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Abstract
Analyzes elements of political philosophy as espoused in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Sees stewardship and the individual vs. the group as significant political themes, as well as distrust of democracy, technology, and potentially avaricious rulers.

Additional Keywords
Political philosophy in J.R.R. Tolkien; Stewardship in The Hobbit; Stewardship in The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Hobbit—Political aspects; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Political aspects
"Dangerous as a Guide to Deeds"
Politics in the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien
William Blackburn

Criticism of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien sometimes requires real determination, a grim and resolute exertion of the will bordering on the heroic – or at least on the perverse. Certainly many of my students regard as perverse my interest in Tolkien’s treatment of politics in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. A few argue that political analysis is irrelevant to what are essentially works of "children’s literature." (This argument makes the dubious assumption that Tolkien is only for little people, and the yet more dubious assumption that the purported ignorance of the reader somehow justifies the actual ignorance of the critic.) Others politely inform me that Tolkien’s heroes, with their valor and honor and loyalty, are incalculably remote from the inept deception and double-talk many young people have learned to accept as the inevitable glories of modern political life. Even those who do not consider Tolkien a political naive may well ask themselves: What, if anything, has the work of such an old-fashioned writer of fantasy to do with politics?

The fact of the matter is that Tolkien’s fiction has much in common with other works of political fantasy. Like, for example, Thomas More in *Utopia* (1516), Tolkien addresses himself to perennial problems, including the problems of rule, and leadership, and the exercise of power. These are the traditional concerns of the writer of political fantasy. Furthermore, Tolkien exceeds many such writers in the skill with which he handles character. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle draws this distinction between history and poetry:

one tells of what happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen while poetry is concerned with universal truths, history treats of particular facts. By universal truths are to be understood the kinds of thing a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation; and this is the aim of poetry, although it gives individual names to its characters.

Tolkien’s interest in character gives his fiction something of the authority of fable. He writes, not of one age of man, but, as the fabulist does, of human nature in all ages. For this reason alone, his treatment of politics is worthy of serious attention.

Furthermore, Tolkien was himself keenly aware of the connection between fantasy in literature and fantasy in politics. In his essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien admits that

fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the mind out of which it came. But of what human thing in this fallen world is that not true? Men have conceived not only of elves, but they have imagined gods, and worshipped them, even worshipped those most deformed by their author’s own evil: they have made false gods out of other materials: their notions, their banners, their monies; even their sciences and their social and economic theories have demanded human sacrifice."

Tolkien’s anatomy of these "false gods" – about which he has some very definite ideas indeed – makes politics a major concern of his fiction. The complexities of that fiction offer an object lesson in the difficulties of reading political fantasy. Like the mirror of Galadriel, Tolkien’s fiction shows many marvellous things – but it is dangerous as a guide of deeds." When Frodo looks into the mirror, what he sees does not make him happy, but he learns something about himself, and he also discovers that "seeing is both good and perilous." Frodo’s discovery is one which the lover of Tolkien’s fiction does well to keep in mind, for, as Gandalf says of the palantiri, "perilous to us all are the devices of an art deeper than we possess ourselves."

An examination of Tolkien’s political preferences, as they are suggested in his work, may well lead one to agree with Roger Sale’s description of Tolkien’s fiction as "the masterpiece of a crank."

There are many things Tolkien doesn’t seem to like, and one can detect an interesting pattern to his peevishness – even in a book as sunny as *The Hobbit*. One feature of this pattern is the author’s fondness for pitting strongly individual heroes against a mob; more that once, the novel suggests that evil is concentrated in certain social classes and groups. The trolls, for example, speak with an accent that betrays their working-class origins. The goblins are likewise types, the soulless and unclean devotees of technology, to whom, as Tolkien pointedly reminds us, we are indebted for the wonders of the Machine Age:

Goblins are cruel, wicked, and bad-hearted. They make no beautiful things, but they make many clever ones.... It is not unlikely that they invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosives always delighted them, and also not working with their own hands more than they could help; but in those days and those wild parts they had not advanced (as it is called) so far.

The great dragon Smaug, whatever he may owe to his forebears in literature, is really a bourgeois in a dragon suit:
Dragons steal gold and jewels... and they guard their plunder as long as they live... and never enjoy a brass ring of it. Indeed they hardly know a good bit of work from a bad, though they usually have a good notion of the current market value; and they can't make a thing for themselves, not even mend a little loose scale of their armour.

When he detects Bilbo's theft of the cup, this scaly hoarder of unearned wealth exhibits "the sort of rage that is only seen when rich folk that have more than they can enjoy suddenly lose something that they have long had but never before used or wanted."

So Tolkien's major villains in The Hobbit either act in groups or, as in the case of Smaug, somehow represent groups. But his heroes are strongly individual - sometimes, as in Bilbo's case to their own astonishment. They are loyal to their society, of course, but their primary allegiance is to their own integrity, and so all undergo periods of estrangement from the society they serve. Bard, the saviour of Lake-town, is a mere fighting man, deprived of his birthright as lord of Dale. Gandalf is, by choice, an exile and a wanderer. Even Bilbo, though a scion of the English greatness, is a strongly individual hobbit, carefully distinguished from his greedy and unadventurous relatives. Tolkien is also careful to see to it that Bilbo's virtues are the right ones; all the counsels of expediency, for example, cannot persuade him to murder the defenseless Gollum in order to save his own life ("Riddles in the Dark"). But Tolkien is also careful to see to it that Bilbo must prove himself time and again, and the effect of this is to make him independent of his neighbors and their expectations. As Gandalf tells him at the end of the novel: "My dear Bilbo... You are not the hobbit that you were."

Tolkien's fondness for presenting the struggle of good and evil as the struggle of the individual against the mob is not the only feature of The Hobbit to have political overtones. His depiction of evil, like his depiction of romantic individualism, indicates Tolkien's interest in political issues. Evil in The Hobbit is concentrated in the figure of Smaug, the dragon of the Lonely Mountain. Smaug's greed, though characteristic of treasure-guarding dragons, enables Tolkien to address a range of evils in the novel, for Dragon-sickness, the irrational lust for gold, dooms man and monster alike.

In his creation of Smaug, Tolkien puts to good use his knowledge of Anglo-Saxon literature. Readers of Beowulf will see that Smaug resembles Grendel and his dam in being, not merely an evil character, but a type of evil. Grendel is a monster, an outcast; to hear the poet's song as being, not merely an evil character, but a type of evil. Tolkien is also careful to see to it that Bilbo's virtues are the right ones; all the counsels of expediency, for example, cannot persuade him to murder the defenseless Gollum in order to save his own life ("Riddles in the Dark"). But Tolkien is also careful to see to it that Bilbo must prove himself time and again, and the effect of this is to make him independent of his neighbors and their expectations. As Gandalf tells him at the end of the novel: "My dear Bilbo... You are not the hobbit that you were."

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"If the elf-king had a weakness it was for treasure... and though his hoard was rich, he was eager for more.... His people neither mined nor worked metals or jewels, nor did they bother much with trade or with till ing the earth.

Thorin, the leader of the dwarves, also shares the Dragon's greed, and is undone by the lust for treasure. On his deathbed, he admits his error and asserts the central values of the novel, telling Bilbo:

there is more in you of good that you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure. If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.

The Master of Lake-town shows the closest resemblance to Smaug. He is reluctant to help Thorin and his company recover the treasure because

the Elvenking was very powerful in those parts, and the Master wished for no enmity with him, nor did he think much of old songs, giving his mind to trade and tolls, to cargoes and gold, to which habit he owed his position.

In Tolkien's view, the Master is unfit to hold office because he devotes his energies to maintaining his position and wealth, rather than to nourishing his people. He almost succeeds in preventing the crowning of Bard, who saved the town after the Master himself had deserted it. Though all the Master has is "a good head for business-especially his own business," and though his people "have had enough of the old man and the money-counters," we are pointedly reminded that "the Master had not got his position for nothing." He speaks so persuasively "that for the moment the people quite forgot their idea of a new king, and turned their angry thoughts towards Thorin and his company." Tolkien's point is that the Master's eloquence, like his greed, links him with Smaug; both man and monster dominates others by the power of his eloquence. Cunning and demagoguery alone argue his right to rule. By contrast, Bard (like Aragorn in The Lord of the Rings) rules by right of both lineage and personal sacrifice. Bard risks his life to save Lake-town, but of equal importance in Tolkien's eyes in the fact that Bard is "a descendant in long line of Girion, Lord of Dale." Bard's last arrow, the arrow with which he kills the dragon, is itself a symbol of that tradition Tolkien reverses: "Black arrow! I have saved you to the last. You have never failed me and always I have recovered you. I had you from my father, and he from of old"

The contest of Bard and the Master of Lake-town illustrates Tolkien's concept of the good ruler. More disturb-
his penchant for making his evil characters types, repre­

elusive in it.” Here Tolkien suggests that what is wrong with democracy is that it carries to power, not those who have the best right to rule as stewards of the common good, but those who, through the power of their eloquence, are able to manipulate the igno­
rant masses. Like Coriolanus, Tolkien regards democracy with suspicion because it places too much responsibility in the hands of the mob. This suspicion is vindicated when the Master, crazed by greed, abandons subterfuge — and loses for all time the fellowship, the food and cheer and song that Bilbo is wise enough to value above hoarded gold:

The old Master had come to a bad end. Bard had given him much gold for the help of the Lake-people, but being of the kind that easily catches such disease he fell under the dragon-sickness and took most of the gold and fled with it and died of starvation in the Waste, deserted by his companions.

So, in *The Hobbit*, we see that Tolkien’s respect for tradition and the traditional virtues of the English yeomanry is inextricably bound up with his suspicion both of the proletariat and of the democratic process, and his mistrust of industry and technology and commerce. In place of elected officials like the Master of Lake-town, Tolkien offers us leaders who are strongly individual, and also dedicated stewards (albeit sometimes self-appointed) of the public good. To the extent that they value riches above the fellowship Tolkien shows that Thorin, the Elvenking, and the Master are all unfit to rule. All suffer the effects of Dragon-sickness, and so are all evil stewards, putting personal gain above the welfare of their people. In Tolkien’s opinion, those who are worthy to rule and lead are those who genuinely strive to be stewards of the public good. Such characteristics are Gandalf, who asks nothing for himself; Beorn (“there were no things of gold or silver in his hall, and few save the knives were made of metal at all”); and Bilbo, who renounces his claim to the treasure when he buys peace by giving the Arkenstone to Bard: “Bilbo, not without a shudder, not without a glance of longing, handed the marvellous stone to Bard....” The temptation against which Bilbo struggles is one which proves too strong for many characters in the novel; his decision is the culmination of that process of self-discovery and self-discipline which he has undergone throughout the novel. In the course of his struggles, Bilbo has learned independence and tapped unsuspected reservoirs of courage and self-reliance, transforming himself from someone who, in the words of the Elvenking, is “more worthy to wear the armour of elf-princes than many that have looked more com­

ey in it.”

Tolkien’s suspicion of man-in-the-mass is revealed in his penchant for making his evil characters types, representing classes and categories rather than individuals. He places his faith in heroic stewards, rather than in political groups or institutions, and counsels us to choose our leaders well and then trust them completely, as Bilbo trusts Bard. This notion of stewardship is at once the chief strength of Tolkien’s fiction and the chief limitation of his political philosophy, for if there is anything more naive than a blind faith in our political machinery, it is a blind faith in our political leaders. Tolkien encourages such a faith by making his stewards so damnably plausible. We love and trust Bilbo Baggins because he seeks nothing for himself, because he supports the transfer of power to Bard, and because he maintains a same perspective, never forgetting that he is “only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all.” But we ought to bear in mind that Bard and Bilbo are scarcely typical of politicians in general. Perhaps there is no real alternative to trusting our political leaders, but those who rise to power are seldom as resistant to Dragon-sickness as Tolkien’s heroes are. And seldom do we know them so well. We approve of Bard and Bilbo because everything in Tolkien’s fiction insists that we are right to do so. Poetry is, claims Aristotle, the supreme vehicle for revealing character; and it is the character of Tolkien’s stewards, we are also implicitly approving his conservatism and his impatience with the rapscallion democracy of Lake-town. Tolkien’s persuasive portrayal of his stewards may well blind us to the fact that their actions, however right in Tolkien’s fiction, may be undesirable as political precedents. However much these heroes deserve our admiration, we must be wary of seeking political wisdom in a fiction which ignores the complex problems of constitutional government and asks us to put our complete trust in stewards we can only assume to have our best interests at heart.

The concept of stewardship must be approached with a like caution in Tolkien’s complex exploration of power in *The Lord of the Rings*. Here we once again find Tolkien’s true stewards, allied with the forces of Nature (the Ents, Tom Bombadil), ranged against the sub-human masses and the dark Satanic mills of Saruman and Sauron. Saruman has “a mind of metal and wheels.” He also has “armouries, smithies and great furnaces. Iron wheels revolved there endlessly.... lit from beneath with red light, or blue, or venomous green.” The legacy of Sauron is to render Mordor “a land defiled, diseases beyond all healing.” Those readers occasionally made uneasy by *The Hobbit* may well raise an eyebrow at the information that the Enemy’s armies include “black men like half-trolls, with white eyes and red tongues,” or at Sam Gamgee’s advice to himself: “Don’t trust your head. Samwise, it is not the best part of you.”

In the Ring-trilogy, the problem of power is of paramount importance; here, as in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien resolves it by creating characters who are plausible as true stewards. The Ring poses a sharp question to Gandalf and his friends: they dare not use it alone, lest it fall into the hands of the Dark Lord. The Ring that comes to possess its possessor is Tolkien’s metaphor for power of all kinds. Tol­

kien’s solution here, is, once again, to be found in the no-
tion of stewardship: only those who do not desire power are fit to be trusted with it. Gandalf, for instance, can so be trusted because he knows that he cannot trust himself. When Frodo seeks to evade the responsibility of choice by offering the Ring to the "wise and powerful" Gandalf, the wizard responds with an uncharacteristic vehemence:

"No!" cried Gandalf, springing to his feet. "Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself... Do not tempt me, I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength."

Gandalf is the type of the good steward in Tolkien's extended study of stewardship in the trilogy; as Gandalf tells Denethor, "the rule of no realm is mine.... But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care.... For I also am a steward. Did you not know?": All the characters who are tempted by power must choose between personal profit and the public good. Some, like Frodo and Galadriel choose well; some, like Saruman and Boromir and Gollum, choose badly; and some, like Denethor, break under the strain. The choice is utterly personal, and Tolkien insists that all political decisions and policies follow from the individual's struggle with the temptations of power. Those who succumb to these temptations (Saruman, Gollum, Boromir) undo themselves by their decision. Only those who can exercise power without being corrupted by it (Gandalf, Aragorn, Faramir) are permitted to survive that exercise.

Thanks to Tolkien's true stewards, the Shadow is lifted from Middle-earth for a time - but the price exacted is a grievous one. Lothlorien perishes; Bilbo, Frodo, and Gandalf take ship with the Elves and sail into the darkling west, never to return. Tolkien is careful to show us that victory is never cheap - but his resolution of events may well trouble us for other reasons - reasons which once again have to do with the supremacy of character in Tolkien's fiction, a supremacy which encourages the reader to trust his heart rather than his head. Despite the value Tolkien places on fellowship, his heroes are all strongly individual, and take personal responsibility for the common good. Sauron is a true fascist, ruling by force and slavery, untroubled by any notion of stewardship; Gandalf and Company are all free creatures, willingly allied, held together by a belief in their common cause. That cause itself depends upon Frodo, and Frodo's solitary choice at the Cracks of Doom. On the very brink, at the moment when he can finally cast his burden into the fire, the steward of the Ring wavers, then asserts as an act of free will his capitulation to Evil: "I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine." The allies are saved only because Gollum, a most timely monster ex machina, rips the ring from Frodo's hand then conveniently tumbles into the abyss. Tolkien has been using Gollum as an alter ego for Frodo throughout the third volume of the trilogy, and there is certainly poetic justice and psychological truth in plenty here. But the fictional and the political are at odds at this point; what is necessary and probable to one is by no means so to the other. The reader who understands what the fiction tells him about Frodo's character perceives the rightness of Tolkien's resolution of events - but soul-less political realists may well find Tolkien's tidy disposal of temptation at the moment of crisis somewhat too providential to be reassuring.

What is troubling about this scene on Mount Doom is that, once again, we see Tolkien put the fate of an entire society in the hands of one individual, and then arrange events to justify his doing so. His fiction of course demands that Tolkien trust Frodo with the Ring. (After all, what sort of brute could find it in his heart to wish that Frodo had delegated the Ring's disposal to a committee?) But it is precisely this demand that makes Tolkien's fiction "dangerous as a guide of deeds." Fiction depicts political actions which are justified on fictional, rather than political, grounds. For the same reason the reader may well find himself disturbed by the scouring of the Shire when Frodo and his comrades return from the wars. They find Saruman at work, the Shire desolate and ugly, its inhabitants terrorized into silence or collaboration, and the black smog so characteristic of Mordor shadowing the land. Our small band of heroes is justly outraged by this betrayal of all they have fought for. They quickly organize resistance, and rout Sharkey's forces in "the battle of Bywater... the last battle fought in the Shire." What is disturbing here is the suggestion that it may be both necessary and desirable for a disgruntled army to make political actions into its own hands. Frodo is, of course, a true steward. We cannot doubt the righteousness of his action in this particular case, but - especially considering the parallels between the Shire under Sharkey and Britain under a Labour government after the Second World War (Sharkey and Co. "do more gathering than sharing, and we never see most of the stuff again") - we may well have reservations about the political precedent Tolkien's fiction here endorses. Tolkien's art veils the very real danger in accepting Frodo's particular action - an action performed by somebody we have been carefully taught to love and trust as a political precedent. Frodo's action is justified by its fictional result - a lasting peace. But the reader who trusts his head long enough to ask "When, except in the pages of fantasy, has there ever been a 'last battle'?" will recognize the need to be on his guard.

What saves Tolkien from simple fascism is his idea of the true leader as the steward of the common good. Before they part, Gandalf tells the hobbits: "I am not coming to the Shire. You must settle its affairs yourselves; that is what you have been trained for." His cadres have learned their lesson well. When Frodo returns home, he acts, not for himself, but for all the inhabitants of the Shire; Pippin defies Sharkey's thugs, not on his authority or for his own profit, but as "a messenger of the king." Tolkien's portrait of such characters, and so we may implicitly accept their creator's despair of the common people, and may even find ourselves condoning political precedents of a most alarming kind.
In these novels, Tolkien’s political thinking requires us to place our complete trust in those who have established their right and ability to lead. But he purposes no practical method by which we can even attempt to select suitable leaders, and does not seem to believe in our ability to govern ourselves democratically and wisely. Nor does Tolkien show much interest in any system of checks and balances which would encourage our political leaders to resist the temptations of power. We would not want Tolkien to crowd his pages with resolutions and majorities, referenda and ballot-boxes. To do so would be neither necessary nor probable, nor pleasing in a work of fiction. But, by the two-fold strategy of asking us to trust our leaders completely, and creating characters who evoke that trust, Tolkien evades grappling with one of the most pressing political problems of our age. Of course he knows that might does not make right, but he also knows that right without might is a hollow reed, and so he presents the hero as the steward of the public good. Stewardship is, for Tolkien, a means of balancing power with service, of reconciling the political and the spiritual, the social and the individual. His belief in the virtues of self-discipline and self-sacrifice is certainly worthy of our respect, as is his demand that our leaders be true stewards and combine these qualities. But his work is fiction, not history; a record, not of what men have done, but of what they might do if character were able to impose its will on events. Tragedy teaches us that character is destiny; the melancholy lessons of history teach something quite different. As students of fantasy and lovers of Tolkien’s novels, we can trust in the possibility of the stewardship he depicts so persuasively. As students of human nature and citizens of Middle-earth, we must admit that such stewardship is more often encountered in literature than in life. Still, Tolkien himself reminds us that the fantasies of literature help determine the fantasies of politics, and it is precisely for this reason that we do well to heed the political implications of his fiction. We should know what it is that we put into the hands of our children and our students. Let them have Tolkien’s heroes, and rejoice in their good fortune – but let them also have Tolkien’s warning that fiction is “dangerous as a guide of deeds.” Let us teach them to submit Tolkien’s fiction to the test of the head, as well as the test of the heart; and let us encourage them to distinguish between Tolkien’s heroes as individuals in a work of fiction, and those heroes as precedents for our political life. We may love Tolkien, but we need not altogether trust him. In the midst of the fantasies of politics, let us recall and pass on to our Children – Valentine Blacker’s admonition to “put your trust in God, my boys, and keep your powder dry.” On the need for such enduring vigilance, Tolkien and even his most perverse critic are all too likely to find themselves regretfully enough – in complete agreement.

NOTES
3 Tolkien and the Critics, ed. N.O. Isacs and R.A. Zimbardo, p. 248
5 It is the general stupidity, cowardice and greed of both human- and hobbit-kind that frustrates Gandalf and Aragorn for so long, that permits Sauron to attain the heights he does, and that betrays the Shire to Sharkey and his crew.
6 This distinction may usefully be made in the context of many works of fantasy and science fiction. For example, would we be comfortable with either Mike Smith (Heinlein’s Stranger in a Strange Land) or Gilbert Gowsen (Van Vogt’s The World of Null-A) in the White House?