

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

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2016

Cormarë Series No. 35

Series Editors: Peter Buchs • Thomas Honegger • Andrew Moglestue • Johanna Schön

Series Editor responsible for this volume: Thomas Honegger

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Thomas Honegger & Maureen Mann (eds.):
Humour in and around the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

Subject headings:

Tolkien, J.R.R. (John Ronald Reuel), 1892-1973

Humour

Middle-earth

The Lord of the Rings

The Hobbit

The Silmarillion

Cormarë Series No. 35

First published 2016

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Set in Adobe Garamond Pro and Shannon by Walking Tree Publishers

Printed by Lightning Source in the United Kingdom and United States

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Strategies of Humour in *The Stupid Ring Parody*

pre-publication offprint

Abstract

Begun in 2002 in response to the release of the first New Line Cinema film in December 2001, *The Stupid Ring Parody* bills itself as the “Earth’s largest Tolkien parody.” At over 300,000 words, its claim is likely to be correct. *Stupid Ring* is written in the form of a screenplay, and it follows *The Lord of the Rings* closely, parodying virtually every episode. Given the length and depth of the parody, and the obvious appreciation of and close attention to Tolkien’s works with which it was written, *Stupid Ring* provides a fertile ground for examination of the many and varied strategies of humour employed by its creators. Drawing as it does on material from the film, from the greater body of Tolkien’s legendarium beyond *The Lord of the Rings*, from the fandom culture that developed around the films, from other *The Lord of the Rings* parodies, and from other works of humour from popular culture, *Stupid Ring* is broad enough in scope to be the subject of several papers. In this paper, I study the construction of the parody as a text, by exploring the following strategies of humour: breaking the fourth wall; metatheatrical commentary by the characters/actors; engagement with the fan culture of which the parody is a part, and use of source materials.

Introduction

The *Stupid Ring Parody* is an online parody of *The Lord of the Rings*. Inspired by New Line Cinema’s *The Fellowship of the Ring* (December 2001), the parody was begun in 2002 by a group of fans on a Netscape message board. Some 70-odd names are credited as co-authors of the parody. *The Stupid Ring* is over 300,000 words long, and exhaustive in parodying virtually every episode to be found in the books. It bills itself as “The Earth’s Largest Tolkien Parody”, and I, at least, have found no parody to challenge this claim.

The stupidring.com domain lapsed some time between July and October 2012. As a result, *Stupid Ring* is now only available in a cached format on the Internet Archive at http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://stupidring.com. The Internet

Archive is a service that crawls the web and periodically takes snapshots of sites for just this purpose: so that Tolkien scholars can write papers about parodies hosted on sites that are no longer available. Any date after July 30, 2012 yields only a cache of a broken page for <http://stupidring.com>, but snapshots from prior dates preserve the parody in its original glory. *Stupid Ring* is thus now the digital age's equivalent of a lost manuscript, in its way similar to Tolkien's fictional *Red Book of Westmarch*.

The strategies of humour employed by *Stupid Ring* are numerous, ranging from low humour about bodily functions to self-referential metafiction. When setting out to write this paper, I was faced with an abundance of options for potential topics. For instance, I could have chosen to write about the translation of the culture of recent decades to Middle-earth: the use of technology such as video tapes to replay flashbacks at the Council of Elrond; the framing of Sauron and Saruman in corporate language, such as Saruman appropriating Gandalf's key-card; and above all the self-awareness of the characters that they are not supposed to have this technology, living as they do in a pre-industrial society.

Another paper could have been written on the use of stylistics, including the juxtaposition of high tone with low content – “In the Elvish tongue they are called books.” This juxtaposition is used in connection with the device, standard in parodies, of making the wise characters from the books appear foolish and incompetent. A study of stylistics could also have explored the use of diction to cast various characters into stereotypical groups familiar to the reader. The Rohirrim, for instance, speak in a parody of cowboy dialect (“But if'n you get kilt, don't bother.”), and the Ents like hippies¹ (“Hey that's cool, man. I can dig it.”). Tolkien used the same device, in a more restrained manner, of distinguishing the hobbits' speech, Gollum's speech, and the Orcs' speech from the more formal diction of the traditionally epic heroes for humorous effect.

¹ While in *praeteritio* mode, I cannot resist drawing attention to the psychedelic effects of Entdraught; the protest slogans of the Ents: “Down with Saruman”, “Give Trees a Chance”, “No Orcs are Good Orcs”, “Make Loam, Not War”, “Ban the Eye”, “Go with the Flow (of the Isen)”, “Hell No, We Won't Plow!”, “Trees have got to be FREE!!”, “Feelin' Grovey”, “Just Dig It, Don't Dig it UP!”, and the allusion to Woodstock in “this one entmoot back in '69. Oh man that was like so far out!...It was pretty short though, only lasted like three days man...Back then it was about peace and love man, not like nowadays.”

Another device used by Tolkien that was translated into parody is music. Just as Tolkien's characters express themselves in song, so do the characters of *Stupid Ring* – only they are reworking popular music. For instance, when Legolas sings of his longing for the Sea, he does so by parodying a Beach Boys song. Fruitful comparisons could be made to Tolkien's own use of songs, particularly those sung by the hobbits, for humorous effect, especially "The Man in the Moon", which is based on a nursery rhyme from the real world.

Since it should be clear by now that it would be impossible to do justice to all the strategies of humour employed by *Stupid Ring* in a single essay, I have elected from this embarrassment of riches to focus on the parody as a text by examining its structure; its relationship to its sources, including Tolkien's writings, the New Line Cinema films, *Lord of the Rings* fan culture, and the parody itself; and the metafictional devices of humour employed in the parody.

1. Structure of the Parody

Stupid Ring is constructed in the form of a screenplay. This decision is owed in part to the film that inspired it. At the same time, the parody's structure follows the book, because it is broken down into the same six books with the same chapters. The header of each chapter gives a roman numeral indicating the book, and an arabic numeral indicating the chapter, so in this paper I use (SR II.5) to indicate the fifth chapter of the second book in *Stupid Ring*.

In its plot, the parody follows the book rather than the film: e.g. Bombadil is present, Faramir never tries to take the Ring, and Aragorn never falls off a cliff nor does he meet Arwen in a dream. The dialogue, however, is inspired as much by the film as the book, to the point where the reader can't tell whether this is a parody of a film or of a book.

The schizophrenic indecision of *Stupid Ring* between film and book extends to the characters as well. To take Frodo and Sam as representative characters, they are sometimes presented as real hobbits named Frodo and Sam, in the manner that Tolkien's characters perceive themselves; sometimes as actors Elijah Wood and Sean Astin, playing fictional characters in a film based on a fictional book written by J.R.R. Tolkien; and sometimes as fully fictional characters in a web

parody based on a fictional book written by Tolkien. For this reason, there are complex interactions between the several major metafictional categories of speakers in *Stupid Ring*:

- the characters of *The Lord of the Rings*
- the film actors
- the film crew
- fictional narrators
- the authors of the web parody
- ad hoc characters

One category in this list of textual levels is missing: J.R.R. Tolkien himself. His name is invoked only a handful of times by speakers, always with respect, and he is never given a speaking part. The reason is obvious: the authors of the parody clearly have no desire to make him a figure of fun, and reverence is simply not as funny as irreverence. Therefore, references to Tolkien are kept both few and inoffensive.

Interactions take place between any and all categories except between actors and characters: Elijah Wood never talks to Frodo Baggins, though he sometimes talks *about* him. Instead, the dialogue, which is consistently presented in the screenplay in this manner,

Frodo: [dialogue]

is sometimes delivered from the point of view of Frodo the hobbit and sometimes from Elijah the human actor. There are no cases of

Elijah: [dialogue]

in the screenplay. In most cases, it is either possible to tell from context whether “Frodo” is speaking as a hobbit or as an actor playing a hobbit, or it doesn’t matter, because the dialogue would suit equally well a character speaking from the heart or an actor delivering a line. But there are a few striking cases in which the same piece of dialogue makes sense only if both contexts are taken into account simultaneously.

For instance, at the Council of Elrond, Bilbo observes that “apparently we’re skipping over my story, which, I may add, is the only one so far that’s been a

best-seller” (SR II.5). In this line, Bilbo is speaking not only as someone who has lived the events of *The Hobbit* and written them, as in Tolkien’s canon, but as someone who has enjoyed the material successes of the published volume that Tolkien enjoyed in the real world. Since Tolkien makes Bilbo one of the characters responsible for metafictional commentary, he is an appropriate choice for crossing the genre boundaries in *Stupid Ring*.

Faramir is given an even more mind-bending line that breaks the wall between film and book. When Frodo assures him that Boromir’s scene in Moria was popular with the fans and enjoyed a moving soundtrack, Faramir observes that the silver lining of his brother’s death is that he can make a killing selling Boromir’s merchandise on eBay. In this case, the speaker labeled “Faramir” speaks both as someone who has lost his brother to the events of the plot – which does not apply to the actor David Wenham – and as someone with merchandise and access to eBay, which could not possibly apply to Faramir. It is a sort of category mistake that produces a humorous effect because it is so blatantly illogical.

Because of the frequent switches between Frodo as actor and Frodo as character, and the occasional blending of characters and actors as in Faramir’s speech, I will use the umbrella term of *speakers* in the essay when it is unimportant, or impossible, to distinguish between actor and character in the parody.

2. Source Material

The sources of *Stupid Ring* that pertain to Middle-earth are four: the books by Tolkien, the films by New Line Cinema, the fictional works by Tolkien fans to be found on the internet, and the parody itself, insofar as later elements of the parody build on earlier elements that are original to the parody. There are numerous other sources that are drawn on for humorous effect, particularly movies and popular music, like Monty Python and the Beach Boys, but since they are not directly related to *The Lord of the Rings*, they fall outside the scope of this essay. Given this abundance of material, the *Stupid Ring* authors had a wealth of options when it came to selecting elements from the source material for the best humorous effect. The following sections explore some of the choices

the authors made that resulted in a parody of such richness and, insofar as a subjective matter like humour can be judged, hilarity.

2.1 The Books as Source

In its use of source material, the *Stupid Ring* parody is in a much more fortunate position than the film. The parody has the collected works of Tolkien, the film itself, and the works of fandom to draw on. The film does not have any rights to use material from *The Silmarillion* or *The History of Middle-earth*, only *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Much use was made of the appendices to *The Lord of the Rings* in the films, but, for instance, the Valar could not be named. The parody suffers no such constraints, and the characters freely make phone calls to Mandos and receive fan letters from Manwë.

Where Tolkien scatters references to his mythology to create a sense of depth in his world, *Stupid Ring* has the director give characters extra reading to do as background for the film, and Pippin – perhaps to be understood in his Billy Boyd persona – perpetually needs references explained to him, as he has not done his homework. Sometimes his companions taunt him by refusing to explain references like the cats of Beruthiel to him. Then, in the end, he shocks everyone by catching up.

As did the makers of the films, the makers of *Stupid Ring* took advantage of the material in the appendices. One notable metafictional use of the source material occurs when Legolas insists on being called by his “true, untranslated name,” rather than “Greenleaf Greenleaf” or “Leggy”. He means “Legolas”, the name by which he is known in the book and film, but the hobbits deliberately misunderstand him and jump on the bandwagon of untranslated names.

Merry: Right! In that case you can call me Kalimac Brandagamba.

Sam: And I think I'd prefer to be called Banazir Galbasi.

Frodo: And you can call me Froda.

By doing this, the characters are drawing attention to the many layers of fictionality: they are in a parody of a film of a book that purports to be based on

a manuscript of lost history written by real people named Froda and Bilba.² Later on, there is a delightful – to the scholarly fan – moment of pedantry in which Legolas addresses the question of whether he is in fact the same Legolas as the one who appears in the history of Gondolin, and he observes that the identification was made by Tolkien only in a single draft (*SR* II.5). This is, of course, the kind of reference that the film-makers do not have the rights to make even should they want to.

2.2 The Films as Source

The differing source material of the book and film gives the parody yet another opportunity for humour: competition between the two. Since the film sometimes gives lines spoken by one character in the book to a different character, this leaves the speakers in *Stupid Ring* fighting over who gets to deliver a line. Sometimes they are forced to go the way of the movie, and they grumble. Frodo solves the riddle of the doors of Moria by asking Legolas the word for *friend* in Elvish, to which Gandalf retorts, “which I’ve known the whole time, and if anyone bothers to read the book, they’ll see *I* in fact was the one to figure it out” (*SR* II.4). Sometimes entire scenes are fought over, as when Glorfindel, from the book, and Arwen, from the movie, both show up to rescue Frodo from the Black Riders, and they have an argument over who is best qualified to do so. The argument, naturally, culminates in silliness and lack of dignity. Arwen spooks Glorfindel with “Oh no! A Balrog!”, making him squeak and jump. As with Legolas, the potential identification of Glorfindel with an elf of the First Age is closed to the film makers. This scene is later invoked as an explanation of a plot point: why Glorfindel is not chosen as one of the Nine Walkers. In Tolkien’s work, Glorfindel’s absence is because force of arms and skill are to play a lesser role than the loyalty of friends. In *Stupid Ring*, the justification given is that if Glorfindel goes, then Arwen will insist on coming, and there is a unanimous agreement among the members of the Fellowship that no one wants to put up with her being lovey-dovey with Aragorn, while at the same

2 Interestingly, an onomastic joke is made in the film as well by creative use of the source material. In the beginning of the *Fellowship* film, Bilbo scoffs that Frodo is “a Baggins, not some block-headed Bracegirdle from Hardbottle.” In the final chapter of the books, “The Grey Havens”, we learn that the much-loathed Lobelia Sackville-Baggins’ own people are the Bracegirdles of Hardbottle.

time she and Glorfindel engage in constant one-upmanship. For a parody that repeatedly harps on its lack of continuity – even to having a character known as Continuity Girl show up periodically to lament its lack – it does show some moments of creative continuity that are in neither film nor book.

In addition to having characters fight over lines, the parody finds many creative ways of working lines in indirectly. Aragorn goes all the way around the Midgewater Marshes while making the hobbits go through, and explains on the other side that he is allergic to midge bites, but there would be a riot from the audience if Sam's line "What do these things eat when they can't get hobbit!" weren't included (SR I.11). Sam indirectly works one of his lines in when, having noticed that the parody is diverging from the book, he wonders: "So how are we going to work in that really cool line about how Winter is nearly gone and time flows on to a spring of little hope?" to which Frodo smiles and replies, "I think you just did, Sam" (SR II.9).

In keeping with the running theme of making the wise appear incompetent, Gandalf forgets a snappy comeback that he would have liked to have delivered to Denethor. Then, too late, he remembers. He delivers his speech about being a steward of all living things in Middle-earth... to Pippin, alone in their room (SR V.1). Without doubt, there is not a reader who has not had this experience and cannot empathize with Gandalf, or empathize with his explanation that there's something about Denethor's eyes that is intimidating. He is right, of course, but Tolkien's Gandalf is immune to it.

When Wormtongue makes his first appearance, his lines have to be shoehorned in, because his actor is a big fan of Ian McKellen, quotes lines from movies McKellen was in twenty years before, and breaks character to ask if he can get his autograph. Gandalf (recall that all lines are attributed to speakers by the names of Tolkien's characters, even when they are speaking from the persona of an actor) has to nudge him to deliver his lines (SR III.6).

2.3 Fandom as Source

Both generic features of fandom and specific works of fandom serve as source material for *Stupid Ring*. Generically, the idea that some of the characters are

sexually attracted to or even in sexual relationships with other characters is a popular one in fandom, and it opens an obvious door to humour: sexual innuendo. The intense male bond between Frodo and Sam has inspired not only a multitude of fanwork linking them in a romantic fashion, but even scholarly works that provide a queer reading of *The Lord of the Rings*, or study the fanworks produced by queer readings. See for instance Smol (2004) and Abrahamson (2013).

Innuendo hinting at same-sex relationships among the members of the Fellowship is unrelenting throughout *Stupid Ring*, but for the most part it is leveled at the characters by the narrators of the parody, and the characters are put in the position of defending themselves against these allegations. In keeping with the general practice of the parody that the dialogue is radically different from the book or even the film, but the action is much the same, Sam still marries Rosie, Sam's friendship with Frodo remains platonic, and Legolas and Gimli are left entirely ambiguous. One humorous strategy I admit falling for five times in a row consists of a sequence of dialogue between Frodo and Sam that, out of context, sounds like it could only be about sex. Then the moment of revelation comes, and the reader learns that the characters were ordering a drink called "Sex on the Beach", or some such other innocent activity. The reader is thus prompted to take responsibility for reading too much into the dialogue, while the characters' behaviour remained entirely above board.

This disparity between dialogue and plot means the parody is open to a purist interpretation as well as a queer-friendly interpretation. The characters can be read as fighting back against the dirty minds of the readers – as when Sam protests that *he is* the one who gets married and has thirteen kids (SRI.10) – in keeping with the interpretation that practically everyone agrees Tolkien had in mind when writing. Alternatively, the parody can be read as delighting in pointing out every place where the homosocial culture with its intense male friendships, which was familiar to Tolkien in the early twentieth century, lends itself more readily to a homosexual interpretation to a modern audience. On the one hand, the intended audience of this parody includes readers of fanworks wherein the sexuality is explicit, and the innuendo is aimed at their entertainment. On the other hand, the deep respect shown by the authors for Tolkien himself and their desire to honour his work manifests in giving him

a voice, as it were, to argue his position, and letting him win in the end. The only occasion on which a sexual encounter takes place in *Stupid Ring* that is not based on anything in Tolkien's work is heterosexual and is handled with a gravity and maturity that contrasts with the humour that is lavished on every other reference to sex in the parody. It is unfortunately beyond the scope of a paper on strategies of humour to treat this passage in detail, but the "Many Partings" chapter of *Stupid Ring* is worth reading for this episode.

Moving from generalities to specific fan works, one piece that was a major influence on *Stupid Ring* is "The Very Secret Diaries". It is a short piece of fandom humour by Cassandra Claire that purports to be the collected diaries of the Fellowship members. "The Very Secret Diaries" became extremely popular in *The Lord of the Rings* fandom, and famous lines from it are often quoted on the internet without reference, the reader being expected to be familiar with the source. The phrase "Stupid Ring" occurs frequently in Boromir's diary, along with "Stupid Orcs," and "Stupid Aragorn," when he is grumbling about things that don't go his way. Thus, even the very title of *Stupid Ring* is indebted to "The Very Secret Diaries".

The major strategy of humour in these diaries is innuendo, implying or outright asserting the existence of sexual relationships between anyone and everyone in Middle-earth. From "The Very Secret Diaries" comes the notion that Aragorn is a "perky hobbit-fancier" who has an unreciprocated interest in Frodo, that Sam "will kill him if he tries anything," and especially the frequent references to strawberry-scented bath soap and/or bubble bath, used in "The Very Secret Diaries" by Sam in his romantic interludes with Frodo. These allusions, along with references to Gandalf's "pointy hat", are most frequent in the first volume of *Stupid Ring*, after which the parody finds its own voice. Table 1 contains counts of each "Very Secret Diaries" reference per *Stupid Ring* book, showing a clear decline in frequency as the parody progresses.

Table 1
“The Very Secret Diaries” References by Book

| | Book 1 | Book 2 | Book 3 | Book 4 | Book 5 | Book 6 |
|--|--------|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| straw- berry bath | 11 | 16 (Fully 11 of which are from a rendition of “Strawberry Baths Forever” to the tune of the Beatles’ “Strawberry Fields Forever.”) | 4 | 6 | 1 | 3 |
| Sam will kill him if he tries anything | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| pervy hobbit- fancier (with occasional variations on “hobbit”, such as “pervy elf- fancier.”) | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| pointy hat | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |

Though “The Very Secret Diaries” is a marvellous and deservedly famous piece of humour, *Stupid Ring* benefits when it gains confidence in its own power to entertain and ceases to lean so heavily on its crutch. When I recommend *Stupid Ring* to people, I advise them that it starts slow but picks up around the “Strider” chapter. The humour after that point becomes more independent – which is not to say without frequent allusions to popular culture – and complex.

Running gags begin to build on themselves, giving the parody the option of either letting the reader finish the sentence, or building up expectations only to subvert them. The parody, in other words, begins to use itself as a source.

2.4 The Parody as Source

One device used by the authors of *Stupid Ring*, the makers of the New Line films, and by Tolkien himself in editing his own texts, is taking something that makes an appearance only once in the source and scattering references to it throughout. In Tolkien's case, once he decided on Arwen as Aragorn's betrothed at the end, he had to scatter references and allusions to her in the text he had already written, so that it would not be completely unforeshadowed. The film took material from their story in Appendix A and incorporated it into the main storyline, as well as expanding on Arwen's role by giving her more frequent appearances, far beyond anything in the books. The later *Hobbit* films from New Line Cinema, released well after the writing of this *The Lord of the Rings* parody, used this technique to even greater effect: emphasizing the importance of the Arkenstone from the beginning, and showing prejudice against elves as one of Thorin's notable character traits throughout the story. *Stupid Ring* takes this technique and goes wild with it. Isolated incidents that made sense in their context are extracted from that context and repeated in the most absurd ways. For instance, after the narrow escape from the Barrow-Wight, the hobbits are described by Tolkien as running naked and free over the grass. In *Stupid Ring*, "naked time" becomes a very important pastime that the hobbits, especially Pippin, need regular doses of. *Parth Galen* is etymologized by an indulgent narrator as "'Parth' means 'place of the little people' and Galen means 'running naked,'" to which information the hobbits respond with joy and proceed to do just that (SR II.10).

But the best use of this device is Merry as real estate developer. In Tolkien's work, Merry helps Frodo buy a house at Crickhollow, as a cover for his leaving Bag End. This is an isolated incident that makes sense in context. In keeping with their strategy of expanding such incidents into important character traits, the *Stupid Ring* authors give Merry the profession of real estate developer. He goes on his journey through Middle-earth with an eye for how this or that

piece of land could be developed into a strip mall or a water park. At first, this seems to be simply a running gag, like Pippin's naked time. Over the course of the parody, however, it grows into much more.

In the first place, Tolkien's landscapes often *do* present a threat to the travellers, and Merry's frequent speculations about the potential of various undeveloped landscapes provides a consistent motivation. In the books, the trees of the Old Forest feel more threatening after Frodo sings a song about woods failing. Caradhras strikes at the Fellowship either because of Sauron's desire for the Ring that Frodo carries, or because the mountain itself has always been known as malevolent. In the film, the snowstorm is caused by Saruman, who desires to force the Company to take the Gap of Rohan and bring the Ring within his reach. In *Stupid Ring*, all these events are inspired by Merry's comments about developing the unspoiled landscape to make a profit, and the others learn to start shushing him before he can get started. Sometimes his proclivities are even brought up when he is not around, as when Frodo, admiring the moon over the Forbidden Pool, mulls, "I bet Merry would have a few things to say about this place" (SR IV.6).

Moreover, the repetition of Merry's obsession increasingly falls into line with Tolkien's themes. Tolkien is known for his love of undeveloped or lightly developed nature and for his hatred of the industrialism that Saruman represents. New Zealand was selected as a site for filming in part because it offered a variety of landscapes that were well suited to a depiction of the largely uninhabited realms of Middle-earth. When Merry wants to replace these landscapes with commercialized developments as places for making money, we are meant to find it humorously incongruous that one of the heroes is proposing such a thing. Yet in its way, it is consistent with Merry's description of the ongoing battle between the Old Forest and the Brandybucks, who earned the trees' hatred by burning them and driving them back from tilled land. Flieger, in writing about this episode, points out the ways in which we are led to see the Old Forest as the enemy because we identify with the hobbits, but to see Saruman as the enemy because we are led to identify with the Ents. Tolkien's presentation of the issues of man versus nature is not simple. Thus Merry is a good spokesman for the side of development in the parody.

Matters come to a head in “The Scouring of the Shire”, where Merry’s oft-envisioned but still unrealized desires for development come up against the reality of what Saruman has done to the Shire.

Merry: Come on guys! I only wanted to build a couple of strip malls ... not like this ... Okay, I see the light! Strip malls are VERY BAD THINGS. (SR VI.8)

Because Merry *is* a hero, though, his trajectory is given a satisfactory resolution. In the final chapter, when Sam is leading the rebuilding of the Shire, Merry’s development skills are put to good use. First he tries building fitness centers, but hobbits being hobbits, no one ever finds time to attend. Then he replaces them with restaurants, and he is said to make a killing.

Merry’s trajectory has now gone beyond mere parodying of the source and into creative generation of new subplots. Perhaps most impressive is how closely it follows the original by changing only the dialogue and leaving the action mostly alone. The same landscapes are still threatening in the same way; they remain untouched by Merry’s wishful thinking; the Shire is devastated by Saruman with no help from Merry (as he protests); and the hobbits, led by Sam, rebuild the Shire after driving out the ruffians. Other than the detail of Merry’s restaurants, the externalities of Tolkien’s world remain largely the same, yet the parody has managed to contribute to the characterization, plot, and theme, all in the pursuit of humour.

3. Metafiction

Much of the use of source material for humour in the previous section involved various metafictional and metatextual devices: for example, the desire of various parties to work their lines into the parody, and the ongoing tension between the presentation of the parody as a book, a film, or a web parody. Metafiction is a major font of humour in *Stupid Ring* that yields a diverse range of humorous strategies, including commentary on strategies of humour and on the relative effectiveness of those strategies.

The Lord of the Rings itself makes use of a metafictional strategy by means of the conceit that the events described therein really happened and were written down by Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam in a story. A manuscript recording this story

was later found and translated into English by J.R.R. Tolkien. Several times in the story, the characters refer to the fact that they are having adventures which are being written down by Bilbo, that these adventures will be the subject of songs – if anyone survives to sing the songs or hear them – and that their adventures are a continuation of other adventures they themselves have heard or read about in stories. Frodo and Sam even have a famous discussion culminating in Sam asking Gollum whether he would prefer to be the hero or the villain of the story. However, while these conversations draw the reader's attention to the fact that these are fictional characters, the characters do not see themselves as fictional. They are presented as real people whose real stories – albeit possibly greatly distorted by some tellers – happen to be told by others after the fact. This perception of themselves is consistent with Tolkien's conceit that this is not a work of fiction but a piece of lost history.

During the journey to and from Mordor, Sam observes more than once that he and Frodo are continuing the story of Beren, Eärendil, and others, and that such stories don't always turn out pleasantly for the people living in them. This passage is parodied to full effect, of course, and one of the strategies employed is having Frodo and Sam reference stories and genres that would be familiar to the reader, not to Frodo and Sam. These include fairy tales such as the gingerbread man who is eaten by a fox, self-help books such as the imaginary *Gollum's Guide to Skin Care and Grooming*, and films such as *Frodo and Sam's Excellent Adventure*. While we expect Middle-earth to have folklore, and perhaps stories of similar plots, we don't expect the details to be the same. Tolkien invokes epics of his own making to increase the reader's sense of the importance of Frodo and Sam's quest; the parody uses less prestigious genres to mock it.

In a final meta-meta-meta stroke, the characters make us question which events "really" took place. Near the end, in a discussion of Bilbo's book that is based on a similar discussion in canon, when speculating about what forms the stories will take in the hands of later storytellers, Frodo predicts: "You know storytellers, they'll probably find a few more wild things to polish the story...maybe

talking trees, and wild men who know algebra³...” Until now, the reader has been accepting that the encounters with talking trees and wild men are events that “really” took place on some level in the parody, just as the events of *The Lord of the Rings* “really” took place in the books. Only now is the reader given reason to question whether the narration might be unreliable. The Ents are part of Tolkien’s canon, so if the encounter with Merry and Pippin is not meant to be understood as something that “really” happened to Merry and Pippin, it must have been a later introduction into the textual history some time during the 4,000 years between the *Red Book* and *The Lord of the Rings*. But when Frodo and Sam question the wild men knowing algebra whom Merry has already encountered, it leaves the reader wondering what is being questioned. Merry’s veracity? Frodo and Sam are still in Mordor and haven’t even heard Merry’s story. One possible reading is that the characters are again mocking the silliness of the web parody authors, but that explanation doesn’t account for the talking trees. Whose credibility is being undermined is a meaningless question to ask, of course: these parody characters are well aware of their own fictional status, in a way that Tolkien’s Frodo and Sam are not. Like the Wenham-Faramir merger described earlier, the humour is all the funnier for its logical impossibility.

3.1 Strategies

The characters themselves comment on the strategies of humour used in the parody. At one point, a “Dick Clark narrator” shows up to ask the characters to rate the songs that the parody authors wrote, and Legolas gives one of the authors, Russ, a 4 (SR III.6). Sam questions whether the “yokels with a keyboard” might neglect to bring Gollum back, because it’s a parody, and Frodo predicts that Gollum will be back, because “the possibilities for silliness with Gollum’s character are endless” (SR IV.2). A narrator wonders aloud whether a gag is still running, complaining that it’s hard to keep track (SR II.3). When the parody

3 G-b-G: “Wildman wild, not stupid. I am great headman Ghan-buri-Ghan. Count many things. Know set theory, differential calculus and Drakes Equation. Count stars in sky and measure doppler shift” (SR V.5). Cf. Tolkien’s “Wild Men are wild, free, but not children...I am great headman. Ghân-buri-Ghân. I count many things: stars in sky, leaves on trees, men in the dark” (RK 104).

reaches the point where Tolkien's Sam describes Gollum on the river Anduin as a log with eyes, the Sam of the parody provides a helpful visual:

[[[[]]]]-8

When Frodo asks Sam how he did that, Sam answers, "It's a web-based parody, Mr. Frodo. We can do all sorts of things" (*SR* II.9).

The speakers, thanks to their self-awareness of the various fictional media – book, film, and parody – are also able to comment on the plausibility of, and reasons behind, various plot devices devised either by Tolkien or by the creators of the movie. For instance, Elrond insists that choosing the members of the Fellowship is an important task that will require time, and the decisions cannot be made spontaneously at the Council just so the audience can have a feel-good moment.

Elrond: Do you think I'm going to say something all dramatic just to give you all a warm fuzzy? Just imagine, a randomly selected bunch stands here together like they're getting a portrait made, I look all proud and say: "They will be the Fellowship of the Ring!" [snort] (*SR* II.2)

Obviously, *Stupid Ring* is offering commentary on the reasons behind the deviation of the movie from the book. But the Elrond of the parody has to give in to pressure, and he sighs: "This is going to be a long epic" (*SR* II.2). Compare Sam's "It's been a long trip" later in the parody, when he laments that he is running out of gafferisms (*SR* IV.7). In this case, Sam is commenting on a use of humour employed by Tolkien in the book, and while doing so he is speaking from the perspective of a real person who has gone on foot from the Shire to Mordor. His use of "trip" stands in contrast to the use of "epic" by Elrond. Unlike Sam, Elrond is speaking from the perspective of either a character or an actor who sees himself primarily as a character or actor within a story. The parody thus is able to comment on strategies of humour from a variety of perspectives.

3.2 Competition

Unlike Tolkien's restrained metafictional allusions to the fact that the characters are in a book, *Stupid Ring* pulls out all the stops when it comes to metafictional techniques. As hinted at in section 1, the speakers in *Stupid Ring* cannot decide

whether they are actors playing hobbits, real hobbits, or fictional characters in a web parody. In the first two cases, they see themselves as real people, just as you or I do, whether they be real people in Middle-earth about whom fictionalized accounts of their adventures will be told, or real people in Hollywood playing fictional characters written by one J.R.R. Tolkien. In the third case, however, they show explicit awareness that they are at the mercy of the parody authors, and that these authors can make them do things. Nevertheless, the line is blurred by such utterances as “You’re no more fictional than they [the authors] are!” (*SR* I.8). The line of free will is blurred still further by the similarities between the parody characters, who have to do what the authors write them doing, and the actors, who have to follow a script. At times, even the characters in Middle-earth show rare fictional self-awareness by commenting on how their free will is restricted by Tolkien’s authorial decisions – though it can be hard to tell whether this should be interpreted as the character himself aware of his own fictional status, versus an actor wondering how much freedom he has in representing his character.

This metafictional chaos is itself employed strategically for humorous effect. Each of the sets of speakers listed in section 1 has its own motivations, and humour often arises from conflicts among their interests and attempts to maintain or upset the balance of power. The parody authors want as much silliness as possible. The film crew wants the actors to deliver their lines. The actors want good working conditions. The characters want to complete their quests with as little hardship and as much praise as possible. The ad hoc characters are generally there to serve a single purpose: e.g. the attorneys’ purpose is to represent their clients. The narrators are a mixed bunch (for example, the beaver narrator wants to gnaw wood), but mostly they are marked by a desire for the actors to cooperate, deliver their lines, and stop arguing.

Though the actors never speak *to* their characters, all other categories of speakers mix it up more or less freely, with few constraints. The actors go on strike and negotiate with the film crew for better working conditions. The actors/characters threaten to shoot the narrators if they don’t comply with their wishes, and at least one narrator does actually find himself in danger from stray missiles on a battlefield. One ad hoc attorney, making a nuisance of himself by attempting to defend Gollum on the charge of entering the Forbidden Pool, is promptly

defenestrated at Faramir's command (*SR IV.6*). Manwë later comments in a letter that, though he is otherwise a big fan of the Faramir chapters, this was not a nice move on Faramir's part (*SR IV.6*). Yet another attorney accuses a narrator of plagiarizing a passage directly from Tolkien and forces the narrator to rephrase (*SR III.6*).

As noted, the characters interact with the parody authors by insulting them (*SR I.8*). They do so as a way of fighting back against treatment that they don't like, in refutation of the observation that they are all at the mercy of the people at the Netscape board. In fact, the autonomy of the characters is a matter of some debate, as evidenced by the following exchange among Frodo, Sam, and the parody author Idril.

Sam: She does have a point.

Frodo: Is she making you say that?

Sam: No, really.

Idril: Thanks Sam, really!

Sam: Look, a large bag of M&Ms! Cool! (*SR IV.2*)

Idril's ability to manifest at will Sam's wish of a large bag of M&Ms leaves in some doubt how much autonomy Sam had to refuse her. On one level, obviously Frodo is able to argue with her. On another level, the reader is well aware that she is the one making Frodo argue with her. Juxtaposing these two levels of reading the text – the one in which we readers suspend disbelief and pretend the story is real, with the one in which we rationally know the author controls everything – is a frequent device for achieving humour in this parody.

The main advantage of the frequent switching of contexts in *Stupid Ring* is the flexibility it affords. The speakers can comment on any aspect of the embedded story that they wish: from the creation of Bilbo to the creation of Tolkien, from the creation of New Line Cinema to the creations of internet fans. Yet another advantage, though, is the fact that the switching itself affords opportunities for humour. With their typical disregard for continuity – a fact that is not only commented on but lamented by the ad hoc Continuity Girl – the characters overtly contradict every expectation they have led the audience to have about

this parody. They derive humour from the very fact that they can't decide what context they are in or how they should behave. For instance, after five books of constant interference from the characters/actors, a frustrated narrator exclaims in book six, "Alright! I'm sorry! I was trying to get your plight across to the audience. I think in NORMAL movies the characters don't listen to the narrator anyway" (SR VI.3). After this, when everyone is becoming genre-savvy in the many genres, Sam comments that the screenwriters have imposed a moratorium on self-insertion and therefore cannot be called on directly (SR IV.7). After uncountable references throughout the parody to sets, props, makeup crews, trailers, scripts, and Peter Jackson, Éowyn says flirtatiously to Aragorn, "Darn. I wish we were in the movie... I could show you the moves I've learned... and maybe you could show me some new ones" (SR V.2).

3.3 Suspension of Disbelief

One of the disadvantages of context switching is that it has the potential for reducing reader engagement. One doesn't have to believe a story is real in order to enjoy it, but if one dwells on the fact that the story is fictional, that none of the perils are a real threat, and that the characters have no free will because they are utterly at the mercy of the author, it becomes difficult to sustain interest. Tolkien differentiated between "primary belief", a belief about the real, external world, and "secondary belief", a belief in a constructed world. In his essay "On Fairy-Stories", he emphasizes the importance of not breaking secondary belief. In a fairy story, he argues, breaking the reader's belief in the magic of Faerie breaks the story. For this reason, he believed that stage drama was poorly suited to most depictions of fantasy, because the audience would be too aware of the primary world and the devices used to achieve the effects. Tolkien, in his own work, keeps us believing in the realness and vitality of his characters. Even when Frodo and Sam are aware that their adventures are part of a story, it is only in the sense that, say, Julius Caesar might have been aware that stories would be told about his deeds.

Stupid Ring, in contrast, makes the conscious choice to break secondary belief frequently for humorous ends. Tension builds in the plot, and then *Stupid Ring* reminds us that none of this is real. One genre-savvy character will reassure

another character that he is too important to the plot to die, or at least that he is sure to last until an epic climax and get a dramatic scene worthy of his death. Reasoning such as “you went for the cutest one, who obviously isn’t meant to die in this scene” (SR II.4) is used to break suspense. Other times, the characters speak from the perspective of the actors, who are not going to die even if they portray the death of their character. The technique works, though it violates Tolkien’s precepts, precisely because the genre is humour. Humour operates by presenting us with the unexpected. Our experience reading literature teaches us to expect that the author wants us to take the plight of the characters seriously, and the reader who refuses to play along and insists that none of this is real is being cheated of the literary experience. Therefore, *Stupid Ring* challenges these expectations by leading us down the accustomed path of being invested in the perils of the characters, then yanking the rug from under us by making us laugh at the absurdity of our own investment. Moreover, the way it reminds us that there is little danger to certain characters in certain scenes is by invoking the very expectations we have formed over years of experience with stories.

Having defused tension in this manner, *Stupid Ring* uses two techniques to restore it. One is that genuine, non-parody stories also violate expectations by killing off characters for a tearjerker effect, for shock value, for plot necessity, or for any number of reasons. Screenwriters also often choose to make their films diverge from the books on which they are based. Accordingly, *Stupid Ring* frequently reminds us that even if the actors know what happened in Tolkien’s book, they do not necessarily know what will happen in the film, for they haven’t been given the script for later scenes. Similarly, we the parody readers, even if we have read the book and seen the New Line films, do not know what liberties the parody will take. It is, in fact, a remarkably faithful parody. The dialogue is radically different, but the actions remain virtually unchanged. Nevertheless, the first time reader of *Stupid Ring* does not know this, and even for the repeat reader, it is a good reminder that the parody authors had the freedom to change anything they pleased.

The second means used by *Stupid Ring* for offsetting the effects of reminding readers that nothing is real is to choose specific occasions on which to honour Tolkien’s great moments of moving emotion. For instance, the Rohirrim go on strike because their losses in battle have been treated with too much callous-

ness by the film-makers/parody writers, and they have to be enticed back with promises of better treatment (*SR* III.8). As Frodo and Sam journey through Mordor, a narrator protests, in response to complaints that he is being too negative, that he is trying to get their plight across to the audience. He asks if they would prefer he make light of their situation (*SR* VI.3). Making light of situations is exactly what the parody is all about, but that very fact makes it all the more effective when on one occasion they violate expectations and choose to pay homage to the magnitude of Frodo's accomplishment in traversing the Black Land. Similarly, when the Ring is destroyed and all the world celebrates, or when he departs from the Grey Havens in a scene of sorrow mingled with hope, one character will express concern that the narrators or parody authors will make fun of them, but will be reassured that even the authors are too overcome with emotion to ruin the moment. In these cases, the humour comes at the expense of the parody authors themselves, while leaving the mood generated by Tolkien intact. And of course, these fans would not have written a parody of such length and depth had they not been deeply in love with Tolkien's work, which their tears highlight. Moreover, the very contrast of their handling of these scenes with their flippancy in other scenes lends greater weight to the moments where they abstain. These are the authors who turned Boromir's death into an "I am your father" revelation from Aragorn⁴ (*SR* II.10). If even these authors, *Stupid Ring* seems to say, tear up at the final parting of Frodo from his friends on the shores of Middle-earth, then the power of the Grey Havens scene is real.

I hope to have shown with this and other examples that *The Stupid Ring Parody* employs a number of sophisticated strategies for humour, including the absence of humour to intensify rare moments of emotional depth. It rewards not only reading but close reading and analysis, and it stands as a great tribute to the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and New Line Cinema, as well as a monument to the creativity and devotion of Tolkien's fans. I hope finally to have inspired some readers of this paper to check out the parody and enjoy a good laugh.

⁴ Aragorn later turns out, in Arwen's words to him, to be someone who will benefit from the streak of celibacy she imposes on him as a married man: "judging by the number of young men who look exactly like you." In support of her observation, Beregond has been introduced by this point in the narrative as "Beregond, son of Arag- I mean, Baranor."

About the Author

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