
Linguistic Foolery

Fact, Interpretation and the Hard Business of Proof

By **Darth Fingon**

I'm going to apologise in advance. This isn't so much a linguistics article as it is a summation of previous articles, which are here pulled together to make one all-encompassing point. A while back I wrote about common fanons and how they can be disproved using the mighty power of research. Herein you will find the same idea, but on a much broader scale.

Where the fanon article addressed specific points (Elves never refer to themselves as men or women, Elves cannot starve to death, etc.), now it's time to examine the idea of fanon overall and how certain interpretations are accepted, passed on, and eventually embraced as canon fact. This isn't to say that those interpretations are in any way incorrect; the majority of them are perpetuated because they are logical and in tune with Tolkien's world, and because fanfiction readers find them appealing. There's nothing wrong with using popular interpretations or fanons. The problems only arise when the lines between interpretation and fact are blurred and readers and writers start to believe that only interpretation A is correct, and B is absolutely uncanonical and therefore impossible.

Several of the past Linguistic Foolery articles focused on the task of disproving popular fanons, either directly or by implication. By examining the words that Tolkien invented for his Elvish languages, we can pick up clues as to what culture and civilisation may have been like for the characters who spoke those words. That there are words for various tools and household items strongly indicates that such things were utilised in the world of the Elves. And we can effectively argue that words for certain classes of citizens and occupations would not have been invented if those people did not exist in Elven society. But at the same time, people can argue that these wordlist entries contradict specific examples that appear in Tolkien's writings, or that most of them are invalid by virtue of the fact that they were composed very early on in Tolkien's career, before Arda underwent the numerous and vast revisions that turned it into what we see in the published works.

In trying to decide which side is right, consider this: Arda would have been inhabited by hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of Elves living in dozens of major settlements across at least two continents. Given the sheer numbers involved and the huge area covered, I think there's more than enough room for hundreds of interpretations to be correct. Not every Elven society across the board is going to be the same. In fact, it would be pretty silly to assume a kind of uniform cultural sameness spanning from First Age Valmar to Fourth Age Mirkwood.

A small but important clue as to how different the Elven kindreds and cultures really were, and how they seem to be presented (at least in the Silmarillion), have a look at the article concerning the clan names of the Elves (['Sindarin' is a Quenya Word](#)). The Noldor are the only ones who actually call themselves by the name that is used in the narrative. All of the others use different clan names, most of which you will never see in fanfiction due to their obscurity. That Elven

opinion differed so much on something as crucial as a collective name (even among the relatively close-knit kindreds of Valinor) is a strong argument in favour of cultural diversity. The Elves spoke different languages and called themselves by different names. How likely is it that they all followed the same beliefs, behaved in the same ways, or even used the same tools and technologies?

What this means is that the presence (or lack) of certain words in Tolkien's lexicons does not prove that a thing existed (or did not exist) for any given group of Elves. It merely opens up that possibility as an interpretation.

To give a specific example, the Gnomish (then considered Noldorin) word for lawyer appears on the list of [Twenty-two Words You Never Thought Tolkien Would Provide](#). Because the word is there, it presents the option of Elf lawyers for any fanfic author interested in writing about them. It does not mean that all Elven cities and settlements must now have lawyers because the Lost Tales-era Noldor had a word for such. Those who find the idea of Nandorin lawyers absurd are under no canonical obligation to include them.

Staying in this mindset, countless further small details can also be examined. The question of how Elves dealt with their dead has been raised more than once on discussion forums and mailing lists. In the Silm we have the specific example of Fingolfin's body buried beneath a cairn of stones, but really this treatment may only be relevant to Noldorin royalty in the late First Age. It proves nothing either way about the funerary rites of Sindar, Vanyar, or Avari two thousand years later or even during the same time period. Similarly, that Legolas rode without tack on his horse in the late Third Age cannot be adopted as proof that all Elves everywhere at all times rode with neither saddle nor bridle. Possibly many of them did, but Legolas' Third Age Mirkwood-based preferences will have no impact on how Celegorm rode thousands of years earlier. Forcing every speck of amassed Elf-related knowledge onto all Elves equally makes about as much sense as insisting that all Elves dwelt in caves, based on one location described in [The Hobbit](#).

The three main problems in deciding what does or does not constitute 'canon' are these: that the 'history' takes place over a huge timeframe in which certain internal facts will absolutely change; that there are multiple, distinct societies among Elves, Men, and Dwarves; and that Tolkien changed his mind every day of the week and twice on Sundays over the decades he was writing all of this. So while almost everyone will agree that there are a few facts that should stay consistent in order to write non-AU fanfiction, these facts are necessarily limited to what might be considered 'historical records'. Fëanor was the son of Finwë. There were three Silmarils. Melkor was defeated in the War of Wrath. Elves are immortal. Outside of that, everything else is at least somewhat open to interpretation, and writers are left to make up their own minds as to what is right, wrong, absolutely true, and completely nonsensical. Such as the presence of Elven lawyers.