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

Volume 41
Number 2

Article 8

4-2023

Wizards and Woods: The Environmental Ethics of Tolkien's Istari

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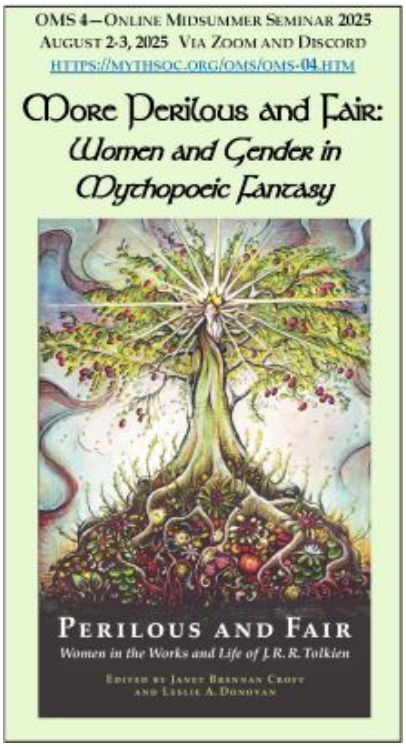
Online MidSummer Seminar 2025
More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy
August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm



Wizards and Woods: The Environmental Ethics of Tolkien's Istari

Abstract

Tolkien's wizards are some of the most interesting and impactful characters in The Lord of the Rings, sent to Middle-earth to inspire the free peoples to resist Sauron. Principal among the Istari are Gandalf and Saruman, both of whom feature prominently in the events of The Lord of the Rings. A much more minor role, however, is played by Radagast the Brown, who appears only in passing mentions in The Hobbit and serves almost as a messenger in The Lord of the Rings. These three Istari enable an interesting discussion of environmental relationships, with Radagast and Saruman portrayed as failures and Gandalf alone successful. Radagast is said to have forsaken Men and Elves for the birds and beasts and thus fails in his mission. Saruman also fails, but because of his lust for power and consequent subjugation of people and landscapes, especially Isengard, the Shire, and Fangorn. Gandalf alone succeeds, caring both for the landscapes of Middle-earth and for its peoples. In an environmental ethical framework, Saruman aligns in an extreme anthropocentric position, prioritizing his own preferences over the health of others and their ecosystems. Conversely, Radagast seems to align more with the ecocentric side of the spectrum, considering the Free Peoples relatively unimportant and giving himself instead to the birds and the beasts. In contrast to both, Gandalf understands himself as accountable to the Valar for the accomplishment of his mission to stir up the Free Peoples in opposition to Sauron, alongside care of

nonhuman organisms and their environment. Tolkien's framing of Gandalf as the only successful wizard underscores this theocentric approach as his preferred resolution of the tension between humans and the nonhuman—rightly relating all of them to one another in the service of their Creator.

Additional Keywords

environment; sustainability; conservationism; ecocriticism; middle-earth; stewardship; Gandalf; Ecology in J.R.R. Tolkien's works; Ecocriticism; Stewardship; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gandalf; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Radagast; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Saruman; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Attitude toward nature

Cover Page Footnote

The authors gratefully acknowledge critical readings of this manuscript by Devin Brown, Rose Sheffler, and Dan Sheffler. A version of this manuscript was presented at Dimensions of Political Ecology 2019, Lexington, KY.

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Introduction

Christianity and environmentalism are often understood as at odds, a tension formalized first, perhaps, by Lynn White, Jr., in his famous paper "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." According to White, Christianity fundamentally changed the way that people thought about the natural world—rather than understanding themselves as part of creation, humans now see creation as "explicitly for man's benefit and rule." If creation were created simply to be used and enjoyed by humans, why shouldn't humans use it as they see fit?

White's paper launched a conversation that continues to this day. In her 2021 paper in *Mythlore*, Sofia Parrila draws from White to discuss a Christian environmental ethic as "inherently anthropocentric"—privileging humans and their preferences over the rest of creation. While Tolkien "works […] with a Catholic model of stewardship," Parrila argues he departs from a conventional Christian stewardship view by "decenter[ing] humanity" (14-15). If the Christian relationship with the environment is fundamentally anthropocentric, Tolkien's departure from anthropocentrism must arise from an influence outside Christianity.

A comprehensive critique of Christian perspectives toward the environment is outside the scope of this paper, although a worthy endeavor. For our purposes, we assume (as White assents in his paper) that there has not been a monolithic "Christian" understanding of the environment through the ages, but that various Christian traditions have held varied perspectives. Thus, rather than reading Tolkien's rejection of anthropocentrism as a departure from Christian ethics, we suggest that it participates in a different Christian ethical framework than that described by White—an ethical framework described by Hoffman and Sandelands as theocentric (142-43).

Tolkien's wizards—Radagast, Saruman, and Gandalf—provide an opportunity to explore this theocentric perspective in comparison with ecocentric and anthropocentric ethical frames. The wizards, or Istari, are powerful immortal beings given to Middle-earth in the days of the resurrection of Sauron with a specific mission from the Valar: to inspire the free peoples to

resist Sauron (Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* [*UT*] 389).[1] In accomplishing this, they are "forbidden to […] seek to rule the wills of Men or Elves by open display of power, but […] bidden to advise and persuade Men and Elves to good" (*UT* 389). Although five Istari are sent to Middle-earth, only three play noteworthy roles in the unfolding drama. In "The Essay on the Istari," Tolkien describes the failures of Radagast and Saruman and the success of Gandalf:

> Indeed, of all the Istari, one only remained faithful, and he was the last-comer. For Radagast, the fourth, became enamoured of the many beasts and birds that dwelt in Middle-earth, and forsook Elves and Men, and spent his days among the wild creatures. […] And […] Saruman the White […] fell from his high errand, and becoming proud and impatient and enamoured of power sought to have his own will by force, and to oust Sauron; but he was ensnared by that dark spirit, mightier than he. (*UT* 390)

Radagast neglects the Istari's errand to the extent that he becomes enamored with the natural world, and Saruman falls short in his purpose as he becomes enamored with power. Gandalf alone maintains focus on the high errand of the Istari.

In this paper, we consider Radagast as an example of ecocentrism, Saruman as an example of anthropocentrism, and Gandalf an example of theocentrism. Ecocentrism considers all species, as well as their environment, as intrinsically valuable, regardless of whether humans find them valuable, and subordinates all their individual needs to the needs of the ecosphere as a whole (Washington et al. 1). Some environmentalists have called for widespread adoption of ecocentric ethics as essential for addressing the world's environmental crises (Taylor et al. 1091). In contrast to an ecocentric frame, anthropocentric systems treat humans as more important or more valuable than non-human species and their spaces, considering nonhuman organisms and their environment valuable only inasmuch as they present some value to humans (McShane 170). Anthropogenic ethics have been criticized as ineffective or inadequate for conservation—Taylor et al. note that "such [anthropogenic] values do not enjoin biodiversity conservation when people cannot be convinced that certain non-human organisms benefit humans" (1092). In contrast to both of these systems, theocentrism understands humans and nature as under the authority of God—distinct from the supremacy of the ecosphere

[1] The Istari were Maiar—other beings of this class that we encounter in the legendarium include Melian of Doriath, as well as the Balrogs and Sauron himself, who were Maiar corrupted by Morgoth.

within an ecocentric system as well as the unaccountable supremacy of humans in an anthropocentric system (Hoffman and Sandelands, 147-50).

We examine interactions of each of the Istari with one another, the free peoples, and the natural world to characterize the environmental ethical frame they represent. We believe the wizards work well as a model for human ethics in the real world because they are powerful beings accountable to the Valar for the fulfillment of a specific mission. People of faith in the real world also often consider themselves accountable to a deity for the fulfilment of a mission. In a Christian environmental context, Wendell Berry has described this mission as caring for the land (drawing from the biblical admonition to tend the Garden of Eden, among other scriptures) and caring for one another, all accountable to God—a system that maps well to the theocentric ethic described above (Berry, *The Gift of Good Land* 272). For people of faith especially, we hope that framing a theocentric, rather than anthropocentric, environmental ethic creates opportunities to productively and faithfully resolve the tension between Christianity and the environment popularized by White.

RADAGAST: A FLAWED ECOCENTRIST?

Despite being one of the most powerful beings in Middle-earth at the time, Radagast's involvement in the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* is noteworthy more for his absence and eventual fading away from the text than for his actual contribution to helping the free peoples of Middle-earth resist Sauron (Birns 113). He delivers a message to Gandalf, and he sends spies to gather information for Gandalf and Saruman at Isengard, but when scouts from Rivendell arrive at his home after the Council of Elrond, he is not found and is never heard from again (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* [*LotR*] II.3.274). From "The Essay on the Istari," we suggest that Radagast's preoccupation with the natural world and its nonhuman inhabitants distracts him from the Istari's purpose and diminishes his significance in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Of the Istari, Radagast is most closely associated with the environment.[2] He is an emissary of Yavanna, the Vala who loved birds and beasts and growing things, and he makes his home on the borders of the forest Mirkwood. Gandalf associates Radagast with wildlife and plants: "He has much lore of herbs and beasts, and birds are especially his friends" (*LotR* II.2.257). Similarly, Radagast is described in *The Silmarillion* as "the friend of all beasts and birds" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* [*S*] 300). In "The Essay on the Istari," Tolkien says that Radagast's name even means "tender of beasts" and notes that Radagast becomes "enamoured of the many beasts and birds that dwelt in

[2] Campbell (170) analyzes Radagast as resonant with St. Francis of Assisi, whom Lynn White, Jr., has proposed as the "patron saint of ecologists."

Middle-earth" (*UT* 390). Radagast's focus on the flora and fauna of Middle-earth distracts him from his mission to inspire the free peoples, and he fades from the text. As Dominika Nycz notes, Radagast settles in a permanent home in the eaves of the forest, permanently aligning himself with the woods, becoming "rooted in his place" and turning "away from his vocation" (70).[3] While Radagast's relationship with the birds and beasts positions him to support Gandalf in gathering information about the Nazgûl and their movements, and, ultimately, to free Gandalf from Saruman's treachery, his immersion in the natural world pulls him away from fully embracing the Istari's errand.

In contrast to his deep connection with the natural world, Radagast is disconnected from the free peoples, isolating himself almost entirely from those whom he has been sent to inspire.[4] In *The Hobbit*, Radagast's relationship with Beorn[5] becomes essential to the success of the expedition to the Lonely Mountain by giving Gandalf rapport with the shape-changer (VII.111). While Birns contests that this demonstrates that Radagast "has not isolated himself entirely from men and other sentient beings" (114), he also notes that Radagast is unlikely to have been known by Denethor or Théoden and seems to have been unaware of the Shire or Hobbits (116-17). Furthermore, Treebeard calls Gandalf "the only Wizard who cares about trees" (*LotR* III.4.466) The omission of Radagast suggests that Radagast is apparently unknown to Treebeard, a person with whom he would presumably have much in common. Furthermore, although he is *known* among the Istari, he does not appear to play an important role in the activities of the White Council (*S* 300); and when he is sought after the Council of Elrond, a pivotal moment for the free peoples of Middle-earth, he is not found. The most generous possible reading of Radagast is that he is not well-known outside of a few surrounding people groups; perhaps a more accurate reading is that he is not known at all outside the White Council and a few neighbors such as Beorn.

Finally, Radagast's relationship with the other Istari further underscores this preoccupation. Although Gandalf speaks positively about him before the Council of Elrond, calling him "a worthy Wizard," Saruman belittles Radagast: "Radagast the Bird-tamer! Radagast the Simple! Radagast the Fool!" (*LotR* II.2.258). While Radagast's relationships with the birds and beasts of Middle-earth enable him to deliver Gandalf from imprisonment in Orthanc, his

[3] This withdrawal from the society of the free peoples places Radagast in the "wild man of the forest" Merlin tradition (Riga 33).

[4] Campbell notes Radagast's narrowed focus on "the welfare of birds and beasts," but does not explore the implications of this from an environmental ethical perspective (127-28).

[5] Paul Lewis suggests that Beorn sees Radagast as a "kindred spirit" because of their shared affection for the birds and beasts (149).

disconnection from the free peoples renders him unprepared to help them resist Sauron. In a time when the Istari could have been working together towards their errand, Radagast remains unfocused and absent.

Radagast's clear preference for the nonhuman seems to align him on the ecocentric end of the ethical framework with which we are working. His affinity for the flora and fauna of Middle-earth is clearly described by Gandalf at the Council of Elrond as well as by Tolkien in "The Essay on the Istari." Gandalf also refers to the birds and beasts as his *friends*—an explicitly relational framing. While his friends do ultimately prove useful in rescuing Gandalf, Radagast values and cares for them regardless of their perceived value—consistent with ecocentric ethics. However, Tolkien problematizes Radagast's disconnection from the free peoples in "The Essay on the Istari"—it is good for him to befriend the birds and beasts, but his lack of attention to the human peoples of Middle-earth is contrary to his mission.[6] Tolkien's framing of Radagast's failure thus characterizes his values as disordered or unbalanced—he ought to have been more concerned with the Free Peoples he had been sent to serve.

In the real world, Radagast is reminiscent of a mystic who goes off into the wilderness alone and never comes back, drawing back from rather than pressing through the complexities and responsibilities of human relationships. Similarly, this might look like the transcendentalists of early 19th century America, who romanticized the "humanless" wilderness as ideal.[7] Furthermore, while we do not read Radagast as misanthropic, we note that this can play out as misanthropic in the real world at times—language describing humans as "the virus" or calling for forced human population control. While the ethic of Radagast is more benign than the destructive ethic of Saruman and does accomplish the mission of caring for the land, it still fails to address the obligation to neighbors.

Saruman as an Anthropogenic Caricature

In contrast to Radagast, Saruman plays a major role in the events of *The Lord of the Rings*. He wields significant influence in Middle-earth; however, in

[6] Importantly, Tolkien does not universally dismiss ecocentric ideas in *The Lord of the Rings*, as Curry has noted. Treebeard is perhaps the foremost example of Tolkien's ecocentrism—an embodiment of the natural world that protects and stewards the nonhuman. Similarly, Tom Bombadil neglects the Free Peoples and their troubles outside the Old Forest, attending instead to Goldberry and the Forest's diverse inhabitants.

[7] Although we note that the idea of "untouched" wilderness in the Americas is a myth, marginalizing the significance of land management practices employed by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years prior to European colonization. See for example Abrams et al.; Kimmerer and Lake (36-41).

direct opposition to the explicit instructions given to the Istari, Saruman uses his power to dominate, rather than inspire, the free peoples.[8] He does this in his pursuit of power, as Tolkien describes in "The Essay on the Istari": "Saruman the White […] fell from his high errand, and becoming proud and impatient and enamoured of power sought to have his own will by force, and to oust Sauron; but he was ensnared by that dark spirit, mightier than he" (*UT* 390). Saruman's desire for power in general translates to his desire for the One Ring in particular (Campbell 96). He even delays the White Council's movement against Dol Guldur, so he can search for the One Ring for himself (*S* 301; *UT* 321-22, 352). His pursuit of power and pride poisons his relationships with the other Istari, the free peoples of Middle-earth, and the natural world.

Saruman holds both Radagast and Gandalf in contempt and seeks to manipulate them for his own gain throughout the drama of Middle-earth. From the beginning, Saruman resents Radagast, who seems to have been thrust on him unwillingly by Yavanna (*UT* 393-94). His disdain for Radagast is evident in the derisive language he uses about him from the steps of Orthanc: "Radagast the Simple! Radagast the Fool! Yet he had just the wit to play the part that I set him" (*LotR* II.2.258; Croft 146). Saruman sees Radagast as a witless pawn and uses him to bait a trap for Gandalf at Isengard.[9] His condescending attitude toward Radagast is a pattern—rather than appreciate and affirm the goodness and value of those around him, Saruman considers himself ultimately wise and justified in using others to meet his own ends.

While Saruman despises Radagast as a fool, he feels threatened by Gandalf as a competitor.[10] Saruman himself recognizes that Gandalf has "the greater influence upon the dwellers in Middle-earth, even though he hid[es] his power and desire[s] neither fear nor reverence" (*UT* 349), but even this acknowledgment is flavored with disrespect, sneering at Gandalf's modest approach to the mission. Obsessed with this one-sided power struggle, Saruman

[8] Riga notes that Saruman's use of power to dominate others is consistent with the "evil Merlin" literary tradition (34).

[9] Parrila notes that Saruman's contempt for Radagast is connected to his devaluation of Radagast's friendship with animals. Saruman consistently treats as worthless any human or non-human creatures who are less powerful than himself (8).

[10] This attitude traces back to the selection of the Istari by the Valar: while Gandalf is chosen third, after Saruman, Varda says that he is not to be the third, a statement that irked Saruman for thousands of years. Varda was not the only one to consider Gandalf "not the third." Upon reaching Middle-earth, Gandalf is further elevated over Saruman by both Círdan of the Grey Havens and Galadriel. Círdan perceives in Gandalf the greatest power and secretly gives him Narya the Red, one of the three rings of the Elves, which Saruman eventually discovers and deeply resents (*UT* 389-90). Similarly, Galadriel campaigns for Gandalf to be appointed the head of the White Council, which would place him in a position of authority over Saruman (*S* 300).

sets spies on Gandalf and mocks him in the White Council: "I know well enough that you have become a curious explorer of the small: weeds, wild things, and childish folk" (*UT* 351). Ultimately, Saruman imprisons Gandalf at Orthanc after Gandalf refuses to join him in his scheme to use the Ring to overthrow Sauron. While Saruman should have considered both Radagast and Gandalf as equals and allies in the quest to inspire the free peoples to resist Sauron, his pride prevents him from appreciating and affirming them, effectively isolating him from them.

Saruman's pursuit of power also leads him to dominate and subjugate the free peoples of Middle-earth. When Treebeard realizes that Saruman has only sought to manipulate him for information, he laments "the treachery of a neighbour, who should have helped us" (*LotR* III.4.485). Saruman also manipulates the Dunlendings, whom he recruits as pawns for his own purposes, not for their liberation or betterment (Burley 27-8). When Saruman attempts to allay King Théoden's wrath in the aftermath of Helm's Deep, his language is manipulative, or as Gimli says, his words "stand on their heads" (*LotR* III.10.579; Chisholm 93-94). When his attempt fails, Saruman's insults more clearly reveal his attitude towards the free peoples of Middle-earth: "I need you not, nor your little band of gallopers, as swift to fly as to advance, Théoden Horsemaster. Long ago I offered you a state beyond your merit and your wit" (*LotR* III.10.581; Croft 146). Later, he uses equally condescending language towards the Hobbits returning in victory from the East (*LotR* VI.8.1018). But perhaps the best example of his relationship with the free peoples of Middle-earth is his relationship with his faithful servant Gríma Wormtongue, who, under the influence of Saruman, undergoes a transformation from a man walking upright to a "worm" crawling on the ground. As Riga says, "Saruman […] uses others merely to gain knowledge that will further his self-serving ends, […] scorns the instruments he uses, and […] cares nothing for their individual character or ethnic stamp" (40). Saruman's obsession with power causes him to mock, manipulate, subjugate, and ruin the free peoples whom he has been sent to inspire.

Saruman also ruins the natural world around him, turning "green and fair" places into industrial wastelands reminiscent of Mordor (*LotR* II.2.260; Campbell 136). Brawley describes this utilitarian attitude toward the natural world as "nature […] viewed as property without an intrinsic value in and of itself" (302). Saruman initiates what Burley calls an "industrial revolution," pursuing ringcraft, presumably enhancing his power (Rawls 31),[11] and a

[11] Rawls reads Saruman's ring as enhancing the power of his voice (31), but note that Ruud reads the power of Saruman's voice, which Gandalf warns his companions to beware, as Saruman's rhetoric, not magic (143).

shimmering new cloak of many colors (29).[12] Similarly, Liam Campbell characterizes Saruman's destruction of Fangorn as "industry devoid of ecological ethic" (246). Davis extends this association of Saruman with industrialism,[13] noting his industrialization of Isengard, his ethical breach in breeding orcs with humans,[14] and his industrialization of the Shire at the end of the novel (57-58). Continuing in this theme, Łaszkiewicz describes Saruman as "[o]bsessed with […] progress," forsaking his "obligations towards nature" in pursuit of his "industrial ambitions" (49). Through a Berryan lens, Saruman represents the modern industrialist charging into the techno-romantic future, dismissing the weak and less powerful, and especially the nonhuman and ecological, as unvaluable (Berry, *Standing By Words*, 62).[15]

In his pursuit of power, "mustering a great force on his own account," he sends orcs in droves to Fangorn (*LotR* II.2.260). They wage wanton destruction on the forest,[16] even cutting down trees and leaving them to rot, which Treebeard perceives as a trespass greater than cutting down trees for some particular use (*LotR* III.4.474; Dickerson and Evans 124). Treebeard himself passes perhaps the most scathing judgment on Saruman: "he has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment" (*LotR* III.4.473). Similarly, when Saruman moved on to the Shire, "new buildings are closely associated with the felling of trees and the black smoke pouring from […] the […] chimney of the new mill" (Dickerson and Evans 205). The Hobbits are known for their love of "peace and quiet and good tilled earth" (*LotR* Prologue.1) but in service to his spite and revenge, Saruman brings about the destruction of those very things—converting yet

[12] For Tally, this "desire to create new things […] almost inevitably leads to the Fall" (18). While Tally is correct that both Sauron and Saruman were Maia associated with Aulë—the Vala explicitly associated with craft—the dismissal of craft and creativity as the threshold of evil is an oversimplification. Firstly, as others have discussed more eloquently, sub-creation is a key component of Tolkien's work. Further, and more to this specific point, associating craft (and Aulë) with "the Fall" neglects the redemptive potential of the Dwarves, explored further by Sena and Harris (in press); Seymour; and Loughlin.

[13] Davis also notes that Saruman's association with industrialization is even more evident in the films by Peter Jackson, which clearly portray him as environmentally destructive (68).

[14] Burley also emphasizes the creation of the Uruk-hai as perhaps Saruman's most egregious activity (28).

[15] Dickerson and Evans further develop this Berryan reading, describing the rhetoric of Saruman as that of modern agribusiness (201)—the rhetoric that invites small-scale farmers and members of small communities to embrace the inevitability of "progress" and assimilate into the technoindustrial economy of the future.

[16] Susan Jeffers calls the orcs of Saruman "eco-sadists" (80).

another garden into a place of bricks and smoke and barrenness (*LotR* VI.8.998 et seq.).

Saruman clearly considers the free peoples, nonhumans, and the environment valuable only inasmuch as they are useful to him (Dickerson and Evans 195), aligning him on the extreme anthropocentric end of the ethical spectrum. Saruman's ethical framework centers around himself—he invites Gandalf to join him to rule the coming "world of men" on the steps of Orthanc—and treats as expendable any that would "hinder" him, certainly including nonhumans, but also "weak or idle friends" (*LotR* II.2.259). As Saruman illustrates, the weak and powerless can be vulnerable in an anthropocentric ethical system. Poetically, Saruman's undoing is the natural world (marshalled by the Ents) that he exploits and the weak and powerless "small folk" that he sees as worthless. In the primary world, this ethic might look like a business owner who does not ensure safe working conditions or fair pay for their laborers. Similarly, this might look like a corporation improperly disposing of waste, leading to persistent environmental degradation that renders the space unhealthy for habitation. The ethic of Saruman fails in both the mission to care for one's neighbors and in the mission to care for the land.

Gandalf—An Example of Theocentrism?

Gandalf alone remains faithful to the Istari's purpose. In "The Essay on the Istari," Tolkien writes:

> Warm and eager was his spirit (and it was enhanced by the ring Narya) for he was the Enemy of Sauron, opposing the fire that devours and wastes with the fire that kindles, and succours in wanhope and distress […]. Merry he could be, and kindly to the young and simple, and yet quick at times to sharp speech and the rebuking of folly; but he was not proud, and sought neither power nor praise, and thus far and wide he was beloved among all those who were not themselves proud. (*UT* 390-91)

Gandalf's humility and respect towards the other Istari, care for the free peoples of Middle-earth, and respect for the natural world demonstrate his faithfulness to the Istari's purpose, straying neither into the negligence of Radagast nor the pride of Saruman.

Gandalf counts the Istari among his allies in the effort against Sauron. While Saruman treats Radagast with contempt, Gandalf treats him with respect, calling him a "worthy Wizard" (*LotR* II.2.257). He also recognizes and appreciates Radagast's unique wisdom, calling on him to send out the birds and beasts who are his friends to collect information on the movements of the enemy (*LotR* II.2.257). Similarly, Gandalf (despite his concerns) respects Saruman:

"Saruman is the greatest of my order. […He] has long studied the arts of the Enemy himself, and thus we have often been able to forestall him" (*LotR* II.2.257). Even after Saruman's betrayal, Gandalf shows him respect. When confronting Saruman in the wreck of Isengard, Gandalf thrice entreats him to come down from the tower and go free (*LotR* III.10.582 et seq.). Rather than use his superior power and influence to compete with the other Istari, Gandalf treats them with humility and respect, perceiving their unique gifts as vital to the resistance of Sauron.

Gandalf is widely known and beloved by the free peoples of Middle-earth, counting Dwarves, Elves, Hobbits, Ents, and Men among his friends.[17] His relationship with the free peoples of Middle-earth demonstrates his humility and his devotion to the work of the Istari. In spite of Saruman's mockery, who called him "a curious explorer of the small: weeds, wild things, and childish folk" (*UT* 351), Gandalf befriends the Hobbits, who appear to be among the least significant of people. He counsels Elrond "help oft shall come from the hands of the weak when the Wise falter" (*S* 301). Gandalf's friendship with the weak and powerless evidences his conviction that all people are precious and worth protecting, including (and even especially so) those who cannot protect themselves (Ruud 149). In contrast to Radagast, who settles in the eaves of Mirkwood, and Saruman, who takes Isengard as his home, Gandalf, the Grey Pilgrim, calls no place his permanent home. This refusal to settle in a single place enables him to know and be known by many peoples in many places (Jeffers 104-105).

Gandalf's interaction with King Théoden of Rohan further demonstrates his faithfulness to the Istari's purpose. In the Golden Hall of Meduseld, Gandalf does not use his power to manipulate King Théoden—even to do good; instead, he urges the king to hear him and hear the truth (Chisholm 91). Later, when Saruman tempts King Théoden from the window of Orthanc, Gandalf stands alongside the king in silence, giving him space to resist Saruman. The way in which Gandalf interacts with King Théoden stands in contrast to Radagast, who is unlikely to even know or be known by the king, much less stand beside him, and Saruman, who seeks to manipulate the king and subjugate him to his own purposes.

As with the other Istari and the free peoples of Middle-earth, Gandalf treats nonhuman creatures with respect. Gandalf's interaction with Shadowfax and Gwaihir exemplify this. In both interactions, Gandalf asks of them rather than demanding of them (Campbell 168-170). Regarding riding Shadowfax, Gandalf explains, "You do not ride Shadowfax: he is willing to carry you—or not. If he is willing, that is enough" (*LotR* III.11.596). Gandalf asks for

[17] Curry calls Gandalf's diverse relationships a "messy pluralism" (131).

Shadowfax's aid in service to the resistance against Sauron; he does not dominate or subjugate Shadowfax. Parrila describes Gandalf's relationship with Shadowfax as a friendship (7), and Dickerson and Evans describe them as co-laborers in the struggle against Sauron (43-4). Similarly, when Gwaihir the Windlord rescues him from Orthanc, Gandalf asks the eagle "How far can you bear me?" (*LotR* II.2.261). Again, he does not make a demand; he asks. Simpson characterizes Gandalf's relationships with Shadowfax and Gwaihir as mutually affectionate and respectful, rather than exploitative or dominating (83-6). This resembles the way Gandalf treats both Radagast and Théoden, whom he invites to participate with him in opposing Sauron, rather than manipulating or overpowering them according to his preferences.[18]

Gandalf also demonstrates care for the flora of Middle-earth. When the Fellowship enters Moria, beset by the Watcher in the Water, Gandalf mourns the loss of the ancient hollies flanking the Doors of Durin: "I fear from the sounds that boulders have been piled up, and the trees uprooted and thrown across the gate. I am sorry; for the trees were beautiful and had stood so long" (*LotR* II.4.309). Gandalf notes their beauty and their longevity—they had stood for millennia, and could perhaps have stood for thousands of years into the future if they had not been uprooted by the Watcher. Later, in his conversation with Denethor about the rights and responsibilities of stewards, he explicitly names the flora of Middle-earth as under his care: "[All] worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come" (*LotR* V.1.758). Gandalf understands his calling to serve and inspire the free peoples to include the broader ecosystem—nonhuman creatures, even plants, are under his care (Dickerson and Evans 44).[19] Of course, Gandalf does also set ablaze a stand of trees in defense of the Fellowship against the wolves of Sauron

[18] Gandalf's ability to inspire and invigorate, discerned by Círdan and enhanced by the Elven Ring, aligns him with the "guide" archetype, which Nelson notes includes qualities such as wisdom, experience, care, and acknowledgement of limitations (48-9). Rather than making extensive use of his powers in opposition to Sauron (Nelson 48), Gandalf inspires the Free Peoples to collectively oppose Sauron themselves (Riga 38; Ruud 150; Campbell 149). Notably, Gandalf's limited use of his powers sets him apart from the Merlin tradition, typically characterized by extensive use of mystical power (Riga 38).

[19] While a central claim of Dickerson and Evans is that Gandalf exemplifies Christian stewardship, Liam Campbell disagrees (116-17). The crux of Campbell's disagreement here seems to be that Gandalf does not prioritize humans over the rest of the natural world in his statement to Denethor, as would be expected in a Christian model. This dismissal seems to draw from a flattened perspective of Christian stewardship, and fails to appropriately engage with Dickerson and Evans's more robust treatment of stewardship in Christian tradition.

on their journey toward Moria (*LotR*, II.4.299); however, as Liam Campbell reads this passage, Gandalf is calling on living things to sacrifice for the good of the world (270). And, if we take Treebeard as an authority on friendship with the flora of Middle-earth, Gandalf is "the only wizard that really cares about trees" (*LotR* III.4.466).

Gandalf's ethic is not anthropocentric; rather, he demonstrates a respect for and value of all the flora and fauna of Middle-earth, regardless of its usefulness to humans. But his ethic also does not seem to be ecocentric—immolating the forest in the Fellowship's altercation with wolves suggests that he considered the survival of the trees of less value than the survival of the Fellowship.[20] We suggest that Gandalf's relationships with the other Istari, the free peoples, and the natural world map well to a theocentric ethic, where Gandalf understands himself to be accountable to the Valar for both the human and the nonhuman of Middle-earth. In Berry's frame, Gandalf cares both for his neighbors and for the land—balanced, ordered affections, which Berry himself has long modeled in the real world on his farm in Henry County, Kentucky.

Conclusion

Both Saruman and Radagast are dissociated from their mission, and, by extension, the Valar—their ethics are rooted in themselves and their environment, failing to appropriately recognize them all as they relate to the Valar. In contrast, by remaining true to his mission, Gandalf reckons himself responsible to the Valar who commissioned him. His theocentric ethic is showcased in his service to the free peoples, his relationships with Gwaihir and Shadowfax, and his conversation with Denethor about stewardship. While Radagast neglects and Saruman manipulates the free peoples, Gandalf appreciates and seeks to serve and protect them—even the least of them. Saruman ridicules him for attending to the Hobbits—what use could a people so weak and ignorant be to the wise? But it is Gandalf's care for them that ultimately destroys the Ring and defeats Sauron. Similarly, while Saruman explicitly sees the nonhuman as material—objects to be manipulated to serve his purposes—Gandalf sees Gwaihir and Shadowfax not as mounts but as friends, who are pleased to help him in his quest to resist Sauron. Finally, Saruman sees the very fabric of the earth as fuel and raw material for his machinations, but Gandalf sees the earth as full of goodness and beauty, and seeks to protect and care for it. Gandalf's choices are contextualized within a

[20] Although, as Campbell suggests, this episode could be read as an invitation for these species to make a sacrifice for the sake of the greater good, or the good of the ecosphere as a whole, which frames this episode, and Gandalf's interaction in it, in a more ecocentric light (270). Campbell does describe Gandalf as ecocentric, drawing on his conversation with Denethor about stewardship (117).

broader and truer understanding of himself, others, and the environment, and their relationships with the Valar. This vision is part of Tolkien's way forward in the midst of our modern ecological crisis—rightly understanding human accountability to the Creator with respect to humans, nonhumans, and the environment, fulfilling the missions both to care for our neighbors and for the land.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An early draft of this paper was presented at the 2019 Dimensions of Political Ecology Conference in Lexington, KY. The authors thank Brad Barlow, Janet Brennan Croft, and an anonymous reviewer for feedback critical to this work. K. S. gratefully acknowledges the unpaid domestic labor of his wife, Susanna Sena, without which his contribution to this project would not have been possible.

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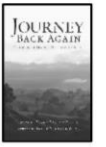

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