

Anders Albertsson

January 10, 2014

### *The Ring, Dragon Sickness, and The Arkenstone*

The small gold ring that Bilbo Baggins finds in the dark caves under the Misty Mountain in *The Hobbit* is not evil- or it was not originally evil, or indeed corrupting or sinister in any way- in the original first edition of *The Hobbit* as published from 1937 to 1951. The real source of evil in *The Hobbit* is gold and wealth- which has a corrupting influence so strong as to draw Dragons to large quantities of it, and to make Dwarves, Men, and Elves forget their wits and make poor decisions in pursuit of it. However, the prototype for the One Ring as featured in *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy does exist in *The Hobbit*- in the form of the Arkenstone- which possesses a magical power and draw that may even be linked to the central artifacts of the Silmarillion. In this essay I will explore three topics: the Ring- and how it became the One Ring fourteen years later, Dragon Sickness- the plight of Dwarves, Elves, and Men, and the Arkenstone- a strange and powerful gemstone that is the literary predecessor to the One Ring in Tolkien's trilogy.

Gollum's ring was not originally intended by Tolkien to be the One Ring to Rule Them All, forged by Sauron in the fires of Mt. Doom in order to control the kings of Elves, Men, and Dwarves during the Second Age. In fact, *The Hobbit*, which was originally published in 1937, existed before the concept of Sauron or his One Ring was even a scribble in Tolkien's notebooks. The ring that Bilbo picks up is in fact just a simple ring of invisibility- it is "a turning point in his career" as a burglar- but nothing more (Hobbit 68). In this first edition, the ring is still Gollum's greatest treasure, though he intends it to be a present for Bilbo if he wins the riddle-game (Olsen 10). When Bilbo wins the riddle game, Gollum goes to look for the present- and finds that his precious ring is missing. Gollum apologizes profusely, "We are ssorry; we didn't mean to cheat, we meant to give it our only only present, if it won the competition," and even offers to catch some fish for Bilbo to make up for it. In the end, Bilbo says that he would let Gollum off the hook on the condition that he would lead Bilbo out

of the caves. Gollum reluctantly agrees, and takes Bilbo up the passage, and the two say good-bye at the top “though [Bilbo] did not feel quite comfortable until he felt quite sure it was gone.” In this first edition of *The Hobbit*- which was not just some early leaked draft, but in fact the only, and definitive, published version of *The Hobbit* in the world for *fourteen years*, Gollum was not an evil, twisted hobbit that had been turned into a pale monster from centuries of possessing the One Ring- he was simply a creature who lived in a cave under the Misty Mountains- and even a somewhat agreeable one at that who had “learned long long ago to never, never, cheat at the riddle-game” and felt obliged to fulfill his debt to Bilbo instead of eating him- and did not for one moment suspect Bilbo of stealing his precious ring. It was only in 1951, three years before the first installment of Tolkien's trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, was published, that he released a second edition of *The Hobbit*. This new version, now “*The Hobbit* as we know it,” contains one very crucial and significant alteration to the original text- the nature of Bilbo's magic ring of invisibility. The Riddles in the Dark chapter was re-written in order to link *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of The Rings*- and with it, Gollum's character changed as well, to resemble the creature who features so prominently in the trilogy (Olsen 11). J. R. R. Tolkien *literally* retconned *The Hobbit* in order to make it a prequel to *The Lord of The Rings*! The rest of the story was mostly left intact, though the trilogy was built upon many of the ideas, concepts, characters, and places featured in *The Hobbit*; the Necromancer, for example, became Sauron. Tolkien's attempt to reconcile with the original and revised versions of *The Hobbit* within his canon was so thorough, that there exists a conversation between Gandalf and Frodo in *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which Gandalf explains that the power of the One Ring had already begun to take hold of Bilbo, and that when he published his book (*The Hobbit*), Bilbo created a false account of how he came to be in possession of the ring- making up that he won it as a present in the riddle-game in order to solidify his claim to the piece- and that copies of this original, false version remain in circulation (Olsen 13).

In *The Hobbit* there is scant evidence that the ring Bilbo possesses is “essentially pure evil”- because the whole idea that it was sinister in any way was written into the book fourteen years from publication. The ring still serves as a major plot device in the book in the original version- though Bilbo's draw to it is utterly pragmatic- as one would imagine a ring of invisibility would be to any aspiring burglar! He deigns to reveal its secret because it is with the use of the ring that he finally begins to gain respect among the dwarves; up until that point, they largely considered him to be a nuisance, and were it not for Gandalf's insistence that the hobbit is

“not a bad little chap,” (which is not exactly the most ringing endorsement one can receive), the dwarves would have been quite content to leave him behind (Hobbit 92). At this moment, Bilbo takes off the ring and appears suddenly in their midst- and plays it off as just another example of his high sneaking skill. Balin- one of his most vocal critics in the past, removed his hood and declared, “Balin at your service”, a gesture that they all had made out of politeness when entering his home before- but one that was now meant with a new level of sincerity (Hobbit 94). The real power of the ring in *The Hobbit* is a power of good- it gives Bilbo the assistance he needs to become a true and proper burglar- and a hero, as well. It is only through the revised chapter of Riddles in the Dark, and the new Gollum's ghoulish nature that we get any hint of the ring as it applies in the broader Tolkien canon.

Gold itself, on the other hand, has much power indeed in *The Hobbit*. “Dragon Sickness”- as Tolkien calls it- is the lust for gold, and the greed and madness that accompanies it. Dragons are essentially greed personified and given wings and fiery breath in Tolkien's world- they are powerful, mythical creatures who can practically live forever, clad in armored scales, with great wings, and who are just as intelligent as they are deadly- and there is nothing that they love more than gold. “Dragons steal gold and jewels, as you know, from men and elves and dwarves, wherever they can find them;” as Thorin Oakenshield tells Bilbo Baggins in his hobbit hole that first evening, “They guard their plunder as long as they live – and they never enjoy a brass ring of it. Indeed they hardly know a good bit of work from a bad, though they usually have a good notion of the current market value” (Hobbit 23). Dragons covet gold though they have no practical use for it, and derive no intrinsic benefit from its possession- yet they defend it with their lives and visit a fiery death upon all those who threaten their hoard. Though the quest of Thorin Oakenshield and company begins ostensibly as a quest to reclaim their lost homeland from Smaug, the dragon, their real purpose for the venture becomes alarmingly clear by the change of the dwarves' demeanor upon entering the mountain at last. The dwarves, who so recently were going mad in the caved-in secret passage way on the other side of the hidden door, now had a renewed vigor about them as they searched for poor Bilbo (whose torch had gone out), “The mere fleeting glimpses of treasure which they had caught as they went along had rekindled all the fire of their dwarvish hearts; and when the heart

of a dwarf, even the most respectable, is wakened by gold and jewels, he grows suddenly bold, and he may become fierce” (Hobbit 239). The dwarves begin in a merry mood- Fili and Kili playing golden harps with silver strings, others explored the hall to caress old treasures- all the while, Bilbo Baggins, the hobbit, expressed that he would give a good many golden goblets “for a drink of something cheering out of one of Beorn's wooden bowls” (Hobbit 240). The dragon sickness at this point has taken full hold of the dwarves- though it can be said that the nature of dwarves and dragons is not altogether different in the first place, despite their difference in size.

When the army of the elves of Mirkwood and the men of Laketown (led by Bard the dragonslayer) arrive at the Lonely Mountain, Thorin and company have already barricaded themselves inside the main gate- and though they have barely enough food to last a few weeks, he flat out refuses to part with any of the gold or negotiate with Bard, and fires an arrow at the Elven King's messenger. Bilbo remarks, “The whole place still stinks of dragon,” and he means it in both the literal and figurative sense- though Smaug is dead and his bones simmer at the bottom of the Long Lake, the dragon sickness infests his hoard, and has taken those already easily susceptible to it under its spell (Hobbit 267). Greed is essentially illogical- it twists the hearts of dwarves, but also elves and men. We see this in the scramble that ensues to get to the Lonely Mountain after Smaug's death- everyone believes Thorin's company to be burnt to a crisp, and wants to be the first to claim the dragon's plunder. As dragons “never enjoy a brass ring” of their hoards, so too would Thorin and the rest of the dwarves be content to starve to death on their mountain of gold- as Bilbo tells Bard and the Elven King in his secret parlance, “You do not know Thorin Oakenshield as well as I do now. I assure you, he is quite ready to sit on a heap of gold and starve, so long as you sit here” (Hobbit 272). Indeed, The Master of Laketown does exactly that- taking as much of Laketown's share of the gold as he can, and fleeing into the wastes, only to die of starvation.

Bilbo Baggins, the lone Hobbit in this affair, has his mind on a different sort of treasure- and that thing is bacon- eggs and bacon, to be precise. Food is the exact opposite of gold- it is down-to-earth, practical, and of immediate tangible value- you can't eat gold, as The Master finds out. As the thirteen dwarves prepare to do battle with two entire armies in order to keep their treasure for themselves, all Bilbo can think of is breakfast back in Bag-End, just as back in Bag-End when the adventure was just beginning, the dwarves stuffed their faces with the contents of Bilbo's pantry and sung songs of pale enchanted gold- and therein lies the fundamental

difference between Dwarves and Hobbits. Culturally, the two peoples hold opposing values; Hobbits value food, community, and simple comforts, while dwarvish culture is intensely secretive, competitive, and prizes riches and material wealth above all. Their language, Khuzdul, is a closely guarded secret, never spoken in the presence of outsiders, and even the names by which we come to know the dwarves are not their real names, but a public name used for dealings with non-dwarves. That is not to say that dwarvish culture is purely materialistic, or that they only have an appreciation for bits of the earth that have been smithed and worked-over with fire and hammer. Gloin's son, Gimli, who is a wee lad at the time his father set out on the quest for Erebor, utters one of the most poetic passages in the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy when he speaks to Legolas of the natural beauty of the glittering caves beneath Helm's Deep.

But the difference between Hobbits and Dwarves is most clearly represented by how Bilbo and Thorin deal with the Arkenstone- the most precious item in all of Erebor. Its draw is incredibly powerful- even Bilbo, who is not so predisposed to dragon sickness as the dwarves are, picks it up and keeps it for himself, hiding it from Thorin as he frantically searches for it, “That stone of all the treasure I name unto myself, and I will be avenged on anyone who finds it and withholds it” (Hobbit 268). Yet while Thorin covets the Arkenstone above all and is willing to go to war with a host of Men and Elves over it, Bilbo, who actually does possess the Arkenstone, willingly gives it up in exchange for peace, sneaking out of the mountain during the dark of night in order to give it to the Elven King and Bard as a bargaining chip, so that they might reason with Thorin. This backfires, of course, but Bilbo ultimately does the right thing- as Gandalf reappears suddenly at that moment, “Well done! Mr. Baggins! There is always more about you than anyone expects!” (Hobbit 274). I think Thorin Oakenshield's dying words to Bilbo speak for themselves on this topic: “There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure. If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world” (Hobbit 290).

The Arkenstone is more than just a mere stone- its material form and its narrative purpose show that it is the precursor to the central plot item in *The Lord of the Rings*- and possibly connected to *The Silmarillion* as well. The Arkenstone has a very powerful magic upon it- we see this in the way Bilbo Baggins covets it when he

first encounters it in the depths of Erebor, and in the descriptive language used:

It was the Arkenstone, the Heart of the Mountain. So Bilbo guessed from Thorin's description; but indeed there could be no two such gems, even in so marvellous a hoard, even in all the world. Even as he climbed, the same white gleam had shone before him and drawn his feet towards it. Slowly it grew to a little globe of pallid light. Now, as he came near. It was tinged with a flickering sparkle of many colours at the surface, reflected and splintered from the wavering light of his torch. At last he looked down upon it, and he caught his breath. The great jewel shone before his feet of its own inner light, and yet, cut and fashioned by the dwarves, who had dug it up from the heart of the mountain long ago, it took all light that fell upon it and changed it into ten thousand sparks of white radiance shot with glints of the rainbow. (Hobbit 237)

Compare this to the description of the Silmarils, found in Chapter Seven of *The Silmarillion: Of the Silmarils and the Unrest of the Noldor*:

Like the crystal of diamonds it appeared, and yet was more strong than adamant, so that no violence could mar or break it within the Kingdom of Arda. Yet that crystal was to the Silmarils but as is the body to the Children of Illuvitar: the house of its inner fire, that is within it and yet in all parts of it, and is its life. And the inner fire of Silmarils Fëanor made of the blended light of the Trees of Valinor, which lives in them yet, though the trees have long withered and shine no more. Therefore even in the darkness of the deepest treasury the Silmarils of their own radiance shone like the stars of Varda; and yet, as were they indeed living things, they rejoiced in light and received it and gave it back in hues more marvellous than before. (Silmarillion 68)

The similarity between these two magical stones- as well as the incredible power which they hold over mortal beings, though not definitive proof that the Arkenstone is in fact the Silmaril of Earth, is nonetheless a strong suggestion that Tolkien had in mind the Silmarils when he was writing the Arkenstone into *The Hobbit*. The Arkenstone also has many similarities with Sauron's One Ring as it is described in *The Lord of the Rings*. When Bilbo first encounters the Arkenstone, though he has a strong resistance to the "dragon sickness", he is inexplicably drawn to it, "Suddenly Bilbo's arm went towards it drawn by its enchantment. His small hand would

not close about it, for it was a large and heavy gem; but he lifted it, shut his eyes, and put it in his deepest pocket” (Hobbit 237). When Frodo Baggins retrieves the Ring from the fire of Bag-End's hearth in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, there is a very similar passage:

Frodo drew the Ring out of his pocket again and looked at it. It now appeared plain and smooth, without mark or device that he could see. The gold looked very fair and pure, and Frodo thought how rich and beautiful was its colour, how perfect was its roundness. It was an admirable thing and altogether precious. When he took it out he had intended to fling it from him into the very hottest part of the fire. But he found now that he could not do so, not without a great struggle. He weighed the Ring in his hand, hesitating, and forcing himself to remember all that Gandalf had told him; and then with an effort of will he made a movement, as if to cast it away – but he found that he had put it back in his pocket. (Fellowship 87).

The Arkenstone serves as the most pivotal item in the plot of *The Hobbit*- even after the death of Smaug there is still war brewing outside the gates of Erebor. The power of the Arkenstone corrupts Thorin Oakenshield, changing him and making him a greedy and warlike dwarf, unlike the long-winded yet sensible leader of the party of fourteen that set out for the Lonely Mountain in a noble quest to defeat a dragon and reclaim the homeland of the Dwarves. He is terse and quick to anger, making threats of violence to whomever has hidden the Arkenstone from him and the host that waits outside the entrance to the mountain- which includes many of those who came to his aid with food, shelter, and supplies not so long ago in Laketown. Thorin curses Bilbo when it is revealed that he has stolen the Arkenstone, and after lowering him down the wall to join the opposing army, he cries out, “Be off! You have mail upon you, which was made by my folk, and it is too good for you. It cannot be pierced by arrows; but if you do not hasten, I will sting your miserable feet. So be swift!” (Hobbit 278). Even after all they have been through together, and the numerous times in which Bilbo has saved all their lives, the powerful greed for the Arkenstone is enough cause for Thorin to renounce their friendship in one moment. The Goblin army arrives just as the battle between dwarves, elves, and men is about to begin- and the sides all join forces as a matter of mutual survival in the Battle of Five Armies. On his deathbed after the battle, a mortally wounded Thorin Oakenshield apologizes to Bilbo for his actions, “I go now to the halls of waiting to sit beside

my fathers, until the world is renewed. Since I leave now all gold and silver, and go where it is of little worth, I wish to part in friendship from you, and would take back my words and deeds at the Gate” (Hobbit 290). This is very similar to the redemption of Borimir in the opening chapter of *The Two Towers*. Borimir, who attacked Frodo because of his desire for the One Ring and its power, now lies dying, pierced by many arrows, when Aragorn comes upon him, and with his dying breath laments his betrayal. Borimir, like Thorin, was a proud prince of an ancient kingdom who set upon a quest for the good of his people- but could not resist the power of a magical artifact that promised salvation for his people- despite its evil nature.

The ring as featured in *The Hobbit* is not wholly evil- because it was not intended to be upon first publication of the story. It was not until Tolkien released a second, revised edition in order to tie *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy he was writing that Bilbo's invisibility ring became Sauron's One Ring. The real source of evil in *The Hobbit* is gold itself- as exemplified by the hoard of the dragon Smaug, and its effect on those who covet it. The antidote to this “dragon sickness” is the food, warmth, and the comforts of home embodied by the hobbits of the Shire. However, the prototype for the One Ring did exist in *The Hobbit*- in the form of the Arkenstone- and much of the significance of the Arkenstone in *The Hobbit* mirrors the One Ring, both in its effect on characters, and in its use as a literary device.



Bibliography:

Olsen, Corey. *Exploring J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. Print.

Tolkien, J. R. R.. *The Hobbit*. Rev. ed. New York: Ballantine, 1937. Print.

Tolkien, J. R. R.. *The Silmarillion*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1979. Print.

Tolkien, J. R. R.. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2003. Print.

Tolkien, J. R. R.. "Riddles in the DarkThe Lost Version." *Riddles in the Dark*. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Jan. 2014.  
<<http://www.ringgame.net/riddles.html>>.