titles, when he so seldom used it in the text? An answer to this may be found in the philological description of these words. Though nowadays words 'fellow' and 'companion' are often used interchangeably, their meanings slightly vary and Tolkien as a professor of philology was well aware of this.

Companion

'Companion' comes from Old French *compaignon*, originally from Latin *companiono* meaning literally "one who

shares bread". It indicates someone who associates or goes along, accompanies another; who shares in an activity with another or spends time with him often only by a chance. In the past it mostly denoted people who were travelling together. Similarly, 'company' was first used this sense to mark a group of co-travelers, companions. Among other definitions there is: a group of people joined together for some common purpose; or in general, a number of people gathered in one place, a small society. It also represents a military unit. But 'company' can denote also the feeling of togetherness, a 'companionship'. This kind of relationship typically involves only little or no emotion and personal affection, since a company is usually created rather out of need and inevitability than desire.

'The Company of the Ring' then may seem more suitable a name for the Nine Walkers. They are characters of different races who came to Rivendell to seek advice. It may be only by chance that they all arrived around the same time when big things were due to be decided. When they met for the first time, each of them was full of opinions and prejudices which they were not easily willing to give up. Some of them were even suspicious, unfriendly, spiteful, almost hating because of personal or historical conflicts, such as the elves and the dwarves. And suddenly, they were chosen to travel together for an undefined period of time until a certain death would find them. They were appointed for a hopeless task full of danger and struggles, and were then expected to help and rely on each other. When they set off, most of them were total strangers; they did not know anything about their co-travelers.

The group thus meets all the basic characteristics of 'company' as defined by dictionaries. It is a group of people who happen to travel together, rather by a chance than by their own wills. They were joined together for one common purpose, destroying the Ring. Consequently, they spend much time together and need to co-operate in many activities that are necessary for their survival and achievement of their task. They even literally share bread and all food as the original ancient meaning of 'companion' implies. Moreover, it is obviously an organized group, because not everyone has an equal position. Some persons are more important than others, and the leaders can be easily identified; and even though they do not really have war ambitions, their aim is closely war related. So in this sense it can be understood as some kind of military unit, too. Moreover, since it involves representatives of all the free nations of Middle-earth, it is an example of the society in microcosm.

However, the group does not remain the same throughout the whole story. The relations within it change and evolve towards friendship. And that is where the definition of 'company' ceases to be enough. The meaning of 'fellowship' thus has to be considered.

Fellow

The root word ‘fellow’ comes from Old English *feolaga* and originated from Old Norse *felagi* which is a combination of words meaning “money” and “lay” and implies “one who puts down money with another in a joint venture”.

This original business connotation was later extended to any kind of partner and nowadays is also used as a synonym for ‘companion’ or comrade. But in the most general sense it is applied to any man, while two extreme attributes of meaning can be distinguished: in a positive way it can be used to name someone who is in the same situation as me, of the same class, my equal, a peer with whom I have something in common; and in a negative way it can be used to point out that someone is of lower rank or considered to be of little importance or worth.

Such meanings hardly correspond to what is needed to define the group of the Nine Walkers and their actual relationships. ‘Fellow’ is too general and used too carelessly, even more than ‘companion’. And Tolkien knew this for he used it similarly widely; for good and bad creatures alike.¹ But the most significant difference is found in the ‘-ship’ derivatives of these words.

A ‘fellowship’, in spite of its modern scholarly and religious connotations, implies in each of its definitions some degree of friendship. It can be said that friendship is essential for the formation of fellowship. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* provides the following definition of fellowship: “Friendliness; the spirit of comradeship; an instance of this” (1993, p. 932). Other dictionaries describe it as “a close association of friends or equals sharing similar interests” or even likening it to a brotherhood. It can be observed that, like ‘companionship’, it is based on shared interests, experiences and aims, but ‘fellowship’, in addition to this, provides something extra – a feeling of closeness and intimacy, mutual love, a friendship. Thus actions between the members of such a group are no longer done only out of duty, but are motivated by fellow feeling and concern for the well-being of one’s co-travelers. This is a much more appropriate description of the relations between the Nine Walkers.

It is not certain when the transformation from pure ‘company’ into a ‘fellowship’ happened, but from their stay at Lothlórien on the group is perceived rather as a ‘fellowship’ and the friendly bonds between them are much strengthened. All the time they were absolutely free to leave when they wanted, but none of them did, some out of pride like Boromir, but most of them out of friendship; they could not betray their friend in his greatest time of need.

The best manifestation of why ‘fellowship’ is more suitable for them can be found in the scene when Aragorn, after the breaking of their company, has to decide whether he, along with Legolas and Gimli, will follow the Ring-bearer or the kidnapped hobbits. If he acted out of duty, he would need to

go after Frodo. But he did not. He decided to chase the orcs in hope to save his dear friends from their claws. This does not mean that he loved or cared about Frodo and Sam less. They just were not in an immediate danger; moreover, their success depended on secrecy and three such strong figures as they were would seem suspicious in such a land as they were going to. So it might have been rather Aragorn’s love and friendship that kept him from going with Frodo, either because he could not help him much or because he did not want to attract unwanted attention to him. Instead, he chose the evidently more hopeless task to run after the enemies and save Merry and Pippin or die trying. Actually, the two of them were very dear to everyone in the company and almost everyone who met them treated them with special kindness as if they were small children. No one wanted them to get hurt, but rather to keep them safe and that is why they often felt like a useless baggage always left behind during the great deeds.

But returning to the original question of why Tolkien preferred the Fellowship of the Ring to Company in the subtitle of the first volume, the choice now seems natural. Not only that ‘fellowship’ better captures the relations and feelings created between its members, but the connotations of this word for most people make it more attractive for the readers, since people are more likely to reach for something with an emotional undertone. Consequently, both the writer and the publisher could be satisfied.

Mellon

Another feature that indicates how significant friendship was in Middle-earth is the writing on the gate of the ancient underground city of dwarves, Moria: “*pedo mellon a minno*” (Tolkien, 2011, p. 305).

Gandalf, being the best skilled in ancient Elvish languages, read it as follows: “Speak, *friend*, and enter” (p. 306, my emphasis), presumably understanding the word *mellon* to be only a way of addressing the potential reader of the note, and adding emphasis on the first word of the utterance. However, as it was later revealed, with the missing punctuation in Elvish it was in fact a riddle with self-contained answer and the correct reading should have been: “Say “Friend” and enter” (p. 308), with emphasis on the word ‘friend’ as being the keyword which opens the gate. Had it been written this way, it could have saved them much time and also some serious trouble. But that is part of the story’s magic which increases the tension.

However, here again a question arises: Why the word ‘friend’ had been chosen to be the password? Does it have any special importance in the world of Middle-earth? As it is explained in the book the password had to be some easy-to-remember and generally known word because the gate it opened guarded an entrance to the famous dwarf-craft centre which stood along a busy trading route between the realms of Man and Elves. In time of peace the Gate of Moria was much frequented, being used by all the three races of the Free Peoples. It may be that this word had been chosen to mark those friendly terms between them.

¹ To use the term ‘fellow’ so freely is a typical feature of hobbitic speech as a sign of their easy-going lifestyle. In Book I, the four hobbits use it not only for their friends or acquaintances, but in the general sense even in reference to the Black Riders until Aragorn explains them what they actually are. As for the bad characters, the orcs use it too among themselves. In total, the word appeared in the text 53 times.

Yet, the gate should have kept all evil creatures, like mountain orcs, out. And that is what I want to point to, the contrast in friendship as perceived and realized by the Dark Lord and by the Free Peoples. Not that the Dark Lord and his servants know nothing about friendship. He does and he even offers his friendship to many people or nations, such as to Dáin the dwarf king from the Lonely Mountain. But Sauron is perverted and his friendship unfair. He only desires domination and power over others. He cannot share or help, that is why he is not capable of any kind of friendship, because these two, sharing and mutual help, are the principal characteristics of friendship. He can only pretend it to achieve his goals. But the history reveals that everyone who had ever been offered his pseudo-friendship was betrayed afterwards, it always ended in disaster for them, as for example the Númenoreans or Elves from Eregion.

Moreover, Sauron also initiates and supports unfriendliness between the nations who stand against him, because then they are weaker and he can subdue them more easily. He does this by means of suspicion and lets false and misleading information spread over the world, for example the rumour that the Rohirrim pay a tribute of horses to him. It is therefore necessary to maintain friendship between the Free People, so that they can better defend their land from Sauron's raiding servants. Such nation-friendships - Alliances, although they were formed especially for war purposes - had long-term effects on the relations of the nations. One of the greatest importance was the Last Alliance, when only thanks to the united forces of Men and Elves were they able to defeat the Dark Lord. This co-operation was never forgotten and in the story it is often recalled or used as an example to break race prejudices. There were also some minor alliances related only to a specific area or situation, such as the one between Elves, Men and Dwarves during the Battle of Five Armies (though this one was formed out of sudden necessity rather than willingness), or friendly-help pacts, like the one between Gondor and Rohan that had its roots even further in the past.

In general it can be said that in *The Lord of the Rings* some kind of friendship is necessary for survival, whether for individuals or whole nations. Tolkien experienced it in his own life and knew the real value of friendship. He knew that true friendship has a magical power when one is alone and with an unfortunate fate, as when he became orphaned, or like Frodo when he realized how dangerous the Ring is; and very likely it was friendship that kept Tolkien from going mad in the trenches. So the significance of friendship that can be perceived in his books is not surprising. The inscription on the Gate of Moria is just the clearest and most apparent expression of this truth.

Linguistic note

The Elvish word *mellon* itself is a perfect example of the process behind the creating of languages as understood by Tolkien the philologist. It is well known that Tolkien's invented languages were not made up randomly, but the word *mellon* proves that they were inspired by Latin and

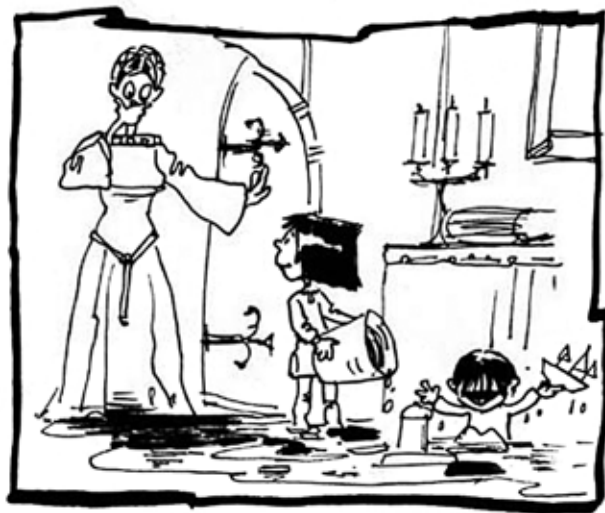
Old Finnish not only phonetically and grammatically, but also semantically.

Mellon is translated as 'friend', being derived from root *mel-* meaning 'love'. So it actually means 'the one who is loved'. However, Tolkien did not assign the word such meaning just because he liked it, but it involved a deeper reasoning. In his language-making he followed the very same principles which are observable within real languages. The construction of *mellon* is similar to the Latin word for friend, *amico*, which is derived from the verb *amare* 'to love'. And *amicitia*, a word which Cicero used for 'friendship', has the same base as well. Similarly, the Greek word *philia* which Aristotle used denotes one of four kinds of love the Ancient Greeks recognized, derived from *philos* - 'loving', and *philein* - 'to love'. Even the English word *friend* has the same etymology, originating from Old English *freond*, verb *freogan* which means 'to love, to favor'.

Having given these examples, it seems that the notion of 'friend' is the same in most European languages, though expressed in different words. So naturally, Tolkien could do no other than follow this pattern if he wanted his Elvish to resemble real languages. Moreover, the word *mellon* as 'the loved one' is thus in correspondence with the philosophical understanding of friendship described as a special type of love.

Resources

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