



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

Volume 23 | Number 4 | Issue 90, Fall/Winter

Article 3

10-15-2002

Types of Heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*

Romuald Ian Lakowski
Grant MacEwan College, Canada

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



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

Recommended Citation

Lakowski, Romuald Ian (2002) "Types of Heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 23 : No. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol23/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by 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.

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



Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

Types of Heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Studies Sam, Aragorn, and Gandalf as archetypal masculine heroes in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Men; Heroes

Types of Heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*

Romuald Ian Lakowski

WHILE much has been written about J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, very little attention has been paid to Tolkien's treatment of Masculine "types."¹ A major complication in addressing the problem of the various patterns of masculine (or feminine, for that matter) heroism to be found in *The Lord of the Rings* is the existence in the story of several different types of heroism represented by the various Free Peoples of Middle-earth. Each of these representatives embodies a very different type of ideal masculinity for the readers. The Hobbits have a boyish quality which is a large part of their appeal, while the Wizards or at least Gandalf represent the type of the Wise Old Man. The Men in the story are usually of mature character, and driven by an almost Stoic sense of duty; they can be proud and fierce, like Boromir, but they are not wantonly cruel. They seem best to represent the masculine types of the Warrior and the King, especially in the case of Aragorn, son of Arathorn, who becomes at the end of Tolkien's epic-romance an embodiment of Arthur Redivivus, of the King-Who>Returns.

Regretfully it is not possible to discuss all the varieties of heroism manifested by the various Free Peoples of Middle-earth. In this study I will confine myself to discussing four of the nine companions of the Fellowship of the Ring: the two hobbits, Sam and Frodo, and Gandalf and Aragorn.

SAM

Most readers of *The Lord of the Rings* identify strongly with the hobbits for natural reasons. They figure prominently in the story after all and they have an obvious boyish charm and appeal. However, even among the hobbits we are presented with a variety of types of heroism. It is Pippin and Merry, or to give them their more heroic-sounding full names Peregrin Took and Meriadoc Brandybuck, who actually engage most clearly in conventional heroic activity. Each of them gets tested in battle. Pippin plays a small but important part in the defence of Minas Tirith—his disobedience to his liege-lord Denethor at a critical moment results in the rescue by Gandalf of the wounded Faramir, Denethor's son, from the funeral pyre on which Denethor immolates himself. Pippin also fights later at the Battle

of the Morannon, in which he slays a great troll. In a similar way Merry is rewarded for his disobedience to his liege-lord Théoden, when together with the shield-maiden Dernhelm/Éowyn, Théoden's sister-daughter (i.e. niece), he helps to slay the Chief of the Ringwraiths, the Witch-King of Angmar, at the Battle of the Pelannor Fields. Both also together with Samwise Gamgee lead the successful revolt of the hobbits against the henchmen of Sharkey/Saruman in "The Scouring of the Shire" at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* (Book VI.8). They retain something of their boyish spirits even after they achieve heroic status, becoming literally larger than life after drinking the entdraughts of Treebeard in the forest of Fangorn. Sam Gamgee embodies a different though not completely unrelated kind of heroism, shown primarily through his dogged "do or die" determination to serve his master and follow him even to the Cracks of Doom. For Tolkien himself Sam was "a more representative hobbit than any others that we have to see much of" (*Letters* 329). He even describes him as vulgar and cocksure: "Sam was cocksure, and deep down a little conceited; but his conceit had been transformed by his devotion to Frodo. He did not think of himself as heroic or even brave, or in any way admirable—except in his service and loyalty to his master" (329). He is not totally lacking in initiative or imagination, and for a brief while after Shelob's attack on Frodo, in the chapter "The Choices of Master Samwise" (Book IV.10), when Sam thinks his master is dead, he debates whether to take the ring and go on alone and try to fulfill Frodo's quest without him:

"What shall I do, what shall I do?" he said. "Did I come all this way with him for nothing?" And then he remembered his own voice speaking words that at the time he did not understand himself, at the beginning of their journey: *I have something to do before the end. I must see it through, sir, if you understand.*

"But what can I do? Not leave Mr Frodo dead, unburied on the top of the mountains, and go home? Or go on? Go on?" he repeated, and for a moment doubt and fear shook him. "Go on? Is that what I've got to do? And leave him?"

[. . .]

"What am I to do then?" he cried again, and now he seemed plainly to know the hard answer: *see it through*. Another lonely journey, and the worst.

"What? Me, alone, go to the Crack of Doom and all?" He quailed still, but the resolve grew. "What? *Me* take the Ring from *him*? The Council gave it to him."

But the answer came at once: "And the Council gave him companions, so that the errand should not fail. And you are the last of all the Company. The errand must not fail." (Book IV.10; II:427-28)

In the end Sam does decide to take the Ring. But he only has to carry it for a short while and, after he manages to rescue Frodo from the Tower of the Watchers, Sam gladly returns to the role of the faithful servant. However, his actions do not become any the less heroic, but if anything even more so. For when they reach Mount Orodruin Frodo proves too weak, worn down by the burden of the ring, to go on at the end, and Sam has to carry him on his back up to the Cracks of Doom.

One of the most remarkable things about *The Lord of the Rings* is that almost everyone has a part to play that turns out to be essential to the development of the story. There is no single “hero” in the story, not even Frodo. Without Sam and also Gollum at that crucial moment at the end when Frodo puts on the Ring in the Cracks of Doom, Frodo could not have achieved his quest. Some, like Stratford Caldecott, have even argued that Sam is the “central hero” of *The Lord of the Rings* (29):

To read *The Lord of the Rings* as, in a special way, Sam’s story, makes it even more our story. The great events of the book begin as well as end with Sam. A self-professed lover of tales about Elves and dragons, caught by Gandalf eavesdropping under Frodo’s window at Bag End, Sam is hauled in by the ears and becomes part of the action from that moment on. In all of this, he represents you and me, the reader. Like him, we love stories about Elves. We too are ‘caught by the ears’ and yanked over the threshold into the world of the Quest, a Quest that promises the transformation of the mundane into the magical. (30)

Surprisingly, *The Lord of the Rings* ends not with a celebration of heroic deeds but quietly, with a return to the mundane world, on a note of domestic felicity, after Sam has seen Frodo off at the Grey Havens:

But Sam turned to Bywater [. . .] And he went on, and there was yellow light, and fire within; and the evening meal was ready, and he was expected. And Rose drew him in, and set him in his chair, and put little Elanor upon his lap.

He drew a deep breath. “Well, I’m back,” he said. (Book VI.9; III:378)

This is brought out even more clearly in the suppressed “Epilogue” to *The Lord of the Rings*, in which some years later Sam, now Mayor of the Shire, tells his children—in one version his now adolescent daughter Elanor—about the events of the War of the Ring (*HME IX*:114-35). In a long letter to Milton Waldman of Collins, written in 1951, just as he was finishing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien himself draws attention to Sam’s importance for the story:

I think the simple 'rustic' love of Sam and his Rosie (nowhere elaborated) is absolutely essential to the study of his (the chief hero's) character, and to the theme of the relationship of ordinary life (breathing, eating, working, begetting) and quests, sacrifice, causes, and 'longing for Elves', and sheer beauty. (*Letters* 161)

It is Sam who in his own homely way, when he and Frodo are resting on the stairs of Cirith Ungol (Book IV.8), articulates the central paradox of the heroic quest: that the real hero does not set out to seek for adventure, but rather that he already finds himself in one before he goes looking for it.

"The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually—their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on—and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same—like old Mr Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into?

[. . .]

All the big important plans are not for my sort. Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: 'Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring!' And they'll say: 'Yes, that's one of my favourite stories. Frodo was very brave, wasn't he, dad?' 'Yes, my boy, the famousest of the hobbits, and that's saying a lot.'" (Book IV.8; II:402-403)

For Sam one of the most important aspects of heroic deeds is that they can be retold by fathers to sons (and daughters in the case of at least one version of Tolkien's "Epilogue" [*HME* IX:121-28]) for their edification. Frodo laughingly corrects Sam:

"But you've left out one of the chief characters: Samwise the stout-hearted. 'I want to hear more about Sam, dad. Why didn't they put in more of his talk, dad? That's what I like, it makes me laugh. And Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam, would he, dad?'

[. . .]

[. . .] You and I, Sam, are still stuck in the worst places in the story, and it is all too likely that some will say at this point: 'Shut the book now, dad; we don't want to read any more.'" (Book IV.8; II:404)

Tolkien himself told early versions of several of his own stories to his sons and daughter long before they were published.

FRODO

Frodo represents a very different kind of masculine 'type' than Sam (or Merry or Pippin)—that of the “sacrificial hero.” And as such he has more in common with Aragorn or Gandalf than with the other hobbits. Though he does not actually die at the Crack of Doom, there is a symbolic sacrificial death—“the body sacrificed is that of Frodo’s alter-ego, Gollum” (Crabbe 78). Frodo himself is maimed—the loss of his finger is a symbolic sacrifice—and he is deeply scarred by the long-term effects of the Witch-King’s morgul-wound and of Shelob’s sting, but most of all by the burden of the Ring itself. Though Frodo returns to the Shire, he is unable to enjoy the fruits of his quest, and after he has written his memoirs in the Red Book and has made Sam his heir, he decides to depart from the Grey Havens, together with the other ring bearers: Bilbo, Gandalf, Elrond, and Galadriel:²

“But,” said Sam, and tears started in his eyes, “I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done.”

“So I thought too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. But you are my heir: all that I had and might have had I leave to you. And also you have Rose, and Elanor; and Frodo-lad will come, and Rosie-lass, and Merry, and Goldilocks, and Pippin; and perhaps more that I cannot see. Your hands and your wits will be needed everywhere. You will be the Mayor, of course, as long as you want to be, and the most famous gardener in history; and you will read things out of the Red Book, and keep alive the memory of the age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger, and so love their beloved land all the more. And that will keep you as busy and as happy as anyone can be, as long as your part of the Story goes on.” (Book VI.9; III:376)

Sam, in particular, will enjoy the blessings that are denied to Frodo. If Frodo is the “Sacrificial Hero,” he is also very much the reluctant hero. He is not larger than life or a “superhobbit.” When Gandalf first suggests to him that he leave the Shire and take the Ring with him, Frodo says: “But this would mean exile, a flight from danger into danger, drawing it after me. And I suppose I must go alone, if I am to do that and save the Shire. But I feel very small, and very uprooted, and well—desperate. The Enemy is so strong and terrible” (Book I.2; I:93). He is very relieved when Gandalf counsels him that he take companions with him—including

the eavesdropping Sam. Later at the Council of Elrond, Frodo, even though he had just barely escaped with his life from the morgul-wound of the Chief of the Ringwraiths, “reluctantly” volunteers to take the Ring:

Frodo glanced at all the faces, but they were not turned to him. All the Council sat with downcast eyes, as if deep in thought. A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo’s side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice.

“I will take the Ring,” he said, “though I do not know the way.” (Book II.2; I:354)

Frodo is not only the “reluctant hero,” he also gets very little recognition for all his heroic sacrifices once he returns to the Shire; Sam and Merry and Pippin get much more:

Frodo dropped quietly out of all the doings of the Shire, and Sam was pained to notice how little honour he had in his own country. Few people knew or wanted to know about his deeds and adventures; their admiration and respect were given mostly to Mr. Meriadoc and Mr. Peregrin and (if Sam had known it) to himself. (Book VI.9; III: 371-72)

Frodo’s reward for all his sacrifices was to be allowed to go with the other ringbearers to Eressëa, a kind of Elvish earthly paradise (cf. *Letters* 198), to be healed:

“Alas! there are some wounds that cannot be wholly cured”, said Gandalf (III 268)—not in Middle-earth. Frodo was sent or allowed to pass over Sea to heal him—if that could be done, *before he died*. He would have to eventually “pass away”: no mortal could, or can, abide for ever on earth, or within Time. So he went both to a purgatory and to a reward, for a while: a period of reflection and peace and a gaining of a truer understanding of his position in littleness and greatness, spent still in Time amid the natural beauty of “Arda Unmarred”, the Earth unspoiled by evil. (*Letters* 328)

While all this is only hinted at at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, it is clear that Frodo is departing on the “Night Sea Voyage”—that will lead ultimately to his death—there can be no return: “In this setting the return of Arthur would be impossible, a vain imagining” (*Letters* 199).

ARAGORN

Another initially unrecognized hero in *The Lord of the Rings* is Aragorn, son of Arathorn—a man of many names—also called Strider, Isildur’s heir, Elessar, Elfstone, and Telcontar at various points in the story. Although, like Frodo, he is

a hero who suffers, most of his suffering has been in the past, and his fate is different than Frodo's, for he is revealed to be Isildur's heir and the rightful claimant of the long vacant throne of Gondor. He is the embodiment of Arthur Redivivus, the Archetype of the King-Who>Returns. It takes a long time for this to be revealed to the reader. And indeed this conception of Aragorn only gradually emerged in the course of Tolkien's composition of the story. He started life in the early drafts of Tolkien's story as Trotter, a wooden-clog-wearing hobbit, and only by a series of extraordinary transformations did he become the Aragorn of the final story. This can be clearly seen in *The Return of the Shadow* (HME VI), Christopher Tolkien's edition of the early drafts of Books I and II of *The Lord of the Rings*. When we first meet Strider the Ranger in the finished work in Book I, Chapters 9 and 10, he certainly seems a suspicious character. Like many other unrecognized heroes he has a hard time winning respect and trust from others. When he first introduces himself, the hobbits certainly do not trust him. Sam, in particular, asks suspiciously: "How do we know you are the Strider that Gandalf talks about?" to which Strider replies:

"[. . .] I am afraid my only answer to you, Sam Gamgee, is this. If I had killed the real Strider, I could kill *you*. And I should have killed you already without so much talk. If I was after the Ring I could have it—NOW!"

He stood up, and seemed suddenly to grow taller. In his eyes gleamed a light, keen and commanding. Throwing back his cloak, he laid his hand on the hilt of a sword that had hung concealed by his side. They did not dare to move. Sam sat wide-mouthed staring at him dumbly.

"But I *am* the real Strider, fortunately," he said, looking down at them with his face softened by a sudden smile. "I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn; and if by life or death I can save you, I will." (Book I.10; 1:231-32)

Some, like Paul Kocher, see Aragorn as the true hero of the story (121-51). The trouble with this view, as Kocher himself admits, is that "Aragorn is rather more difficult to know truly than any other important person in the story" (122). Tolkien himself for a long time did not know what to do with Trotter/Strider/Aragorn. In the Introductory Note to *Tree and Leaf* (1964), he states that it was

written in the same period (1938-39), when *The Lord of the Rings* was beginning to unroll itself and to unfold prospects of labour and exploration in yet unknown country as daunting to me as to the hobbits. At about that time we had reached Bree, and I had then no more notion than they had of what had become of Gandalf or who Strider was; and I had begun to despair of surviving to find out. (9)

This picture is largely confirmed by Christopher Tolkien's edition of the drafts of Books I and II in *The Return of the Shadow* (HME VI) and *The Treason of Isengard* (HME VII).

Certainly by Book V, it becomes clear that he is the True-King-in-Waiting. His gift of healing definitely suggests that (especially in Chapter 8, "The Houses of Healing")—it is clearly modelled on the figure of holy English King Edward the Confessor in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (Act 4.3.140-59). This is just one of several plot elements in *The Lord of the Rings* that, as Tom Shippey has argued, are derived from *Macbeth*: the Ents—in particular their attack on Isengard and their part in the Battle of Helm's Deep—are clearly inspired by the "leafy boughs" and "moving grove" of Birnam Wood in Act 5, Scenes 3 to 5 of *Macbeth*; Éowyn's and Merry's battle with the Witch King are inspired by Macduff's battle with Macbeth; and the Witch's prophecy about "no man of woman born" echoes Éowyn's words to the Lord of the Nazgûl (Shippey 163-66). Aragorn's full heroic stature is not completely revealed until he is finally crowned by Gandalf as the King of Gondor after the defeat of Mordo:

But when Aragorn arose all that beheld him gazed in silence, for it seemed to them that he was revealed to them now for the first time. Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him. And then Faramir cried:

"Behold the King!" (Book VI.5; III:298)

Tolkien admitted there were faults in his work. In his long letter to Milton Waldman in 1951, he laments: "I do not feel much can now be done to heal the faults of this large and much-embracing tale" (*Letters* 161). One of the most obvious weaknesses of the tale had to do with Aragorn's love-interests. On first reading it is hardly obvious that Aragorn is in love with and betrothed to Arwen:

Unless the reader is very alert to the few obscure references to Arwen scattered here and there later on, he can easily wake up somewhere in Volume III with a shock of total surprise at Aragorn's approaching marriage to the lady. Not until the beautiful 'Tale of Arwen and Aragorn' in Appendix A [A.I(v); III:416-26] do we fully grasp her influence upon his life and see him whole. (Kocher 123)

But the Tale is clearly modelled on the earlier "Tale of Beren and Lúthien," which exists in at least eight different versions (Shippey 277-79), including one told by

Aragorn himself (Book I.11; I:257-60) and another found in *The Silmarillion* (194-225), and stands apart from the rest of *The Lord of the Rings*, though Tolkien regarded it as “the most important of the Appendices” and a “part of the essential story” (*Letters* 237). Many readers naturally assume that Aragorn will eventually marry or fall in love with the “Valkyrie” shield-maiden Éowyn, despite his initial rejection of her. However, Aragorn is not Siegfried, nor is Éowyn Brunhilde (cf. Shippey 274-80). Although at one point in writing Book III Tolkien did consider having Aragorn marry Éowyn, he later rejected the idea (*HME* VII:427-28).

Aragorn’s heroic stature is most fully revealed in his death, which he foreknows and chooses. In the account in Appendix A.I(v), when it comes time to die, Aragorn tells Arwen:

“Nay, lady, I am the last of the Númenoreans and the latest King of the Elder Days; and to me has been given not only a span thrice that of Men of Middle-earth, but also the grace to go at my will, and give back the gift. Now, therefore, I will sleep.

I speak no comfort to you, for there is no comfort for such pain within the circles of the world.

[. . .]

[. . .] But let us not be overthrown at the final test, who of old renounced the Shadow and the Ring. In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them there is more than memory. Farewell!”

“Estel, Estel!” she cried, and with that even as he took her hand and kissed it, he fell into sleep. Then a great beauty was revealed in him, so that all who after came there looked on him in wonder; for they saw that the grace of his youth, and the valour of his manhood, and the wisdom and majesty of his age were blended together. And long there he lay, an image of the splendour of the Kings of Men in glory undimmed before the breaking of the world. (A.I(v); III:424-25)

Though Tolkien was a devout Catholic all his life, the world of *The Lord of the Rings* is at best a pre-Christian one: Aragorn is a virtuous pagan and all he can offer Arwen is a vague hope in an afterlife (cf. Shippey 182-83, 286-87). However, as an immortal who had, like Lúthien before her, chosen death in order to be with a mortal, Arwen only now fully understands the bitterness of her choice:

“But I say to you, King of the Númenoreans, not till now have I understood the tale of your people and their fall. As wicked fools I scorned them, but I pity them at the last. For if this [i.e. death] is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One [Eru, the Creator God of Middle-earth] to Men, it is bitter to receive.” (A.I(v); III:425)

After Aragorn's death, Arwen refuses to be comforted: "She dies under the 'fading trees' of a Lórien gone 'silent', and the end of her tale is oblivion" (Shippey 182). Like Frodo's departure from Middle-earth on his "purgatorial" voyage from the Grey Havens, the deaths of Aragorn and Arwen frustrate the reader's desire for the closure of the Classic Fairy Tale ending: "There is even a point in the deaths of Aragorn and Arwen being sent off to an Appendix. The Appendices prevent any sense of easy, happy closure, show the whole story fading into memory—and then, like the Third Age, into oblivion" (Shippey 287).

Gandalf

Besides Aragorn, there is one more heroic figure who is too important for the story to pass over in silence, namely Gandalf. Gandalf seems to emerge first in Tolkien's writings in the pages of *The Hobbit* (first published 1937). In that work, he is a largely comic figure, though he does aid Bilbo and the Dwarves on several important occasions. Like the dwarves he seems to have stepped out of the pages of Grimm's Fairy Tales: "Mr Baggins began as a comic tale among conventional and inconsistent fairy-tale dwarves" (*Letters* 26). In fact, Gandalf's name, as with most of the dwarf names in *The Hobbit*, was derived from the name of a dwarf in the Norse *Völuspá* (cf. *Letters* 383). However in *The Lord of the Rings*, he becomes a much more serious and commanding figure who marshals all the forces of good in the fight against Sauron, the Dark Lord. Although he is extremely old, he is not immortal—at least in his bodily form. Indeed, Gandalf the Grey does die, but undergoes a kind of resurrection as Gandalf the White. Although he does come back to life, that does not make his "sacrificial death" fighting the Balrog in the Mines of Moria any the less heroic. He, like Frodo, is something of a Christ figure. When the eight surviving members of the Fellowship of the Ring finally reach Lothlórien, they lament the loss of Gandalf to Galadriel:

"Alas!" said Aragorn. "Gandalf the Grey fell into shadow. He remained in Moria and did not escape."

[. . .]

"Yet our grief is great and our loss cannot be mended," said Frodo. "Gandalf was our guide, and he led us through Moria; and when our escape seemed beyond hope he saved us, and he fell" (Book II.7; I:461).

When Gandalf returns as "The White Rider" and meets Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli in the eaves of Fangorn Forest, he is greatly changed and at first the

three confuse Gandalf with his rival, the wizard Saruman, until at length Legolas recognizes him:

“Mithrandir!” he cried, “Mithrandir!”

“Well met, I say to you again, Legolas!” said the old man.

[. . .]

At last Aragorn stirred. “Gandalf!” he said. “Beyond all hope you return to us in our need! What veil was over my sight? Gandalf!” [. . .]

“Gandalf,” the old man repeated [. . .] “Yes, that was the name. I was Gandalf.”

[. . .] “Yes, you may still call me Gandalf,” he said, and the voice was the voice of their old friend and guide. “Get up, my good Gimli!” [. . .]

[. . .] and the Dwarf looked up and laughed suddenly. “Gandalf!” he said. “But you are all in white!”

“Yes, I am white now,” said Gandalf. “Indeed I *am* Saruman, one might almost say, Saruman as he should have been. [. . .] I have passed through fire and deep water, since we parted. I have forgotten much that I thought I knew, and learned again much that I had forgotten. I can see many things that are far off, but many things that are close at hand I cannot see.” (Book III.5; II:119-120)

As a hero Gandalf is somewhat different than Aragorn and especially Frodo, in that he possesses superhuman powers like the heroes of classical myth and drama. In November 1954, after the publication of Volume I, Tolkien addressed the problem of Gandalf’s exact ontological status in a letter to Robert Murray, S. J., a close personal friend who had read parts of *The Lord of the Rings* in manuscript:

Gandalf really ‘died’, and was changed: for that seems to me the only real cheating, to represent anything that can really be called ‘death’ as making no difference. [. . .] But G. is not, of course, a human being (Man or Hobbit). [. . .] I wd. venture to say that he was an *incarnate* ‘angel’—strictly an ἀγγελοζ [messenger]: that is, with the other Istari, wizards, ‘those who know’, an emissary from the Lords of the West [Valar], sent to Middle-earth. (*Letters* 201-02)

He goes on to explain: “By ‘incarnate’ I mean they were embodied in physical bodies capable of pain, and weariness, and of afflicting the spirit with physical fear, and of being ‘killed’” (202). For Tolkien, the wizards are not perfect and they can make errors of judgement and fail:

Gandalf alone fully passes the tests [. . .] For in his condition it was for him a sacrifice to perish on the Bridge in defence of his companions [. . .] for all he could know at that moment he was the only person who could direct the resistance to Sauron successfully,

and all his mission was vain. He was handing over to the Authority that ordained the Rules, and giving up personal hope of success. (202)

When Gandalf appears again to his three companions, it is almost as an apotheosis or epiphany, and there are striking parallels with the account of the Transfiguration in the Gospels (Matt. 17): the initial manifestation of power and appearance in white, the three companions, and then the return to the ordinary, familiar identity. The difference is that in the Gospels the Transfiguration is an anticipation of Christ's own death and resurrection, whereas Gandalf's own transfiguration looks backward to the change that has already taken place. He hints at this when he tells the three companions about his battle with the Balrog:

"I threw down my enemy, and he fell from the high place and broke the mountain-side where he smote it in his ruin. Then darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell.

"Naked I was sent back—for a brief time, until my task is done. And naked I lay upon the mountain-top. [. . .] I was alone, forgotten, without escape upon the hard horn of the world. There I lay staring upward, while the stars wheeled over, and each day was as long as a life-age of the earth. [. . .] And so at the last Gwaihir the Windlord found me again, and he took me up and bore me away.

[. . .]

"Thus it was that I came to Caras Galadhon and found you but lately gone. I tarried there in the ageless time of that land where days bring healing not decay. Healing I found, and I was clothed in white." (Book III.5; II:129-130)

Tolkien himself comments on this passage: "Naked is alas! unclear. It was meant just literally, 'unclothed like a child' (not disincarnate), and so ready to receive the white robes of the highest. Galadriel's power is not divine, and his healing in Lórien is meant to be no more than physical healing and refreshment" (*Letters* 203). Although Gandalf has "angelic" powers which he occasionally manifests—as, for example, when he rescues Faramir and when he forbids the entrance of the Chief of the Ringwraiths into Minas Tirith—his chief function as a wizard is "to assist the rational creatures of Middle-earth to resist Sauron, a power too great for them unaided" (237). In the case of Gandalf's confrontation with the Lord of the Nazgûl, "so powerful is the whole train of human resistance, that he himself has kindled and organized, that in fact no battle [between the two] occurs: it passes to other human hands" (203).

In *The Lord of the Rings* we are confronted with "a whole hierarchy of heroic possibilities" (Crabbe 75), expressing a variety of different types of masculine (and

to a certain extent feminine) behaviour. This was partly a deliberate strategy on Tolkien's part to "present heroes to an audience trained to reject their very style" (Shippey 191). In this he was only partly successful. Ours is an anti-heroic, irony-ridden age, and Tolkien's attempts to revive the high-mimetic style of heroism in particular, especially at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, have often met with ridicule (Pearce 1-10). However, millions of modern readers every year continue to belie the critics. No other work has done more in the last fifty years to legitimize the whole genre of fantasy literature for modern readers, both male and female. Every culture has a need for male and female heroes; one might even say with Jung that they appeal to something "archetypal" in human nature. It was part of Tolkien's literary genius to give expression to this need for our modern age.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was given at Mythcon XXXII: Many Dimensions: Modern Supernatural Fiction, held at Clark Kerr Campus, Berkeley, California, on 4 August 2001. Since there are many editions of *The Lord of the Rings* available and the readers may not have access to the (three-volume) edition used in this paper, reference is made to both the book and chapter number, and the volume and page numbers (e.g. Book VI.9; III:378). The various volumes of the *History of Middle-earth* are referred to by volume number and pages, e.g. *HME IX*:114-135.

2. According to "Appendix B: The Tale of Years," after the death of Mistress Rose, Sam also later sailed from the Grey Havens: "the tradition is handed down from Elanor that Samwise passed the Towers, and went to the Grey Havens, and passed over the sea, the last of the Ring-bearers" (App.B, S.R. 1482; III:476).

Works Cited

- Caldecott, Stratford. "Over the Chasm of Fire: Christian Heroism in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*." *Tolkien: A Celebration, Collected Writings on a Literary Legacy*. Ed. Joseph Pearce. London: HarperCollins-Fount, 1999. 17-33.
- Crabbe, Katharyn W. *J. R. R. Tolkien. Literature and Life: British Writers*. Rev. ed. New York: Continuum-Unger, 1988.
- Kocher, Paul H. *Master of Middle-earth: The Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien*. New York: Ballantine, 1977.
- Pearce, Joseph. *Tolkien: Man and Myth. A Literary Life*. London: HarperCollins, 1999.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Ed. Nicholas Brooke. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: OUP, 1994.
- Shippey, Tom. *The Road to Middle-earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*. 2nd ed. London: HarperCollins, 1992.

Types of Heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*

- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The History of Middle-earth*. Ed. by Christopher Tolkien. 12 vols. London: HarperCollins, 1991-97. (Vols. 1 and 2: *The Book of Lost Tales*. Vol. 3: *The Lays of Beleriand*. Vol. 4: *The Shaping of Middle-earth*. Vol. 5: *The Lost Road and Other Writings*. Vol. 6: *The Return of the Shadow*. Vol. 7: *The Treason of Isengard*. Volume 8: *The War of the Ring*. Vol. 9: *Sauron Defeated*. Vol. 10: *Morgoth's Ring*. Vol. 11: *The War of the Jewels*. Vol. 12: *The Peoples of Middle-earth*.)
- *The Hobbit or There and Back Again*. London: HarperCollins, 1996.
 - *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. Ed. Humphrey Carpenter, with the Assistance of Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 1995.
 - *The Lord of the Rings*. 3 vols. London: HarperCollins, 1993.
 - *The Silmarillion*. Ed. by Christopher Tolkien. London: Unwin, 1983.
 - *Tree and Leaf; Smith of Wootton Major; The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son*. London: Unwin, 1975.
 - *Unfinished Tales*. Ed. by Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 1998.