

Proposal: Tolkien in Vermont Conference 2016

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Sister-sons

In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien refers to the long medieval tradition that places uncles and nephews, particularly maternal nephews or “sister-sons” (*sweostersunu* in Old English), in a special relationship. For example, in *Beowulf*, the poet alludes to the story of Sigemund, *êam* (maternal uncle) to Fitela (line 881), and how they fought together in times of need. In line 115 of the Old English poem “The Battle of Maldon,” Wulfmær, one of the fallen warriors, is identified as the lord’s *swuster sunu*. Tolkien recognizes the appropriateness of Wulfmær’s place near his uncle in the verse drama “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” where one of the characters comments, “His sister-son! The songs tell us, /ever near shall be at need nephew to uncle (“Homecoming” 127). In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien follows the tradition of sister-sons fighting to the death to protect their uncle: “Of the twelve companions of Thorin, ten remained. Fili and Kili had fallen defending him with shield and body, for he was their mother’s elder brother.” (“The Return Journey,” *The Hobbit* 268).

Peter Jackson alludes to this relationship in his adaptation of *The Hobbit*. The young dwarves Fili and Kili refer to Thorin as their uncle, and in *The Desolation of Smaug* Thorin tells Fili that one day he will be king, acknowledging the family line. When Thorin welcomes Fili and Kili to the kingdom of Erebor, he addresses them as his “sister’s sons.” When Thorin finally bursts out of the mountain gate to join the battle, the two warriors running closest to him on either side are Fili and Kili. In their last fight, Thorin calls Dwalin, Fili, and Kili to go with him in an attempt to take down Azog. Gandalf comments that Thorin is taking his best fighters with him. In Old English they would be called his *heorð-geneatas*, his “hearth-companions,” a small group of noble, well-trained fighters who are closest to their lord, and it is reasonable to think that the young and courageous nephews would be among them. Fili and Kili, then, are appropriately represented as sister-sons in most of Jackson’s *Hobbit*.

Until their final battles, that is, when Jackson departs from the medieval tradition and creates scenes in which uncle and nephews cannot make a heroic last stand together. While I *do* propose to talk about the medieval tradition of sister-sons, I do *not* want to talk about how Jackson hasn’t faithfully reproduced the book. Instead, taking my cue from Robin Reid’s work on Tauriel, I want to examine the sister-sons in Jackson’s movies for the values and themes that they do represent. Reid has argued that Tauriel is the moral centre of *The Desolation of Smaug* when she calls on Thranduil to look beyond his borders to help others. Kili becomes part of her story and thereby takes on very un-dwarvish values, such as openness to — indeed, love of — someone from outside his own people and culture. Although Tauriel repeatedly saves Kili’s life — an interesting reversal of stereotypical gender movie roles — he dies trying to defend her, not his uncle. I propose to explore Jackson’s more complicated interwoven story threads — Kili-Fili-Thorin intersecting with Kili-Tauriel-Legolas — to examine what is lost and what is gained in the movie versions.