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Tolkien's Middle Earth
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On the Origin of Species: Exploring and Complicating Tolkien's Orc

The Orc is the most numerous of any creature in Tolkien's legendarium¹. What *is* an orc? Bestial soldiers, orcs number in the hundreds of thousands; they march in black tides of ruin and woe and doom. The physical embodiment of evil, the agency by which the Dark Lords have stretched forth their hand to wage war against the Free Peoples of Middle-Earth throughout the Ages, the orc is the bloodiest cog in the machine of the Enemy, portrayed as an irredeemable beast given no quarter or mercy. And yet, an orc has language. An orc has medicine, and lineage, and loyalties and superstitions, and even dreams (though nightmares may be more apt a description). What *is* an orc? Where do they come from? There is no concrete answer that can be reached in confidence; but in a careful examination of Tolkien's works, with the consideration of many scholarly analyses, a conclusion of sorts can be reached about the nature and origin of the orc: namely, that while the Orc may have a convoluted and debatable history as a species, they are far from empty puppets of darkness, surviving and, indeed, *living*, in cultures of their own right.

Where did the orcs come from? From what stinking pit or slime-filled cave did they spring in ancient days of woe? Though J.R.R. Tolkien did originally have a clear conception of their birth, the creation story of the orc has changed dramatically since their inception. The simplest answer is that there isn't a single answer. While there are clear threads that Tolkien meant to pursue, the end result is up for interpretation. The Peter Jackson cinematic interpretation of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is wonderful in its scope and artistic presentation of

¹ Save, perhaps, for Samwise Gamgee's *neeker-breakers*.

Tolkien's work, but inherently flawed in its exclusion or inclusion of elements chosen as per creative license. Perhaps most grievous of these is the confident assertion given voice by Saruman that orcs were born purely (if that word may be used) from the twisting of Elves in days long past by the Dark Lord Melkor in the darkness of Utumno. This may sound familiar; the idea that Orcs are a twisted corruption of Elves is the most widely accepted version of their origin, supported by both in *The Silmarillion* and *The Two Towers*. The passage in *The Silmarillion* reads thus:

This is held true by the wise of Eressëa, that all those of the Quendi who came into the hands of Melkor, ere Utumno was broken, were put there in prison, and by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of the Orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves...For the Orcs had life and multiplied after the manner of the Children of Ilúvatar...so say the wise (*Silmarillion*, 50).

Treebeard, wise and ancient and forgetful, speaks thus: 'Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves'². Indeed, this conception was the first of Tolkien's, that in Melkor's inability to create life anew, he merely took hold of an existing form and shaped it to his own needs. As far as the characters of the story are concerned, this is an acceptable answer, one that posits perhaps one of Melkor's greatest atrocities. Unfortunately for this simplistic idea, the tale does not end there. The *Lord of the Rings* and related works in the Legendarium are ever held beneath the lens of a 'historical artifact', as Tolkien framed his works. As such, characters have fault and bias and misunderstanding, being 'real' existing persons. As Tolkien is careful to point out, this is a tale of the so-called 'wise', not an assertion by an omniscient narrator. Furthermore, Treebeard's

² *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, p. 486 (page numbers from the 50th Anniversary series collection)

account can hardly be held as faultless. He is shown to have a weak grasp on many things, having lost the Entwives and never hearing of Hobbits before two appear before him in the flesh³.

Far from being the simple accusation of an undergraduate researcher, this idea of a fallible narrator is one made by Tolkien himself.

What we have in the *Silmarillion*, etc, are traditions...handed on by Men in Númenor and later in Middle-Earth (Arnor and Gondor); but already far back...blended and confused with their own Mannish myths and cosmic ideas (*Morgoth's Ring*, 370).

This brings up an important distinction that must be made in the further examination of the origin of Orcs: that of *inside* and *outside*. From within Tolkien's narrative, *inside* assertions can be made based only on internal events and contexts. *Outside* deals with the process by which Tolkien created his world, including but not limited to the *Lord of the Rings* proper, associated works such as the *Silmarillion* and the *Histories*, and *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. As a historical text, *inside* ideas are susceptible to bias and misinformation. From the *outside*, ideas change and disappear and are born through Tolkien's constant process of revision. From the inside, the most acceptable theory is that Orcs very likely originally sprang from the corruption of Elves during the very First ages of Arda. From the outside, however, it is not nearly so simple, as we are not left with a single definitive answer, in the end, except for that which we make ourselves.

A timeline of Tolkien's work is crucial in examining how the origin of orcs changed over the years. The Legendarium began with the crafting of the *Voyage of Earendel*⁴ *the Evening Star*

³ Hobbits, of course, have their own mysterious origins. Given their semantic separation from humans as 'Big Folk' vs. 'Little Folk' rather than a clearer distinction like Elves and Men, it appears that the *periannath* or *holbytla* are an offshoot of humanity, like the Drúedain. How or why they came to be is a mystery more like Tom Bombadil than orcs, as Tolkien makes no major inquest into their origins.

in 1914. By 1937, *The Hobbit* had been published, and the collection of works that would be posthumously published as *The Silmarillion* were in a near-completed state⁵. In this stage of development, orcs were, unquestionably, of Elvish origin, both inside and out. This conviction did not last. Christopher Tolkien writes in *The History of Middle Earth X: Morgoth's Ring* that his father revisited the proto-*Silmarillion* with the intent of altering many of the earliest events, among them 'the origin of the Orcs'⁶. Alter it indeed he did, at least in determining what they were not. Tolkien definitively wrote, concerning the creation story in the *Annals of Aman*, 'Alter this. Orcs are not Elvish'⁷.

Where, then, do Orcs come from? Again, there is not one single answer; rather, there are many pieces laid out by Tolkien in his quest, that one can stitch together into a quilt of possibilities. Though he decided that Elves were not the primary root of Orcs, he could not take a definitive stance on what they might have been. Points that he raises in his musings are as follows, collected by Christopher:

Only Eru could make creatures with independent wills, and reasoning powers. But Orcs seem to have both: they can try to cheat Morgoth / Sauron, rebel against him. Therefore they must be *corruptions* of something pre-existing. But Men had not yet appeared, when the Orcs already existed. It also seems clear that though Melkor could utterly corrupt and ruin individuals, it is not possible to contemplate his absolute perversion of a whole people, and *his making that state heritable*. In that case Elves, as a source, are very unlikely. In any case, is it likely or possible that even the least of the Maiar would become Orcs⁸? Yes...In

⁴ This was the original spelling for Eärendil.

⁵ *HOME X: Morgoth's Ring*, p. vii

⁶ *Morgoth's Ring*, p. viii

⁷ *Morgoth's Ring* p. 409

⁸ Tolkien elsewhere uses this to explain exceptional orcs such as the Great Goblin, or orcs that lived for many centuries.

summary: I think it must be assumed that...the Orcs were *beasts* of humanized shape deliberately perverted / converted into a more close resemblance to Men. (*Morgoth's Ring*, 409-410)

Perhaps one of the most crucial pieces in determining the fundamental, physical nature of an orc, regardless of origin, is in Tolkien's letters. In Letter 153, Tolkien writes: 'Elves and Men are evidently in biological terms one race, or they could not breed and produce fertile offspring'⁹. If this is the case, then so too must be later orcs, as shown by the goblin-men and Uruk-Hai found in Eriador and Isengard.

'There were some [Men] that were horrible: man-high, but with goblin-faces, sallow, leering, squint-eyed. Do you know, they reminded me at once of that Southerner at Bree; only he was not so obviously orc-like as most of these were' (*LOTR: TTT*, 566).

If these orcs are likewise able to be bred with the other Children of Ilúvatar (the method does not wish for close examination), they came from the same body (and are, therefore, not entirely the hybrid of beasts in Tolkien's musing). Why, then, could the orcs not have come originally from Elves? The simplest answer is, of course, that *some did*. My interpretation is that many of the original creatures known as 'orcs' were, indeed, twisted Elves. As Tolkien writes, 'it remains therefore terribly possible that there was an Elvish strain in the Orcs'¹⁰. There is no argument that the earliest creatures to be called 'orcs' were alike to Elves; so much so, in fact, that they were alike in appearance enough to be confused with them. So says the *Silmarillion*:

Ere long, evil creatures came even to Beleriand, over passes in the mountains, or up from the south through the dark forests. Among them were the Orcs...they were yet few and wary, awaiting the return of their lord. Whence they came, or what they were, the Elves knew not then, thinking them perhaps to be Avari

⁹ *The Letters of JRR Tolkien: Letter 153*, p. 189

¹⁰ *Morgoth's Ring*, p. 411

who had become evil and savage in the wild; in which they guessed all too near, it is said' (*Silmarillion*, 93-94).

Of perhaps shocking note is the mention physical appearance. Though 'evil and savage', the earliest Orcs were alike in form to Elves—even savage ones—at least in passing. Knowing the discerning and keen eye of an Elf, this is a far cry from the later brutish and terrible forms that Orcs wore. The suggestion is that these few early orcs were simply twisted Elves. The evidence, or lack thereof, suggests that these remained few in number among their kind. The cause is the physical and spiritual nature of an Elf.

As explored in *Morgoth's Ring*, the Children of Ilúvatar are composed of a duality of form: the *fëa* and the *hröa*, or spirit and body, respectively. It is this that sets them apart from beasts and spirits, in a physical body driven by an ethereal, rational consciousness. Elves are made up of more of spirit than body, manifesting itself in their immortality and the lightness that typifies their kind. This is seen both physically, as Legolas strides across the snow in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and in the radiant glow (as seen by Frodo in the realm of wraiths) that surrounds an Elf who has returned from Valinor, such as Glorfindel. Men, however, are more of body. Upon death, the *fëa* of an Elf is summoned to the Hall of Mandos in Valinor unless refused¹¹. Men are given the gift of Death instead, and are severed from Middle-Earth upon dying, to an unknown fate. Orcs, as a kind and as individuals, are given no mention of an afterlife. If orcs are the corruption of Elves, it stands to reason that their *fëa* would be that of an elf. Upon death, they would likewise be summoned to the Hall of Mandos, as it is their body that has been most changed. The idea that Melkor is able to sever the most precious and powerful of things—the soul—seems beyond his scope. However much this notion of an orcish afterlife stands to reason, there is no mention made of its happening. The appearance of a multitude of orcs in

¹¹ *Morgoth's Ring*, p. 339

the Hall of Mandos is a ridiculous supposition, one so preposterous that it would undoubtedly receive mention. If, however, only the few early orcs came from Elves, it's less of a stretch of the imagination that these few would undergo the same death as an Elf. In fact, this is Tolkien's conclusion as well. 'Dying, they would go to Mandos and be held in prison till the End'¹². While there may be no room for hordes, there is room enough for the imprisonment of few. Those orcs not being of Elvish origin might have faced the same fate as the defeated Sauron and Saruman, clouded forms blown away in the wind. As for orcs that came from beasts, from dust they came and to dust they returned. The easiest counter-argument to make against an Elvish origin is that orcs are simply puppets, empty bodies that require their master to function. Tolkien suggests that their speech was like that of parrots, echoing the will of their Master¹³. The previous quote of their waiting (for their lord), as well as later explorations of their culture and identity, however, prove this argument to be unfounded.

I have made mention of the idea that the first creatures known as 'orcs' came at least in part from Elves. There is, then, the implication that there are disparate yet similar creatures by the same name. Rather than attempting to wrangle these conflicting ideas and possibilities into a single homogenous creature, I suggest that there should be a split. It is my assertion that many of the original orcs came from corrupted Elves, as well as an amalgamation of beasts and lesser Maiar, and embodied *one* kind of orc that was similar in form and nature to Elves. There is no reason to suppose that these Orcs were homogenous in kind, and may have been extremely varied in their natures. Upon dying, these orcs would either return to dust or be imprisoned in Mandos, as according to their kind. In seeing the effectiveness of twisting the Children of Iluvatar as opposed to other forms of Orc, Melkor (and, later, Sauron) would have found the

¹² *Morgoth's Ring*, p. 411

¹³ *Morgoth's Ring*, p. 410

emergence of Men to be essential to ‘mass-producing’, as it were, vast armies. The hordes of misshapen, irredeemable¹⁴ and hideous soldiers, the self-sustaining amalgamation originating from Man, Elf and beast that we know (and love) from *The Lord of the Rings* proper, are therefore an entirely different animal—but one similar enough to the original still wear the label of Orc. The idea of two creatures—one greater and one lesser—using the same name is a bold claim in comparison to the idea of a single changing creature; a claim that wants for strong evidence, or a precedent. Both can be found: the former in previous interpretations of the evidence and the latter in the Balrog. But what may perhaps be the most compelling argument for this theory is in the origin of the word ‘orc’ itself. Tolkien writes:

The Elves from their earliest times...used a word with a base (*o*)*rok* to denote anything that caused fear and/or horror. It would have been applied to ‘phantoms’ as well as to any independently existing creatures. Its application to the creatures called *Orks*¹⁵ was later. It is probable that these *Orks* had a mixed origin. Most of them plainly (and biologically) were corruptions of Elves. But always among them there must have been numerous corrupted spirits who assumed similar bodily shapes (*Morgoth’s Ring*, 414).

Here, Tolkien suggests that the name of Ork was simply a word for monster, originally, and not even a name for a collection of wholly similar creatures. It is possible, as we shall soon see, that he may have changed the name in later days—had he been given the chance—to distinguish further between these myriad bogeymen and the collected ‘species’ of later orcs.

¹⁴ This, of course, is a matter of vigorous debate that I don’t dare cover in a paper of this length.

¹⁵ Tolkien’s spelling of ‘Ork’ vs. Orc was a change made late in his life, interestingly. Perhaps it was not until he had decided on this linguistic root that he made the change.

A darkness dwelt in Moria, in the long dark of Khazad-Dûm; *ghâsh*, fire, a thing ‘of man-shape maybe, yet greater’¹⁶, that fills the hearts of Legolas and Gandalf with dread and terror at its appearance: Durin’s Bane, a mighty Balrog of Morgoth. There are only two of the *Balroгах* that are given names; Durin’s Bane is the one responsible for the darkness of Moria and the death of Gandalf the Grey, of course, but in the Elder Days, the mighty Gothmog lead what was described as a ‘host of Balroгах’¹⁷, an army of many. A Balrog was originally a creation of Melkor, a terrible soldier of darkness and flame that came in armies of strength. But, as with the orcs, Tolkien decided Melkor could not create his own life. The Balrog was then remade into the Valaraukar, ‘powerful spirits from before the World’^{18,19}. Of these mightier demons, ‘there should not be supposed more than, say, 3 or at most 7 ever existed’²⁰. Yet there still remained the armies that assailed Gondolin and other strongholds in ancient days: ‘Morgoth let loose his strength, and hell was emptied. There came wolves and serpents, and there came Balroгах one thousand’²¹. Time and again, a Balrog or many of them are described as turning the tide of battle and engaging in fiery duels. Would these creatures have been written out entirely? I find it far more likely that Tolkien would simply have reclassified and renamed the lesser (yet still mighty) soldiers. Like the orc, we have a state of uncertainty due to the fluid nature of Tolkien’s canon. His ‘final’ decisions are not in themselves complete, and so only extrapolation and interpretation are possible. I assert that these few Valaraukar did not replace the multitude that was written before. Instead, like the orc, they were a different creature who merely shared the name ‘Balrog’

¹⁶ *Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 329

¹⁷ *Morgoth’s Ring*, p. 80

¹⁸ Whether these were Maiar, Valar, or members of the ambiguously defined collection of primordial spirits from which the Ainur were derived is up for debate, but the most likely is that they were Maiar originally on a similar order and degree to Olórin.

¹⁹ *Morgoth’s Ring*, p. 203

²⁰ *Morgoth’s Ring*, p. 80

²¹ *HOME V: The Lost Road*, p. 310

in Elvish. The Balrog is a complementary example of Tolkien's name-sharing and revision that lead to the two major kinds of Orc. While the theory of an entirely Elvish origin for orcs (as perpetuated by Peter Jackson's films) is not wholly wrong, it's flawed in its certainty. The best answer for where the orcs came from is that there are many answers (both from the inside and the outside); in the simplest terms, though, there are two distinct forms of orc: the older, hodgepodge amalgamation of beasts, spirits, and tortured elves, and the later homogenous and singular 'species', as it were.

It's been established (hopefully) where orcs came from. The question still remains, however, of what an orc *is*. Though it is a form of life that exists like the Children of Iluvatar, and 'reproduces after [their] manner'²²(though the precise meaning of that is up for debate, as we will see), the orcs fill a dehumanized role in the Legendarium. They fall by the thousands, their bodies 'piled in great heaps'²³. When heroes need something to kill, orcs oblige en masse. From a narrative standpoint, they fill the role of the faceless 'Other', being essentially puppets to be cut down with justified violence. Early drafts of the orc supported this in their fundamental nature, as Shippey muses: 'There can be little doubt that the orcs entered Middle-earth originally just because the story needed a continual supply of enemies over whom one need feel no compunction'²⁴, drawn from Tolkien's wartime experiences. Some versions of the orc (both inside and out) were not even capable of independent speech. Tolkien muses:

I think it must be assumed that 'talking' is not necessarily the sign of the possession of a 'rational soul'. The orc's 'talking' was really reeling off 'records' set in them by Melkor. This talking was largely echoic (like parrots). (*Morgoth's Ring*, 411)

²² *The Silmarillion*, p. 50

²³ *LOTR: TTT*, p. 545

²⁴ *The Road to Middle-Earth*, p. 233

This is a viewpoint that is fundamentally untrue compared to modern understanding of intelligence²⁵. Altogether, the evidence points to orcs possessing as much rational intelligence as can be expected of a Child of Iluvatar, and possess their own ‘culture’, as it were—not the instinctual existence of animals, but an anthropological state of society (however corrupt and distasteful).

In recent years, studies of the possibility of teaching apes, our closest relatives, to communicate with meaningful sign language have led to a reevaluation of the nature of language. What sets ‘language’, as a set of words representing ideas, apart from animal communication, is the ability to string together words in a way that conveys true understanding of information. To expand on that, the difference between ‘aping’ and parroting a language and using it for one’s self is in the ability to ‘manipulate symbolic information and to create mental categories of [one’s] own’²⁶, which is what sets humans apart from our relatives. In accordance to this, orcs would be simply of intelligence somewhat beyond that of a bonobo, repeating words of which they understand only the result, and not the meaning. Even in conceding a greater intelligence than that, Tolkien writes that ‘they made brutal jargons, scarcely sufficient for their own needs’²⁷. This is far from the case. Orcs use slang, borrowing from other languages: they call Men of Gondor ‘tarks’, a rude shorthand of the Quenya word ‘tarkil’ for Númenoreans. He writes further that the orcs, ‘being filled with malice, quickly developed as many barbarous dialects as there were groups or settlements of their race’²⁸. Rather than being the debased and primitive action he suggests, it shows a shocking amount of intelligence; orcs are so capable of imparting meaning to words based on shared experience that even neighbouring tribes would

²⁵ Tolkien can hardly be blamed for this, of course. As he often bemoaned, his work can be taken too seriously, from a scientific standpoint, an assault that it cannot withstand as a work of fiction.

²⁶ Savage-Rumbaugh, 2009

²⁷ *LOTR: Appendix F*, p. 1131

²⁸ *LOTR: Appendix F*, p. 1131

have different words for the same thing, with a huge variance of dialect. This is impressive, not repulsive. In their journey through Mordor, Sam and Frodo encounter this in action. Two different ‘breeds’, or castes, of orc are in heated discussion. ‘As usual, they were quarrelling, and being of different breeds they used the Common Speech after their fashion’²⁹. Not only do these orcs invent words within the form of Black Speech that they use, not only do they borrow words from other languages; orcs learn new languages entirely, using Westron as a lingua franca. An orc is at the very least bilingual, something many of us *more educated and intelligent humans* cannot fully claim. An orc may have a stronger grasp of language than many friends and colleagues. It is in this grasping of language that we see an orc as more than simply a dark and ugly beast. It is through language that we created and create culture, the transfer of ideas from individuals as well as between generations. Through language we store memories, technology, and beliefs. And an orc has all of these things.

The idea of orc reproduction is distasteful, but for an orc to have culture, there must be new orcs created within these varied societies. While Tolkien is mercifully unclear on their exact method of reproduction, he does establish (as mentioned previously) that they do so like Men and Elves, as should be expected given their origin. This does leave an ample amount of leeway, and many theories have arisen, from the simply pragmatic to the uncomfortable absurd. The sensation a reader may have is that lifting a rock at the beach would produce the same effect as discovering an orc nursery: sudden light cast on a muddle of disgusting black slime and squiggling forms. Henry Gee, author of *‘The Science of Middle-earth’*, would most emphatically agree. His is one of the theories that cannot be disputed, but leaves an uncertain nausea in its wake: ‘It could have been that Orcs laid eggs...perhaps from rarely seen Queen Orcs’³⁰. It’s a

²⁹ *LOTR: Return of the King*, p. 924

³⁰ *The Science of Middle-Earth*, p. 69-70

disgusting image, one that makes Peter Jackson's similar spawn-pits vastly more appealing—but that method, too, is problematic in its portrayal of adult orcs 'hatching', in a way, from slime. Tolkien appeared to consider more conventional reproduction the more viable explanation. In a letter, he wrote that 'there must have been orc-women. But in stories that seldom if ever see the Orcs except as soldiers of armies in the service of the evil lords we naturally would not learn much about their lives'³¹, and indeed, the evidence suggests not only reproduction but enough parental care and upbringing to warrant a recognition of lineage. I am referring, of course, to the relation of Azog and Bolg, two of the few named orcs in the *Legendarium*. This is a father-son pair, an element introduced in *The Hobbit* but largely glossed-over. Tolkien was given the chance to revise this statement, but passed over it; in the *Appendices* it states, again, that the orcheftain Bolg is the son of the mighty Azog who tormented the dwarves in years past³². In his insistence to maintain this decision, Tolkien makes clear that orcs recognize lineage.

Perhaps in the industrialized manufacturing of Mordor, where hordes are churned out in Sauron's machine, orcs are born in hellish spawning pits of unspeakable nature, as Shippey supposes they could multiply 'in hatcheries in Barad-dûr'³³. In the removed, isolated, and tribal societies that orcs maintained in the mountains, however, there is the supposition that there existed conventions of reproduction of a more 'natural' sort, as it were. Not alien, but archaic—and this is an important distinction to make, for as we see, orcs are not alien. It is in this that they are terrifying, for orcs are not an unfathomable beast removed from our being altogether, but rather a state to which even Man can fall³⁴. Tolkien writes in a letter that orcs, 'though horribly

³¹ *The Science of Middle-Earth*, p. 70

³² *LOTR: Appendix A*, p. 1078

³³ *Road to Middle-Earth*, p. 234

³⁴ This is important especially when one considers the dichotomy of Aragorn vs. Orcs. Aragorn Elessar stands as something just beyond the scope of normal Men, being noble of quality and degree higher than a human can naturally obtain thanks to his Elven blood. Likewise, an Orc is debased beyond that which

corrupted, [are] no more so than many Men to be met today'³⁵. Verlyn Flieger's essay *Fantasy and Reality* offers this insight: 'We [humans] see our shadow, the unadmitted, the worst side of human character in the unadmirable but depressingly human behavior of the Orcs'³⁶.

Orcs may be nasty, but they are not solely bent on death and suffering. Komornicka's *The Ugly Elf* goes so far as to say that orcs may have even an appreciation for their physical forms 'that does not involve savagery. The mere fact the orcs possess medicine suggests that they have an active respect for health and the body's proper functioning'. Aragorn's experience with orcs informs us that orcish herbal knowledge is not restrained to medicine, but that 'orc-blades too often are [poisoned]'³⁷. While these are relatively simple concepts to be taught by a more knowledgeable source, that Aragorn would only have faced the tribal and removed orc-tribes (and not manufactured drones of Mordor) means that, regardless of when they were taught, orcs redistributed and imparted the technology, a mark of true culture and society. And to these cultures, orcs show perhaps the strangest thing about them yet: loyalty.

Orc bands and tribes seem to exist in the helpful condition of 'breeds', bred, as it were, for different functions, yet remaining a part of the same species, like a dog. Merry and Pippin's abduction by Uruk-Hai and Mordor-orcs, as well as Sam's adventure in Cirith-Ungol, uncover the grisly aftermath of the collision between orc-kinds. Rather than emphasizing a manufactured and animalistic nature, however, these clashes support the idea that orcs maintain loyalty to their own tribes. *Uruk* is the general word for the larger soldier-orcs of Mordor and Isengard, while *snaga*, 'slave', referred³⁸ to the remainder of the breeds³⁹. Between these kinds, and between the

even scum like Grima could obtain, and yet they exist as a disquieting reminder of the human potential for abject failure.

³⁵ *Letters: 135*, p. 190

³⁶ *Green Suns and Faerie*, p. 10

³⁷ *LOTR: FOTR*, p. 336

³⁸ Admittedly, the derogative *snaga* is used primarily by the *uruks* themselves.

various tribes, allegiances led to uneasy alliances even under the will of Sauron. While the strife between orcs of Isengard and Mordor as seen in *The Two Towers* is somewhat understandable (given the inherent rivalry and conflict between both the orc-kind and the orcs' immediate masters), we see from the all-out massacre at Cirith-Ungol that the different groups wage war even within Mordor, with Shagrat, captain of Cirith-Ungol, and Gorbag, a Morgul-orc, wiping each other out. What is, perhaps, most interesting, is the expressed sentiment of orcs against their masters. During their trek across Mordor, Sam and Frodo encounter a large *uruk* and a smaller scout, of different origins, in discussion. When the smaller orc expresses dissent, the *uruk* shouts, 'that's cursed rebel talk, and I'll stick you, if you don't shut it down, see?'⁴⁰. He goes on to threaten the rebellious scout with the Nazgûl's punishment for traitors. This, fascinatingly, reveals the idea of orcs refusing to obey their masters; but the most interesting piece is the scout's response. He accuses the *uruk*, 'you can't do your job, and you can't even stick by your own folk,'⁴¹, implying the expectation of orcish loyalty to their own kind. As with Azog and Bolg, orcs possess, or are supposed to possess, the capacity for fierce loyalty among their kinds even in the face of their far-more-powerful overlords. This is a stunningly human trait, one that gives insight into the very heart of the orc. Rebellion is not, in this case, in the distaste for doing wicked deeds⁴², but in the hatred of being governed by 'another', a 'not-us'. This is the history of many nations in our world, and the core sentiment is that which drives the entire struggle by the forces of good in *The Lord of the Rings*. While they may be twisted and corrupted, orcs reveal in their natures a spark of will.

³⁹ *LOTR: Appendix F*, p. 1131

⁴⁰ *LOTR: ROTK*, p. 925

⁴¹ *LOTR; ROTK*, p. 925

⁴² Indeed, orcs 'pine for the fjords', as it were, in their wish to quit the horrors of Mordor and return to a happier life of pillaging and cruelty.

An orc is not kind. An orc is not pretty, nor brilliant, nor perhaps even redeemable (a topic compelling, but worthy of a separate essay in itself). But an orc is not mindless, faceless, empty, a mere tool or weapon to be used. Instead, an orc is as its origin suggests: a thinking, rational creature, one that forms family ties and inherited culture, maintains medicinal skill and linguistic capability beyond the bare necessity, and that feels a driving sense of loyalty and purpose. While in days long-past, creatures that wore the name ‘orc’ may have been spirits or demons or Elves⁴³ not quite as twisted as in days to come, the later orc is an autonomous and homogeneous race that stands on its own two (misshapen and blood-soaked) feet. While Dark Lords may bend them to their will, orcs raise their voices⁴⁴ in defiance—even those born into servitude. While an orc is not pretty, nor a misunderstood soul, an orc is more complex than they are given credit for. What *is* an orc? Tolkien could not decide, and so we must interpret what we can. Elves, spirits, beasts, Men, and/or some combination; there are many answers, but none of them are that orcs are empty, one-dimensional puppets. Instead, orcs survive and live in cultures of their own right, a deed perhaps all the more impressive given their origin and nature.

⁴³ Most likely all of these together.

⁴⁴ In many dialects and multiple languages!

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