

## Magical Objects in The Lord of the Rings

*Prof. Alison Milbank, Feb 2026. Manuscript of a talk presented at the Future Foundation Talk Event on "On Magic Objects, Tolkien, Palantir & the Question of Evil" at WU Vienna.*

Objects are at the heart of Tolkien's novel, *The Lord of the Rings*. At the back of the third volume of the novel, you will find a series of indexes: interestingly, first come songs and verses, then persons, beasts and monsters, next places and finally an index of things. Tolkien does not share the view of objects that pertained as a result of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century in which the world of animals, vegetables and minerals became inert things that humankind could manipulate, with animals reduced to machines or automata in Descartes' writings. Nor does Tolkien share Immanuel Kant's view of phenomena – the things we experience through our senses - as essentially in our perceptual control through the categories through which we organise experience. Tolkien reaches back to a more ancient understanding of objects, in which they have a life of their own and may easily have causal power.

Philosopher Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age*, suggests that in traditional societies, humans are quite different from the modern individual but rather porous like sponges in their relation to the world beyond the self, not shut off in a little mental castle like the modern subject, whom he describes as buffered, like a dodgem car at a funfair. They are open to influences by other creatures, the stars, spirits and even things. Everything in such a world has a purpose, a *Telos*, and this means that the most humble object, according to Taylor has the "power of exogenously inducing or imposing meaning." He continues, "charged things can impose meanings, and bring about physical outcomes proportionate to their meanings." So objects have both "influence" and "causal power."

One of the best things about the Jackson films are the hundreds and hundreds of beautiful objects. Legions of craftsmen were employed to use traditional techniques to make everything from brooches to pottery, armour to swords, along with some very innovative use of 3 D printing as well. To make a traditional sword like *Sting*, the sword Bilbo passes on to Frodo, and then get it to glow blue when orcs are near is quite a challenge, but the Weta Workshop did a superb job. For a European viewer like me – and you I imagine – the objects stand out in their realism from an utterly strange series of landscapes. Tolkien sets his story in our world and specifically Europe – Gondor, for example, is about near Florence – so that he too would have been confused by the very unEnglish flora of the Shire in the Jackson films, which were made in New Zealand. Rivendell too is based on a specific valley in the Swiss Alps but filmed in the Kaitoke National Park near Wellington. Yet the Gondor armour based on medieval models and the more Anglo-Saxon wear of the Rohirrim are familiar to us, so quite an interesting effect of familiar strangeness is conveyed, in which the objects, whether furniture of Bag End, Bilbo's house, the clothes and armour, stand out. Here is the bar at the Green Dragon, now an actual pub.

We can see this teleological sense of an object having meaning and purpose as if it were a person in the broken sword of *Narsil* inherited by Aragorn as the descendent of Elendil. It was broken in the encounter between Elendil and Sauron, in which the former died, but the broken handle was soon wielded by Elendil's son Isildur to cut the Ring of Power off Sauron's finger, thus defeating him. You will see this happen in the prologue to the first film. The sword's name in the elvish language *Quenya* means fire and white flame, symbolising the

sun and moon, the enemies of darkness. This sword is reforged for Aragorn (in the novel before the Fellowship set out; much later in the Peter Jackson film) and he names it Anduril, flame of the west. You won't see the reforging until the third film

This object has a history which brings influence with it, but it also possesses virtues and causal powers. Reforged, with runes written over it, it shines red in sunlight and silver in moonlight. Its mystical light is so intense it terrifies enemies, especially orcs. Galadriel the elf queen of Lorien gives Aragorn a scabbard for it decorated with flowers, which will make it indestructible. It is engraved with runes telling the lineage of the sword and, of course, the lineage of Aragorn as well. In the film, its runes read: "I am Andúril who was once Narsil, sword of Elendil. The slaves of Mordor shall flee from me". The purpose of this sword is therefore more than just a practical weapon. Its ownership grants the authority of Elendil and the free peoples over Sauron as engenderer of slavery. Note how they flee its power rather than being cut down by it. Its use maintains the order of the universe once lit by a golden and silver tree, now by the sun and moon. The virtues and powers of the makers go with it, and the sword and scabbard together signify the union of elf Arwen and human Aragorn. In the film it is Elrond, Arwen's father, who hands the reforged sword and scabbard to Aragorn to emphasize this.

We might call this sword, 'magic', in that it has inherent powers of indestructibility and light that cause an effect. Tolkien, in an unsent letter makes a distinction between different kinds of magic which may help us to understand the power of the sword.

But I suppose that, for the purposes of the tale, some would say that there is a latent distinction such as once was called the distinction between *magia* and *goeteia*<sup>1</sup>. Galadriel speaks of the 'deceits of the Enemy'. Well enough, but *magia* could be, was, held good (*per se*), and *goeteia* bad. Neither is, in this tale, good or bad (*per se*), but only by motive or purpose or use. Both sides use both, but with different motives. The supremely bad motive is (for this tale, since it is specially about it) domination of other 'free' wills.

I think as Tolkien understands it, *magia* is when a character like an elf or wizard uses their inherent powers to make an effect in the physical world, whereas *goetia* is when you use a spell, like that set on the doors of Durin, which you will see working in the first film. Elsewhere, Tolkien makes a distinction between enchantment, which he associates with art's power to create and magic, which is about domination. The sword of Narsil/ Andúril has the power of him who bears it (*magia*) and its own virtues and the runes carved upon it, making it have a goetic power. The sword may have an element of making fear but only to those already depraved and enslaved. It is not dominatory as such.

Enchantment is related to a shared effect of wonder, and this is linked by Tolkien to the effects of art and the craft of words, which we often say leave us spellbound. To use Taylor's terms, we might say that enchantment is akin to influence and magic to causal power, but in magic objects the two are often united. This is the case in the sword of Anduril. Its light has influence, in that it affects the emotions of others and is thus goetic; its unbreakableness is the result of causal magic power, which comes from Galadriel's *magia*, whose ring of adamant, Narya, gives her the power to keep things whole and safe.

The elves in *The Lord of the Rings* are the main makers of magic objects, which are mainly an enhancement of the natural through their own powers, spiritual and physical. They offer

lembas bread, which lasts well beyond the capacity of normal bread and a tiny piece sustains. Their cloaks allow the wearer to be almost invisible, changing shade with the foliage and terrain. In all these cases the thing made has all the qualities of the natural object but to a hyper degree. In the case of the elven rope as Sam and Frodo discover on their way down a precipice, it actually unties itself. To see this scene in the Jackson film, I am afraid you need the extended version of *The Two Towers*.

These objects are the work of beings who honour and value the natural world, and this gives the things they make using natural materials a fullness and presence we deny to the objects that make our own lives possible.

This is true of the divinatory magic object Galadriel, the elf-queen, possesses, a scrying mirror in a pool, which enables people to see the future, but its magic, like the elven art, comes partly from herself, and her wearing of the Ring of *Nenya*, which is linked to water. She has prophetic powers, even predicting her own behaviour should she take the Ring Frodo offers, and the visions people see in the mirror partly depend on their own perception; the future is not fixed. As with the cloaks and the rope, there is a synergy between the human and the natural agent in play here. The mirror is a mode of divination, and thus traditionally goetic. The water and light play their part in the communication of knowledge, but again this is to refer back to an ancient understanding of the whole natural order as a source of wisdom, not merely a collection of inert things. A more ancient division in magic is between low magic through spirits and high magic or theurgy through the divine and the divine creation as here.

Divisions of magic are tricky but one way to be sure magic is being used for good is when it is freely offered as a gift. You will see that Galadriel furnishes the Fellowship with various gifts. As you know from fairy-tales magic objects are dangerous especially if stolen, so that the magic harp in *Jack and the beanstalk* calls out 'Master, master!' when Jack steals it. It is important that one has the power and authority to deal with a magic object and that is assured when it is a gift. As you probably know, many societies have had no money but only exchanges of objects. In gift-exchange theory beginning with Marcel Mauss there are good and bad gifts, depending on the intention of the giver. Kings give gifts to cement relationships with the recipient. A very positive example of this is the way that when Gimli, a dwarf and ancestral enemy of elves, is offered a gift by Galadriel, he requests a hair from her head. The hair becomes a pledge of union between their races and literally a part of Galadriel goes with it, just as the elves put all their love in the things they make. Galadriel has also given her grand-daughter to Aragorn. When giving presents to the Fellowship, she says Aragorn already has her gift, and touches a jewel he wears, the *Evenstar*, given by Arwen to him as a pledge of their love. People too are gifts and Arwen cements the union of elves and humans, even giving up immortality for life with Aragorn.

The hobbit Ring-bearer Frodo is given a magic phial of light by Galadriel from Earendil's star as caught in the waters of Galadriel's mirror, which will light him in dark places. It links him back to ancient times of the *Silmarils*, the jewels containing the light from the original two trees of the *Valinor*, one of which now lights the heavens. This light is made by Eru/*Iluvatar*, the divine, and so is natural, but its channelling and capture might be thought of as magical. It is a little like St Augustine's idea of a miracle as an acceleration of nature or a manifestation of divine ideas. Note how this object as a channel leads back to a heavenly divine origin and is thus theurgic.

One can contrast these magic gifts with the Ring of Power, which is also linked to gift-giving. As described in the film prologue, Sauron came as Annatar and taught some elves to forge rings of power. Three were forged by Celebrimor without his knowledge and they were held by Galadriel, Elrond and the wizard Gandalf, enhancing their natural powers. Other rings Sauron forged and gave to nine kings to whom he taught sorcery, and enslaved, and others to dwarves, while he secretly forged the Ring of Power which would control them all. Here is the rhyme from the epigraph to the novel:

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,  
 Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,  
 Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,  
 One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne  
 In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie  
 One ring to rule them all, one ring to find them,  
 One ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them  
 In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.

The sixth and seventh lines are inscribed on the Ring of Power in the black speech of Mordor. Ash nazg durbatulûk, ash nazg gimbatul, ash nazg thrakatulûk, agh burzum-ishi krimpatul. This language sounds violent and I think it significant that it contains no 'e', which in English is the most commonly used letter; Sauron's magic is both magia, his own powers and goetic. He puts much of his own lust for power into the ring as if it were a totem or fetish object, so that instead of sharing his power creatively and theurgically, it is bad goeteia. Unlike Galadriel who channels the divine light and goes in friendship with her gift of hair, Sauron's gift dominates, manipulates and controls through dark magic. You meet the terrifying dark riders early on in the first film. They are those witch-kings, who gained no magic mastery by their relation to Sauron but instead became hollowed out and are now the Ring-Wraiths or Nazgul, who exist to do Sauron's will, controlled by the Ring of Power. The gift of rings to them was an example of a poisonous gift in contrast to the good gifts of Galadriel which empower and aid, and cement friendship and trust. A modern equivalent would be the gifts of the gangster drug lord, which first entice and then become a form of control and tools for blackmail.

You will see in the films how the Ring of Power has a personality and agency all of its own. Frequently, some character will say the Ring left or abandoned someone. It controls those who think they own it. Early on, you will see how hard it is for the kindly Bilbo Baggins the hobbit to give it up. Frodo struggles not to put it on his finger, even though he knows to do so will make him more easily visible to the Dark Riders. And later you will meet Gollum, once the water-hobbit Smeagol, who wore the Ring for many years and as a result has lost any hobbit appearance and even his name, becoming Gollum. He is in complete thrall to the Ring, which he calls 'My Precious' as if it were a beloved person. It is the Ring which has power, while he loses all agency except the lust to recover it. Where Galadriel's gifts make friendships, the Ring shuts off the possibility of relationality, though at one point in fellow-feeling, as a Ring-bearer, Frodo comes as close as anyone could in reaching out to touch something still hobbitlike in the lost Gollum.

The film, indeed, has an even darker view of the Ring than Tolkien's novel, and Frodo is soon suffering from its effects on the will, because he is the one chosen to carry it to Mordor to unmake it on Mount Doom where it was forged. There is a tension in the film between those

who believe it is possible to use the Ring of Power for good and those who know the only way forward is to literally unmake it, so that it can become innocent molten gold once again. Gandalf the grey will not even touch it lest he be enslaved and Galadriel imagines herself for a moment as universal queen when Frodo offers the Ring to her, although she passes the test and refuses to take it. Those who believe they can use it without harm, like Boromir, only bring about their own destruction.

I have made a sharp distinction between good magic objects that preserve life, give wisdom and honour the natural world and the Ring, forged with spells to control and destroy. Yet even good magic objects or magia can be used for bad purposes. We see that in the case of the great wizard Saruman's magic staff. You will encounter two wizards in the films: Gandalf the Grey and the head of his order, Saruman the White. To the hobbits of the Shire, Gandalf is just a purveyor of tricks, like a party conjuror, but he wields real magic. Look for what his staff can do. When he goes to Orthanc to consult with Saruman about what to do about Sauron and the Ring, he discovers too late that Saruman has decided Sauron is invincible and has changed sides. The staff, with its precious stone that is his sign of authority he now uses against Gandalf as a weapon and the film has the two wizards engage in a duel of staffs, which Saruman wins through his greater powers, concentrated in his magic wand. He captures Gandalf's staff and sends him hurtling upwards to imprisonment in the top of the tower. Although the film (and even the book) does not make it explicit, the wizards are spiritual angelic beings, not humans with magical powers, and their authority comes from the Valar, the angelic beings who with the Creator God, Eru or Ilúvatar made the world. They are incarnated into human form but with special powers. Their staffs then are magic objects, but as with the elves as an expression of their own power and they make changes in the material world like magia. Be alert to see what Gandalf's staff can do. The wizards have free will and can therefore use those powers for good or ill. Indeed, Sauron himself is a maiar or angelic being who has chosen the dark side. All this detail is to be found in *The Silmarillion*, a book of legends and stories that give the backdrop to *The Lord of the Rings*. Part of the power of Tolkien's narrative comes from the fact that everything in it is completely thought out and related to greater stories.

So, I hope this gives you some idea of the magic so interwoven into the fate of Middle-earth. While you watch the films, I suggest as an exercise you note how many magical objects you can spy. You may give different answers. Sometimes perhaps you may hesitate, unsure whether an object is magical or not. For example, that evenstar jewel of Arwen touched by Aragorn in their meeting at Rivendell seems to give off a more than natural glow. It is, one might say, enchanted: a work of crafted metal, yet more than a dead object, but rather full of presence and purpose, always pointing beyond itself. We enchant objects ourselves by taking something we have bought or made and wrapping it up to give as a present. It ceases to be a market commodity to be bought and sold and becomes something more meaningful, a symbol of the relation between us ourselves and the one to whom we give. Something of the giver goes with the gift. So do not worry whether you are correct to see something as magical in the film, for as I have demonstrated, to receive something as enchanted, is itself a gift in which you are truly entering the porous world of Tolkien in order to receive the world as deeper in meaning than it appears, and to join him in resisting the instrumentalization and commodification of experience in which objects are disenchanting, just inert things.

So I hope you enjoy your entry into Middle-earth, and even better, one day read the books which are even more beautiful and magical.

