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## Saruman as 'Sophist' or Sophist Foil? Tolkien's Wizards and the Ethics of Persuasion

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### Abstract

Persuasive speaking is an important part of J.R.R. Tolkien's fiction, and the wizards Gandalf and Saruman are often the most skilled orators and speakers in the Middle-earth stories. Literary critics and Tolkien scholars (including the author in his prior publications) have spent much time discussing how the oratory of the wizards helps to advance the narrative action within the stories as well as add depth to the wizards themselves and the other characters. Many critics describe the speech of Saruman as 'sophistry,' but does the white wizard really personify the rhetoric of the historical Sophists? The author explores this question, and he also discusses how both Gandalf and Saruman embody not only the Sophist and Classical views of speech and oratory, but how the two wizards embody the underlying philosophies of these two systems of thought.

### Cover Page Footnote

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SARUMAN AS 'SOPHIST' OR SOPHIST FOIL?  
TOLKIEN'S WIZARDS AND THE  
ETHICS OF PERSUASION

CHAD CHISHOLM

ORATORY AND RHETORIC IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S FICTION play a critical part in the world he creates: they advance the narratives within his novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as well as distinguish the characters according to their individual cleverness, leadership abilities, and historical sense of myth and transcendent goodness. However, rhetoric also reveals crucial details about the philosophies, ethics, and passions of the many inhabitants of Middle-earth that perhaps were not apparent before. The wizards Gandalf and Saruman, both of whom seem the most skilled and studied rhetors in Tolkien's fiction, not only represent elements of the Sophist and Classical views of rhetoric, but also embody the philosophies and values (as well as the flaws) of those systems.

As Jay Ruud points out in his own work on wizardly rhetoric, Tolkien "was familiar with classical rhetoric and dialectic through both formal and informal study" (141n1) as he read classic texts as part of his "Honor Moderations" study at Exeter College, which included the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, and Cicero. Ruud also reminds us that Tolkien would have been exposed to forms of classical rhetoric and dialectic before entering the university because of his membership in the Debating Society at the King Edward School in Birmingham. Therefore, Tolkien would have been familiar with the classical system of rhetoric developed by Aristotle and its Roman amplification by Cicero and Quintilian.

Once he completed his first Oxford University exam, Tolkien changed his academic study to medieval philology where he continued to focus his energies and interests for the remainder of his life (Ruud 141n1). There is also scant evidence that Tolkien showed much preoccupation with classical rhetoric studies, particularly at the time he was writing his Middle-earth stories. Nevertheless, Tolkien the medievalist had to deal with classical rhetoric in his professional studies since so many medieval texts draw on a simplified view of Aristotle's system of rhetoric. Furthermore, the study of rhetoric is highly relevant here because throughout much of Tolkien's fiction, the lines of a constant battle are fought not only with weapons and magic arts, but more often with opposing rhetorics and their philosophical implications. These are the

forces in play within Tolkien's world. To understand them better, we should turn to *The Silmarillion* within which the values of Middle-earth are infused.

While only Tolkien's most avid fans venture to read his prequel, *The Silmarillion* helps us understand Tolkien's stories for children and adults since it illustrates that from the beginning of Middle-earth the narrative contains a *logos* (a love of life and adherence to truth) that has an aprioristic existence from this beginning. This means that Tolkien made a conscious choice to firmly establish the truths of his world before creating its characteristics or values, and the creation of *The Silmarillion* (which Tolkien worked on at intervals for 57 years and never published in his lifetime) is his rhetorical argument for all of his Middle-earth stories. What is interesting is that the *logos* Tolkien builds seems to come to life and act as what Wayne C. Booth calls the "implied author" of the novel, since it not only serves as a guide and a companion for the readers, but it comes to personify the very values necessary for readers to understand and interpret the story (Booth 70-76).

With this *logos* firmly in place, Tolkien establishes an *ethos* (character) within Middle-earth, starting in the opening pages with Melkor who ends the harmonious fellowship of the Music of the Ainur with his wandering "alone into the void places seeking the Imperishable Flame": we see the character of Middle-earth clearly when its values are violated once we see that "desire grew hot" within Melkor "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." However, this is dangerous because "being alone, [Melkor] had begun to conceive thoughts of his own unlike those of his brethren" (S I.16), and as such he begins to violate the natural laws of Middle-earth because Tolkien is creating a rhetorical argument that holds through all of his fiction, using his words and his textual characters as tropes for his worldview, and the *logos* of that worldview is this: that both a love and life of adherence to *truth* is more important than the pursuit of self-interest, empowerment, or even expediency.

While Tolkien's *Silmarillion* might not be as popular as the *Lord of the Rings*, it is important in helping us understand his more popular stories. In the world that Tolkien constructs, it is the unabated pursuit of these aforementioned desires that eventually leads to the most ravenous evils. Both the means that Tolkien uses to do this and his argument bear scrutiny when they are applied to the conventions of Sophistic and (mainly) Classical Rhetoric.

In a previous paper, I discussed Gandalf's use of Classical Rhetoric in *The Hobbit*. Whether he is dealing with the three trolls who want to eat the dwarves alive, or attempting to enlist Beorn as a possible ally, Gandalf is often Aristotelian in his approach: the wizard draws on his knowledge of his audience and their histories, as well as their strengths and foibles, in order to move them into a favorable mindset that is more open to persuasion. Gandalf's plans are so

clever and persuasive that he keeps Tom, Burt, and William arguing until the dawn comes and the three trolls are turned to stone. Rather than annoying Beorn, Gandalf's account of the adventures of the dwarves, accompanied by his equivocal arithmetic, amuses the sometimes ill-tempered shapeshifting bear-man, who then provides aid to the company.

However, as I pointed out in that previous paper, Gandalf's actions create an ethical problem since he misleads Beorn about the numbers of Thorin's company, and he deceives the trolls so that they will fight each other until morning. On the surface, Gandalf seems to be in violation of the basic tenets of Classical Rhetoric, which contend that the speaker should always be honest. Of course, the problem is easily solved with the special backdoor that Quintilian provides for those like Gandalf:

[T]he rhetor must be honest with himself, and therefore manipulation or even lying can be acceptable if done for justifiable reasons, such as when Gandalf wants to save his companions from being roasted, or likewise when they are cold, wet, and hungry, to get them food to eat and a bed for the night. Therefore, while Gandalf here might not be truthful, he is adhering to what many Classical Rhetors often refer to simply as 'the good,' which is what is best for the greater number of people. ("The Wizard and the Rhetor" 36)

In other words, Gandalf misrepresents the truth because he wishes to adhere to the *logos* of Middle-earth that was put forth in the *Silmarillion*. For Gandalf to remain honest and true to his convictions, he must deceive his audience for the sake of his companions. Otherwise, the wizard will fail to uphold his values and adhere to the most "honorable motive" within him:

Gandalf the Grey abides by the rules of the Classical Rhetor that acknowledges, what Plato argues in the *Phaedrus*, that "there never is nor ever will be a real art of speaking which is divorced from the truth" [...]. Therefore, Gandalf is only a rhetor second, after he is first a philosopher. As Plato makes a distinction between teaching the truth to others and being persuasive, he argues that those who seek the truth must learn philosophy before rhetoric, and that rhetoric must be employed in the service of philosophy so that souls of persons might be led to truth. ("Wizard" 36)

For Gandalf, rhetoric is only a tool so that he can be the philosophic hero of Tolkien's world. This is in stark contrast to Saruman who becomes the archetypical Platonic representation of the Sophist Rhetor who places persuasion above all else, even truth. Furthermore, while Gandalf in *The Hobbit*

operates under an *ethos* of possibility, Saruman often uses his rhetoric to create a mindset (or mood) of impossibility. This is most obvious when Saruman evokes either a certain or impending doom to his audience.

*The Lord of the Rings* is like *The Hobbit* in that rhetoric continues to reveal details about the philosophies, ethics, and passions of the characters. The *logos* of Tolkien's story, that faithfulness to truth means more than contemporary values such as self-fulfillment or ease of life, remains the rhetorical argument that shapes Middle-earth. However, as his seemingly 'long rehearsed' speech to Gandalf illustrates, Saruman gets around these values (without challenging them too directly) by appealing to the situational impossibility that he and Gandalf face in opposing Sauron's rising in the East:

The Elder Days are gone. The Middle Days are passing. The Younger Days are beginning. The time of the Elves is over [...]. A new Power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all. There is no hope left in Elves or dying Númenor. This then is one choice before you [...]. We may join with that Power. It would be wise [...]. There is hope that way. Its victory is at hand [...]. (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] II.2.259)

As Saruman concedes to Gandalf, acceptance of such inevitability means many scruples such as "deploring maybe evils done by the way" and they will have to "keep our thoughts in our hearts" for the sake of alliance. However, Saruman confidently argues that he and Gandalf can "come to at last to direct" Sauron's "courses" and even control him by "approving the high and ultimate purpose" that they share with the dark power, which is a desire for "Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things that we have striven in vain to accomplish, hindered [...] by our weak or idle friends" (II.2.259). What makes Saruman's appeal here to a "high and ultimate purpose" most alluring is his previous attempt to make Gandalf despair over the futility of fighting for what is eternally right. Using his rhetoric of impossibility, Saruman hopes to move Gandalf into a state of hopelessness so that Saruman can again elevate Gandalf to a state of hope with his alternative vision.

Gandalf, however, rejects Saruman because Gandalf embodies the truth that governs Tolkien's world. When faced with the rhetoric of impossibility, each character in Middle-earth must make a similar choice: those who adhere to the values of Tolkien's world must confront and overcome this despair that comes from similar acts of persuasion.

Again, Gandalf and Saruman engage in rhetoric more than the other characters of Middle-earth, and they both enact and embody the values and flaws of the Sophist and Classical views of rhetoric. Gandalf often uses a more dialectic form of rhetoric where the orator must have more elasticity in order to

persuade since the audience can respond in some sort of give-and-take structure. Saruman uses a more oratorical rhetoric where the audience cannot (and does not expect to) respond to the rhetor.

While Saruman's shadow looms throughout *The Lord of the Rings* from the time of the Council of Elrond, the first unfiltered view of the white wizard is much later at the Tower of Orthanc after he is defeated by Treebeard and the Ents. King Théoden, Éomer, Gimli, Legolas, Merry, and Pippin ride to the tower to see if Gandalf can convince Saruman to repent for his misdeeds and reconcile himself to those he has misled with lies and distortions. However, once he appears in the Tower, Saruman neither acts nor speaks as a vanquished enemy who is cornered. Saruman, who began a war of aggression against Théoden and his kingdom of Rohan, seems incredulous of his situation because he immediately endeavors to use Gandalf's gesture to try and turn the different members of the envoy against each other.

First Saruman attempts to reach out to Théoden, asking "first to speak with the King of Rohan, my neighbor, and once my friend." Saruman reminds the old lord how beneficial an alliance between them would be. He praises Théoden as "worthy son of Thengel the Thrice-renowned" and the "mightiest king of western lands" and laments "the unwise and evil counsels that beset" him, but Saruman maintains that "Despite the injuries that have been done to me, in which the men of Rohan, alas! have had some part, still I would save you, and deliver you from the ruin that draws nigh inevitably, if you ride upon this road you have taken" (*LotR* III.10.579). Twice Saruman is interrupted, once by Gimli the dwarf and a second time by Éomer, Théoden's nephew, both of whom remind the taciturn Théoden of the contrast between Saruman's current words and his recent deeds. Saruman responds sharply at first with scathing insults, but then softens his tone and reminds both Gimli and Éomer that for reasons of distant citizenry and inexperience, they should "Meddle not in policies which [they] do not understand" (580).

Finally, Saruman also answers the charges against him and offers Théoden a rationale for the recent war between Isengard and Rohan:

[A]m I to be called a murderer, because valiant men have fallen in battle? If you go to war, needlessly, for I did not desire it, then men will be slain. But if I am a murderer on that account, then all the House of Eorl is stained with murder; for they have fought many wars, and assailed many who defied them. Yet with some they have afterwards made peace, none the worse for being politic. I say, Théoden King: shall we have peace and friendship, you and I? It is ours to command. (III.10.580)

Here Saruman uses the rhetoric of impossibility not to create a picture of an impossible battle or inevitability, but of a different impossibility: that no act can

have value, no deed can be heroic, knowledge of the past (even if personally experienced) is questionable, and there is an ineluctable equivalence between the just and the unjust. Saruman's goal is to increase his own stature in Théoden's eyes by diminishing Théoden's own sense of moral rightness, and Saruman does this by blurring the line between justice and injustice, appealing to pragmatism, and distorting Théoden's own knowledge of the past and of virtue. Once accomplished, Saruman believes that he can persuade Théoden as he once did.

In the end, Saruman is unsuccessful with Théoden, though for a moment he seems to be able to sway some in the assembly, including Théoden perhaps, though it is unclear whether his reticence during Saruman's speech is due to "anger or doubt." Incredibly, Saruman is most successful with some of the Riders of Rohan who have just fought a costly battle with the wizard's forces at Helm's Deep: they "were silent, as men spell-bound" and the image of Saruman in their minds was beginning to morph from a nefarious enemy to a savior who "stood beside a door of escape, holding it half open so that a ray of light came through" (III.10.579). Gandalf warns the others that "Saruman has powers you do not guess"; Ruud maintains that "it is Saruman's rhetoric, rather than any magical powers, that makes him so dangerous," and Ruud uses Tolkien's 1958 letter to Forrest J. Ackerman to amplify his claim: "Saruman's voice was not hypnotic but persuasive. Those who listened to him were not in danger of falling into a trance, but of agreeing with his arguments, while fully awake. [...] Saruman corrupted the reasoning powers" (qtd. in Ruud 143). Indeed, Saruman's main strength seems to be his ability to use language not simply to *communicate* knowledge and ideas, but also to *construct and reconstruct his audience's* understanding of reality. Thus he exemplifies the meaning of his name: a "man of skill." Unlike Gandalf, who remains an objective observer of his audience and acts very much like a diagnostician, Saruman sees his audience as vastly malleable and particularly vulnerable to emotional appeals. Hence Gandalf's warning to "Beware of his voice!" (III.10.577).

Saruman rejects the Aristotelian rhetoric that Gandalf uses for the powers of the Sophists, particularly that of Gorgias who was a person of fierce criticism in the dialogues of Plato, Aristotle's teacher. In *Gorgias's Encomium of Helen*, the Spartan queen is a defendant in a lawsuit and Gorgias positions himself as her defense attorney. Gorgias begins his defense by claiming that Helen of Troy cannot be culpable for starting the Trojan War for three reasons. First, Gorgias asserts that Helen absconded with Paris because it was the will of the Olympian gods, and therefore Helen is innocent since mortals cannot elude fate (e.g., Oedipus). Second, Gorgias suggests that Paris might have forced Helen to go to Troy against her will (which is what happens in an Egyptian



version of the tale, told by Stesichorus, around 600 BC), in which case Helen could not be held responsible for the War.

However, in his third argument, Gorgias claims that "if it was speech" rather than divine fate or human coercion "which persuaded [Helen] and deceived her heart," then we should also consider this in our judgment (45). In other words, Gorgias claims that Paris might have been able to use rhetoric in his courtship of Helen so seductive that it was capable of vetoing her own will to stay in Sparta and be the goodwife of Menelaus. Indeed, Helen would have seen the impossibility, the sheer futility, of doing otherwise. Gorgias further asserts, "The effect of speech upon the condition of the soul is comparable to the power of drugs over the nature of bodies" (46). In the hands of such a skilled rhetor, Helen would have been helpless.

Essentially, all of Gorgias' defenses of Helen hinge on an impossibility created by rhetoric: language and rhetoric, as Gorgias describes them, are more of a magic art rather than the rational system for persuasion preferred by Aristotle. To make his point, Gorgias draws a parallel between rhetoric and its persuasive influence over an audience with the sway of dramatic poetry on its listeners: "Sacred incantations sung with words are bearers of pleasure and banishers of pain, for, merging with opinion in the soul, the power of incantation is wont to beguile it and persuade it and alter it by witchcraft" (45). The power of rhetoric and oratory, as Gorgias describes it, seems secondary to no other art and no one seems safe from its manipulative strength.

While Saruman is a wizard who can sometimes use magic, it is important to remember that magic for Tolkien is not always a superseding force because it often cannot surmount other things such as the personal *ethos* of the character, moral choice, elasticity of mind and action, and finally, the constantly reoccurring theme of grace that permeates Tolkien's world. This is what Tolkien intended with his *Istari* wizards when he created them for his fiction, as he indicated in a 1954 letter draft to his close friend, Father Robert Murray: the purpose was precisely to limit and hinder their exhibition of 'power' on the physical plane, and so that they should do what they were primarily sent for: train, advise, instruct, arouse the hearts and minds of those threatened by Sauron to a resistance with their own strengths; and not just to do the job for them (*Letters* #156, 202).

Nevertheless, Saruman would not need to be the mightiest magician because the power of rhetoric, as Gorgias asserts, springs not from preternatural powers but from a natural human concupiscence or, as Gorgias puts it, the "opinion in the soul" that is inclined to merge with the influence of oratory:

All who have and do persuade people of things do so by molding a false argument. For if all men on all subjects had [both] memory of things past and [awareness] of things present and foreknowledge of the future, speech would not be similarly similar, since as things are now it is not

easy for them to recall the past nor to consider the present nor to predict the future. So that on most subjects most men take opinion as counselor to their soul, but since opinion is slippery and insecure it casts those employing it into slippery and insecure successes (45).

Since such is the state of all people, this bewitching knowledge that leads (or manipulates) them can be instructed to others: hence, the need to employ a Sophist to teach the aspiring men of Athens rhetoric and oratory because, after all, Gorgias seems to be using the *Encomium* as an opportunity for advertising his skills.

As Ruud points out, Saruman's speeches and his grounds for supporting his claims are astounding when viewed within the system of Classical Rhetoric. For example, Saruman tries to use his credentials ("all the aid that my knowledge [...] can bring") to sway Théoden to join him, but, as Ruud claims, it "is difficult for Saruman to claim any moral authority when he has used those long years of knowledge to forge new tools of warfare, and when he has himself inflicted the injuries that need repairing" (Ruud 145). However, Saruman here is not merely committing a fallacy of traditional systems of rhetoric, nor does Saruman merely disagree with his audience's interpretations of events, but, like Gorgias, he calls into question their very notion of reality. For instance, when he finally addresses Gandalf, Saruman disputes his former colleague's version of what happened the last time Gandalf visited Orthanc: that Saruman had held him prisoner for the One Ring and, before his escape, was planning to send Gandalf to Mordor. Instead, Saruman admits that "in my eagerness to persuade you, I lost patience. And indeed I regret it. For I bore you no ill-will," but that all the time Saruman contends that he was really attempting "to advise you for your own good," and that since he and Gandalf are "both members of a high and ancient order" that they should "redress the past" for the good of Middle-earth (III.10.581).

However, both Gandalf and Théoden reject Saruman's offers of help and his interpretations of the past. True to Aristotle and Plato, both characters point out in their refutations that they reject any notion that all knowledge can ever be is probable, which is one of the original tenets of the Sophists, and instead Gandalf and Théoden refer to truths of motive and intent, which, in their Aristotelian view, can be distinguished from and transcend Saruman's attempts to persuade them to reconstruct a fake past with his words and propositions. Théoden declares Saruman to be "a liar [...] and a corrupter of men's hearts" and that even if his war on Rohan was justifiable (which Théoden still denies) the actions of Saruman's henchmen and orcs in Westfold where children were murdered or at Helm's Deep where "they hewed Háma's body before the gates of the Hornburg, after he was dead" (III.10.580) could never be considered

justifiable actions. Therefore, Saruman cannot claim that his past acts were honorable or justifiable. Gandalf in turn replies that he possesses "a clearer memory of [Saruman's] arguments, and deeds" and then proceeds to remind the beleaguered wizard of his true situation: "Your servants are destroyed and scattered; your neighbors you have made your enemies; and you have cheated your new master, or tried to do so. When his eye turns hither, it will be the red eye of wrath" (III.10.582-3).

Aside from his probable view of truth, many of Saruman's rhetorical errors can be measured not only from the conventions of Aristotelian and Classical rhetoric, but also from the Sophist standpoint as well. Ruud often calls Saruman's rhetorical tactics "sophistry," the origins of this term obviously linked to the perception of Sophist philosophy that comes mainly from Plato. While he seems to have held a similar view, rhetorical scholars since Tolkien have attempted to reconstruct the beliefs of the Sophists. This has not been easy since most Sophistic writings have disappeared and many surviving accounts of them (e.g. Plato's dialogues) are hostile. However, scholars such as Jacqueline de Romilly, Everett Lee Hunt, and Robert Wardy have tried to restructure the original Sophist epistemology, and have rehabilitated some of the Sophist's reputation on issues such as rhetorical affect, social virtue, and cultural tolerance; if this new critical narrative on Sophistic rhetoric and philosophy is viable, then Saruman has failed to learn his lessons as a Sophist.

First of all, Saruman has made the mistake that, if Plato's accounts can be trusted in the *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*, the students of the Sophist might have made when practicing the arts of their teachers, which is learning oratory for the purpose of using rhetorical appeals to control an audience unilaterally. In other words, Saruman takes it for granted that if he exerts his powers for oratory and persuasion, then he needs only a minimal amount of willingness from his audience. Indeed, though Saruman seems to misplace the credit for his rhetorical successes (temporary or not), he is mostly persuasive because—as with the war-weary Riders of Rohan who, for a fleeting moment, dream of peace at any price—he can anticipate some of their innermost wants and desires. However, as obvious as Saruman's oratorical skills are, his reliance on his own persuasive powers and not on the audience's mood or disposition blinds him to both the exigencies and constraints he faces when setting out to persuade Gandalf and Théoden.

Whereas Protagoras developed a technique for using *dissoi logoi* (opposing arguments) so that a rhetor might strengthen his own position, or Gorgias illustrated the role that language had in generating an audience's beliefs as opposed to merely informing them dispassionately, Saruman pushes some of the ideas of the Sophists to their logical extreme, and thus becomes not another Gorgias but a Callicles—Gorgias's volatile student in Plato's *Gorgias*—who at

one moment tells Socrates that “natural fairness [...] is this—that he who would live rightly should let his desires be as strong as possible and not chasten them, and should be able to minister to them when they are at their height” (115). While this is not what Gorgias has been teaching, Plato has his Gorgias persona admit to Socrates that “by virtue of this power [rhetoric] you will have the doctor as your slave, and the trainer as your slave; your money-getter will turn out to be making money not for himself, but for another—in fact for you” (91).

Saruman seems to fit the exact role of a Platonic Sophist, someone who sees rhetoric as the means to power and is willing to deny or forsake truth in order to acquire it. Indeed, Saruman diminishes so much so that he no longer resembles a historical Sophist, but a Platonic Sophist: similar to those archetypes that Plato ridicules in his dialogues, the former white wizard has devolved so much that, as Gandalf’s repartee implies, Saruman truly missed his calling in life, which was to be a coxcombed fool.

While it is impossible to know for certain if Gorgias’s performance in *Encomium* is meant as entertainment or promotion (or perhaps both), clearly those persons who desired to hold power over others through language—like a Saruman who desires more than white but “many colors”—would have found Gorgias’s underlying assertion useful, which is that absolute knowledge is impossible to attain and so rhetors must concern themselves only with probable knowledge, and this can only be done through language. However, Robert Wardy argues in his *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato and Their Successors* (1996), that the performative nature of what Gorgias does in his *Encomium* presupposes a cooperation between the entertaining speaker and his listeners: the audience is lured into Gorgias’s equivocations and florid declamations only because they wished to be lured for some purpose such as amusement or wish fulfillment (Wardy 33). Indeed, as with the Riders of Rohan, Saruman is able to offer them some sort of satisfaction for their desires for peace and security, or at the very least Saruman seems to offer them a strong, momentary release from their emotional anxieties. However, in this case the effect of his appeal is fleeting because Saruman has an audience in no mood to be humored, especially by him, which therefore renders Gorgias’s strategies in the *Encomium* useless for Saruman.

Furthermore, when Saruman’s rhetorical strategies fail, the diminished wizard seems not only frustrated with his audience, but oratorically jammed and unable to adapt his language or conventions to address their beliefs. In his influential theories on the philosophy of language, Donald Davidson describes two concepts that help to govern the interpretations of both speaker and listener, which he calls “prior” and “passing” theory. Prior theory “expresses how [the listener] is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while passing theory is how he [actually] *does* interpret the utterance,” and for the

speaker, the prior theory "is what he *believes*" his audience's "prior theory to be, while his passing theory" is the convention "he *intends* [for] the interpreter to use" (Davidson 442). Davidson believes that at some point the passing theories of both the speaker and the listener must become more alike while communication is taking place, or otherwise understanding and agreement is impossible. What is required at Orthanc is for Saruman to modify his passing theory, since there is a chasm between his prior theory and the one held by Gandalf, Théoden, and the others. However, this Saruman cannot do, calling his listeners "fools" and "cut-throats," and ordering them to "go away" and "come back when [they] are sober" (III.10.583). Saruman fails to use a passing theory in his communication with the others, and his inability to evolve his prior theory is one of the factors that results in his failure to persuade.

Finally, Saruman cannot do as Isocrates insists and fall back on his reputation as a speaker, which Isocrates felt was important if a rhetor wanted to be persuasive: that is, for the speaker to live a good, moral life and draw on this *ethos* to win support from the audience. The character of the speaker (or if not his *ethos*, his ability to use his personality to move the audience) is, for the Sophists, crucial for persuasion, and Saruman's reputation is ruined before both his friends and enemies, which is why his offer to use his wisdom to aid Théoden falls flat and even reminds Saruman's audience how he has recently put his knowledge to use at Helm's Deep. Indeed, Gandalf laughs at Saruman's appeals, saying, "you missed your path in life. You should have been the king's jester and earned your bread, and stripes too, by mimicking his counsellors" (III.10.582). Indeed, Saruman's ability to unwittingly amuse Gandalf is probably the closest the fallen wizard comes to embodying the true, historical Gorgias.

Saruman's use of rhetoric in an attempt to alter perceptions of reality underlies the crucial part that all decisions play in Tolkien's world. In the end, while *ethos* is illustrated in actions such as Frodo's mercy towards Gollum, or his refusal to murder him after he has been captured, what is most paramount is the choice that each of these characters must make: to embrace and follow the *logos* of Middle-earth, or labor against it for some other perceived good. In an earlier paper "Winston and Frodo: Demons, Choice, and Grace in *The Lord of the Rings*" (2007), I spent much time discussing the role choice plays in Tolkien's fiction:

The themes of diabolical and grace transcend Frodo, Gollum, and all peoples of Middle-earth and the *choices* they make. The characters of Middle-earth cannot evade choice. When Éomer asks the trio of Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli, "What doom do you bring out of the North," Aragorn answers with, "The doom of choice." The enemies of Middle-earth thrive on this ineluctability. Saruman tries to persuade Gandalf to

join him with, "I said *we*, for *we* it may be, if you will join with me" and "This then is one choice before you, before us." (Chisholm, "Winston" 21)

Gandalf and Saruman are quite similar, and one possible reason for this, according to Frank P. Riga, is that the two wizards are based on the different sides of Merlin that are depicted from a long, sprawling, and often conflicting tradition of Arthurian literature: Saruman is the darker side of the Merlin narrative, while Gandalf is visionary, courageous, and moral. When it comes to oratory, Gandalf and Saruman, throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, perform opposing rhetorical roles: each tries to persuade the other characters who face a choice to choose a different path, which is for Saruman the path of expediency, pragmatism, and power.

In a Platonic sense, Gandalf is the rhetorical hero of Middle-earth because he knows what is true, and he cannot bear its corruption by Saruman. Gandalf uses his rhetoric, dialectical or oratorical, to lead others to that truth, which matters most whether or not it is profitable, or whether it leads to defeat or victory. In the rhetoric that Gandalf uses throughout Tolkien's fiction, he urges the other characters not merely to learn the values of Middle-earth, but to discover and remember the absolute truths and forms of their shared world, and thus find peace and certainty at the center of their souls; this, from a Platonic point of view, is what all persons yearn for beyond security or material comforts. While most readers (and certainly the Peter Jackson film fans) might mostly remember the battles or external conflicts which are the stage for Tolkien's fiction, the "doom of choice" that these characters face is paramount, more so perhaps than any victory or escape, and the weight of these choices often seems stronger than any other burden.

The doom of choice faced by the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* is why a small number of wizards walk among the vast population of Middle-earth. It is why their words are more important than their magic. It is why rhetors are of the essence in Tolkien's fantasy world, and the wizards are constructed for this purpose: so that each character will have the opportunity to make—and will be incapable of evading or postponing—their choice.



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