

Humour in and around  
the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

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"This of course is the way to talk to dragons":  
Etiquette-Based Humour in *The Hobbit*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*The Hobbit* frequently calls attention to social conventions within the story, and to the correctness or incorrectness of characters' conduct. The etiquette motif is sufficiently prominent, in fact, that some critics have ventured to discern a strong didactic purpose in it, while others have identified a more parodic intent. This essay considers several etiquette-laced interactions in *The Hobbit*, along with their apparent analogues or precedents in four earlier works of British children's fantasy – *Through the Looking-Glass*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Marvellous Land of Snergs*, and *Winnie-the-Pooh* – and concludes that Tolkien is primarily lampooning ordinary forms of politeness for humorous effect, doubtless to the delight of generations of children who have been pressured to conceal their more selfish tendencies beneath a veneer of courtesy. But is this skewering purely subversive and comical, or is Tolkien perhaps making a deeper point about true politeness and moral courage? Even as they laugh, children are likely to gain a deeper intuitive understanding of the many shades of hypocrisy and sycophancy that so often underlie the outward forms of courtesy. Although true courtesy can be a sign of respect between equals, the powerful have far less need of politeness.

### Introduction

For those who may have wondered how to avoid awkward missteps when conversing with dwarves or dragons, Tolkien's narrator provides an invaluable service, as he frequently calls attention to social conventions within the story, and to the propriety of characters' conduct. Particularly in the light-hearted early chapters, the narrator points out Thorin's politeness to the Great Goblin, Gollum's politeness to Bilbo, Gandalf's politeness to the eagles, and the dwarves' efforts to be polite to Beorn. Likewise, the narrator notes that Bilbo is so flustered by

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<sup>1</sup> The author presented an earlier version of this essay at the Celebrating *The Hobbit* conference at Valparaiso University in March 2013. Liam Daley and Kris Swank kindly commented on the draft when I was readying it for the Valparaiso presentation.

the dwarves' unexpected arrival that he briefly forgets his manners, that Thorin is "rudely interrupted" by Bilbo's inadvertent shriek of distress (*H* 17), and that Beorn is "never very polite" (*H* 112). Yet even as the tale shifts into a more somber register and the narrator's voice recedes, etiquette is not forgotten; Balin notes that the crows are "nasty suspicious-looking creatures at that, and rude as well" (*H* 235), and Dain's people use "polite and rather old-fashioned language" in confronting Bard (*H* 253).

The etiquette motif is sufficiently prominent, in fact, that some critics have ventured to discern a "strong didactic purpose" in it (Stevens and Stevens 59). Specifically, Stevens and Stevens conclude that *The Hobbit* "is a book about good manners for children," which teaches that "everyone should be a good little hobbit, and good little hobbits are polite little hobbits" (65). It is certainly not unreasonable to suppose that Tolkien was interested in good manners and saw value in them. After all, the core principle underlying polite behaviour is the expression of respect and consideration for others (Götz ix), and Tolkien himself suggested that old-fashioned, highly formalized manners actually "made life a lot easier, smoother, and less frictional and dubious; and cloaked or indeed held in check (as table-manners do) the everlasting cat, wolf, and dog that lurk at no great depth under our social skin" (*L* 72).

Nonetheless, it seems clear that *The Hobbit* primarily subverts ordinary forms of politeness for humorous effect. We can get a sense of authorial intent with respect to manners, in the first instance, by looking at the evolution of the characters' interactions in Chapter I and by considering certain aspects of the narrative voice in Chapter II.

The only known surviving portion of Tolkien's original manuscript, which Rateliff has dubbed "The Pryftan Fragment" (3),<sup>2</sup> maps easily to a portion of the opening chapter of *The Hobbit*. It starts in the middle of the unexpected party, just as Bilbo is moved by the dwarves' song, and ends with a suggestion that the company should get an early start on the quest. Many of the ideas and phrasing in *Pryftan* appear essentially unchanged in the final published novel.

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2 For simplicity, I will cite The Pryftan Fragment as *Pryftan*, and I have amended the quotations to incorporate all changes Rateliff has marked in the text. Certain names in *Pryftan* are disconcertingly different from their final published form; to avoid confusion, I refer to Thorin's antecedent in *Pryftan* as the "chief dwarf" and Gandalf's antecedent as the "wizard".

Bearing in mind that good manners is “the Art of making those People easy with whom we converse” (Swift 34), however, it is striking that the *Pryftan* characters make an effort to conduct themselves with moderation and reasonableness, and a degree of sensitivity toward others. For example, in *Pryftan*, Gloin speaks “in embarrassment” after he learns that Bilbo overheard a dwarf’s unflattering remarks about him (*Pryftan* 9). Similarly, when the wizard explains that Bilbo was a fallback choice for the adventure, he hastens to soften the blow with an aside to Bilbo: “I beg your pardon, but I am sure you will understand – dragon slaying is not I believe your specialty” (*Pryftan* 10). Such polite hedges are entirely absent from the opening chapter of *The Hobbit*.

But Tolkien does not merely omit polite hedges in *The Hobbit*; the dwarves and Bilbo now deliberately insult each other, face to face. For example, in both versions, Bilbo is stung when he overhears himself referred to as a “little fellow bobbing [*H*: and puffing] on the mat” who “looks more like a grocer than a burglar” (*Pryftan* 8; *H* 18), and in both versions, he recklessly volunteers for the adventure to salvage his pride. But in *The Hobbit*, Bilbo also takes the opportunity to turn around the statement he has just overheard to insult the dwarves: “As soon as I saw your funny faces on the door-step, I had my doubts” (*H* 19). No such insulting comeback appears in *Pryftan*, even though Bilbo is equally provoked by the insult he has overheard.

Table 1: Bilbo Insults His Guests

<i>Pryftan</i> (8-9)	<i>The Hobbit</i> (18-19)
Dwalin to Company (overheard by Bilbo): “if it hadn’t been for the secret sign on the door, I should have been sure I had come to the wrong house, <i>as soon as I clapped eyes on the fat little fellow bobbing on the mat</i> . He looks more like a grocer than a burglar!”	Gloin to Company (overheard by Bilbo): “if it had not been for the sign on the door, I should have been sure we had come to the wrong house. <i>As soon as I clapped eyes on the little fellow bobbing and puffing on the mat, I had my doubts</i> . He looks more like a grocer than a burglar!”
Bilbo to dwarves (in response): “I am sure you have come to the wrong house – but treat it as the right one.”	Bilbo to dwarves (in response): “I am quite sure you have come to the wrong house. <i>As soon as I saw your funny faces on the door-step, I had my doubts</i> . But treat it as the right one.”

In *Pryftan*, as in *The Hobbit*, the dwarves turn to an outsider for suggestions on how to recover their treasure. (Notoriously, the suggestion is to sit on the steps of Erebor until they think of a plan.) In *Pryftan*, this suggestion is elicited, logically enough, from the wizard with a simple and direct question. In *The Hobbit*, however, Thorin directs the question to the least-informed member of the group, framed in a wordier and superficially deferential way: “supposing the burglar-expert gives us some ideas or suggestions” (*H* 21). The narrator describes Thorin’s tone as one of “mock-politeness” (*H* 21). Just as politeness involves sensitivity to others and putting other people at their ease, mock-politeness is almost exactly the opposite; it is intended to insult others with *deliberately unconvincing courtesy*. Thorin’s mockery has a bitter and cowardly edge to it. Rather than challenging the wizard directly and risking retribution,



Thorin indulges a petty and mean-spirited streak by ridiculing powerless Bilbo to demonstrate his dissatisfaction with the wizard's choice.

**Table 2: Thorin Ridicules Bilbo**

<i>Pryftan</i> (10)	<i>The Hobbit</i> (21)
Dwarves to wizard: “What is your plan” then they all said.	Thorin to Bilbo: “Very well then,” said Thorin, “supposing the burglar-expert gives us some ideas or suggestions.” He turned with mock-politeness to Bilbo.

It is also worth noting that the chief dwarf becomes far more self-absorbed, pompous and ineffective in the published work. The alterations make him ruder, and the scene much funnier. Already in *Pryftan*, the chief dwarf is wordy; the narrator remarks that “in the end he would probably have said all he wanted to, and left a little time over for some of the others to have a word” (7). Clearly, the dwarf likes to hear himself talk and takes a while to get to the point; but perhaps no more than some grownups that the average child will meet. But in *The Hobbit*, the chief dwarf is no longer *merely* wordy; he “would probably have gone on like this until he was out of breath” (H 17). Thorin, unlike his antecedent, is not about to leave even “a little time” for “others to have a word”; he is entirely self-centered. That is, Thorin lacks the sensitivity and self-control to stop talking of his own accord, as common courtesy requires. Only his own physical limitations – a literal lack of breath – will slow him down.<sup>3</sup>

In sum, the participants in the opening chapter have been exaggerated to the point of caricature in *The Hobbit* – and much of the humour lies in their unmitigated rudeness to each other. As, in its essence, “good breeding consists in concealing how much we think of ourselves and how little we think of the

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<sup>3</sup> Consistent with the now comically exaggerated description of the dwarf's long-windedness, this particular speech is about 30 words longer in *The Hobbit*. One small gem is that the introductory phrase “may require explanation” (*Pryftan* 7) becomes “may require *a little brief* explanation” (H 17; emphasis added). Of course, Thorin's propensity to speak “until he was out of breath” also helps explain his subsequent delivery of two solid pages of uninterrupted exposition (H 22-24), which Tolkien has added to the *Pryftan* story.

other person” (Twain 345), Tolkien’s decision to ratchet up the rudeness to a comical level sets the tone for a discussion of etiquette humour in *The Hobbit*.

With this baseline in mind from the drafting history of Chapter I, let us turn to the narrator’s comments on etiquette conventions in the troll scene of Chapter II. The trolls are bigger, stronger, and more ruthless than the Company, and would gladly eat every “burrahobbit” or dwarf they can find. Yet the narrator makes a point of criticizing the trolls’ *manners*, of all things, rather than their penchant for killing and eating passing travelers.<sup>4</sup> “Yes, I am afraid trolls do behave like that,” the narrator says, when one of the trolls “wiped his lips on his sleeve” (H 33). Given the trolls’ predilection for dining on sapient bipeds, it is absurd and incongruous to pretend that a mere lapse of etiquette is the greatest imaginable horror to which our heroes are exposed.<sup>5</sup>

The narrator further remarks that trolls do not speak in “drawing-room fashion at all, at all” (H 33). Did anyone expect them to? Trolls are known for their coarseness in body, mind and spirit, while drawing-rooms are places for consciously refined and elegant entertaining. But even beyond this essential incongruity, the unnecessary repetition of the words “at all” signals a humorous intent: It is easy to imagine the line delivered in an exaggeratedly fake “upper-class” accent with a pinky extended from an imaginary teacup. The narrator’s tut-tutting over the trolls’ uncouth speech surely does not in any way encourage children to emulate the refined behaviour appropriate to the formal setting of the drawing-room. Rather, it taps into children’s mockery of the perceived stuffiness of “fancy” grown-up manners.

Gail Munde notes that “incongruity is generally recognized as the cornerstone of humour, for without the correct set of expectations the unexpected is not

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4 Tolkien’s narrator in *The Hobbit* is an “intrusive” one, who seems to have greater knowledge and experience than the reader and frequently comments on the story (see generally Thomas 162-65). The narrator’s humorously misguided comments in the troll scene, however, suggest early on that readers need not accept the narrator’s interpretation and judgments at face value.

5 There are echoes of *The Marvellous Land of Snergs* in this scene; *The Hobbit* narrator disapproves of the trolls’ failure to use napkins, just as the *Snergs* narrator criticizes an ogre’s failure to furnish flatware (Wyke-Smith 78).

surprising” (220).<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the absurdity and incongruity of references to etiquette in the troll scene suggest that Tolkien’s purpose is not primarily educational; it is only readers’ pre-existing understanding and expectations of proper behaviour that allow them to “get” the joke. Sly mockery of the role and importance of manners is doubtless popular with child audiences, since the undeniable “asymmetries of power between grown-up and child” (Briggs and Butts 141) mean that children are inevitably on the receiving end of courtesy lessons from adults. Indeed, Alison Lurie (4) suggests that

most of the great works of juvenile literature are subversive in one way or another: they express ideas and emotions not generally approved of or even recognized at the time; they make fun of honored figures and piously held beliefs; and they view social pretenses with clear-eyed directness.

Nonetheless, one may well ask whether there is perhaps a deeper purpose to Tolkien’s etiquette humour, beyond mere entertainment or parody. After all, his approach to matters of courtesy remains remarkably light and flexible throughout; the narrator explains what is polite among dwarves and eagles, but not what is polite among hobbits or elves, let alone any of their common enemies. And much rudeness, particularly on the part of the dwarves, passes with little or no comment. This essay will consider several etiquette-laced interactions in *The Hobbit*, along with their apparent analogues or precedents in certain earlier works; and look at more “serious” uses of etiquette in *The Hobbit* by way of comparison. In doing so, we will see if we can discern a broader purpose underlying Tolkien’s etiquette-based humour.

## A Tradition of Etiquette Humour

Naturally, Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* did not arise in a vacuum, but amidst the evolving tradition of British children’s fantasy literature. Tolkien’s etiquette humour can be helpfully compared with that found in four classic tales.

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<sup>6</sup> “Incongruity” is one of the most widely accepted theoretical bases for humour, along with “superiority” (a sense of superiority over the “butt” of the joke) and “relief” (a sudden release of anxiety or nervous energy) (see generally Carr and Greeves 81-95; Weitz 66-67). Munde also reports, with apparent approval, Michele Landsberg’s observation that “children, like all the powerless, find their best release and choicest weapon in humour” (221, 229).

The first two books, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* and his friend George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*, were published in the Victorian period, about twenty years before Tolkien's birth. The works have enjoyed an enduring prominence in the history of children's literature (e.g., Lurie 5, 8; Townsend 68-69, 72-73), and it seems likely that they were part of Tolkien's childhood reading.<sup>7</sup> *Looking-Glass* signals its interest in etiquette early on. Even before the dream-adventure begins, when a kitten tangles up her yarn, Alice criticizes the feline's comportment: "Really, Dinah ought to have taught you better manners! You *ought*, Dinah, you know you ought!" (Carroll 176). Alice makes an effort to speak politely throughout the tale, but the looking-glass creatures lecture her almost incessantly (if nonsensically) on manners. Briggs and Butts note that the Alice books "may be read as a profound scrutiny of systems, including those of social behaviour," and suggest that they reflect "the child's sense of puzzlement at the elaborate codes of the adult world" (141). Much of the humour comes from the looking-glass world characters' over-the-top rudeness to Alice. They indulge in a dizzying variety of interruptions, insults and personal remarks, unreasonable and changeable rules of comportment, refusal to pick up on social cues or give proper answers to straightforward questions, over-literal interpretation of common expressions, and the like.

Politeness is also a recurring theme in *Princess*. The narrator instructs readers that "a real princess is never rude" (MacDonald 21), and both the narrator and the characters comment on instances of courtesy and discourtesy they observe in the story. The etiquette humour in *Princess* is more subtle than in *Looking-Glass*, as it mostly involves a subversion of expectations. For example, it is the social inferior (the nurse) who is far more concerned with observing the formalities of rank than the princess. There is humour, too, in Irene's mistaken effort to be "very polite" to her fairy relative by addressing her as "great-great-great-great-grandmother" (86) – apparently unaware that gratuitous "greats" in this context unflatteringly exaggerate a relative's age, rather than indicating the relative's superlative abilities or eminence.

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<sup>7</sup> Tolkien referred to both of these works in his correspondence (L 460, 481). Although Tolkien appears to have lost his taste for MacDonald later in life, Douglas Anderson identifies *Princess* as a significant source or influence for *The Hobbit* (6).

The second pair, A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* and E.A. Wyke-Smith's *The Marvellous Land of Snergs*, were published about fifty years later, in the 1920s, while Tolkien's sons were young and before his daughter was born.<sup>8</sup> Although *Snergs* has not achieved the lasting acclaim of the other tales, it must be included, given "Tolkien's own high regard for this now-forgotten story" (Rateliff xxxviii, 60), its popularity with the Tolkien boys (Rateliff 47, 59), and its apparent influences on *The Hobbit* (Anderson 6-7) – whether as "an unconscious source-book" for the race of hobbits (*L* 215) or otherwise.<sup>9</sup> Wyke-Smith's narrator, like MacDonald's, purports to praise good manners and deplore bad manners – but does so in a way that undermines any possible etiquette lesson. We see this, for example, in the narrator's description of Miss Watkyns' attempt to coax "perfect behaviour" from her charges (Wyke-Smith 6). Only two children meet the challenge, and the narrator not only dismisses them as "smug little girls," but also notes that the incentive Miss Watkyns had offered to the children was out of fashion by the time it was awarded (7).

Milne, by contrast with the other authors, does not specifically call attention to his characters' lapses in courtesy in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, but instead plays each episode for gentle humour. As Lurie notes, "the verbal hypocrisies [...] of polite etiquette [are mocked] in Rabbit" (152). Readers may also smile at other etiquette failures among the denizens of the Forest, ranging from Eeyore's pessimistic variations on standard greetings to Kanga's nonsensical responses in any conversation that does not pertain to her own immediate interests. I have not been able to determine whether Tolkien ever read Milne's works,<sup>10</sup> but it makes sense to discuss *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The Hobbit* together here because the authors depict similar scenes of impolite behaviour, and their works have

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8 According to Rateliff's analysis, Tolkien began work on *The Hobbit* in 1930 (Rateliff xx), just two years after the publication of *Snergs*, and four years after *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

9 Hobbits resemble Snergs in their height and love of feasting, but the Snergs live in a land where fairy-tale elements co-exist with humans from multiple time periods. In Wyke-Smith's tale, a much-derided Snerg, Gorbo, befriends two mischievous human children and helps them through a series of scrapes featuring an evil witch, a semi-reformed ogre, and courtly medieval folk.

10 Tolkien was certainly aware of Milne in 1929, at least as the author of a theatrical adaptation that Tolkien disliked (Rateliff 58). And it seems almost certain that Tolkien would have been aware of the Pooh books as "the spectacular British success of the 1920s" (Townsend 125), particularly as he was familiar with other contemporaneous children's literature such as *Snergs* while his children were young. However, despite the boys' predilection for bears (Rateliff 253-54), Jared Lobdell recollects that Christopher Tolkien told him he "had a Pooh-less childhood" (e-mail message to the author, 31 May 2016).

reached similar prominence in the history of children's literature (Carpenter 211; Townsend 125, 130).

### Situational Etiquette in *The Hobbit*

Where etiquette books may promise to guide the reader in how to deal gracefully with common social scenarios, and didactic fiction may depict characters who are rewarded for proper behaviour, Tolkien instead puts his characters into situations where those who attempt to be polite are (at best) not rewarded, may become laughing-stocks, and may even find themselves at a distinct strategic disadvantage.

### Close Scrutiny of the Polite Formula

Everyday conversation is laced with "little pleasant phrases," part of a low-level background politeness that signals a generally friendly intent and helps put others at ease (Martin, *Turn-of-the-Millennium* 71; see also Blyth 45). In essence, these stock phrases are not intended to convey any deep meaning beyond a polite acknowledgment of another person's existence. They do not stand up to analysis, and are not intended to; they are, in effect, "ritualistic utterances" which require only the prescribed conventional response (Martin, *Turn-of-the-Millennium* 71). One of the most common, prosaic formulas is the simple "Good morning!" – to which the ideal response is a reciprocal, cheery "Good morning!" Milne and Tolkien both play with this expectation.

In *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Eeyore's response to a polite greeting from Pooh is deeply pessimistic:

"Good morning, Eeyore," said Pooh.

"Good morning, Pooh Bear," said Eeyore gloomily. "If it *is* a good morning," he said. "Which I doubt" (Milne 72).

The etiquette humour here is subtle, but subversive. If we are not supposed to say how we are really feeling when people ask "How are you?" (Blyth 108; Martin, *Excruciatingly Correct* 206), it is even clearer that we should not question the goodness of the morning when people wish us one. Tolkien improves

on Milne's hint in *The Hobbit*, where Gandalf's response to a cheerful "Good Morning!" from Bilbo, who "meant it," is one of dark skepticism (*H* 5). The passing stranger, as yet unidentified to the reader, looks at the hobbit "from under long bushy eyebrows" and demands an explanation:

"What do you mean?" he said. "Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?" (*H* 5-6).

Bloom points out that Bilbo's greeting is, in fact, "the first thing we hear Bilbo say" in the story, and that Gandalf "is rude enough to overinterpret the remark" (2). As it is also Gandalf's first remark, however, a first-time reader does not necessarily know, quite yet, whether this unusual response springs from a comical misunderstanding or some other source.<sup>11</sup> The reader may balk at this deviation from the polite formula, but Bilbo initially takes it in stride and responds graciously. Or at least he does so until Gandalf discloses that an adventure is in the offing. At that point, Bilbo begins trying to signal to Gandalf (without saying so directly) that the conversation is at an end.

Unfortunately for Bilbo, however, Gandalf is perfectly willing to exploit the gap between the literal meaning of words and their socially coded meaning for his own purposes. Tolkien seems to be taking some hints from Carroll in this regard. For example, when Alice responds to bizarre and unintelligible statements with a polite but puzzled, "I beg your pardon?" the looking-glass creatures take her words literally. Humpty Dumpty, seizing on the word *pardon*, assures her that he is "not offended" (Carroll 267). The White King stops processing the sentence at the verb and informs Alice that "it isn't respectable to beg" (Carroll 280).

Likewise, Gandalf takes Bilbo's "I beg your pardon" literally, and grandly offers to "give you what you asked for. [...] My pardon. I give it you" (*H* 7). Shippey notes that "it is comic to find Gandalf repeatedly ignoring the social code, and acting, as only someone foreign to it would, as if Bilbo meant what he said by

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<sup>11</sup> Miss Manners suggests that those "who insist on taking social idiomatic expressions literally [...] want to strip these remarks of their usefulness and then laugh at their nakedness" (Martin, *Excruciatingly Correct* 206). By contrast, Bloom infers from Gandalf's rudeness that the wizard is "self-important" (2). While an exaggerated sense of self-importance may explain Thorin's initial rudeness to Bilbo, it seems more plausible that Gandalf is acting strategically to obtain Bilbo's assistance. He later uses a different technique, with equal craftiness, to obtain Beorn's assistance.

phrases like ‘I beg your pardon’ (9). It is, of course, implausible that Gandalf wouldn’t be familiar with the appropriate polite response. Gandalf is, after all, the only member of the Company who knows that the correct reply to the eagles’ farewell is the somewhat cryptic wish that “the wind under your wings bear you where the sun sails and the moon walks” (*H* 106).<sup>12</sup>

But Tolkien has taken Carroll’s hint in a new direction. The infuriating literalism of Humpty and the White King is simply part of the madness of the looking-glass world, while it is clear that Gandalf is perfectly aware of Bilbo’s meaning, and is choosing a response that will throw Bilbo off-balance.

Gandalf also uses another technique, with equal relish, in which he pierces through the polite formula and exposes Bilbo’s true intentions. This comes about when Bilbo tries to dismiss Gandalf and end the conversation by saying “Good morning!” and “thank you!” in quick succession (*H* 6). As Shippey notes, this “insincere politeness [...] is socially coded to mean its opposite” (9), but when Gandalf points out what Bilbo is doing, Bilbo denies it. Obviously, it would be impolite for Bilbo to acknowledge in so many words that Gandalf’s presence is unwelcome, and as a result he is too embarrassed to admit that Gandalf’s interpretation is correct. Thus, Bilbo’s own concern for the appearance of proper behaviour traps him into a conversation that he finds more and more alarming, until the only way that he sees to escape is to invite Gandalf to tea. Bilbo then promptly scuttles inside “as quickly as he dared, not to seem rude” (*H* 8). Gandalf’s response – “laughing long but quietly” outside Bilbo’s door (*H* 8) – suggests that this is precisely the result he had intended. He has, by skillful rudeness, manipulated Bilbo into hosting a tea party.

For this technique to work, Gandalf had to make Bilbo extremely uncomfortable. He undoubtedly counted on Bilbo’s intense (and very British) distaste for the impropriety of a *direct* confrontation, as well as Bilbo’s fear of offending a wizard.<sup>13</sup> If Bilbo were more honest, and more courageous, he could easily

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<sup>12</sup> Olsen notes that the “references to ‘eyries’ and ‘wings’ show that it is an internal formula – what eagles say to each other upon parting, not what they say to others” (133).

<sup>13</sup> The narrator implies that Bilbo’s desire “not to seem rude” to Gandalf is at least partly self-protective, since “Wizards after all are wizards” (*H* 8). Five chapters later, when Bilbo fears that he has inadvertently offended the eagles with his babbling, the narrator returns to the theme of self-protective politeness, exhorting readers “not to be rude to an eagle, when you are only the size of a hobbit, and are up in his eyrie at night!” (*H* 102).



have avoided this dilemma. Throughout the scene, we see that pre-adventure Bilbo is overly concerned with the forms of politeness, the appearance of good manners. Knowing this, Gandalf easily keeps Bilbo off-balance and maintains control of the situation.

### The Cold Offer, Warmly Received

A very closely related theme is the “cold offer” – one which is extended as a matter of form, but with social cues to make clear that it must be declined. Naturally, there is humour in characters who (like Gandalf) are more than willing to ignore such cues to get their own way.

A classic instance in Milne’s novel is Rabbit’s comically ineffective attempt to avoid a visit from Pooh. After very elaborate but unsuccessful efforts to convince his friend that he is not at home, Rabbit finally lets Pooh in and very politely invites him to have “a mouthful of something” (Milne 26). This is clearly a mistake, because Pooh silently devotes himself “for a long time” to consuming honey and condensed milk,

... until at last, humming to himself in a rather sticky voice, he got up, shook Rabbit lovingly by the paw, and said that he must be going on.

“Must you?” said Rabbit politely.

“Well,” said Pooh, “I could stay a little longer if it – if you --” and he tried very hard to look in the direction of the larder.

“As a matter of fact,” said Rabbit, “I was going out myself directly.”

“Oh, well, then, I’ll be going on. Good-bye.”

“Well, good-bye, if you’re sure you won’t have any more.”

“*Is there any more?*” asked Pooh quickly. (Milne 26-27)

Rabbit’s hypocritical politeness seems to be almost compulsive, offered in spite of repeated evidence that Pooh will blithely ignore every social cue. Pooh, in turn, is a truly terrible guest, one who is fully prepared to lick Rabbit’s larder clean, and is able to do so by ignoring Rabbit’s unobtrusive hints that Pooh’s pres-

ence is unwelcome and instead seizing on each tepid and meaningless courtesy offered by his reluctant host.

In the opening chapter of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo likewise makes a “cold offer” to the dwarves:

“I suppose you will all stay to supper?” he said in his politest unpressing tones.

“Of course!” said Thorin. “And after.” (*H* 12)

Bilbo’s “unpressing tones” make clear that, despite his words, Bilbo would very much prefer that his unexpected guests leave as soon as possible rather than staying for dinner. Where Gandalf actively manipulated Bilbo into doing something he did not want to do, Thorin (like Pooh) accepts an invitation that was insincerely given. Thorin and Pooh disregard social cues and hold an unwilling host to his word; Thorin goes farther than Pooh in inviting himself and thirteen others to partake of hospitality far beyond what is offered.

And what of Bilbo? How does he respond to the liberties Thorin is taking? Here we might turn to Sir Percival in Wyke-Smith’s story. Brushing aside the knight’s protests, Gorbo places the two children on the horse with Sir Percival, fore and aft, blocking the knight from using his reins or holding his lance. Only after the children are firmly installed does Gorbo consult the knight about the arrangement:

“I hope this is not incommoding you at all,” said Gorbo politely, struck with a sudden idea.

“Oh, no,” replied Sir Percival with bitter irony. [...] “Who *would* be incommoded by a little thing like this?” (Wyke-Smith 93-94).

Bilbo is, if possible, even more comically ineffective than the knight in responding to the imposition of one who blithely disregards all social cues. Where Sir Percival finds refuge in bitter irony, Bilbo cannot even reply to Thorin’s remarks, but instead starts “almost squeaking with fright” (*H* 13) as the dwarves clear up everything from the tea for the next stage of the adventure.

## Proper Deportment for the Prisoner

One situation that is seldom addressed in the etiquette books is the proper conduct of a person who finds himself in the role of captive. Fortunately, MacDonald and Tolkien both help fill this surprising lacuna, by calling attention to the level of courtesy demonstrated by characters who fall into the hands of goblins.

In MacDonald's story, the young miner Curdie is particularly anxious to avoid detection when spying on the goblins. The narrator explains that Curdie does not expect the goblins to "exercise courtesy" toward him, given his well-deserved reputation as their "special rhymester and persecutor" (MacDonald 70). When Curdie literally falls into their midst, however, he addresses the goblin king respectfully as "Your Majesty" in responding (albeit falsely) to questions about his identity and purpose (MacDonald 134). The king's reaction is perhaps surprising; he is "pleased" by this unexpected politeness from a miner, because he "attributed it to the power of his own presence" (MacDonald 134). It apparently feeds his ego to imagine that his presence is so intimidating that Curdie is cowed into submission. But we learn immediately that the king "did not therefore feel friendly" to Curdie (MacDonald 134). The goblin king instead taunts Curdie by ordering him to leave (when he knows Curdie is lost), and then ordering his subjects to seize Curdie when he requests a guide. Under the thinnest veneer of politeness, Curdie and the goblin king do not trust each other; each knows the other is lying and each is awaiting his chance to gain an advantage.

In *The Hobbit*, when the Great Goblin begins interrogating the dwarves about their presence in goblin territory, Thorin responds with "Thorin the dwarf at your service!" – and the narrator quickly reminds us that "it was merely a polite nothing" (*H* 60). Some critics suggest, in analyzing the passage, that Thorin is speaking "from force of habit" (Stevens and Stevens 64). West similarly notes that the words "could be dangerous if taken literally, but it is a formula regularly used [among dwarves] when introducing oneself throughout *The Hobbit*" (6).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bilbo uses a different formula, introducing himself to Gollum as "Mr. Bilbo Baggins" (*H* 69). MacIntyre suggests that Bilbo is drawing on "proprieties current in the Shire," which are "as unfamiliar to Gollum as Gollum is to Bilbo" (13). However, Bilbo's formula is equally unfamiliar to Miss Manners, who states emphatically that "one never applies a title of courtesy to oneself," including the title of "Mr." (Martin, *Turn-of-the-Millennium* 51).

But it is misleading to suggest that Thorin's politeness is automatic. After all, Thorin deliberately withheld the greeting when he fell on Bilbo's doorstep and injured his dignity: "Thorin indeed was very haughty, and said nothing about *service*" (H 11). Here, by contrast, Thorin's "polite nothing" is surely purposeful. At a minimum, it helps buy him time to think. The goblins are sufficiently wicked and cruel that anyone in their clutches must take care to avoid making them angry. An illuminating contrast can be seen when the dwarves are later captured by the Wood-elves; in that situation, they "did not even pretend to be polite" to the Elvenking (H 158). The Wood-elves, though less wise and more dangerous than their kin, are still "Good People" (H 154); the dwarves doubtless know that they can get away with rudeness to the elves, as they cannot with the goblins. That is, the Elvenking may (as he does) angrily confine the dwarves, but he will not kill, torture or starve them (H 156, 159).<sup>15</sup> The dwarves have no such confidence with respect to the Great Goblin, who (when angered) not only orders his minions to "Slash them! Beat them! Bite them! Gnash them!" but also "rushed at Thorin with his mouth open" (H 61).

Both MacDonald and Tolkien are doing something similar here, in calling attention to a prisoner's insincere politeness to his goblin captors; the humour in such exchanges lies in the tension between surface and reality. Good manners in these circumstances are clearly strategic or tactical, rather than sincere. Nor is the prisoner's courtesy rewarded in any conventional sense, as seen in didactic stories. For example, courtesy does not win the goblins' trust or friendship. The tactic seems to be one of stalling for time and avoiding immediate destruction.

### Addressing One of Higher Rank

Etiquette requires use of proper titles when addressing an individual of higher rank (see generally Martin, *Excruciatingly Correct* 687-91), and several of our authors play with this concept. When Alice becomes a queen, she scolds herself for being insufficiently dignified – and actually addresses herself as "your Majesty" in doing so (Carroll 317). When the princess of MacDonald's story invites a young miner to call her "Irene," her nurse is indignant and insists that

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<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the Elvenking's threat to keep the dwarves locked up "until you have learned sense and manners" (H 159) is reminiscent of parental punishments such as being sent to one's room.

Curdie should address the princess as “Your Royal Highness” (MacDonald 39). But the princess, in turn, is outraged at the suggestion that Curdie should call her by her royal title. Irene’s outrage is not due to democratic pretensions, but because she interprets it (literally) as name-calling:

“My Royal Highness! What’s that? No, no, Lootie. I won’t be called names. I don’t like them. You told me once yourself it’s only rude children that call names; and I’m sure Curdie wouldn’t be rude. Curdie, my name’s Irene” (MacDonald 39).

The joke here, of course, is that the princess has completely misunderstood the convention of addressing royalty by their formal titles and imagines that it is an insult. The low-born Curdie is very well aware of Irene’s innocent mistake, as he gives the nurse a glance which shows he enjoys teasing her and tells Irene that “it is very kind of you to let me call you anything” (MacDonald 39).

Polite speech to one of superior rank not only involves use of proper titles, but it often (in books) takes place in an elevated and archaic register, characterized by circumlocutions and use of the vocative *O*, and ornamented with elaborately constructed phrases and compliments. It is easy to skewer this “high” style of speaking through sheer exaggeration or by “misapplying” it to unlikely topics, and Wyke-Smith does exactly that. In *Snergs*, King Merse II’s least favorite subject, Gorbo, addresses his monarch respectfully as “O King,” and expresses the prescribed wish (i.e., that the king’s “shadow be ever a wide one”<sup>16</sup>) – even when the king is heaping insults upon him, such as “O Ornament to the race the other way round” (Wyke-Smith 42). The incongruity and unfairness of this arrangement is rather striking, and is doubtless intended for humorous effect. Wyke-Smith further mocks this convention by mixing formal, archaic speech with modern, colloquial speech. When Merse II asks Joe “what will Miss Watkins (on whom be peace) think of these thy wanderings” (Wyke-Smith 42), he is speaking in the customary formal, archaic register which he uses indiscriminately for purposes high and low. Throughout the scene, a humorous mixture of modern, colloquial

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<sup>16</sup> This is surely echoed, although reimagined, in the Elvenking’s farewell wish to Bilbo: “May your shadow never grow less (or stealing would be too easy)!” (*H* 267).

speech with formal, archaic speech is characteristic of both children, as they awkwardly combine the vocative *O* with contemporary slang.<sup>17</sup>

Tolkien similarly draws on a subject/monarch linguistic pattern for Bilbo's conversation with Smaug. As Shippey (38) observes, Bilbo speaks to Smaug "in a much more elevated style than is usual for him" and "Smaug replies more archaically and more heroically than anyone has done in *The Hobbit* so far." Although initially caught off-guard, Bilbo quickly addresses the dragon as "O Smaug the Tremendous" and "O Smaug the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities" – causing Smaug to remark that Bilbo has "nice manners for a thief and a liar" (*H* 204). Bilbo's use of respectful titles makes sense here, since Bilbo is addressing one who is, as Bard grimly observes to his compatriots, "the only king under the Mountain we have ever known" (*H* 225).

There is much humour in the narrator's comment that riddling talk "of course is the way to talk to dragons," almost as if he were giving etiquette advice to readers anxious to learn the proper forms of discourse for their own future dragon encounters (*H* 205).<sup>18</sup> As hobbit and dragon engage in verbal fencing, each laying traps for the other, they address one another with pretended deference: A single mock-respectful "O Barrel-rider" from Smaug is countered by Bilbo's "O Smaug the Mighty" as well as "O Smaug the unassessably wealthy"<sup>19</sup> (*H* 205-7).

It is even possible to trace tactical changes in their conversation through changes in their forms of address.<sup>20</sup> For Bilbo, the most significant shift occurs when he

17 For example: "I don't know, O King," replied Joe, hoping he was saying it correctly. "We just scooted. For fun" (Wyke-Smith 42-43). Similarly, Sylvia says, "You see – er – O King, Joe and I ran away – for fun – and Gorbo found us," and Joe asserts that "Gorbo's a jolly good sort, O King" (43).

18 Indeed, the narrator, who has previously noted the strategic importance of not antagonizing wizards or enormous eagles through open rudeness, here emphasizes that it is "very wise" not to "infuriate [dragons] by a flat refusal" to reveal one's true name (*H* 205). A flat refusal to respond to a question is, unquestionably, impolite.

19 An apt title, since Smaug's wealth is too vast to assess (measure), and Smaug is also too powerful for anyone to dare attempt to assess (tax) it.

20 Smaug starts with mere name-calling ("thief" and "liar"), rather than titles (*H* 204). As he becomes intrigued with Bilbo's riddling talk, he uses a mock-respectful title and the vocative case ("O Barrel-rider") (*H* 205). As he gains the upper-hand through shrewd guesses and is able to manipulate Bilbo by introducing doubts about his companions, Smaug tones down the titles a notch and abandons the vocative ("Thief Barrel-rider" and "Mr. Lucky Number"). But when he gives himself wholly over to boasting, he enters a more archaic and poetic mode (echoing the Old Testament or a sweeping epic) and refers to Bilbo as "Thief in the Shadows" (*H* 207).

turns to *purposeful* flattery to gain information; at that point, he drops the *O* and refers to the dragon as “Lord Smaug” and “Your Magnificence” (*H* 208). Indeed, Bilbo’s use of the honorific “Lord” is surely ironic, because “in speech, ‘Lord’ or ‘Lady’ before a given name means that the bearer has *inherited* the title” as the child of a duke, marquess, or earl (Martin, *Excruciatingly Correct* 691; emphasis added). Even if Smaug has appointed himself king under the Mountain, he certainly has not inherited the role, and holds it by might rather than by right.<sup>21</sup>

Smaug primarily speaks with “a kind of elaborate politeness, even circumlocution, of course totally insincere (as is often the case with upper-class English)” (Shippey 37), i.e., a mere “parody [of] polite language” (Kullmann 43). Shippey (38) notes that even as Smaug’s tone becomes “familiar, even colloquial,” it oozes with contempt and “roundabout mock-courtesy”. Yet through all the tonal shifts, Smaug’s false politeness suggests that he is not entirely sure who or what he is dealing with, just as Gollum, when he realizes that Bilbo has a sword out of Gondolin, “became quite polite” as he was “anxious to *appear* friendly [...] until he found out more about the sword and the hobbit” (*H* 69; emphasis added).

We see in Chapter XII, from Bilbo’s use of flatteringly polite titles, that Bilbo is addressing one who is far mightier than he. But the ring, and perhaps Bilbo’s unfamiliar scent, gives Bilbo an edge in dealing with Smaug so that he is not utterly at Smaug’s mercy. This elevates Bilbo above the status of mere prisoner (or lunch!) so that he can assume the role of subject addressing a monarch. Smaug’s attitude toward Bilbo is reminiscent of Merse II’s toward Gorbo, rather than that of a goblin toward a prisoner.

## Daring To Be Offended

Etiquette also dictates how one may respond to the impolite behaviour of others, and we again see our authors exploring this concept with humour. In Chapter

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<sup>21</sup> Smaug clearly has not inherited a peerage; and pretending he has earned one would not give him distinction under the British class system. As Miss Manners explains, “the further away the title holder is from earning his distinction, the more distinguished he is considered” and thus, it is ideal to be “the inheritor of a title given to a remote ancestor” (Martin, *Excruciatingly Correct* 690).

4 of MacDonald's novel, the young princess Irene is offended by her nurse's rudeness and informs her, "you are not fit to be spoken to – till you can behave better" (23). However, when the nurse says "I'm sure I beg your pardon" in an offended tone, Irene graciously "let the tone pass, and heeded only the words" (MacDonald 23). Here, the humour lies primarily in MacDonald's inversion of the customary roles, i.e., the child is correcting and disciplining the adult for improper behaviour. Both Irene and her nurse take offense in this scene, but the narrator emphasizes that only Irene is justified in doing so. The nurse certainly has no right to use an "offended tone" when she is requesting Irene's pardon for her own impoliteness. What we may also notice here is that the princess, who has reason to be offended, is quick to forgive, whereas the nurse is quick to take offense.

In Tolkien's tale, it is the dwarves – and especially Thorin – who take offense most readily. As we have seen, when Bilbo opens the door suddenly and Thorin falls on his face with three dwarves on top of him, Thorin "was very haughty" to Bilbo and only after profuse apologies does he finally grunt "pray don't mention it," and stop frowning (*H* 11). Grunting is hardly gracious, but another part of the humour here is also that the characters all erroneously assume that Bilbo was in the wrong for opening the door too abruptly. (The dwarves would not have fallen in, no matter how quickly the door opened, had they stood at a respectful distance after knocking.) Likewise, after Bilbo rescues the dwarves from imprisonment in the Elvenking's realm, Thorin is grumpy, rather than grateful, on being freed from his barrel; the narrator notes that "it was some time before he would be even polite to the hobbit" (*H* 178). Thorin is particularly quick to stand on his dignity and to unleash his displeasure on the hobbit by withholding common courtesies.

By contrast, the dwarves show great restraint in the presence of Beorn. They scrupulously heed Gandalf's warning that "you must all be very polite when I introduce you" to Beorn (*H* 108). But when they offer Beorn their service, his response is rather rude. Beorn immediately sees through the form of politeness and (like Gandalf with Bilbo in the opening chapter) points out the truth of the situation, noting correctly that he does not need the dwarves' service, "but I expect you need mine" (*H* 112). Beorn's brusqueness only escalates as the dwarves continue to arrive and offer him their service. Olsen (134) notes,



correctly, that “Beorn’s rudeness to Thorin and Company shows, in part, that he does not fear them.” But an important converse is true as well. When Beorn reaches the point of simply laughing at the dwarves and ordering them to “sit down and stop wagging,” the dwarves promptly obey, “not daring to be offended” (*H* 114-15).<sup>22</sup>

In everyday life, quickness to take offense, and to express that offense through sullenness or grumpiness, is a sign of immaturity and is (naturally enough) seen most often in children. MacDonald inverts the expectation in the relationship between the young princess and her nurse; and Tolkien again expands on MacDonald’s hint. His dwarves, though fully grown, respond like children when they do not get their own way<sup>23</sup> – except when their self-interest counsels otherwise. Thus, they feel free to sulk and scowl at harmless Bilbo, but not at dangerous Beorn.

### Counterpoint: Rudeness as Benchmark

While Bilbo (unlike the dwarves) generally makes efforts to be reasonably polite, it is notable that skillful use of rudeness marks two significant points in Bilbo’s development.

Indeed, rudeness is Bilbo’s primary weapon in Chapter VIII, his first real “heroic” endeavor, when he saves his companions from the spiders of Mirkwood. He wields Sting and throws stones, but ultimately prevails “by taunts and trickery, not by combat” (MacIntyre 15). Bilbo’s strategy consists of inventing insulting songs “on the spur of a very awkward moment” (*H* 147) to taunt the spiders into blind rage and draw them off. Bilbo’s taunting poetry for the spiders somewhat echoes Curdie’s taunting poetry in *Princess*. In MacDonald’s world, rhyming verse is the miners’ main weapon against the goblins. While Curdie’s songs are, in Irene’s estimation, “rather rude” (MacDonald 41), their

22 Indeed, through Beorn’s eyes, readers may see the dwarves’ overscrupulous politeness as ridiculous (*H* 114; Olsen 133). Critically, Beorn helps the Company only because he becomes interested in Gandalf’s story. Although his interest is heightened by the interruptions (*H* 116), his reaction to the dwarves’ obsequious bowing and offers of service is merely that of annoyance and amusement; thus, he orders the dwarves to stop, once he is through laughing at them.

23 [The “immature” sulking could also be linked to pre-modern behaviour, as found in numerous protagonists in the Icelandic sagas. It is, however, more likely that Tolkien, in the context of *The Hobbit*, had primarily the behaviour of children in mind. – Eds.]

effectiveness appears to lie in the rhymes themselves. That is, it appears that the goblins are extremely discomfited by poetry because they “have no more voice than a crow” (MacDonald 36) and “could not make any” verses of their own (MacDonald 49). The rudeness appears to be almost incidental, a byproduct of Curdie’s genuine contempt for them.<sup>24</sup> As Curdie explains, “if you’re not afraid of them, they’re afraid of you” (MacDonald 36). Tolkien has reinvented rhyming verses as weapons for Bilbo, whose deliberate use of rude names such as “Attercop” and “Tomnoddy” makes the spiders “frightfully angry” (*H* 147); it is now the rhymes that appear to be merely incidental. Although the notion of using rudeness as a weapon is somewhat absurd, it is a benchmark of Bilbo’s growing heroism.

A second significant turning point, reflecting Bilbo’s increasing self-confidence, occurs just four chapters later. Just as Gandalf rudely punctures Bilbo’s polite nothings in Chapter I by calling attention to Bilbo’s true intentions, Bilbo does much the same to Thorin in Chapter XII, and it signals an important shift in their relationship. Thorin has begun a grand speech on the theme of “Now is the time for our esteemed Mr. Baggins [...] to earn his Reward” (*H* 195). The narrator quickly deflates Thorin’s “magniloquent speech” for the reader, and then Bilbo further mocks Thorin’s polite hypocrisy (Shippey 42-43). As Tolkien writes:

It certainly was an important occasion, but Bilbo felt impatient. By now he was quite familiar with Thorin too, and he knew what he was driving at.

“If you mean you think it is my job to go into the secret passage first, O Thorin Thrain’s son Oakenshield, may your beard grow ever longer,” he said crossly, “say so at once and have done!” (*H* 195)

Bilbo now sees through Thorin’s grand words, and publicly reveals their emptiness while parodying a courtier’s flattering speech; and yet he also now has the courage to volunteer for the task with eyes wide-open.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Curdie does “not value the enmity of the goblins in the least” (MacDonald 46), and unwisely dismisses them from his calculations.

<sup>25</sup> This is not the last time that Bilbo pierces through Thorin’s polite nothings; in the descendant-of-rats scene, Bilbo challenges Thorin about the “service” he had promised to Bilbo (*H* 251-52). Shippey (44) notes that Bilbo thereby “punctures dwarvish greeting formulas in much the same way that Gandalf punctured his own at the beginning.”

## Conclusion

The “good” characters presented in *The Hobbit* are, as Shippey (49) notes, “far removed from standard presentations of virtue as thought suitable for child readers – no doubt one reason why the book has remained so popular.” Precisely the same can be said of Tolkien’s presentations of etiquette in *The Hobbit*; these are not simple, one-size-fits-all applications of rules of custom and courtesy, but instead, comically and subversively, they show that manners can and do change to fit different circumstances and different purposes. Superficially polite words may be used to insult, to deceive, to satisfy tradition, or to show genuine respect;<sup>26</sup> others’ polite words and actions (whether or not sincerely meant) may be reciprocated, pierced, or ridiculed; and the forms of politeness may be withheld, or even entirely abandoned in favor of undisguised taunts and insults.

We have seen that what constitutes polite behaviour among the denizens of Tolkien’s world is somewhat arbitrary, a matter of convention removed from its literal meaning. Moreover, a person who is overly concerned with polite behaviour, like Bilbo at the beginning of *The Hobbit*, can be manipulated into situations he would prefer to avoid. Not only do we see that politeness can be hypocritical; we also see Bilbo suffering the consequences of his own insincere politeness when the Company takes him at his word. It is the impolite characters, Gandalf and Thorin, who prevail in the initial tussles with Bilbo; and much of their success in bullying him into an adventure is owed to their ruthless disregard of courteous behaviour. Bilbo himself soon learns to deploy rudeness strategically against the spiders of Mirkwood.

Nor is adherence to polite formulas rewarded elsewhere in *The Hobbit*. Thorin’s politeness to the Great Goblin, the dwarves’ politeness to Beorn, and Bilbo’s politeness to Smaug – none of these efforts “pay off” in any tangible way. They fool no one, and win no friends, through their efforts to be polite.

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<sup>26</sup> For example, when Balin learns that Bilbo has managed to slip by him undetected, he takes off his hood to Bilbo and reintroduces himself with the words “Balin at your service” (*H* 87). The implication is that the ordinarily empty polite formula now has meaning, because Bilbo has managed to earn Balin’s respect with his stealth. In a similar vein, the use of the vocative *O* and elaborate titles is merely false and flattering in Bilbo’s encounter with Smaug, but becomes serious and formal in the halls of the Elvenking, as the king has gained a genuine affection and respect for the unlikely burglar (*H* 267).

In fact, where Tolkien breaks away most completely from his predecessors is in this additional layer of Realpolitik: politeness is most consistently displayed from the less powerful to the more powerful. This mirrors the traditional experience of children who have rules of politeness imposed on them regardless of whether the adults follow such rules consistently or not. Like children, the dwarves are peevish and sulky, and even downright rude to Bilbo and the Elvenking because they can get away with it; but they are scrupulously polite to Beorn and the goblins, as their self-interest dictates. Over the course of the tale, we can even see levels of politeness change as the power balance changes in different relationships. Gollum and Smaug put on a show of politeness as they take Bilbo's measure; and a defining moment in Bilbo's relationship with Thorin occurs late in the story when Bilbo pierces Thorin's courteous words, much as Gandalf did to Bilbo and Beorn did to the dwarves. Simply put, in Tolkien's world, as in our own, the powerful have far less need for politeness.

### About the Author

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