



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 26  
Number 1

Article 10

---

10-15-2007

## Imitative Desire in Tolkien's Mythology: A Girardian Perspective

Hayden Head

*College of the Ozarks, MS*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Head, Hayden (2007) "Imitative Desire in Tolkien's Mythology: A Girardian Perspective," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 26: No. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol26/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSU<sup>TM</sup>

---

## Mythopoeic Society's Online Midwinter Seminar 2024

17th–18th February 2024: Something Mighty Queer

Submission Deadline: November 30, 2023

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2024.htm>



### Imitative Desire in Tolkien's Mythology: A Girardian Perspective

#### Abstract

Tests the theories of literary critic René Girard against selected stories from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* and finds some interesting cases of applicability, particularly in the connected stories of Morgoth, Sauron, and Saruman, and in the various Ring-bearers, particularly Gollum. Contrasts Tom Bombadil's lack of desire and envy.

#### Additional Keywords

Desire in fantasy; Envy in J.R.R. Tolkien; Girard, René. Deceit, Desire, and the Novel; Hubris in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gollum; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Morgoth; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Saruman; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Sauron; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Tom Bombadil; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—The Ring

## IMITATIVE DESIRE IN TOLKIEN'S MYTHOLOGY: A GIRARDIAN PERSPECTIVE

HAYDEN HEAD

IN HIS BOOK *THE EVERLASTING MAN*, Chesterton cautions his readers about those students of mythology who claim to have discovered the key to unlocking the meaning of myths:

There are too many keys to mythology, as there are too many cryptograms in Shakespeare. Everything is phallic; everything is totemistic; everything is seed-time and harvest; everything is ghosts and grave-offerings; everything is the golden bough of sacrifice; everything is the sun and moon; everything is everything. (103)

The problem, as Chesterton sees it, "comes from a man trying to look at these stories from the outside, as if they were scientific objects" (103). The solution Chesterton proposes is that the student of mythology ought to become a storyteller himself, or a poet, a maker of myth, for the only one who truly understands a myth is one who appreciates its aesthetics. Or as Chesterton writes, "He has only to look at them from the inside, and ask himself how he would begin a story" (103). Of course, J.R.R. Tolkien immediately comes to mind as a student of myth who is also a creator of myth. In creating Middle-earth, Tolkien is inside the myth; as a scholar, he is outside. Tolkien is not only concerned with the aesthetics of his mythology, but also with the truth it represents, and, while Tolkien consistently maintains that his mythology is not Christian allegory, nevertheless, the truth of Tolkien's mythos is given form and coherence by his Christian worldview.

Chesterton goes on to argue that classical mythology, guided by the laws of the imagination,

did satisfy, or rather it partially satisfied, a thing very deep in humanity indeed; the idea of surrendering something as the portion of the unknown powers; of pouring of wine upon the ground, of throwing a ring into the sea; in a word, of sacrifice. It is the wise and worthy idea of not taking our advantage to the full; of putting something in the other balance to ballast our dubious pride, of paying tithes to nature for our land. This deep truth

of the danger of insolence, or being too big for our boots, runs through all the great Greek tragedies and makes them great. (110)

That is, after warning us against the notion that there is a single key to mythology in general, Chesterton suggests that there is a key, or at least a fundamental theme that enables us to understand mythology, namely, the tempering of “o’erweening” pride, or *hubris*. Again, Tolkien comes to mind as a mythologizer in the Chestertonian vein, since the danger of *hubris* and the tempering of pride are persistent themes in the *Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Furthermore, I contend that the theories of René Girard are especially helpful in unpacking and understanding Tolkien’s deepest designs, precisely because Girard, like Tolkien, operates within a Christian understanding of myth. That is not to say that Chesterton would entirely approve of Girard. Perhaps no critic is more single-minded in his approach to myth than René Girard—Girard insists that imitative desire and the “golden bough of sacrifice” underlie all mythology—and I, at least, would not describe Girard’s writings as “poetic.” Nevertheless, I find Girard valuable principally for two reasons: 1) to my lights, he conclusively demonstrates that mythology simultaneously evokes then conceals the role of imitative desire in religion and culture, and 2) he shows that myth properly understood, and particularly Scripture properly understood, unmasks the imitative nature of desire in the quotidian world. Girard’s theory of imitative desire reveals the *modus operandi* of *hubris*, the overreaching pride that, according to Chesterton, is tempered in mythology. Finally, I contend that the mythology of Tolkien especially lends itself to a Girardian reading because both Tolkien and Girard operate within the same Christian framework, a framework that blurs the distinction between the mythic and the mundane by revealing the mechanics of human desire. (For the purposes of this essay, I will not be considering the relationship of mimetic desire to the scapegoat, an extremely important concept for Girard but somewhat tangential to my argument here.)<sup>1</sup>

At this point, a short review of Girard’s theory of imitative desire may be helpful before applying his theory to Tolkien’s mythology. In brief, Girard argues that we do not desire objects, things, people, status, what-have-you, for themselves; rather, objects of desire receive their value because they are possessed by an “Other.” The illusion is that we desire things for themselves. Girard dispels that illusion in his triangular model of desire. Desire is not a straight line; rather, desire is mediated by a rival, the possessor of the object. Or

---

<sup>1</sup>In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard distinguishes between *acquisitive mimesis*, in which two rivals mirror one another in their ongoing struggle to appropriate an object, and *conflictual mimesis*, which triggers the scapegoat mechanism. As I state above, this essay will largely focus on *acquisitive mimesis*.

to put it more simply, all desire is born of rivalry.<sup>2</sup> In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard writes, "To untie the knot of desire, we have only to concede that everything begins in rivalry for the object. The object acquires the status of a disputed object and thus the envy that it arouses in all quarters, becomes more and more heated" (294). The key word in this passage is *envy*, and in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard argues that envy, or mediated desire, is necessarily imitative. That is, any movement of the desiring individual toward the object is in reality a movement toward the rival. This movement inevitably becomes imitative; the rival becomes at once the mediator of desire and the model of behavior. Eventually, the one who desires cannot imagine possessing the object without also possessing the rival. As a result, Girard says, the rival himself becomes an object of desire, but an object of desire that always repudiates the advances of the desirer. The mediator/rival stands in aloof superiority, simultaneously attracting and repelling the one who desires. The result, according to Girard, is that the "[t]he subject is torn between two opposite feelings toward his model—the most submissive reverence and the most intense malice. This is the passion we call *hatred*" (*Desire* 10).

The wellspring of mediated desire, this mutual attraction to and repulsion from the rival, is the perceived inferiority of the desirer. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* Girard calls this sense of inferiority an "ontological sickness." Richard Golsan writes that for Girard, this "ontological sickness" is "the true source of all mimetic desire: to covet what the other desires is really to covet the other's essence" (12). Or as Girard writes, "Imitative desire is always a desire to be Another" (*Deceit* 83). Consequently, that person who seeks his being in the imagined model/rival sacrifices whatever inherent and authentic being he possesses. Moreover, the desire of the subject is provoked by both the superiority of the model and his own feelings of inadequacy. Again from *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*,

[T]he subject rapidly begins to credit himself with a radical inadequacy that the model has brought to light, which justifies the model's attitude toward him. The model, being closely identified with the object he jealously keeps for himself, possesses—so it would seem—a self-sufficiency and omniscience that the subject can only dream of acquiring. The object is now more desired than ever. Since the model obstinately bars access to it, the possession of this object must make all the difference

---

<sup>2</sup> In claims of this magnitude, questions and doubts necessarily arise: is Girard suggesting that all desire is born of rivalry? Well, yes, excepting purely biological desires. In his initial discussion of Cervantes in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard writes, "Some of Sancho's desires are not imitated, for example, those aroused by the sight of a piece of cheese or a goatskin of wine. But Sancho has other ambitions besides filling his stomach" (3).

between the self-sufficiency of the model and the imitator's lack of sufficiency, the model's fullness of being and the imitator's nothingness. (296)

This imitator, this "ontologically sick" desirer, possesses at his core precisely nothing; he is, Girard says, a *vaniteux*, a void, a cipher who "cannot draw his desires from his own resources; he must borrow them from others" (*Deceit* 6).

How then are these ideas, vanity and envy and mediated desire, related to *hubris*? After all, most of us feel envy at some point, but few of us seek to overreach our given human condition to challenge God. Or don't we? The book of Genesis teaches that the sin of Eve and Adam, the Original Sin, arises from the urge to rival God by disobeying his commandments, and in Eve's particular case, God's commandment concerning the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The serpent tempts Eve to eat the fruit, saying, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). According to the myth of the Garden, all sin has its root in the primeval impulse to appropriate the prerogatives of God, to perceive God as the rival for one's happiness rather than the source. This desire to claim God's power for oneself, to emulate God not out of love but out of envy, is the impulse of *hubris*.

The irony behind this "upward ascent" of imitative desire is that the mighty, those who apparently possess more substance, more "being," than the rest of us, are those most susceptible to the temptation to rise against God. The man who possesses power, who has grown accustomed to thinking of himself as a rival to others rather than a *vaniteux*, finds that he is caught in the very web of imitative desire that he supposed himself to master. Gazing into the pure ontology of God, the strong man discovers anew his own contingency, and his pride of strength dissolves in the cauldron of envious desire.

Mythologically speaking, Satan is the archetype of greatness corrupted into envy. Satan, of course, was the most beautiful of the angels, and yet it was his greatness that provoked his *hubris*, his envy of God. The prophet Isaiah records Satan's emulous intentions: "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:13-14). Satan clearly states his intention to become like God; his desire is purely imitative. Satan, in turn, mediates his *hubris* to Eve, who desires herself to "be like God, knowing good and evil," and she subsequently mediates her desire to Adam. Clearly, in both of these examples, *hubris* is imitative, and the object of that imitation is God himself. Moreover, Satan, Adam, and Eve seek to imitate God not to reflect His glory but to seize His glory for their own. They misjudged the distance between

themselves and God, between the created being and the Creator, and the awful discovery of the unbridgeable chasm between themselves and God is itself the fall. The fall is that sudden recognition of the incommensurability between God and man.

According to Girard, however, Satan is more than a symbol for unbounded human ambition; nor is Satan merely a reification of human envy. In his book *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard asks and then answers this question concerning Satan:

Why do the Gospels, in their most complete definition of the mimetic cycle, have recourse to a figure named Satan or the devil rather than to an impersonal principle? I think the principal reason is that the human subjects as individuals are not aware of the circular process in which they are trapped; the real manipulator of the process is *mimetic contagion* itself. There is no real subject within this mimetic contagion, and that is finally the meaning of the title "prince of this world," if it is recognized that Satan is the absence of being. (69)

According to Girard, "Satan" is the name we give to the empty complex of imitative desire. This complex seems to possess some sort of being, some sort of presence, because it touches every aspect of desire. The reality is that Satan is an absence, an emptiness, onto which we project the quality of being out of the felt intensity of our own imitative desires.

In Tolkien's mythology, the *hubris* of Satan, of course, is re-presented in the *hubris* of Melkor, who desires to create his own melody rather than serve as a sub-creator to the music of Eru Ilúvatar. In the *Ainulindalë* of the *Silmarillion* Tolkien describes the envy of Melkor thus:

But now Ilúvatar sat and hearkened, and for a great while it seemed good to him, for in the music there were no flaws. But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself. To Melkor among the Ainur had been given the greatest gifts of power and knowledge, and he had a share in all the gifts of his brethren. He had gone often alone into the void places seeking the Imperishable Flame; for desire grew hot within him to bring into Being things of his own, and it seemed to him that Ilúvatar took no thought for the Void, and he was impatient of its emptiness. (4)

Melkor is driven by a desire to imitate Ilúvatar and wishes to claim the ultimate prerogative of Eru, which is the capacity to create. And though he possesses as much "being" as a contingent creature can possess, though he is more powerful

than his fellow Ainur, nevertheless, Melkor is not content with any “being” less than Eru’s ultimate being. Like Satan’s doomed attempt to rival God, however, Melkor’s attempt to emulate Eru only serves to bring about his fall:

From splendour he fell through arrogance to contempt for all things save himself, a spirit wasteful and pitiless. Understanding he turned to subtlety in perverting to his own will all that he would use, until he became a liar without shame. He began with the desire of Light, but when he could not possess it for himself alone, he descended through fire and wrath into a great burning, down into Darkness. And darkness he used most in his evil works upon Arda, and filled it with fear for all living things. (*Silmarillion* 19)

Having failed to acquire the light of Ilúvatar, Melkor, now called Morgoth, is left with the bitter consolation of “fire and wrath,” dim parodies of Ilúvatar’s creative fire. Morgoth nevertheless persists in evil and mediates his envy to Sauron, who in turn becomes the master manipulator of envy in Middle-earth. In the *Akallabêth*, Sauron provokes the Númenóreans’ envy of the immortal Elves and the Valar to the point that they sail against Aman, the undying lands. The Valar had attempted to inhibit the Númenóreans’ envy by imposing a ban against sailing toward the West: “[T]he design of Manwë was that the Númenóreans should not be tempted to seek for the Blessed Realm, nor desire to overpass the limits set to their bliss, becoming enamoured of the immortality of the Valar and the Eldar and the lands where all things endure” (270). Sauron, however, was able to exploit the pride and envy of Ar-Pharazôn, king of the Númenóreans, and seduce him into the worship of Melkor and the betrayal of his own people; in the end, he persuades Ar-Pharazôn to war against the Valar, saying:

“The Valar have possessed themselves of the land where there is no death; and they lie to you concerning it, hiding it as the best they may, because of their avarice, and their fear lest the Kings of Men should wrest from them the deathless realm and rule the world in their stead. And though, doubtless, the gift of life unending is not for all, but only for such as are worthy, being men of might and pride and great lineage, yet against all justice is it done that this gift, which is his due, should be withheld from the King of Kings, Ar-Pharazôn, mightiest of the sons of Earth, to whom Manwë alone can be compared, if even he. But great kings do not brook denials, and take what is their due.” (282)

Ar-Pharazôn both desires and resents the immortality of the Valar and the Eldar, and in his own “fire and wrath” violates the Valar’s ban against sailing to the West. Like Morgoth before him, Ar-Pharazôn rebels against his own contingency



of being and fails. When he sets foot in Valinor, his death and the destruction of Númenor immediately follow.

Sauron, who had hoped to enhance his "being" and increase his substance through the folly of the Númenóreans, discovers instead that he, too, has been shorn of his being and must flee as a disincarnate spirit to Middle-earth.<sup>3</sup> In the same way that Satan rivals God in envious emulation, fails in his rivalry, and then proceeds to incite a similar envy in Eve and Adam, so Morgoth fails in his rivalry of Eru Ilúvatar only to seduce Sauron who in turn seduces Ar-Pharazôn in a chain of imitative desire. Both myths reveal the attraction and the failure of *mimetic contagion*, a failure that ultimately manifests itself as an absence of being, precisely as Sauron is revealed as an absence when he flees Númenor.

Of course, Sauron persists as a wicked spirit intent on "curing" his "ontological sickness." Having failed to enhance his "being" by deceiving the Númenóreans, Sauron attempts to do so by establishing a tyranny over Middle-earth, that is, by crushing every rival, real or imagined. In the process of rebuilding his power, Sauron subsequently ensnares Saruman in the selfsame web of envious emulation that eventually brings about the wizard's fall.

Let us consider Saruman as another mythological model of envy, imitation, and violence. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gandalf recalls the conversation with Saruman in which his former ally and superior revealed his corruption; Saruman told Gandalf:

"I am Saruman the Wise, Saruman Ring-maker, Saruman of Many Colors!"

I looked then and saw that his robes, which had seemed white, were not so, but were woven of all colours, and if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that the eye was bewildered.

"I like white better," I said.

"White!" he sneered. "It serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed. The white page can be overwritten; and the white light can be broken."

"In which case it is no longer white," said I. "And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom." (*LotR* II:2 252)

---

<sup>3</sup> In the *Akallabêth*, Tolkien describes Sauron's "ontological crisis" as follows: "But Sauron was not of mortal flesh, and though he was robbed now of that shape in which he had wrought so great an evil, so that he could never again appear fair to the eyes of Men, yet his spirit arose out of the deep and passed as a shadow and a black wind over the sea, and came back to Middle-earth and to Mordor that was his home. There he took up again his great Ring in Barad-dûr, and dwelt there, dark and silent, until he wrought himself a new guise, an image of malice and hatred made visible; and the Eye of Sauron the Terrible few could endure" (289).

The fact that Saruman perceives his white garment, the symbol of his character and his virtue, as a blank, a page to be written on, indicates that he has jettisoned his own being out of the desire to possess the being of Sauron. Like Girard's *vaniteux*, Saruman has become a cipher who perceives the deficiency of his being in the power of his rival. The fact that he wears a ring and identifies himself as a Ring-maker signifies that he is but a copy of the arch Ring-maker. In his delusion, Saruman believes that he is becoming greater while in reality he sacrifices the very greatness he possessed. That Saruman has become a diminished image of his rival is borne out in Tolkien's description of Isengard in *The Two Towers*:

A strong place and wonderful was Isengard, and long it had been beautiful; and there great lords had dwelt, the wardens of Gondor upon the West, and wise men that watched the stars. But Saruman had slowly shaped it to his shifting purposes, and made it better, as he thought, being deceived—for all those arts and subtle devices, for which he forsook his former wisdom, and which fondly he imagined were his own, came but from Mordor; so that what he made was naught, only a little copy, a child's model or a slave's flattery, of that vast fortress, armoury, prison, furnace of great power, Barad-dûr, the Dark Tower, which suffered no rival, and laughed at flattery, biding its time, secure in its pride and immeasurable strength. (*LotR* III:8 542)

Clearly, Tolkien intends for us to see that envy is imitative at its root; envy inevitably transforms the one who desires into a lesser copy of his rival. Saruman's fascination with the Ring costs him his very being, and his duty to Middle-earth degenerates into a selfish bid for power. By contrast, when Galadriel resists the temptation to take the Ring from Frodo, she says, "I pass the test [...]. I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel" (II:7 357). Galadriel, in effect, relinquishes the desire for imitative "being" and in so doing retains her authentic "being."

Saruman hopes to pass the test of acquiring the ring, vanquishing his rival Sauron, and augmenting his "being," but his project is doomed because of the very nature of the evil he emulates. Saruman may seek his "being" by imitating Sauron, but he pursues an illusion. For Tolkien continues to define Sauron in terms of absence, as an abyss of desire. Consider the famous description of Sauron's Eye in Galadriel's mirror:

[S]uddenly the Mirror went altogether dark, as dark as if a hole had opened in the world of sight, and Frodo looked into emptiness. In the black abyss there appeared a single Eye that slowly grew, until it filled nearly all the Mirror. So terrible was it that Frodo stood rooted, unable to cry out or to withdraw his gaze. The Eye was rimmed with fire, but was

itself glazed, yellow as a cat's, watchful and intent, and the black slit of its pupil opened on a pit, a window into nothing. (II:7 355)

As Shippey observes, evil for Tolkien is both an absence and a presence; theologically speaking, evil is both Boethian and Manichean (135). The Eye of Sauron is represented as at once powerful and impotent, for the pit of that Eye is a window into nothing. This "black abyss" is the abyss of envy, never satisfied until it has conquered every rival and destroyed every pleasure save its own. In fact, it seems as if Tolkien draws on the "Evil Eye" of folklore in his creation of the Eye of Sauron. In his book *Envy*, Helmut Schoeck writes, "Almost everywhere it is felt that universal values, such as personal health, youthfulness, children, have to be protected from the evil eye, the active expression of envy, and this is evident in the proverbs and the behaviour patterns that are employed by so many peoples to ward it off" (9). The Eye of Sauron is an eye of envy, for Sauron not only desires to dominate but to destroy what is good simply because it is good. In such a world, the Shire is necessarily in peril, for Sauron could not endure the homey pleasures of innocent folk. Their joy would only increase his misery by reflecting back to him his own "non-being." And Saruman imitates this abyss of envy, this emptiness that swallows his identity even as he struggles to overcome his rival. Given the imitative power of mediated desire, Saruman's corruption of the Shire seems not to be an after-thought on Tolkien's part but the inevitable consequence of his dominant theme.

So what then is the One Ring? Yes, it represents the *libido domandi* and the desire to oppress. But clearly the Ring has no power unless it is possessed. And yet possession of the Ring does not satisfy one's desire; indeed, possessing the Ring only intensifies one's desire. As Gollum warns Frodo and Sam concerning Sauron: "Don't take the Precious to Him! He'll eat us all, if He gets it, eat all the world" (*LotR* IV:3 623). The Ring is an abyss, like the Eye of Sauron, which nothing can fill, and as such possession of the Ring necessarily throws the Ring-bearer into rivalry with Sauron and eventually with anyone else who desires power. In fact, Tolkien emphasizes that the real power of the Ring lies in rivalry, and in Tolkien's mythology, rivalry is always imitative, as I have already demonstrated. As such, the Ring is the symbol *par excellence* of imitative desire as Girard defines it throughout his works. Boromir, Gollum, and finally, Frodo all imitate Sauron in their fascination with the Ring; like Saruman they become lesser images of that preeminent evil while each of them sacrifices his identity as the desire for the Ring overcomes him. Tolkien unmaskes the power of imitative desire when Frodo declares at the brink of Mt. Doom that he intends to keep the Ring for himself. Of course, Mt. Doom is not only the place of the Ring's destruction; it is also the place of its creation. In carrying the Ring to its destruction, Frodo has also been led into the place of its origin, the womb of

mediated desire. In laying claim to the Ring, Frodo reveals the insuperable attraction of rivalry, and he ceases to be a humble hobbit from the Shire; he has become, like Isengard, a diminutive copy of the power of Barad-dûr. The fact that Frodo disappears when he puts on the Ring—invisibility is, of course, an important power the Ring bestows on its wearer—underscores that he himself sacrifices his “being” at the very moment he seizes the Ring.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Ring is destroyed not through intention—though Frodo’s intention moves the Ring as far as it could be moved, and for that, he is indeed praiseworthy—but by the dynamic of rivalry itself. Gollum’s sheer joy in seizing the Ring, his triumph in vanquishing his rival to claim the object of his desire, leads to his and the Ring’s destruction.

I said that the Ring is an abyss that cannot be filled; that, of course, is not entirely accurate. The Ring is filled once, with the blue eye of Tom Bombadil, and Tom’s blue eye is the spiritual antithesis of Sauron’s red Eye. But then, Tom is defined in terms of his being. When Frodo asks Goldberry who Tom Bombadil is, she initially, and enigmatically, replies that “he is.”<sup>5</sup> Rather than associating Tom with Yahweh when He speaks from the burning bush or as an incarnated Valar, we might consider Tom in Girardian terms; that is, the Ring has no power over Tom because Tom is utterly content with his “being.” In that regard, Tom

---

<sup>4</sup> Gandalf warns Frodo in *The Fellowship of the Ring* that the Ring will ultimately rob him of any real being: “A mortal, Frodo, who keeps one of the Great Rings, does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues, until at last every minute is a weariness. And if he often uses the Ring to make himself invisible, he *fades*: he becomes in the end invisible permanently, and walks in the twilight under the eye of the dark power that rules the Rings. Yes, sooner or later—later, if he is strong or well-meaning to begin with, but neither strength nor good purpose will last—sooner or later the dark power will devour him” (I:246).

<sup>5</sup> Goldberry’s reply has sparked much discussion, the first example of which, presumably, is recorded in Tolkien’s letters. In the draft of a letter to Peter Hastings dated September 1954, Tolkien replies to Hastings’s charge that he had “over-stepped the mark in metaphysical matters”; one of these metaphysical missteps concerned Goldberry’s reply, “He is,” which Hastings said “seemed to imply that Bombadil was God” (187). Tolkien writes, in part, “Frodo has asked not ‘what is Tom Bombadil’ but ‘Who is he’. We and he no doubt often laxly confuse the questions. Goldberry gives what I think is the correct answer. We need not go into the sublimities of ‘I am that am’—which is quite different from *he is*. She adds as a concession a statement of part of the ‘what’. He is *master* in a peculiar way: he has no fear, and no desire of possession or domination at all. He merely knows and understands about such things as concern him in his natural little realm. He hardly even judges, and as far as can be seen makes no effort to reform or remove even the Willow” (192). Bombadil’s mastery lies in the fact that he does not desire to master; his “being” is derived from opening his hands—as he does when he presents a flower to Goldberry—not in clutching them. He is rather like the Green Man of Chesterton’s *Man Alive*, Innocent Smith, whose initials spell out “I.S.”

Bombadil simply "is," as Goldberry says, and his "being" lies, paradoxically, in his refusal to master, well, anything. He is not imitating anyone because he exists completely beyond the web of rivalry. His curious suit, his singing, his odd practice of referring to himself in the third person, his enduring infatuation with Goldberry, his love for his realm, and his abundant larder all indicate a fullness of being which removes him from the world of envy and mediated desire. Tom Bombadil is not susceptible to the seduction of *hubris* for his "being" seeks no increase. Moreover, he himself is not an object of envious desire because he is set apart from Middle-earth. He is inimitable and has no desire to imitate anyone else, and because he stands outside the power of mimetic contagion, Tom possesses the power to liberate others, as he does the hobbits. When Tom releases Merry and Pippin from Old Man Willow, he does so by reminding the tree of what he is; that is, Tom tempers his pride: "What be you a-thinking of? You should not be waking. Eat earth! Dig deep! Drink water! Go to sleep! Bombadil is talking!" (I:6 118). Tom reminds Old Man Willow that he is a willow and not an old man. When the tree is humbled, out pop Merry and Pippin.

Similarly, Tom recalls the Barrow-wight to his true condition of being:

*Get out, you old Wight! Vanish in the sunlight!  
Shrivel like the cold mist, like the winds go wailing,  
Out into the barren lands far beyond the mountains!  
Come never here again! Leave your barrow empty!  
Lost and forgotten be, darker than the darkness,  
Where gates stand for ever shut, till the world is mended.*

(*LotR* I:8 139)

Like Old Man Willow, the Barrow-wight fancies himself to be a dark power that can grasp and bind. That he himself is bound in the web of mimetic contagion is borne out by the song he sings or, as this song seems to Frodo, his "incantation": "*In the black wind the stars shall die, / and still on gold here let them lie, / till the dark lord lifts his hand / over dead sea and withered land*" (138). The Barrow-wight reveals himself to be a minion of the "dark lord"—that is, of Sauron—and like a diminutive Sauron, the Barrow-wight must gather his little world of treasure to substantiate his "being."

Tom asserts his mastery over the evil spirit through his own song, and in doing so, easily vanquishes the Barrow-wight and liberates the hobbits. The ontological contrast between Tom and the Barrow-wight is so great that the Barrow-wight cannot withstand Tom, and he disappears with a "long trailing shriek, fading away into an unguessable distance" (139). Once again Tolkien suggests that authentic "being" necessarily repulses illusory "being"; in the character of Tom Bombadil the real and absolute prevail over the merely imitative.

Whether or not Girard's theory of imitative desire applies to all myth is impossible to say; we can imagine Chesterton dismissing imitative desire as yet another "key" that purports to unlock the meaning of mythology. Nevertheless, that imitative desire does reveal the *modus operandi* of *hubris* seems clear, and that mythology is certainly concerned with *hubris*, by Chesterton's own admission, seems equally clear. Most importantly for the purposes of this essay, Girard's understanding of imitative desire casts a helpful light into the shadows of Tolkien's great mythology. Consistent with the Christian doctrines of evil and original sin, Tolkien reveals mediated desire as Satanic, or more appropriately, as Sauronic. He furthermore reveals that the powerful lure of the rival so dominates all human desire that even the humblest and best of us cannot resist its attraction. As it goes for Frodo, so it goes for us all. Who can deliver us from these chains of reciprocal desire, from the *mimetic contagion* in which we find ourselves? On the answer to that question, Chesterton, Tolkien, and Girard would all agree.

### WORKS CITED

- Chesterton, G. K. *The Everlasting Man*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993.
- Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988.
- . *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Trans. James G. Williams. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001.
- . *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987.
- Golsan, Richard J. *René Girard and Myth: An Introduction*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993.
- Shippey, Tom. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- Schoeck, Helmut. *Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Press, 1987.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994.
- . *The Silmarillion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.