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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 naif 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 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 always 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 it was composed Tolkien shows many characters in The Hobbit who share Smaug's evil qualities. The King of the elves, for instance, recalls Smaug in his indolent greed:

"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 tilling 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 reveres: "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-
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 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.

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. Tolkien'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 per­

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 affairs into its own hands. Frodo is, of course, a true steward. We cannot doubt the rightness 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 regrettably 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 Gosseyn (Van Vogt's The World of Null-A) in the White House?

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Mythopoeic Core Reading List
Mythlore frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the purpose of Mythlore. In order to be a general help, the following is what might be considered a core reading list, containing the most well known and frequently discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given.

Good reading!
J.R.R. Tolkien

C.S. Lewis
Out of the Silent Planet 1938; Perelandra 1943; That Hideous Strength 1945; The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe 1950; Prince Caspian 1951; The Voyage of the Dawn Treader 1952; The Silver Chair 1953; The Horse and His Boy 1954; The Magician's Nephew 1955; The Last Battle 1956; Till We Have Faces 1956.

Charles Williams
War in Heaven 1930; Many Dimensions 1931; The Place of the Lion 1931; The Greater Trumps 1932; Shadows of Ecstasy 1933; Descent Into Hell 1937; All Hallow's Eve 1945; Taliesin through Logres 1938, and The Region of the Summer Stars 1944 (the last two printed together in 1954).