Was Faramir Gandalf’s Chosen Ring Bearer? Or is This the Beginning of My Own Work of Fan Fiction?

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Abstract

Good afternoon and thank you for sharing your interest in J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings. The title of my talk, as specified in the program distributed via e-mail, is the question “Was Faramir Gandalf’s Intended Ring Bearer?” But there is also a further sub-title omitted from the program that hints at the larger problem of interpreting and appreciating literary works: the subtitle continues, “OR Is... Read More

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Good afternoon and thank you for sharing your interest in J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings. The title of my talk, as specified in the program distributed via e-mail, is the question “Was Faramir Gandalf’s Intended Ring Bearer?” But there is also a further sub-title omitted from the program that hints at the larger problem of interpreting and appreciating literary works: the subtitle continues, “OR Is This the Germination of a Piece of Fan Fiction?” So I have a double purpose today: I wish to explain some puzzling aspects—puzzling to me at least—of Faramir’s construction as a character, adhering strictly to the letter of Tolkien’s text, but then I also want to explore some avenues of possibility that are implied by the text—or that in any case seem to me to be implied by the text—but that are not elaborated or specified by it. Thus I will begin in the tradition of the clearly legitimate realm of literary interpretation and textual exegesis, but as I proceed I will, at some point that may be hard to pin down with complete precision, cross over into an imaginary realm that is inspired by the text but not spelled out by it. In other words, interpretation will turn into fan fiction.

Beginning in the original author’s own words, I will build a narrative of my own—a story arc, as fictionists are fond of describing it—that will move beyond the original author’s own words. And since an arc, even if it is a story arc, is merely a segment of a Ring, and since we all know what comes of Rings, perhaps by the end we will understand more clearly the process by which extant stories give rise to new stories, and we may also understand the seductive power of
the narrative ring upon the souls of mere mortal story-tellers. At stake is the realm NOT of Middle Earth, but of literary scholarship as an instrument of understanding and truth.

To begin, then: in the chapter of The Two Towers entitled “OF Herbs and Stewed Rabbits,” author J. R. R. Tolkien introduced a new character to his story: Faramir, son of Denethor, brother to the flawed dead hero Boromir of Gondor. At this point in Tolkien’s story arc, Gollum is leading Frodo and Sam southward to the Morgul Vale where the three of them intend to climb the Stairs of Cirith Ungol in order to pass into Mordor; their progress, however, takes a short detour when Faramir intercepts them and brings them to the Window on the West, although not before Sam has sight of an Oliphaunt. In this introductory passage, readers meet Faramir as a man of both strength and subtlety.

Faramir’s strength appears in the courage he brings to bear in ambushing an army of Southrons bound for Mordor to place themselves in service to Sauron; his subtlety appears in the woodcraft by which he disguises his small force in order to maximize the advantage achieved by his surprise attack. Then, too, his strength appears in the calm forbearance with which he questions Frodo, betraying no weak or rash excitement upon hearing the name of his brother in Frodo’s speech; his subtlety appears in the manner by which he had already learned of Boromir’s plight in battle and death—Faramir had heard the Horn of Gondor all the way from Ammon Hen above the falls of Rauros, and in a vision he had seen his brother’s funeral boat float down the waters of the River Anduin. Clearly, Faramir excels in both strength of arms and strength of mind, and also in subtlety of battle strategy and subtlety of acquiring knowledge beyond the empirical limitations of his eyes and ears. His powers keep him unseen when he wishes, but they also reveal the unseen to him as need arises.
This portrait is a distinct contrast to that of Boromir, the courageous man of arms who lacked the subtlety of mind to withstand the corrupting power of the One Ring. Upon arriving in Rivendell, seeking the solution to a puzzling dream—a dream that came repeatedly to Faramir yet to Boromir only once (Tolkien 239)—Boromir learned the full story of the Ring and immediately argued, “Let the Ring be your weapon, if it has such power as you say. Take it and go forth in victory!” (Tolkien 261). As a warrior and a man of action, he has no peer in Gondor, but as a strategist against evil, this example of his reasoning at the Council of Elrond shows that he fails to perceive the Ring’s power to subvert good intentions to evil ends. He fails to understand that a good man who uses an evil means to secure himself against evil has already succumbed to the evil he is attempting to resist. To him, the Ring is merely a weapon, and he assumes that, as a man skilled in weaponry, he will wield it and not the other way around. But the great evil of the Ring is that it wielding the creature who calls on its power, bending that being—whether man, elf, hobbit, dwarf, or Maiar—to an evil end.

Repeatedly, Tolkien has depicted the inherent evil of the Ring and the awesome power it wields over those who would use its power: Gandalf dares not touch it, and Galadriel struggles against it in the ultimate test of her self-possession. In the five hundred years of Gollum’s stewardship of the Ring, the possessor has become the possessed, and Gollum has been enslaved in a pit of bottomless addictive compulsive adoration. Even after a mere sixty years of contact with the Ring, Bilbo has lost some of his good nature, and in an even shorter time Frodo is being crushed by the weight of his burden. Boromir’s seduction by the Ring seems almost inevitable in light of his increasingly desperate life-long struggle against the forces of Mordor. How then can Faramir say of the Ring, as he does after capturing Frodo and Sam, “I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway. Not were Minas Tirith falling in ruin and I alone could save her, so,
using the weapon of the Dark Lord for her good and my glory" (Tolkien 656). Tolkien seems to have contradicted his own logic in making the Ring an absolute evil wrapped in an omnipotent form, and yet also making Faramir immune to its power.

Part of the answer to this question can be found in a careful reading of the text, and part can be inferred from suggestions Tolkien leaves in the narrative. But a fully satisfying answer may require a further act of imagination that goes beyond the facts of the text but that remains under the governance its logic. And it is this final level of satisfaction—the answer that goes beyond the statements of the text and yet is governed by its logic—that leads me to the larger implications of my full title: to make my case fully, I may have to expand on Tolkien’s hints.

I begin my interpretation of Faramir’s claim of resistance to the Ring with the first fruits of a casual reading—keeping in mind that first fruits are not necessarily the ripest ones. My earliest impression of Faramir, after only a couple of readings of the text, drew the inaccurate conclusion that he was a student of Gandalf—that the two of them shared a special connection. I speculated that Tolkien perhaps wanted to provide an explanation for the persistence of the supernatural in the world: perhaps some form of Gandalf’s extraordinary powers could be learned and retained as a form of lore and learning. Perhaps it could be passed down through generations from teachers to pupils, from tutors to tyros, from masters to apprentices. If Tolkien was indeed creating a mythology as a kind of back-story to the history and literature we already know about, surely he had to account for supernatural elements in existing myths and fairy tales. If Gandalf could pass some aspect of his power to human beings by taking on a pupil, then Tolkien would have provided the imaginative link between the lost world of Middle Earth and mundane world of Earth as we know and experience it.
Power, however, and the specialized form of power we refer to as knowledge, is part of the problem, not part of the solution to the challenge of extirpating evil from Middle Earth. The Ring is an agent of power. We know from examples in the story that this power is ultimately subdued by the efforts of the most disempowered creatures in Middle Earth, as Frodo and Sam laboriously drag the Ring to its destruction in the fires of Mount Doom. If my first inference were right—if Faramir had been instructed by Gandalf—then he would know the secrets of the Ring that Gandalf has traced out in the ancient records of Gondor, and he would know the uses that could be made of such a power. But clearly those who know best what the Ring is and what it can do are also those who struggle against its temptation with greatest difficulty. It seems that Faramir cannot have any great knowledge of the Ring when he claims to be indifferent to it.

Tolkien’s text can help correct this erroneous first impression. On a closer reading, it becomes clear that Faramir could not have been in any sense of the word a student of Gandalf. Faramir reports that he can read the ancient records “for I have had teaching,” but he does not specify that Gandalf did the teaching (Tolkien 655). More specifically, he says, “It was these records that brought the Grey Pilgrim to us. I first saw him when I was a child, and he has been twice or thrice since then” (655), and he elaborates on Gandalf’s mission in Minas Tirith (the following passage is condensed from about a page of exposition):

Mithrandir never spoke to us of what was to be, nor did he reveal his purposes. He got leave of Denethor, how I do not know, to look at the secrets of our treasury, and I learned a little of him, when he would teach (and that was seldom) . . . . But this much I learned, or guessed, and I have kept it ever secret in my heart since: that Isildur took somewhat from the hand of the Unnamed, ere he went away from Gondor, never to be seen among mortal men again . . . . What in truth this Thing
is I cannot yet guess; but some heirloom of power and peril it must be. A fell
weapon, perchance, devised by the Dark Lord. If it were a thing that gave
advantage in battle, I can well believe that Boromir, the proud and fearless, often
rash, ever anxious for the victory of Minas Tirith (and his own glory therein)
might desire such a thing and be allured by it. (Tolkien 656)

Here, in the words Tolkien put into the mouth of Faramir, readers can see two important textual
truths: first, Faramir was kept at arm’s length by Gandalf’s unwillingness to share knowledge
with him, and second that Faramir himself does not know what “Isildur’s Bane” may be. Two
lines further on, when he says “I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway,” he does not
know exactly what the thing he refers to actually is. His ignorance about Isildur’s Bane is intact.
In a sense, Faramir is as innocent of the Ring’s might as Frodo is. Gandalf had amply
opportunity to convey information about the Ring to Faramir—to take the young man into his
confidence and prepare him for a great quest—but clearly he did not do so.

So Faramir was not a student of Gandalf with respect to the mysteries of the Ring.

Nonetheless, it still makes sense at some level to ask whether Faramir could have been Gandalf’s
intended Ring bearer, since Faramir’s ignorance of the full story of Isildur’s Bane and the powers
that the Ring can confer on its bearer MAY have been the result of Gandalf’s thoughtful care to
keep a useful member of the Gondorian ruling family innocent of the Ring’s corrupting power—a
power that begins with the mere knowledge of the Ring and its uses. I think it is possible that
Gandalf intended to place the Ring in Faramir’s unsuspecting hand at some point and therefore
cultivated the young man’s ignorance, considered as a form of innocence, as an advantage in
dealing with the Ring.
But in terms of the larger story, could Faramir’s youth and maturation fit into the facts of the story that are set forth in *The Fellowship of the Ring*? We know that some seventeen years elapse between Bilbo’s one hundred and eleventh birthday party, at which he demonstrates the Ring’s utility so effectively (and publicly), and the time that Frodo sets out toward Rivendell pursued by the Nine Riders. About Faramir’s age, we know only that he is a “grave young man.” If he had been, say, ten years old at the time of Bilbo’s party, then he would have been twenty-seven years old during the last year of the Third Age of Middle Earth—a suitable age for anyone worthy of being described as both “grave” and “young.” At ten, he might have already undertaken some of the lessons that enabled him to understand the ancient lore of Gondor’s archives. In fact, he might have been still of a pliable enough nature, at ten, to be receptive to any suggestions Gandalf might have wished to implant in his formative mind.

But could Gandalf have had any contact with Faramir between Bilbo’s party and Frodo’s departure? The text does not specify Gandalf’s entire travels during this period, but clearly he traveled somewhere, and there was enough time for him to reassure himself as to the true identity of Bilbo’s ring. Additionally, there was enough time for Gandalf to lay the groundwork that would be required in order to move the Ring to Mount Doom without the knowledge of the Dark Lord—a very tricky bit of business. I can imagine Gandalf mulling over his options: no one of great power could be allowed to handle the Ring, since Sauron would sense its presence, and yet it was also the case that no one weak of will could be allowed near it either. Getting it to Rivendell may have seemed the least problem, since he intended to accompany Frodo there from Bree—intended, that is, until his “fortunate fall” in discovering Saruman’s treachery and escaping the trap at Isengard on the wings of Gwaihir.
But what about that second leg of the journey beyond Rivendell? The great wizard must have pondered deeply how to skirt between the Scylla of Orthanc beyond the Gap of Rohan and the Carybdis of Barad-Dur’s ever-watching Eye. As he perused the ancient scrolls and codices in the depths of the archives in Gondor, perhaps his eye happened to light upon a boy of a serious disposition, reading some ancient text of interest. Not a warrior bold and yet rash, but an introspective and self-controlled young man capable of thinking beyond the demands of courage and glory. It would have been an easy task for Gandalf to compel the attention of such a boy and to prepare him for a role in the destruction of the One Ring not through explicit instruction, but through indirection and an ever-so-slight bending of the pliant will to the wizard’s particular purposes. Eventually those purposes place Faramir in opposition to his father, and since he ultimately chooses as Gandalf would have chosen in his place, it is not unreasonable to imagine some effort on Gandalf’s part to bring about such a result.

Picture how the story would have differed had Faramir—the one to whom the riddling dream came repeatedly—had arrived in Rivendell instead of Boromir, who asserted his right to make the journey because he was older and bolder. In the chapter entitled “Many Meetings,” the reunion of Gandalf and Faramir would have been among those meetings. And at the Council of Elrond, no one would have stood forth to argue that the free people of Middle Earth should take the Enemy’s weapon for their own purposes. Frodo would not have been required to step forth as the only reasonable candidate to carry the Ring to Mordor since Faramir would have the advantage of even knowing how to get there while never having seen any demonstration of the Ring’s tremendous seductive power. Faramir the skilled woodsman would not have needed any companions beyond Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli. These experienced warriors could have traveled night and day, having no need of elevenses and numerous other meals per day.
Before the forces of Saruman had even struck the first blow against Rohan, the Ring could have already arrived at Mount Doom and been cast forth. Theodred need not have died—instead, surely he would have married the noblest shield maiden of Rohan, the beautiful Eowyn. The four hobbits would have made their way home to the Shire in safety after a pleasant visit in Rivendell and found no need for the scouring that followed their much later arrival. The chief problem at the end of the story would have been Saruman, not Sauron. The war would have started in the East and then moved to the West, and in all likelihood might have ended the sooner with the same result of the Return of the King and the wedding of Aragorn and Arwyn.

In terms of narrative arc, it should be obvious why Tolkien did not chose to have Gandalf use Faramir as his Ring Bearer: shorter and more direct story arcs become reduced to the mere line of moving from point A to point B. Faramir as Ring Bearer might have done a splendid job, but the story as a whole would have been shorter, more realistic, and on the whole lacking in the power that its actual structure has. The development of the little guys into heroes of the first order, winning against all the odds, makes for greater suspense along the way and greater satisfaction at the end. Nonetheless, I still think it’s reasonable to suppose that Gandalf DID indeed plan to use Faramir as the Ring Bearer, since maximizing the power of the narrative arc clearer could not have been his motivation: he would have sought the surest and quickest way to victory over Sauron, thereby sparing the greatest number of lives. So yes, I must conclude that Faramir was Gandalf’s intended ring bearer.

One further dilemma remains: what can it possibly mean to ask whether Gandalf intended anything, since as a fictional character, Gandalf is, at least technically, nothing more than the sum and total of the author’s words upon the page. If Tolkien has not explicitly stated that Gandalf had a particular mental state that readers can recognize as an intention, are readers
entitled to speculate about the possibilities that are at best only suggested or hinted at? If not, then clearly the limits of literary interpretation are narrowly constrained to the authorial, authorized, authoritative text. But if it does make sense to speculate about the possible implications of the text, then the line between interpretation and flights of fancy is considerably blurred. At some point, interpretation gives way to fan fiction—somewhere between paraphrase and slash fiction, the limit of exegesis hovers in obscurity.

So, in my imagination, when I think of how the story’s own internal logic must have gone, I see the candle-light gleam on the polished wood and brass of the desk worn by centuries of use in the cozy alcove at the rear of the dusty library, as silent as a tomb in the late winter sunshine. A boy was reciting his lessons to his tutor, conjugating verbs in the literary cadences of the Elvish language; his teacher, the most venerable of the library’s staff of scholar-historians, listened with a sharp ear for correct intonation and a sharp eye for inattention on the part of his pupil. Thus it was that the ancient archivist of Gondor noticed the approach of an old man, ignoring for the moment the droning recitation of his ten-year-old pupil, the solemn younger son of Lord Denethor. The unknown old man approached with a firm step that suggested a firmer purpose, dressed entirely in an undistinguished but serviceable gray habit with a silver scarf around his neck and a great dusty blue hat, wide of brim and with a pointed crown, drawn down upon his brow. This old man appeared intent on the stairwell that led down to the most ancient and valuable documents in the depths of Gondor’s vast royal library. The archivist cleared his throat by way of interrupting the old man’s progress: “Ahem! Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance?” As the stranger continued toward the stairwell, the archivist added, “Master Faramir, we will conclude our lesson now, if you please. Go join your brother in the stable for a riding lesson. Go now, young man, and quit gawking in that low manner,”
The archivist hastened to intercept the unknown visitor as the boy dawdled over the task of putting away his books. “Excuse me, sir. I am the Keeper of these texts, as was my father before me, and I am under the charge of the Steward of Gondor to keep these records safe and legible for as long as the walls of our city continue to stand. May I be of assistance? I assure you, I can answer innumerable questions about the lore of Gondor, for I devote my life to the mastery of the knowledge stored here into perpetuity. Unh—I mean no offense, but have you the permission of Lord Denethor to enter the archives?”

For every reader of *The Lord of the Rings*, surely there is a license to explore the depths of the text—both those that are specified, and those that are merely implied. How far that license extends, I cannot say—does it sanction slash fiction, for example? Clearly, too slavish an adherence to the Ur-text eliminates the possibility of symbolism, while too uninhibited an approach leaves the door open to options that will displease many. Somewhere in between the letter and the spirit of the text lies the interpretation. And now that I have reached the end of MY text, I invite you—verily, I authorize you—to explore the possibilities hinted at in the suggestions I’ve thrown out as to the potential deeper mysteries in the text my text is based on. The floor is open for questions and discussion.