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# Linguistic Foolery

## Elvish Fanons and Canon Contradictions

### (Or, how to get those canatics off your case for stuff you were right about in the first place)

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Every writer of Tolkien fanfiction has probably been in this scenario at least once. You put a lot of work into a story, glow with pride at your accomplishment, post it to an archive, and eagerly hope for a few good reviews. And then, inevitably, someone comes along to comment with the dreaded 'Elves would never [insert un-Elvish action here].'

So, who's right, you or the unimpressed reviewer? Here's a look at a few things that Elves would supposedly never do.

#### 1) Elves never refer to their own kind as men, women, or children.

There are some people out there (notably on fanfiction.net) who insist that Elves should always be referred to by Elvish terms (*ellon*, *elleth*, *ner*, *nis*) or fanon constructs (the word *elfling* is not used by Tolkien). These people are wrong. You can use these popular terms if you want, but they are not mandatory. Anyone who tells you otherwise should be directed with all haste to *The Fall of Gondolin* from *The Book of Lost Tales 2* (p 191-192):

Now the pass of Cristhorn, that is the Eagles' Cleft, is one of dangerous going, and that host had not ventured it by dark, lanternless and without torches, and very weary and cumbered with **women** and **children** and sick and stricken **men**, had it not been for their great fear of Melko's scouts, for it was a great company and might not fare very secretly. Darkness gathered rapidly as they approached that high place, and they must string out into a long and straggling line. Galdor and a band of **men** spear-armed went ahead, and Legolas was with them, whose eyes were like cats' for the dark, yet could they see further. Thereafter followed the least weary of the **women** supporting the sick and the wounded that could go on foot. Idril was with these, and Earendel who bore up well, but Tuor was in the midmost behind them with all his **men** of the Wing, and they bare some who were grievously hurt, and Egalmoth was with him, but he had got a hurt in that sally from the square. Behind again came many **women** with babes, and girls, and lamed **men**, yet was the going slow enough for them. At the rearmost went the largest band of **men** battlehole, and there was Glorfindel of the golden hair.

The bold emphasis is mine, but you can clearly see the men, women, and children in that passage. All of them (save Tuor and, to an extent, Eärendil) Elves. In the same story, Tolkien uses capitalised Men to refer specifically to the mortals of Tuor's ilk, thus illustrating the difference between Men and men. In other writings, terms like *Elf-man* and *Elf-woman* appear. The Elvish words are not used.

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## 2) Elves can never become sick.

Apart from all the men and women, another curious aspect of the passage quoted above is its two references to sickness. Though the Prophecy of Mandos contained in The Silmarillion explicitly states that Elves cannot suffer from sickness, different versions say otherwise. A comment made in BoLT1 has wording that indicates that Elves, at least in Middle-earth, WILL suffer from sickness (in direct opposition to their illness-free life in Valinor). Compare 'no sickness may assail you' (Silmarillion, p 88) with 'never would they have made the dreadful passage of the Qerkaringa had they or yet been subject to weariness, sickness, and the many weaknesses that after became their lot dwelling far from Valinor.' (Book of Lost Tales 1, p 166).

In another example, HoME4 shows a shift in phrasing to show that while 'Elves were immortal, and free from all sickness,' in one draft, Tolkien changed this to 'Elves were immortal, and free from death by sickness' (Shaping of Middle-earth, p 21). So while Elves could indeed become sick, they could not die from their ailments. Death still may only occur through injury or fading.

From the viewpoint of linguistic analysis, the Qenya Lexicon lists several words relating to sickness, including *cough*, *cold*, *sneeze*, *nausea*, *disease*, and *invalid*.

## 3) Elves can never die from hunger or thirst.

This one is pretty silly from a logical standpoint. Recall what Frodo told Sam as they were crossing Mordor: Orcs are living things, therefore they need to eat and drink. The same applies to Elves. If Elves did not need to eat to live, they would not have made lembas. They also would not have made words for *hunger*, *thirst*, and *starve*, all of which exist.

## 4) Elves are not right- or left-handed: they are all ambidextrous.

Tolkien does state that Elves are ambidextrous, but also contradicts himself in this. The evidence goes both ways. So it's perfectly fine to write ambidextrous Elves, and also perfectly fine to write them as right- or left-handed.

In The Silmarillion, it is implied that Maedhros was (primarily?) right-handed before his Thangorodrim ordeal, but later 'he lived to wield his sword with left hand more deadly than his right had been.'

The early wordlists are even more obvious: the Gnomish word for *left hand* also means *clumsy*, while *right hand* also means *clever*. The Qenya word for left hand also means slow, dull, and stiff. These words are likely made obsolete by revision (later Quenya and Sindarin connect the right hand with north and the left with south), but Elvish terms for right-handed and left-handed still exist.