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### The Scouring of the Shire as a Hobbit Coming-of-Age

#### Abstract

Contents the events of *The Lord of the Rings*, culminating in the Scouring of the Shire, demonstrate a coming-of-age for the individual hobbits of the Fellowship, for some social and for others spiritual. The Shire's response to Sharkey, especially after the Fellowship members return, is a coming-of-age for Hobbit society as a whole.

#### Additional Keywords

Coming of age in literature; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Frodo; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Hobbits; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Merry; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Pippin; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Sam Gamgee; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Shire; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. “The Scouring of the Shire”

# The Scouring of the Shire as a Hobbit Coming-of-Age

Jonathon D. Langford

One of the primary sources of Tolkien's popularity among adolescents, as well as that of the genre of modern heroic fantasy as a whole, is arguably the preeminence of growth and coming-of-age patterns within his works. Readers, many of them perhaps starved for meaningful initiation experiences within their own cultural and social contexts, identify with the heroes in such stories as they pass from "callow, lumpish, and selfish youth" (to use Tolkien's words) to attain "dignity, and even sometimes wisdom" ("On Fairy-stories," 45). Such readers are obviously getting something more than simple literary enjoyment out of these works; they are using them to help shape their own emotional lives.

Given this extraliterary importance of fantasy as a setting for the vicarious coming-of-age of its readers, it is important to understand the nature of these coming-of-age patterns and how they function within specific works. As intermediaries between the modern world and the world of romance, for example, the hobbits occupy a unique position within the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, neither outside Middle-earth nor fully part of it. They are our alter-egos within Tolkien's world, and it is their coming-of-age in that world with which we as modern readers particularly identify. It is within this context of special significance for the hobbits as representatives of our own modern, non-heroic culture that I wish to consider the scouring of the Shire as a hobbit coming-of-age within *The Lord of the Rings*.

One of the most important aspects of the heroic quest as described by Campbell and others is the return of the hero from the enchanted realm back to the world of ordinary human existence. Once he has obtained the treasure,

the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy.... back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may rebound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds

(Campbell, 193).

This is particularly true in cases such as Frodo's, when the quest is carried out for the benefit of the community, rather than to fulfill any personal or private purpose — to save the Shire, in this instance. It is important both literally and mythically for the story to return to its origins, not only to show growth of the hero since the beginning of the quest but also to establish the community's status by how it treats the returning hero. By accepting and honoring the hero on his or her return, the community also accepts and proves its worthiness for the boon the hero has secured. By rejecting or misunderstanding the hero, the community

also rejects the gifts the hero brings, rendering the quest a failure regardless of how the hero may have performed against the physical and spiritual challenges of the adventures itself. Indeed, the great spiritual myth often counted more on this question of the community's worthiness than that of the hero: the children of Israel worship idols while Moses is receiving the law on the mount, and the apostles sleep while Jesus prays.

The triumphant homecoming of the hobbit adventurers to the Shire at the end of their quest represents just such a return. For Merry and Pippin, it is the culmination of a maturation process that has from the beginning been geared, though not always obviously so, toward their eventual importance as leaders within hobbit society. For Frodo and Sam, it represents a reassessment of the success of their quest in light of its reception by the community that has been their chief object of service. And for the hobbit culture as a whole, it is the final link in a coming-of-age process that extends beyond the adventures themselves to embrace the whole of the Shire, as the hobbit community grows from its initially isolated and protected status to take its place in a wider world.

This pattern is most apparent in the case of Merry and Pippin. Heirs to two of the "great families" of the Shire, their importance to the quest of the Ring as such is minimal, right up to the time when they are separated from Frodo and the Ring at the Falls of Rauros. From this point, however, the two begin to display signs of a growing maturity and of a greater impact on the events of the outside world. Merry cuts off the arm of several of the orcs who capture them at Rauros (II, 58). Pippin equals this deed with his later daring, though unsuccessful, attempt at escape; he quickly captured, but is able to drop his elven-brooch as a sign to Aragorn and the others who are following (II, 65-6). Then, in what is almost a model for how chance (or providence) in Tolkien's world interacts with the efforts of his characters, the two hobbits together escape from the orc camp during the battle: the arrow from the darkness which kills the orc Grishnakh is "aimed with skill, or guided by fate" (II, 75), but the rest — getting Grishnakh to the edge of the battle, keeping themselves alive up to this point, and their subsequent escape into the woods — is up to them. Next, they themselves become agents of chance, as their news in Fangorn Forest unexpectedly touches off the rousing of the ents and subsequent destruction of Isengard — events with an impact far beyond anything that could have been imagined by the hobbits themselves.

This increased power and effectiveness in the wider world is symbolized by the ent-draught they ingest, which causes a literal and ongoing increase in physical stature. The fact that this occurs long past the regular hobbit adolescence, when the two have to all appearances already "grown up," suggests that the opportunities offered within their own culture for a true coming-of-age — and, by implication, within ours as well — are largely inadequate. In order to truly grow, they must leave the Shire and encounter experiences and individuals beyond what their aristocratic, insular, sheltered backgrounds can offer.

This growth continues with subsequent separation of Merry and Pippin not only from the other members of the Company, but even from each other — stripping them of the last remnants of their own accustomed social structure, leaving them free as solitary characters to make new and in some ways more meaningful attachments. It is thus as individuals that the two perform their most noteworthy actions and engage in their greatest growth. In clearly deliberate parallel scenes, Merry and Pippin take service respectively with Théoden, king of Rohan, and Denethor, steward of Gondor — exchanging their earlier horizontal relationships as members of a fellowship for the more formally structured hierarchical relationship between liege lord and vassal.

Paradoxically, it is only in this apparently more subservient capacity that the two learn to act as mature individuals, taking responsibility for their actions even when these involve disobedience or disagreement with socially constructed authorities. Merry's oath of loyalty to Théoden and his duty to the larger quest both require him to accompany the king to Gondor and fight beside him there; but in order to do so, he must disobey a direct command from the king. Similarly, Pippin must disregard the wishes of Denethor — and persuade others to do so as well — in order to save the life of Faramir, his son. Each case represents a conscious choice between culturally defined and enforced local loyalties, on the one hand, and a broader duty to the larger community and to a more general conception of right and wrong on the other. As Pippin tells Beregon, "Well, you must chose between orders and the life of Faramir.... I think you have a madman to deal with, not a lord!" (II, 123).

These experiences serve not only to advance the tale but to prepare Merry and Pippin for the roles they must eventually assume as hereditary leaders of the Shire. Pippin, as the heir to the Thain of the Shire, is both a future military leader and a representative of the authority of the king, by whose authorization the hobbits had originally settled the Shire long ago. As such, it is fitting that when given the opportunity he should declare his allegiance to the steward of the realm of Gondor — an individual, like himself, who is granted authority to govern in the king's absence. Similarly, Merry is the heir of the Master of Buckland — the only other hereditary title we hear of in the Shire, and one technically independent of the authority of the Thain since the settlement of Buckland lies outside the

Shire's boundaries. The parallel of the situation of Buckland, outside the Shire but bound to it by ties of friendship, though no fealty as such, and Rohan, similarly situated next to the older and greater realm of Gondor with which it shares friendly relations, subtly underscores the fact that both hobbits are in their way heirs to similar positions of power within their own land. During their terms of service, both hobbits witness the passage of power from old and weakened incumbents to new leaders who reinvigorate the realm and establish a new royal line — a pattern which foreshadows the effects of their own homecoming, which will usher in a new period of change, liberation and growth among the hobbits of the Shire.

Similarly, the apparent approval of Gandalf and other such authority figures, including Théoden himself in the case of Merry, for the quasi-mutinous activities of the two hobbits not only validates these actions but suggests important lessons regarding the proper exercise of power in Middle-earth, lessons with particular importance for the hobbits as future leaders in Tolkien's world. Merry's slaying of the Nazgûl, Pippin's saving of Faramir, hobnobbing with princes and marching off with the army to war are all part of their education for the roles they will assume on their return to the Shire. The status they earn as knights of the Mark and of Gondor, respectively, attests to not only their heroic deeds but also to the thoroughness and proficiency with which they have absorbed that education.

This process finds its culmination during the scouring of the Shire, for it is here that the two hobbits experience the opportunity to serve in the leadership capacities for which they have been trained. Upon the return to the Shire at the end of their adventure, the travellers discover that ruffians, men invited in by Frodo's cousin Lotho Sackville-Baggins, have been confiscating the food, tearing down houses, terrorizing the populace, promulgating regulations, and in general supplanting the regular hobbit government (such as it was). Merry and Pippin function as the hobbits' chief military captains in throwing out these invaders, marshalling the forces of the Shire in a way that utilizes their own special experience with combat and military organization. While it is clear that the four travellers consider Frodo to be more or less in command, still it is Merry and Pippin — and, to some degree, Sam — who make the arrangements and send the messages, who prepare the ambushes and lead in the actual fighting; and "at the top of the Roll" listing those who participated in the Battle of Bywater "stand the names of Captains Meriadoc and Peregrin" (III, 365). In the eyes of the other hobbits and in terms of their own personal development, Merry and Pippin are almost literally new people, altered in dress, bearing, and physical characteristics. No wonder that the hobbits at the Brandywine Bridge, and even their friend Fredegar Bolger, express difficulty in recognizing them; for they have changed, "grown up now," as Gandalf tells them, "Grown indeed very high; among the great you are" (III, 340).

One necessary ingredient in the two hobbits' preparation for civil leadership is the social recognition and acceptance they receive, not only in foreign lands but in their own Shire. Merry and Pippin's leadership during the battle is accepted apparently without reservation by the other hobbits; and afterwards,

The two young Travellers cut a great dash in the Shire with their songs and their tales and their finery, and their wonderful parties. 'Lordly' folk called them, meaning nothing but good; for it warmed all hearts to see them go riding by with their mail-shirt so bright and their shields so splendid, laughing and singing songs of far away; and if they were now large and magnificent, they were unchanged otherwise, unless they were indeed more fairspeoken and more jovial and full of merriment than ever before. (III, 377)

In order for them to truly fulfil the purposes of their own quest, they must be accepted as leaders and heroes by their own people at the end of the journey. The fact that the hobbits of the Shire are willing to do so places a final seal of completeness on their personal coming-of-age.

Frodo and Sam's coming-of-age is of a very different sort. Unlike Merry and Pippin, who as heirs to noble families apparently give up nothing and violate no social expectations by faring off into the blue for an adventure or two, their commitment to the quest represents a real sacrifice for them, one symbolized on the most obvious level by Frodo's sale of Bag End and Sam's departure from his lifelong home in Hobbiton, leaving behind friends, family, and even Rosie Cotton. The possible costs of this choice, which at first may not be recognized by the causal reader or even by the hobbits themselves, are brought home by the scenes Sam witnesses in the Mirror of Galadriel:

But now Sam noticed that the Old Mill had vanished, and a large red-brick building was being put up where it had stood. Lots of folk were busily at work. There was a red chimney nearby. Black smoke seemed to cloud the surface of the Mirror.

"There's some devilry at work in the Shire," he said. "Elrond knew what he was about when he wanted to send Mr. Merry back." Then suddenly Sam gave a cry and sprang away. "I can't stay here," he said wildly. "I must go home. They've dug up Bagshot Row, and there's the poor gaffer going down the Hill with his bits of things on a barrow. I must go home!"

"You cannot go home alone," said the Lady. "You did not wish to go home without your master before you looked in the Mirror, and yet you knew that evil things might well be happening in the Shire." (I, 469-70)

Frodo's recognition of the risks is clearer. As early as his conversation with Gandalf in Chapter 2, he realizes that in order to save the Shire, he may have to sacrifice his own place in it — a recognition which in the end proves more true than he had expected. Even more alarming, however, is the danger that his own personality may be permanently damaged by the power of the Ring, a possibility which only gradually becomes apparent to him and Sam as they see it reflected in the actions and temptations of their

companions and themselves. The quest itself becomes the source of their greatest peril, with no apparent reward for its successful accomplishment but the abolishment of a great evil and an end to labors.

The focus of Frodo and Sam's education is thus not on learning to lead armies and conduct affairs of state but on developing the internal moral and spiritual strength that will enable them to carry out the quest into Mordor. From the beginning, Sam's interest is the elves, and Frodo's heritage from Bilbo suggest a special sensitivity to the higher spiritual and cultural dimensions of life in Middle-earth, one which corresponds to the social affinities displayed by Merry and Pippin. It is true that Frodo and Sam both demonstrate qualities of leadership and martial courage — indeed, both Frodo and Sam display traits of social responsibility and military prowess long before Merry and Pippin. Still, the ultimate success of the quest depends on first Frodo and then Sam leaving behind these patterns and following a higher, more spiritually oriented heroic code, one perhaps demonstrated most clearly in Frodo's ultimate rejection of force and Sam's return to the role of gardener at the end of the book.

This education begins even before the two leave the Shire, with Frodo and Sam's conversations with Gandalf and pursuit by the Black Riders. During their long trek, Gandalf, Aragorn, Elrond, Galadriel, Faramir, and others provide examples of the kind of moral character and strength of will they must develop. Encounters with the Black Riders, Old Man Willow, the Barrow-wights, Shelob, the orcs, and even such less straightforward antagonists as Bill Ferny, Boromir, and Gollum teach the two how to recognize and oppose evil. The issue of free will and force, so crucial to a proper understanding of right and wrong in Middle-earth, arises again and again, most notably in the hobbits' interactions with Gollum and in the operation of the Ring. All these lessons help build toward the internal spiritual knowledge and moral strength required for the quest to succeed.

Significantly, it is around the question of loyalty to the quest that Frodo and Sam's greatest personal tests revolve, comparable in importance to Merry's disobedience of Théoden and Pippin's of Denethor. A careful reading of Gandalf's instructions to Frodo at Hobbiton and Elrond's charge at Rivendell reveals that Frodo's primary task as Ringbearers is not the destruction of the Ring, something which is clearly beyond his power even before he left the Shire. Rather, it is simply "to come if he could to the Mountain of Fire in Mordor, the land of the Enemy itself, where alone the Ring could be unmade" (II, 9). In other words, he is to do his best to bring about the conditions under which the Ring can be destroyed, but with no foreknowledge on anyone's part of exactly how this may be accomplished. This distinction sheds an important light both on Frodo's personal responsibilities as part of the quest and on the honor he receives at his return. Clearly, Gandalf and the others knew of Frodo's failure of will at

the Crack of Doom. The fact that the Ring was destroyed despite this is due to the fact that Frodo had performed to the best of his ability and made all the correct decisions up to this point — to leave the Company at Rauros, to show mercy to Gollum, to resist the temptation of the Ring (for Tolkien's view on these points, see for example *Letters* 233-4, 251-3, and 325-8).

Sam experiences his own testing when Frodo is captured and he must take the Ring, and even wear it for a while, in order to keep it from capture by the orcs. He is forced to acknowledge that his master's quest must take precedence even over service to Frodo himself — a recognition which enables him to become something more than the travelling companion he has been up to that point. His consequent increase in spiritual stature is perhaps best illustrated by his sparing of Gollum's life on Mount Doom, although he has both reason and opportunity to kill him. His ability in this incident to see and recognize Gollum's inner torment and, most important, to feel pity for him demonstrates that Sam has acquired something of Frodo's own insight and spiritual strength, becoming in the process something very different from the inexperienced, intolerant, and relatively simple hobbit who left Hobbiton months before. Sam thus becomes Frodo's spiritual heir, acquiring one by one not only his personal traits but the responsibilities of the quest, and even after the quest is over and it has become obvious that Frodo will never be able to return to the normal life of a hobbit in the Shire, his social position there as well. He inherits Bag End and the Red Book, with a special charge to help the hobbits remember their past (III, 382), and becomes a powerful and influential figure in the Shire, first helping to direct its reconstruction after the ruffians are routed and eventually serving as mayor for nearly fifty years. His role complements and to some degree supplants that of Merry and Pippin, and he helps lead the Shire into a new era of peace, prosperity, and renewed fertility, symbolized on the most obvious level by his own thirteen children.

The scouring of the Shire and subsequent reconstruction of hobbit society thus represents the culmination of



the coming-of-age process for Sam, though in a less obvious way than that of Merry and Pippin. Throughout the quest, his focus has been preserving and maintaining life, even on those rare occasions when he has had to take up arms against a common enemy. He has acted as conspirator and companion, cook and bodyguard, and even as a porter for Frodo's belongings and for Frodo himself. Now, his duty is to return to his original calling as a gardener, one which has itself been ennobled through his exposure to Galadriel and the gifts from her garden — a role which is now expanded to include responsibilities for making all of the Shire into a garden, reversing the physical and spiritual damage that has been caused by the actions of Lotho and Saruman's ruffians.

The case of Frodo is more difficult, raising as it does the specter of the misunderstood hero and the unsuccessful quest. Despite the honor Frodo receives from the leaders of the West and even from the other hobbit adventurers, it is clear that the nature and scope of his efforts are far beyond the comprehension of most of the people in Middle-earth, including the vast bulk of his fellow hobbits. The misunderstandings and ignorance of Ioreth at Aragorn's coronation (III, 302) finds a parallel in the attitudes and apathy of the Shire-folk regarding Frodo's adventures:

Frodo dropped quietly out of all the doings of the Shire, and Sam was pained to notice how little honor he had in his own country. Few people knew or wanted to know about his deeds and adventures; their admiration and respect were given mostly to Mr. Meriadoc and Mr. Peregrin and (if Sam had known it) to himself. (III, 377)

The fact that Frodo's true opponent in Hobbiton turns out to be not Lotho but the ex-wizard Saruman illustrates how far Frodo's experiences have taken him from his hobbit

rooms. He is in many ways no longer truly a hobbit, transformed by the suffering he has experienced, by the sights he has seen, and even by the physical effects of wearing the Ring. And there are yet other elements that contribute to Frodo's discomfort in the Shire. In addition to his probable feeling of guilt, unjustified though it may be, regarding his failure of will at the Crack of Doom, there are the wounds he has received which cannot be fully healed in Middle-earth.

In light of these factors, Frodo's decision to leave Middle-earth and seek the peace of the West seems less an epilogue that the true ending of his quest. He has returned to the Shire and witnessed its rejuvenation, but discovered that he no longer has any place there. He therefore leaves Middle-earth in company with his true peers, who include not only Bilbo but Gandalf, Elrond, and Galadriel. Frodo's departure thus reflects not only his own increased spiritual stature but the limitations of the Shire: the inhabitants are unable to understand either him or his sacrifice, nor is he able to find there the peace, comfort, and healing he had hoped for.

What makes this all the more problematic is that this is to some degree true for the other travellers as well. Sam is happily married, has a large family, and enjoys many years of respect both inside and outside the Shire; but when his wife dies, he too departs from the Shire and leaves to join Frodo in the West. Even Merry and Pippin, who never bore the Ring and who appear perfectly happy in their positions of social responsibility and recognition, do not die in the Shire but in foreign lands, visiting their former companions in Rohan and Gondor (III, 472). This seems extraordinary, given the tremendous social importance for hobbits of being with their own kind. What it suggests, however, is that despite the acceptance the adventurers feel on their return, once they have come of age in a larger world there is part of them which belongs to that world forever after. As Bilbo says to Gandalf on leaving Bag End for the last time:

I want to see mountains again Gandalf — *mountains*; and then find somewhere where I can *rest*.... [Frodo] would come with me, of course, if I asked him.... But he does not really want to, yet. I want to see the wild country again before I die, and the Mountains; but he is still in love with the Shire, with woods and fields and little rivers. (I, 58)

Like Frodo before his departure on his own quest, the inhabitants of the Shire are content in their own enclosed world. Despite the transformations wrought by the return of the travellers, the Shire remains not fully a part of Middle-earth, outside its marvels and mysteries.

For great as is the importance of the scouring of the Shire for the returning adventurers, its impact on the Shire itself is even greater, providing as it does a true coming-of-age for hobbit society in general. The hobbits' status as representatives of modern culture within the romantic world of Tolkien's fantasy, evidenced in the violent anachronisms that surround them (see, for example, Shippey, 50-55), has already been noted. Their other major

association as a class is with children, a similarity that is stressed repeatedly and in a variety of ways throughout the books: in the simplicity of hobbit customs, including, for example, their delight in presents, food, and birthday parties; in their physical stature and lack of beards; in the fact that they are constantly compared with children or mistaken for them by others (see, for example, II, 44, and II 302); in Pippin's easy friendship with Beregon's nine-year-old son; in the fact that they must be continually protected from the many evils that prowl their borders, and are unaware even of the fact that they are protected. Aragorn's comment about the simplicity of the Breefolk applies equally well to the hobbits of the Shire: "If simple folk are free from care and fear, simple they will be, and we must be secret to keep them so" (I, 326).

In protecting the hobbits, Aragorn and his people are merely continuing their duty as descendants of the old kings to maintain the peace for their unknowing subjects. One result, however, is that the hobbits have in many ways been cut off from full participation in the events of the outside world. They fight no wars, but neither do they embark on any adventures. In short, they are immature, both as individuals and as a race; sheltered from the challenges of life in Middle-earth, they have not achieved their true potential, and have in fact begun to lose sight of those elements of their heritage that pointed to the possibility of greater things. Even the dining customs of the hobbits, which one assumes they learned from the Númenoreans along with their language, have lost much of their higher significance: they still bow to their host and thank him, but have forgotten the ritualistic moment of silence in remembrance of lost Númenor, if indeed, they ever observed it (II, 361).

All this began to change with the quest of the Ring. For the first time since the fall of the North Kingdom over a thousand years before, hobbit representatives are present as active participants in the affairs of the outside world, playing key roles in the return of the king and restoration of the kingdom. In this way, the hobbits begin to pay back the debt they have incurred for their long protection by the Rangers and others. At the same time, they prove their worthiness for membership in the restored kingdom by contributing to that restoration. The fact that this validation and repayment take place through the intermediation of proxies, specifically members of the hobbit aristocracy, reflects the importance of kings and other leaders in Tolkien's world as symbolic and spiritual figures as well as military and political figures. Gondor is a Númenorean state not because the majority of its citizens are of Númenorean descent, but because its nobles are; in accepting Aragorn as their king during the coronation sequence, the citizens of Gondor are not only accepting his credentials but proving their worthiness in his kingly heritage. Similarly, by acknowledging Merry, Pippin, Sam, and Frodo as heroes on their return, the hobbits of the Shire accept as valid their vicarious acts on their behalf. The adventurers thus become bridges, or links, between the

outside world and the immature and protected world of the Shire, while by accepting them as their leaders, the hobbits take the symbolic step of inviting the outside world into their own land — a step in their own growing maturity.

There is yet another respect in which the scouring of the Shire represents a hobbit coming-of-age, for while Frodo and the others have been occupied with the business of the quest, the outside world has intruded in a violent way into the Shire's accustomed peace and prosperity. As Farmer Cotton describes it,

It all began with Pimple, as we call him.... He'd funny ideas, had Pimple. Seems he wanted to own everything himself, and then order other folk about. It soon came out that he already did own a sight more than was good for him; and he was always grabbing more....

Of course he started with a lot of property in the Southfarthing which he had from his dad, and it seems he'd been selling a lot o' the best leaf, and sending it away quietly for a year or two. But at the end o' last year, he began sending away loads of stuff, not only leaf. Things began to get short, and winter coming on, too. Folk got angry, but he had his answer. A lot of Men, ruffians mostly, came with great waggons.... And before we knew where we were they were planted here and there all over the Shire, and were felling trees and digging and building themselves sheds and houses just as they liked. (III, 360)

By the time the adventurers return, the ruffians, now taking orders from a vengeful Saruman, are doing their best to destroy the Shire: "They cut down trees and let 'em lie, they burn houses and build no more." (III, 361). In order to stop the destruction and regain control of their own land, the hobbits must organize under Merry and Pippin's leadership and take the responsibility for defending themselves. Even before the adventurers return, however, the hobbits begin to act against the invaders: Farmer Cotton smuggles food to Gaffer Gamgee in defiance of the rules, doubtless part of a widespread passive resistance; Frodo's friend Fredegar Bolger helps organize a band of rebels; and Took drive the ruffians off their lands when they came collecting. All they require is a new set of leaders with preparation to match the needs of their own new situation — leaders such as Merry, Pippin, Sam, and even (as the confrontation with Saruman shows) Frodo.

All this represents a major step forward in terms of social maturity in Tolkien's world, in which even those (like Frodo) who chose not to take up arms in defence of themselves must earn that right by first proving their willingness and capability to do so. The hobbits must prove themselves capable of taking care of themselves, rather than being taken care of. On another level, the more thoughtful among them ought also to recognize that part of what made them so vulnerable was their lack of internal organization and complicity about events in the outside world. They are thus prepared, by the time Frodo and the others return, both to accept their forthcoming affiliation with Aragorn's kingdom and to welcome with open arms

the skills and experiences the adventurers bring — again, acts of acceptance on their part which represent steps into a wider world.

Exactly what this means in terms of future hobbit attitudes and actions remains uncertain. We know that the expulsion of the ruffians is followed by a period of great peace and prosperity, leading to the creation of the Westmarch thirty years later, and that centers of learning are established in Buckland, at Tuckborough, and the Tower Hills, with information both about the hobbits' own past and regarding the larger history of the West. Samwise's daughter, Elanor, is made a maid of honor to Queen Arwen; the *mallorn* thrives in Hobbiton; and the Thain, the Master of Buckland, and the Mayor of the Shire are made Counsellors of the North Kingdom, indicating a continuing and relatively vigorous participation of at least some of the hobbits in the affairs of the greater realm. On the other hand, the Shire obviously continues on some ways to be an insulated and insular place. Aragorn issues a decree forbidding men to enter it, implying a continuing need for special protection and insulation from the outside world (III, 471). Merry, Pippin, Sam, and Frodo must all eventually leave, suggesting some deficiency in the depth and breadth of the hobbit culture. Above all, the hobbits themselves continue to be hobbits — partly grown children, halfings caught between the world of the adventurous quest and the unromantic reality of modern life — and so, we presume, incapable of entering fully into the heroic realm of Aragorn and Gandalf, while at the same time one step removed from the mundanity of our own.

It is in this connection that the hobbits assume what I feel is their greatest importance for ourselves as modern readers. For on yet another level, the journey — out from the protected world of childhood, on the one hand, or of nonheroic commercialized society on the other — is the quest each of us undertakes whenever we embark into the realm of the imagination. The Shire, halfway house of adventure, is the story itself, through whose portals we enter into that realm to seek for the treasures of personal, social, and spiritual maturity in our own coming-of-age, both as individuals and as a culture — a coming-of-age made possible not only by the efforts of individual readers, but by the transforming power of the heroic quest. ☛

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