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## A Cloud of Witnesses: External Mediation in Frodo's Journey to Rivendell and Beyond

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### A Cloud of Witnesses: External Mediation in Frodo's Journey to Rivendell and Beyond

#### Abstract

Applies Rene Girard's mimetic theory to a study of Frodo's motivations and role models in the early phases of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien's incorporation of extensive background material deepens our understanding of his main characters, most of all his central hero, Frodo. Commonly described as "role-models," external mediators work to pacify relations in a community, and act to endow individuals with meaning, purpose, and direction they otherwise would not have. By the imitation of role-models, Frodo, Sam, Pippin, and Merry become real to Tolkien's readers by comparison and contrast to Bilbo Baggins, Gildor and his high elves, Tom Bombadil and ultimately, the long-lost Eärendil. Tolkien arrived at similar insights to Girard by drawing upon his legacy of classical and Catholic education.

#### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Frodo; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Eärendil; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Bilbo; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Tom Bombadil; Girard, René—Mimetic theory



CLOUD OF WITNESSES:  
EXTERNAL MEDIATION IN FRODO'S  
JOURNEY TO RIVENDELL AND BEYOND

CARL P. OLSON

IN A LETTER TO THE EDITOR MILTON WALODAN, J.R.R. Tolkien wrote of creating a mythology for England; in his words, “a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic to the level of romantic fairy story [...] which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country” (*Letters* 144). Some consider “more or less connected legend” an understatement. Others see it as a great strength, and others, a weakness, of his work. He is accused of “info-dumping,” or what Michael D.C. Drout called “the treatise of tedium,” the practice of halting a story, singly or at intervals, to inform readers, in excruciating detail, about the authors’ imaginary world, in the process bringing the narrative to a halt. Indeed, many readers see Tolkien as the first and most influential offender in this regard, in that he repeatedly interrupts his tale with lengthy asides about places no character visits, natural features in multiple exotic languages, and long-dead heroes of doubtful relevance to the narrative. In answer to this charge of ponderous didacticism, I will assert that Tolkien’s background material serves to illuminate, and to deepen the readers’ bond with, his main characters, using the insights of mimetic theory.

Beginning in the 1990s, Garland Press published a monograph series on theorists of myth, leading with a familiar name, Joseph Campbell. The series’ seventh volume covers René Noël Théophile Girard (1923-2015). He was born in Avignon, France, trained as an *archiviste-paleographe* (a kind of doctoral-level archivist), immigrated to the United States in 1947, enjoyed a career in literary studies, and retired as a philosopher of anthropology at Stanford University (Palaver 4). He published over thirty books, dozens of essays, and many interviews. In 2005, the Académie Française inducted him as an *immortel*. In perhaps the ultimate academic accolade, scholars have formed several associations to study his ideas.

For Girard, the driving force behind human nature is *mimetic desire*. Human imitation has a spontaneous power lacking even in the highest order animals. No creature imitates such complex behavior, so spontaneously, as humans do. Humans innately want to be alive, but do not know what will make them more alive. As with language and culture, human beings learn what to desire by imitating other persons. These personal models “mediate” between

any desired object and ourselves. He boldly asserts that objects have no value until another desires them. This other becomes the mediator of our desire. Beyond organic needs, our desire for an object arises when we see others desire the same object.

The usual first objection is to ask if all desires are truly mimetic. Desire for food would seem, obviously, more innate than imitative. In answer, we might profitably distinguish between needs and desires: humans *need* food and water to survive, but they *desire* a particular cuisine, to imitate someone they wish to become: no one, for example, is born wanting coconut-battered shrimp with a nice chardonnay. In Girard's words, "all desire is a desire for being" (*When These Things* 12).

This can be seen further in other desires, whether the much-celebrated sexual desire, or the oft-maligned material desire. Sexuality stands today as a fundamental human desire, which alone bestows individuality on humans. Yet while we need reproduction or gratification, we desire popular schoolmates, because others desire them. Everything from beverage preferences to heartfelt convictions in politics and religion derive principally from mediators (Golsan 25).

If we are able share any object, mutual desire generates unity and cooperation towards a shared goal. Shared unity, the validation and delight it begets, and desire for the shared goal all reinforce each other, in a positive feedback loop. People will report a "craze" or "energy" or "spirit" that takes hold. This may result in great film, theater or television, regional athletic triumphs, and in extreme cases, building pyramids and cathedrals, winning world wars, and putting flags on the moon.

If, however, we cannot or will not share the object, it creates competitors or competing factions who, no less than colleagues, "will tend to strengthen each of their desires" (Livingston 292-295). This escalation arouses severe distress, halts creativity, and locks competitors into a mimetic spiral. They evolve into rivals, then into enemies. "There is a snowball effect that seems to take on a life of its own; by then, everyone perceives themselves as victims of some mighty contagion. Terror, in fact, ensues" (Harter 45).

By the Greek word *mimesis*, Girard intends to capture two key concepts. First, *mimesis* is the ability to mimic not just raw behavior, but to perceive and imitate intention, or desire, even when it is not explicitly stated. Infants, beginning at 18 months of age, are able to guess the unstated purpose behind a simple task, and to try new strategies to succeed (*Mimesis and Science* 65). Secondly, the English word 'imitation' carries a sense that it is a conscious, volitional act. *Mimesis* conveys that it is spontaneous and 'natural.' If a crowd at a stadium begins singing a popular song, nothing will feel so original and creative to each person as to sing along, doing what the crowd is doing.

To achieve the same *objective*, circumstances force both colleagues and competitors to *do the same things* to obtain it. Since each objective offers a limited range of actions that will actually succeed, colleagues must emulate, and competitors must “copycat,” one another to obtain it. Competition escalates until it overshadows the original desire. The goal fades from view, and the objective becomes to break free of copycatting. The most direct means of doing so is to destroy the copycat (Girard, *Violence* 31).

Copycatting strikes directly at our sense of *distinction* (Girard would say “differential”). The value of difference, or “optimal distinctiveness,” to human identity can hardly be overstated (Brewer 482-284). The relationship of identity to distinction occurs at every level of our awareness. Scientists establish true causes by isolating (that is, distinguishing) a true cause from other possibilities. At an emotional level, the most loving sentiments bestow uniqueness (“You are special, no one is like you,”) and the worst insults denigrate someone’s distinction (“You’re just a typical . . . You ‘X’ are all the same . . .”). Finally, death, of course, is the ultimate loss of distinction. No insult humiliates us like a rival better able to copy us than we could copy them. Copycatting we thus interpret as a threat equivalent to death, to be dealt with by mortal violence (Reysen and Puryear).

Therefore, to understand conflict, it is misleading to ask how the rivals are *different*, but rather how they are *competitors*. Evenly matched rivals (e.g., the most identical) make the most intense rivalries. The worst wars are civil wars. Religions regard heretics as worse than pagans. Ex-friends are the worst foes, and the worst feuds are family feuds. When disasters struck them, ancient and medieval chroniclers invariably brought home the horror of these events to their readers by emphasizing the confusion and social collapse they engendered (Girard, *Scapegoat* 13).

Violence thus mimics the action of an infectious disease. Like disease, violence inflames a human propensity that does much good, when it is in good health. Violence has risk factors: swallowed resentments erupt seemingly from nowhere. It strikes hardest among homogenous populations, where are found the most evenly matched contenders. It has different strains. A debilitating, sullen resentment defeats all progress (churches and small businesses are famous for this). The disease will short-circuit memory, with words like “you were never my friend!” Deadlier strains cause panic, fever, delirium, or death. Moreover, it has a vector: it spreads by mimesis, making it highly contagious among humans. Once it erupts, it must run its course, out to dispersion, social collapse, death, or destruction (Girard, *Violence* 297). This is Girard’s take on disaster legends like Atlantis or the Tower of Babel: mighty cities swallowed by tidal waves of violence.

Girard goes on to analyze language, ritual, religion, culture and civilization as a series of adaptations to contain the disease of violence. One may surmise that human tribes, over many years, tried any number of practices towards this end. For reasons set forth by Charles Darwin, certain cultural practices succeeded more than others did, and allowed humans to live in larger groups, keeping at bay the tendency to chaotic dissolution. This gave an evolutionary advantage to humans who adopted them.

On a very basic level, language endows the world with distinction. Once given names, objects acquire distinction, and distinction equals identity. This is Girard's take on creation myths about primordial darkness, in which the first man creates the world by giving names to everything. On a higher level, human tribes create elaborate taboos, a Polynesian word for hard prohibitions, the breach of which will arouse divine wrath. Taboos act as hygienic measures. Many taboos, for example, have to do with love or sex, a hardy perennial flashpoint for violence (Girard, *Violence* 36). Taboos may even create logical distinctions: this, not that; here; not there; then, not now, which orient each person, and enable the growth of a rational cogitation not otherwise possible.

We thus may summarize Girardian anthropology by saying that an upright bipedal hominid first became vulnerable to a disease of violence, then culture evolved to curtail violence, until culture took over as the driver of human evolution. What we call "humanity" or "human nature" is the product of culture-driven evolution, in a long march to stay ahead of violence.

Beyond all these, an advanced development emerged, which Girard calls "external mediators." Violence erupts from mimesis of those *in our village*, whom we take as mediators, as colleagues, or competitors. External mediation is mimicking someone *outside* the village. "External mediation does not carry the risk of rivalry between subjects, because they belong to different worlds" (Andrade).

External mediators enable us to defer violent impulses, not simply block them. Freud taught the world to call this "inhibition," but inhibition is simply one blind impulse countering another. Deferral involves a conscious choice to suspend the rush to violence (Gans). It provides an escape from rivalry, through role models such as celebrities, aristocrats, elderly relatives, deceased relatives, ancestors, heroes, saints, angels, demi-gods, gods, elder gods, and supreme gods. Mimicking external desires weakens the impulse to copycat nearby desires, and dampens the whirlpool of mimetic desire.

To be effective, external mediators must be two opposite things. First, to be worth studying, models must be close and real. Children model young celebrities, as young celebrities offer to them the best chance of successful imitation. This is the path of least resistance. Humans of any age need a figure who can compete for their attention and regard against people who *are* close and

real. If one young man is a *Star Trek* fan, and his non-fan peers invite him to join them in acts of lawlessness, Captain Kirk may not suffice as a model because he is fictional. If the student should refuse, openly citing Captain Kirk's example, the other students will likely ridicule him, or even make him the target of their violence (Golsan 2-5). A local sports hero, who is real, and is known to all involved, would likely have a stronger deterrent effect on lawless behavior.

Conversely, external mediators must be far distant and far greater. The greater any role models are, the greater the contrast with their merely mortal admirers. By this contrast, the truth of one's identity stands revealed to itself. Self-control is only possible through self-awareness; external mediators raise self-awareness by acting as a frame of reference. All educational systems expend tremendous effort to impart external role models to their students. Society benefits from reduced conflict and individuals gain greater self-knowledge and with it, the development of distinct personalities (Adams 283).

Distant mediators challenge their admirers, in this process, to muster and exert a great deal of creative energy. Consider, for example, a legendary figure such as King Arthur. Daily life has obviously changed since King Arthur's day, so if he is to be a viable external role model, devotees must adapt Arthur's desires to their own lives as they find them. Guinevere, Excalibur or the Holy Grail remain forever out of reach. His admirers must find ways to imitate him in their present context. Such a project can engage King Arthur's admirers over the course of their whole lives. By pursuit of a lifelong imitative model, human identity develops stability, priority, and direction that it otherwise could not.

Relationships to absent persons may thus go far in creating in humans a coherent identity, not just a bundle of impulses fighting for dominance (Reynolds 186). This coherence appears whenever persons resist mimetic desire for reasons invisible to onlookers, or play a game to the end, without quitting or escalating to violence. Witnesses will say that they "have character," to the extent that character means the demonstrated ability to resist the power of mimesis. Darwin would agree that, over the last 40,000 years, proto-humans who do this best might survive and propagate better than persons more easily enveloped in conflict. Social psychologists also read René Girard with great interest.

#### **IMITATIVE DESIRE IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS**

A few scholars have explored Girard's ideas in relation to *Lord of the Rings* [LotR]. Hayden Head uses mimetic theory to illustrate the self-understanding of Tolkien's principle characters. Gandalf refuses the Ring lest he "become like the Dark Lord Himself" (LotR I.2.61) Elrond also refuses the Ring, as "the very desire for the Ring corrupts the heart" (II.2.267). Gandalf and

Elrond are two of the three bearers of the elven rings. They already belong to a very exclusive company, and they fear to take the last step, to a company of one.

Galadriel and Boromir also imitate Sauron's desire for the Ring, with entirely different outcomes. Galadriel passes the test, saying, significantly, "I will diminish, and go into the West, and *remain Galadriel*" (emphasis mine, II.7.366). By this display of character, Tolkien would later write, she achieved forgiveness for her proud revolt against the Valar (*Letters* 407). By contrast, Boromir chases a phantom of what wonders he might accomplish with the Ring, if he had powers to match Sauron. He fatally breaks the fellowship, and only achieves redemption at the cost of his life. Desire for the Ring, in each of these cases, creates mimetic rivalry with Sauron.

Head points out that very little demonstration of the Ring's power appears in the text, beyond some strange gifts, such as far-seeing and invisibility. It could well be the case, he concludes, that the real source of the Ring's power is the mimetic desire it arouses. To explicate further, the ring is the One Ring, with no double. Truly, the Ring, not Sauron, is the title character of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is the "one ring to rule them all." It could not be the Ring of Power if there were more than one. Being unique makes the possessor unique, far seeing, and incomprehensible (therefore invisible). These are the attributes of God. This puts the ring firmly in comparison the apple in the Garden of Eden, from which, the serpent promises, "you will not surely die [...] you will be like God" (*Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, Gen. 3:4-5).

Girardian theory is thus consonant with Kathleen E. Gilligan's study of temptation in Tolkien's work. Becoming God throws the ring-possessor into solitary confinement, deprived any relationship, even with God. Thus deprived, the owner loses any purpose to live, beyond continued ownership of the Ring. All other persons become rivals for the Ring. Gollum has no relationship with anyone, and frequently talks to himself as if he were alone. This is why he has the erratic personality of a spinning top. The Ring makes its owners into God, whereupon it destroys them, by sundering all other relationships.

Marjorie Burns's *Perilous Realms* nowhere directly references Girard, but her work has some striking parallels. She sees Tolkien's characters as *doubles*. One such double pairing is Denethor and Théoden, whose names, laid side by side, almost form a chiasmus, to highlight their respective destinies (Burns 94). Denethor is a terrible old man (*LotR* V.1.759) who dies in madness, while Théoden is an enfeebled old man who dies in glory. They each track the other's destiny, but to the end, each could still turn back.

Similarly, Galadriel is Lady of Light, while Shelob is the monster who vomits darkness, but the Rohirrim pointedly refer to Galadriel as spinner of webs (*LotR* III.6.514), hatching plans from afar. Galadriel's many manipulations carry the risk for her of morphing into Shelob, a creature once fair and bright.



Girard himself uses the term *doubling* for the way rivals become mirrors of one another, as each rival copies the others' most successful strategies (*Violence* 83). Giving in to lust for the Ring is to become Sauron in order to defeat Sauron. Satan cannot cast out Satan.

It is my purpose here to explore how external mediators illuminate the central drama of Book I of *The Fellowship of the Ring*: four hobbits on their way to Rivendell, led on, and slowly transformed, by a succession of external mediators, in the face of dangers and malevolent enemies, against whom they seem outclassed from the start, going simply by their native ability.

For most of the twelve years he shares Bag End with his uncle Bilbo, Frodo Baggins remains indistinct; he has little to say and his neighbors describe him only as "[v]ery much like Mr. Bilbo" (*LotR* I.1.22). His character only unfolds as those he admires become external. After his birthday joke (and a long struggle with Gandalf), Bilbo leaps a low hedge and vanishes, joining a band of dwarves whose names never appear, because the reader has no need to know them. Bilbo simply recapitulates his adventures with Thorin's band in *The Hobbit*. For Frodo, the moonlit leap is a metaphor for Bilbo's death. Bilbo has become external, like a deceased relative or illustrious ancestor. Frodo's first distinctive thought is "he suddenly realized he loved the old hobbit dearly" (I.1.31).

In response, Frodo preserves, by imitation, Bilbo's love of home, his poetry, his ambling walks, his fascination with Elves, and even takes up his rivalry with his avaricious and overbearing cousins, Odo and Lobelia. More ominously, Frodo receives his cousins "fidgeting with something in his pocket," plainly Bilbo's magic ring (I.1.38). At this point, Frodo knows little or nothing of it. It seems almost a side-note to Bilbo's adventures, next to spiders, woodland elves, and the Battle of Five Armies. Yet it was precious to Bilbo. That fact makes it precious to him.

After seventeen years in this twilight existence, Frodo learns from Gandalf the full story of the Ring. In response, "a great desire to follow Bilbo flamed up in his heart" (I.2.62). He resolves his long distress and indecision by embracing Bilbo's solution. He sacrifices Bag End to his odious cousins, abandoning one struggle to take up another. With his friends, he follows Bilbo, verbatim, over the moonlit hedge, at the same age his uncle was when the older hobbit's adventures began. To exhort his friends, Frodo sings "The Road goes ever on and on." Pippin pointedly asks if the song is Bilbo's or "one of your imitations?" (I.3.73). Frodo does not know.

Nearly scuppered by a Black Rider their first day, they are rescued by the timely arrival of Gildor and his band of elves. Unlike the frolicking Edith Nesbit-style elves found early on in *The Hobbit*, Frodo and his friends meet fully realized High Elves, and become like children bantering with college students. Frodo greets them in high Elvish, which Gildor and his friends find adorable.

After a magical evening of songs, feasting, and counsel, the High Elves depart overnight, and by dawn, they have become external to Frodo and his companions. Sam speaks for his friends, saying "It isn't to see Elves now [...]. I don't rightly know what I want: but I have something to do before the end" (I.4.87). Frodo, Sam, and Pippin express no wish to become High Elves, but they have come to adopt elven desires that affect the world far beyond the Shire. Wanting and pursuing, let alone getting, of course, are different things. The companions soon afterward lapse into familiar hobbitry with Farmer Maggot, who advises them to go home and stay home. In the Old Forest, Frodo mimics Farmer Maggot's disdain for lands beyond the Shire, and lands his friends in the clutches of Old Man Willow.

They gain rescue and respite care from Tom Bombadil, who arrives as a sort of super-charged hobbit, singing and cavorting in a blue coat and yellow boots. It is easy to see why he is absent from Peter Jackson's films. His whole episode seems outwardly one more narrative interruption. Tom the bucolic pacifist seems an unlikely mediator for travelers on a perilous quest. Yet his example provides the Hobbits with a strong heroic exemplar, led by his rhyming songs.

One of the earliest inspirations related to Tolkien's legendarium, scholars widely agree, is the *Kalevala*, "The Land of Heroes," the epic poem inspired by Finnish oral tradition and published in the 1830's by Elias Lönnrot. Recent scholarship (Gay 295-304) suggests that Tom Bombadil shares many characteristics with Väinämöinen, the hero of the *Kalevala*. He is ancient beyond human telling, and he wins battles by singing (West 292). The *Kalevala* scans in *trochaic tetrameter*, a pattern widely known as "Kalevala meter," which inspired many English imitators in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*.

Tolkien's attraction to *Kalevala* meter is hinted at in his letters: "I was brought up in the classics, and first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer" (*Letters* 172). Trochaic tetrameter appears often in classical drama and poetry, used in scenes when royalty arrive, or messengers announce dramatic news, or at scenes of turmoil or headlong rush to a climax (Drew-Bear 398-399). Trochees signify action and animation, which are essential characteristics of life.

Tom thus arrives like a nature spirit. Tolkien's 1914 poem "Tinfang Warble" describes an ethereal sprite dancing alone and content beneath a blue star (Garth 75). This faun-like creature may well be the first draft of Tom Bombadil and his blue coat. His arrival, saving the hobbits from Old Man Willow, signals a dramatic turn in the story. Their sojourn with Tom is thus more than an episode of comedic relief. Tolkien wrote that Tom is a pacifist, who has effectively renounced the desire for anything (*Letters* 178-179). In the most dramatic part of his episode, Tom examines the dreadful Ring of Power, which

moves armies all over Middle-earth in the quest to possess it. To their astonishment, the Ring, which Gandalf fears, fails to make Tom invisible. Tom puts it on and takes it off, as if it were costume jewelry.

In Girardian terms, Tom is invulnerable to the Ring because, as Hayden Head demonstrates, Tom Bombadil is unique (146-147). The ultimate distinction offered by the Ring can give Tom nothing he does not already have. Precious objects desired because of their power to inspire envy in others abound in literature, and Frodo hands over the Ring eager to see Tom hunger for it, as if to validate his own desire. He is actually crestfallen that his ring's power has limits. By defeating so easily the "very desire for the Ring," the pacifist Tom foreshadows the soldier Faramir, who strengthens Frodo and Sam (Williams) by his slight of the Ring. Tom's renunciation of desire, and thus all rivalry, is every bit as courageous as any soldier who conquers fear. Respite from the Ring's terrible allure re-energizes the four hobbits. When the hobbits take leave of Goldberry, "it seemed faint-hearted to go jogging [...] when they should be leaping, as lusty as Tom [...] straight towards the Mountains" (*LotR* I.8.136).

Still early in Frodo's adventures, the examples of Bilbo, Gildor and Tom begin to have their effect. At the Barrow-downs, Frodo is still a little hobbit, fearful enough to consider abandoning his friends, thinking Gandalf will forgive him, but by Tom's example, he rallies and maims the Barrow-wight (I.8.141). When the Black Riders return, Strider intervenes with stories of Beren and Lúthien, who prevailed against evils greater than Sauron. His legends also guide by example. At Weathertop, Frodo charges the Nazgûl shouting names of Elven heroes. At the Ford of Bruinen, he defies the Witch-king like Hector on the Trojan plain. Though badly wounded, he saves his life and quest through his outwardly unimpressive attempts at valor (I.12.214).

As Book II begins, Frodo awakens at Rivendell, greatly relieved and contented. He has done his part. He can now exchange stories with Bilbo, as an equal. Soon, an eerie event shakes his satisfaction. Seeing the Ring, Bilbo changes before his eyes into "a little wrinkled creature with a greedy face and bony hands"—a copy of Gollum. In response, Frodo feels "alone and [...] forlorn," as his childhood hero reveals feet of clay (II.1.232-33). Simply put, Tom Bombadil has outclassed Bilbo. Frodo has outgrown his uncle, and must reach beyond him. Yet Bilbo has a final gift for Frodo. He sings of Eärendil's voyage. The song gives Frodo a new star to steer by (II.1.233-236).

At Rivendell, he meets an assembly that bring to life the heroes of legend: Elrond, son of Eärendil, Glóin, hero of Erebor, Aragorn, heir of Isildur, and Arwen, who is "Tinúviel reborn." Yet no one arises who can take, or guard, the Ring. Bilbo is willing, but by Gandalf's counsel, he admits "[The Ring] has grown, and I have not" (II.2.270). Bilbo is right. The Ring has grown because more people know that it has returned. It was bad enough to find the Ring

precious because Gollum desired it. Now the Lord of Mordor, all who support him, and even *many who oppose him* desire it, thus inflaming Bilbo's own desire to possess it for all time. Mimetic desire will overwhelm even the wisest.

In the ensuing silence, Frodo says "I will take the Ring [to Mordor], though I do not know the way." He speaks "as if some other will was using his small voice" (II.2.270). This voice, I suggest, he has formed within himself, from Bilbo, Gildor, Tom, Strider, Beren and Lúthien, and ultimately, Eärendil, who sailed to Valinor to ask for aid against Morgoth, at the cost of never returning home. His fate is to sail the sky over Middle-earth as the Evenstar, with a Silmaril in the prow of his ship. Frodo's last external mediator is Eärendil, who models Frodo's ultimate destiny. This is what gods and heroes have always really done for humanity.

Once the Fellowship is sundered, the central story becomes a war for Frodo's soul between the awful Sauron, the pathetic but deadly Gollum, and the memory of Eärendil, a struggle rendered more poignant by the too-brief reappearance of Sméagol, who appears as "a very old hobbit," until Gollum reawakens by mimesis of Sam's hostility. Frodo, in the end, fails Eärendil at the very lip of Mount Doom. Yet by providence, his quest succeeds at such great personal cost that, like Eärendil, he must sail to the Undying Lands. At the end of all things, he leaves behind his book, as his own kind of Evenstar: to guide, comfort and teach those for whom he endured so much.

Although Tolkien never studied mimetic theory, his insights into absent heroes and their effects upon humans may have come from his own experience. Edwardian education was populated with heroic role models from classical education and medieval revivals. Humphrey Carpenter noted in passing that, as a boy, "the Arthurian legends also excited him" (*Biography* 22). It is worth noting that Edwardian children's editions of King Arthur tales differed from modern publications. They often included other popular fairy tales reset in King Arthur's Camelot. Pointedly, the most frequent fairy tale imports were Tom Thumb and Jack the Giant-Killer. Furthermore, children's editions usually included the tale of Sir Gareth, the kitchen boy, who becomes a knight and joins his heroes at the Round Table. Arthurian tales may thus have inspired the very young John Ronald with stories of humble heroes and great deeds (see Richmond).

Scholars have stated with more confidence that young Lt. Tolkien, though nurtured on Homer, parted company with other schoolboy-officers, and went to the Great War led on by Beowulf and Beorhtnoth, rather than Hector and Achilles. "The Germanic world was chillier and grayer," and thus "Tolkien could picture war only too well" (Garth 43). The outcome for so many, Tolkien included, was less than glorious, but for Tolkien, perhaps, less shattering. Readers get a glimpse of this in the way that Hobbit heroics also have mixed

results. By the often-painful contrast of his Hobbits with elves, demons, wizards, and warriors, Tolkien brings his hobbits to life as the story unfolds. This contrast arouses the readers' sympathy in a superb exercise in "showing, not telling."

Girard's insights into external mediators help us understand how Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin engage us. Tolkien reflects their experience in a mirror made of heroes. His ancient lore and legend, therefore, are no part of a gratuitous info-dump. They reveal Middle-earth as they reveal its main characters. His friend and colleague C.S. Lewis seemed to understand this at once: "Almost the central theme of the book is the contrast between the Hobbits (or 'the Shire') and the appalling destiny to which some of them are called" (Lewis 101). This contrast gives his hobbits depth and definition.

I have suggested some possible inspirations for Tolkien's use of absent heroes, and a final verdict is likely out of reach, yet by the title of this essay, I suggest another. The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews, chapters 11 to 12, recounts a Homer-like catalog of heroes from Abraham and Moses to the likes of Rahab, Samson and Jephthah and concludes, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us [...] run with endurance the race set before us" (Heb. 12.1). It exhorts readers to mimic them all, ending with Jesus of Nazareth, "the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Heb.12.2). Thus, Tolkien's inclusion of so many bygone heroes, I believe, stems from his devotion to perhaps the best-known external mediator. Jesus of Nazareth was a carpenter, whose followers believe him to be divine. The Greek word translated 'carpenter' is *tehton*, a worker in durable material, such as wood, brick or stone (Evans 14), making him a house-builder, not a furniture maker (Steinmair-Pösel 227-229). Jesus of Nazareth serves as an ideal external mediator, close and real as a bricklayer, yet distant and perfect.

A fuller exploration of Tolkien's insights into external mediators, stemming from his Catholic upbringing, might therefore begin with a classic work of religious studies, Jaroslav Pelikan's *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (1985). Chapter by chapter, Pelikan describes how every era since first-century Palestine reimagined Jesus as the highest model of its own ideals. From a rabbi "like the prophets of old," Jesus became a neo-platonic mystic, a heavenly Caesar, a Dark Age warrior against the devil, a troubadour of souls, a divine architect of nature, a romantic artist, a revolutionary, and the founder of multicultural goodwill. It may be worthwhile to explore Tolkien's characters in relation to past cultural visions of Jesus, particularly from the age of Beowulf's poet, as well as from the Edwardian age of Tolkien's boyhood.

My purpose here has been to explore the purpose of Tolkien's inclusion of so much background material to set the stage of his heroic story. Ultimately, I suggest, Middle-earth itself is the hobbits' external mediator, and thus brings the hobbits to life. C.S. Lewis perceived this when he wrote:

[I]n the Tolkienian world, you can hardly put your foot down anywhere from Esgaroth to Forlindon, or between Ered Mithrin and Khand, without stirring the dust of history. Our own world, except at rare moments, hardly seems so heavy with its past. This is one element of the anguish which the characters bear. But with the anguish comes also a strange exaltation. They are at once stricken and upheld by the memory of vanished civilizations and lost splendour. (102-103)

Closeness and greatness, the twofold character of external mediators, begets both anguish and exaltation. When Aragorn regales Frodo with the lore of the Argonath and Tol Brandir (II.9.393), Frodo ponders what he hears, in quiet anguish and exaltation, and learns what is at stake in his quest: the survival of this cherished lore, for it will all perish if Sauron prevails. Hobbits, said Tolkien, "are rustic English people, made small in stature, because it reflects [...] the small reach of their imagination—not the small reach of their courage or latent power" (Tolkien, "BBC Interview," emphasis added). External mediators play an underestimated part in providing humans with latent power.

Tolkien sees his characters as small fish in a sea of people and places, past and present. Similarly, Girard sees our modern cult of autonomy and individualism as something of an illusion: "There exists in every individual a tendency to think of himself as no only different from others but as extremely different, because every culture entertains this feeling of difference among the individuals who compose it" (*Scapegoat* 21).

A cynical paraphrase may be "way down deep, we're all shallow." Yet if so, we are shallow as a rain forest is shallow. Humanity is the forest growing from a thin film of organic nutrients, thanks to an abundance of sunlight and rainfall. This forest is bewildering, complex and horrifying. Everything is beautiful, and nothing gets out alive. Girard and Tolkien both hint that by myth and story, humans can, like Bilbo in Mirkwood, climb the canopy, breathe clear air, and glimpse the sky and distant mountains.

In Girard's words, "Human beings could no more change their desires than cows their appetite for grass. Without mimetic desire there would be neither freedom nor humanity. Mimetic desire is intrinsically good. [...] If desire were not mimetic, we would not be open to what is human or what is divine" (*I See Satan* 15-16). Redekop and Ryba ("Introduction," 18) offer an elegant paraphrase: "At the core of our humanity, we are relational creatures, with meaning, fulfillment, awareness and consciousness flowing from relationships."

In other words, desire goes farther to establish our identity than rational thought. Indeed, rational thought is only possible on a platform of identity, and identity derives from external mediators of our desire. In a word, it comes from our heroes. As we read Tolkien, we see the hobbits transformed

by absent heroes and ancient landscapes, and we see how their struggles to equal their heroes match our own.

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