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Círdan the Shipwright: Tolkien's Bodhisattva Who Brings Us to the Other Shore

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Abstract

Tolkien wrote that Círdan the Shipwright “saw further and deeper than any other in Middle-earth” despite being a minor, incidental character in both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The important role that Círdan plays in Tolkien’s secondary universe can be understood by looking at him as a bodhisattva in a Buddhist tradition. Círdan’s role throughout the Three Ages of Middle-earth chronicled by Tolkien was to come to the aid of others, to reduce their suffering, and particularly to help facilitate their sailing to the “Blessed Lands” in the West (which can be seen as a metaphor for seeking light, or enlightenment), while he himself remains behind to continue to serve others on that path. Tolkien’s statement that it was Círdan—and not one of the more prominent, powerful, and celebrated characters such as Elrond or Galadriel—who sees further and deeper is a profound statement of the value that Tolkien placed on compassion and service to others; on being, in the words of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, a bodhisattva who practices the insight that brings us to the other shore.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Círdan; Bodhisattvas; Buddhism



CÍRDAN THE SHIPWRIGHT:
TOLKIEN'S BODHISATVA WHO
BRINGS US TO THE OTHER SHORE

DOUGLAS CHARLES KANE

Círdan saw further and deeper than any other in Middle-earth ...

J.R.R. TOLKIEN WROTE THIS STATEMENT IN APPENDIX B of *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR* App B. 1085). One would expect that a character referred to in such a way by an author would be one of the most prominent figures in that author's work. Yet despite being a constant presence throughout the three ages of Middle-earth chronicled in Tolkien's legendarium, Círdan seems to be no more than a minor, incidental character in both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Many readers would likely never even see the statement quoted above, buried as it is in an appendix that many casual readers would skip. And Tolkien scholars have shed little light about Círdan's importance in the legendarium, in some cases even belittling his role.

In a 1972 *Mythlore* paper entitled "The Wielders of The Three and Other Trees," Paula Marmor writes that by passing Narya, the Ring of Fire, on to Gandalf, Círdan "relinquished his position to the Wizard Gandalf" (7). Clyde Kilby, who worked with Tolkien on the failed attempt to publish *The Silmarillion* during his lifetime, goes so far as to write in his book *Tolkien and the Silmarillion*, "Círdan is essentially a nobody, though he held Narya the Great, one of the Three Rings of Power, and we are told 'saw further and deeper than any other in Middle-earth'" (32). In his 1987 piece, "Círdan the Shipwright" in the *Minas Tirith Evening Star*, Richard Blackwelder quotes Kilby's statement about Círdan being "essentially a nobody" and responds by saying "It must be assumed that Tolkien never developed his history [...], not that he was an unimportant person in reality" (Blackwelder 11). However, while Blackwelder does a good job of summarizing Círdan's actions as portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and *Unfinished Tales*, he fails to provide much explanation of why Círdan was not "an unimportant person in reality." Similarly, in his 1996 paper "Círdan—one of unknown heroes," in *Amon Hen*, Marcel Büllés begins by stating that Círdan "is talked about as a most wise, valiant and important person but almost never really shows up in the stories" (15). Although Büllés goes on to say that he wanted to shed light about Círdan's character, like Blackwelder he simply summarizes Círdan's actions without giving much insight as to why he is important.

In the quarter-century since Büllés's paper, the only comments about Círdan that I have located in Tolkien scholarship, other than incidental references, are entries in compendiums, most extensively in Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond's *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* (see, e.g., Scull and Hammond C 808, G 239–240, 981, 1163). Michael Drouot's vast *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* does not even have an article on Círdan. The only reference to Círdan in the entire 774-page encyclopedia is an incidental reference to his surrendering Narya in the article on Gandalf (Stanton 230).

Nonetheless, Tolkien's statement that Círdan saw further and deeper than any other in Middle-earth has profound implications. Tolkien famously wrote of *The Lord of the Rings* in his late 1951 letter to Milton Waldman that "Hardly a word in its 600,000 or more has been unconsidered" (*Letters* 160, #131). While he was not speaking specifically of the appendices (which had not been completed yet when he made that statement), it is safe to say that the same care was applied. Tolkien would not have made such a definitive statement without a purpose. He was extraordinarily careful with his use of language. As Verlyn Flieger writes in her classic book *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*,

Both the Secondary World of Tolkien's fiction and the force field that holds it are built up out of words. Tolkien's response to words, to their shape and sound and meaning, was closer to that of a musician than a grammarian, and his response to language was instinctive and intuitive as well as intellectual. (Flieger 33)

Moreover, in this case the significance of the statement that Círdan saw further and deeper than anyone else in Middle-earth was further emphasized when Tolkien reiterated that statement in a later text, adding that it even included Galadriel, Elrond and Celeborn, characters that seem to be much more powerful and prominent figures in the secondary universe.

How then, can we reconcile the seeming contradiction between this explicit description of Círdan's great wisdom with his limited role in the narrative? Sometimes, when confronted with such a dilemma, it is helpful to look at the matter through a different prism. Here, the important role that Círdan plays in Tolkien's secondary universe can be understood by looking at him as a bodhisattva in a Zen Buddhist tradition.

"A bodhisattva is an enlightenment-seeking being who eschews *nirvāna* to teach compassion and help liberate fellow human beings" (Powell 34). As the late Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "Bodhisattvas vow to come back again and again to serve, not because of craving but because of their

concern and willingness to help” (Nhat Hanh, *Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching* 244).¹

That description applies well to Círdan, whose role throughout the three ages of Middle-earth chronicled by Tolkien was to come to the aid of others, to reduce their suffering, and particularly to help facilitate their sailing to the “Blessed Lands” in the West (which can be seen as a metaphor for seeking light, or enlightenment), while he himself remains behind to continue to serve others on that path. In the late text referred to above, likely written in the last year of Tolkien’s life, he revised Círdan’s story to make it clear that he gave up his own deep desire to travel to the Blessed Realm to serve the deeper purpose of providing aid to others. Tolkien’s statement that it was Círdan—and not one of the more prominent, powerful, and celebrated characters such as Elrond or Galadriel—who Tolkien describes as seeing further and deeper than any other in Middle-earth is a profound statement of the value that Tolkien placed on compassion and service to others; on being, in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, a bodhisattva who practices the insight that brings us to the other shore.

PREVIOUS BUDDHIST INTERPRETATIONS OF TOLKIEN’S WORK

Tolkien, of course, was not a Buddhist, nor is there any evidence that that he was directly influenced by any Buddhist traditions. However, as I and others have noted previously, while Tolkien’s work very clearly reflects his own deep Catholic beliefs, it also often echoes universal concepts that transcend his direct influences (Kane, “Túrin the Hapless” 149; see also Powell 37). That has sparked many efforts to look at Tolkien’s work through different lenses. In the past twenty years, there have been several attempts to look at Tolkien’s work from a Buddhist perspective, with varying degrees of success, including a couple of previous attempts at identifying figures within Tolkien’s legendarium who act as bodhisattvas.

In 2003, there were two pieces that engaged in Buddhist reflections into Tolkien’s work, Jennifer L. McMahon’s and B. Steve Csaki’s chapter “Talking Trees and Talking Mountains: Buddhist and Taoist Themes in *The Lord of the Rings*” in the book *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy: One Book to Rule Them All* and John Algeo’s “The Buddha and Tolkien: A discussion of the Four Noble Truths in fairy stories.” The following year David Loy and Linda Goodhew’s book *The Dharma of Dragons and Demons: Buddhist Themes in Modern Fantasy* included a chapter entitled “The Dharma of Engagement J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.” In 2011 there were two more pieces that attempted Buddhist interpretations of Tolkien’s work, Sarah J. Sprouse’s “Ending the Dualism of

¹ The term in Sanskrit literally means ‘a person whose essence is perfect knowledge’, from bodhi ‘perfect knowledge’ (budh- ‘know perfectly’) and sattva ‘being, essence’.

Nature and Industry in *The Lord of the Rings*" and "Hobbits as Buddhists and an Eye for an 'I'" by Paul Andrew Powell. Another paper vaguely referring to a Buddhist interpretation of Tolkien's work was Eric Reinders's "Reading Tolkien in Chinese," published in 2014, in which he notes that the terminology used for places like 'heaven' is so influenced by Buddhism that it colors the impression given to the reader of the translated text. Zuiko Julie Redding's "Our 'Precious': A Buddhist Meditation on the One Ring," published in 2017, is a brief mediation on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold path with examples from Tolkien's tale. Finally, my own paper "Túrin the Hapless: Tolkien and the Sanctification of Suffering," published in 2021, includes some discussion of Buddhist thought (Kane, "Túrin the Hapless" 149, 158), though it includes much more discussion of Tolkien's own Judeo-Christian beliefs (particularly regarding the Book of Job). However, the concepts in that piece did not come into focus until I began to develop a greater understanding of a Buddhist perspective on suffering.

Most relevant to this discussion, Loy and Goodhew make the claim (echoed by Sprouse) that Frodo and Sam "let go of all personal ambition, although not the ambition to do what is necessary to help others. In Buddhist terms, they become bodhisattvas" (Loy and Goodhew 27; Sprouse 28). Loy and Goodhew also describe Gandalf as "the definition and the model of a modern bodhisattva, the sort we need today" (40–41). Similarly, Powell posits that Tom Bombadil is the character that most exemplifies the bodhisattva in the text of *The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] (34).

Of these, the character with the most dubious claim to being a bodhisattva is Sam. His actions were not motivated so much by the ambition to do what is necessary to help others in general as they were by his devotion to his master, Frodo, which as Tolkien says, "had an ingredient (probably inevitable) of pride and possessiveness" (*Letters* 329, #246). Similarly, while Bombadil certainly gives aid in need to Frodo and his companions, he demonstrates little interest in doing what is necessary to help others generally. As Gandalf says of him, "he is withdrawn into a little land, within bounds that he has set, though none can see them, waiting perhaps for a change of days, and he will not step beyond them" (*LotR* II.2.265). Gandalf then adds in response to the question of whether Bombadil would take the Ring and guard it, since it seemed to have no power over him: "'No,' said Gandalf, 'not willingly. He might do so, if all the free folk of the world begged him, but he would not understand the need. And if he were given the Ring, he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind. He would be a most unsafe guardian; and that alone is answer enough'" (*Ibid*). This strongly contradicts the idea of Bombadil as a bodhisattva. As for Gandalf himself, while he certainly selflessly serves the people of Middle-earth, his role as an emissary from the Valar, an angelic being clothed in flesh, conflicts with the idea of a

bodhisattva as an “enlightenment-seeking being who eschews *nirvāna* to teach compassion and help liberate fellow human beings.”

Of the four, the best case can be made for Frodo, who in his own words “tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me” (*LotR* VI.9.1029). But Frodo’s role is more as a martyr than as a bodhisattva. Though he is granted the right to travel to the Blessed Realm, “this is strictly only a temporary reward: a healing and redress of suffering” (*Letters* 198, #154). And, as will be seen, it is Círdan who acts as the gatekeeper that allows Frodo to go to the Blessed Realm (and for Gandalf to return there) and that in doing so he is acting as a bodhisattva in a distinct way.

THE HISTORY OF CÍRDAN

To understand Círdan’s role, it is helpful to trace how his history evolved over the course of Tolkien’s creation of the legendarium. Círdan did not appear at all in any of the pre-*Lord of the Rings* versions of the tales of the Elder Days, nor is he included in the drafts of the early sections of *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps fittingly, he first makes an “appearance” in the drafting of the *Lord of the Rings* chapter on the *palantir*, in the passage where Gandalf describes the history of the *palantíri* to Pippin:

Seven they set up. At Minas Anor that is now Minas Tirith there was one, and one at Minas Ithil, and others at Aglarond the Caves of Splendour which men call Helm’s Deep, and at Orthanc. Others were far away, I know not where, maybe at Fornost, and at Mithlond [**struck out: where Círdan harboured the . . . ships . . .**] (**in**) the Gulf of Lune where the grey ships lie. But the chief and master . . . [?of (the) stones] was at Osgiliath before it was ruined. (*War of the Ring* 76)

Christopher Tolkien notes that this is “the first appearance of Círdan in the manuscripts of *The Lord of the Rings*” (*Ibid*). In fact, it is his first appearance anywhere in the legendarium.

Christopher later comments that “The remainder of the chapter in the first manuscript reaches the final form in all but a few respects,” but that Gandalf still says there were five stones in Gondor, and of the other two, “Maybe they were at Fornost, and with **Kirdan** at Mith[l]ond in the Gulf of Lune where the grey ships lie” (77). This seems to be only occasion where Círdan’s name is spelt with a ‘K’ instead of a ‘C.’ Two days later (on April 3, 1944), Tolkien wrote to Christopher that he was copying and polishing this chapter but, as Christopher notes, “Gandalf still says that he does not know where the others had been ‘for no rhyme says’, but maybe in Fornost and with **Círdan** at the Grey Havens” (*War of the Ring* 77–78; see also *Letters* 70, #59).

Círdan next appears in a draft of the chapter "Many Partings." In the section describing Arwen's conversation with Frodo in Minas Tirith when she offers him her place on the ship into the West, she says "Take with you the Phial of Galadriel and **Círdan will not refuse you**" (*Sauron Defeated* 66–67). This is the first indication that Círdan had a special role of facilitating the passage of others to the Undying Lands in the West, although the reference to him here is ultimately removed in the final published form (*LotR* VI.6.974–975).

Christopher observes of the drafting of the final chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, "The Grey Havens," that "The last part of the chapter was set down with great sureness, though not all elements in the final story were immediately present. At the meeting of Frodo and Sam with the Elves in the Woody End there is no mention of the Great Rings of Elrond and Galadriel; at Mithlond **Círdan the Shipwright does not appear (but enters in a later marginal addition)**" (*Sauron Defeated* 109). In the final form of this chapter, Círdan prepares the way for the bearers of the Three Rings and many others of the Eldar, plus Frodo and Bilbo, to embark on the ship at the Grey Havens that bears them into the West:

As they came to the gates Círdan the Shipwright came forth to greet them. Very tall he was, and his beard was long, and he was grey and old, save that his eyes were keen as stars; and he looked at them and bowed, and said: 'All is now ready.'

Then Círdan led them to the Havens, and there was a white ship lying [...]. (*LotR* VI.9.1030)

Though it is not noted in the *History of Middle-earth* volumes on the drafting of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien then added references to Círdan in the earlier parts of *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly in the chapter "The Council of Elrond," where Elrond describes how he and Círdan were the only ones to stand by Gil-galad in the battle with Sauron in the Last Alliance and how he and Círdan tried unsuccessfully to convince Isildur to destroy the One Ring (II.2.243).

When Tolkien returned to the tales of the Elder Days after *The Lord of the Rings* was finished but not yet published, he included in *The Annals of Aman* a statement that Círdan was the lord of those members of the Teleri that Ossë persuaded to remain in Middle-earth when Olwë and most of his people traveled to Valinor and became the first mariners in Middle-earth and the first makers of ships (*Morgoth's Ring* 85). Christopher noted in his commentary that "Círdan the Shipwright, lord of the Havens, appears from *The Lord of the Rings*" (90). Interestingly, Círdan does not appear at all in the equivalent section of the later *Quenta Silmarillion* that was written in the same time period (175). While this statement about Círdan being the lord of those who Olwë persuaded to

remain in Middle-earth was included in the published *Silmarillion* (*Silmarillion* 58), as will be seen, Tolkien subsequently substantially changed and expanded that story, as will be seen. However, that expansion was not included in the published *Silmarillion*.

Other than simply naming him as the Lord of the Havens (or similar language), almost all further references to Círdan in Tolkien's work in the 1950s on the tales of the First Age relate to his providing aid to others. For instance, in a passage taken from the *Grey Annals* and included in Chapter 15, "Of the Noldor in Beleriand," of the published *Silmarillion* he sends messages of warning to Thingol of the unrest that Morgoth is stirring (*War of the Jewels* [WotJ] 42; *Silmarillion* 128). In another passage taken from the *Grey Annals* and included in Chapter 18, "Of the Ruin of Beleriand and the Fall of Fingolfin," when Fingon was hardpressed by the army of Morgoth and outnumbered, "the ships of Círdan sailed in great strength up the Firth of Drengist, and in the hour of need the Elves of the Falas came upon the host of Morgoth from the west" (*Silmarillion* 160; WotJ 60). In yet another passage from the *Grey Annals* included in Chapter 20, "Of the Fifth Battle," Turgon seeks the aid of Círdan, who at his bidding "built seven swift ships, and they sailed out into the West" (*Silmarillion* 196; WotJ 80). In Túrin's story as told in Chapter 22, "Of Túrin Turambar," as well as in *Unfinished Tales* and *The Children of Húrin*, Círdan sends a warning to Orodreth, Lord of Nargothrond from Ulmo with the elves Gelmir and Arminas (*Silmarillion* 212; see also *Unfinished Tales* [UT] 159–62 and *Children of Húrin* 171–75).

When *The Lord of the Rings* was finally published in three volumes in 1954 and 1955, Tolkien completed the appendices that he had started back in 1948 when the text was still in process (see *Peoples of Middle-earth* [PoMe] vii and *Letters* 209–210, #160). As told in both Appendix B of *The Lord of the Rings* and the essay "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age" that was included in *The Silmarillion*,² Círdan was the bearer of Narya, the Red Ring, until he surrendered it to Gandalf when Gandalf arrived after approximately a thousand years.

'Take this ring, Master,' he said, 'for your labours will be heavy; but it will support you in the weariness that you have taken upon yourself. For this is the Ring of Fire, and with it you may rekindle hearts in a world that grows chill. But as for me, my heart is with the Sea, and I will dwell by the grey shores until the last ship sails. I will await you.' (*LotR* App B. 1085; see also *Silmarillion* 304)

² This essay was "probably in existence by 1948, because in a letter to a Mrs. Katherine Farrer most likely dated June 15 of that year Tolkien says he was unable to find it" (Kane *Arda Reconstructed* 248; see also *Letters* 130, #115 and *Morgoth's Ring* 5–6).

This is the passage where Tolkien states that Círdan saw further and deeper than any in Middle-earth.

The other allusions to Círdan in the appendices are descriptions of his coming to the aid of the descendants of Isildur in the North Kingdom (see, e.g., *LOTR* App. A. 1040, 1041–1042, 1051) other than the statement the headnote to the section of Appendix A entitled “Eriador, Arnor, and the Heirs of Isildur,” where Tolkien notes “At the Grey Havens dwelt Círdan the Shipwright, and some say he dwells there still, until the Last Ship sets sail into the West” (App A. 1039).

Little is said about Círdan in the Second Age. In the “Description of the Island of Númenor” written by 1965, Tolkien states that when the Edain first set sail upon the Great Sea their ships “were steered by one of the Eldar deputed by Círdan” (*UT* 171). In the tale of “Aldarion and Erendis,” written around the same time, Círdan befriends Aldarion and teaches him the building and handling of ships (*UT* 175, 200). At one point, Tolkien suggests that Gil-Galad gives the Red Ring, Narya, to Círdan soon after Celebrimbor created the Three Rings and then gave Narya and the White Ring, Vilya, to Gil-Galad around the year 1500 of the Second Age, but a later marginal note indicates that Gil-galad kept it until he set out for the War of the Last Alliance at the end of the Second Age (*UT* 237, 239, 254).³

Finally, in a remarkable text likely written in the last year of Tolkien's life, Tolkien significantly expanded and updated the story of Círdan's failure to leave Middle-earth for the Blessed Realm with Olwë, the Lord of the Teleri after Olwë's brother, Elwë (Thingol) was lost. In this text, he states that Círdan was close kin of Olwë's and the leader of those who searched for Elwë. Tolkien writes:

Thus he forfeited the fulfilment of his greatest desire: to see the Blessed Realm and find again there Olwë and his own nearest kin. Alas, he did

³ One other abandoned text should be noted. In *The Nature of Middle-earth*, Carl Hostetter republished an essay that originally appeared in *Vinyar Tengwar* 42 (2001) that included an abortive text written in the late 1960s describing an Eldarin settlement in the Belfalas region of Gondor. That text includes the odd claim that “They were a remnant, it seems, of the people of Doriath, who harboured still their grudge against the Noldor and left the Grey Havens because these and all the ships there were commanded by Círdan (a Noldo).” Hostetter notes that the manuscript page ends mid-sentence, and then adds, “Christopher Tolkien writes: ‘It was perhaps a purely experimental extension of the history, at once abandoned; but the assertion that Círdan was a Noldo is very strange. This runs clean counter to the entire tradition concerning him—yet it is essential to the idea sketched in this passage. Possibly it was his realization of this that led my father to abandon it in mid-sentence’” (376, 387–388).

not reach the shores until nearly all the Teleri of Olwë's following had departed.

Then, it is said, he stood forlorn looking out to sea, and it was night, but far away he could see a glimmer of light upon Eressëa ere it vanished into the West. Then he cried aloud: 'I will follow that light, alone if none will come with me, for the ship that I have been building is now almost ready.' But even as he said this he received in his heart a message, which he knew to come from the Valar, though in his mind it was remembered as a voice speaking in his own tongue. And the voice warned him not to attempt this peril; for his strength and skill would not be able to build any ship able to dare the winds and waves of the Great Sea for many long years yet. 'Abide now that time, for when it comes then will your work be of utmost worth, and it will be remembered in song for many ages after.'" (*PoMe* 386)

Tolkien reiterates in this text that Círdan "is said in the Annals of the Third Age (c.1000) to have seen further and deeper into the future than anyone else in Middle-earth. This does not include the Istari (who came from Valinor), but must include even Elrond, Galadriel, and Celeborn" (385). The fact that Tolkien felt the need to restate this point is a further indication the significance that it had for him.

While the references to Círdan in the final chapter of the *Quenta Silmarillion* in the published *Silmarillion*, "Of the Voyage of Eärendil and the War of Wrath," in which he tries to give aid to the Elves of Sirion (*Silmarillion* 247), assists Eärendil in the building of his ship, Vingilot (*Silmarillion* 246), and refuses to leave Middle-earth at the end of the First Age (*Silmarillion* 254) all appear to be editorial additions (see Kane, *Arda Reconstructed* 229, 230, 232, 235), the passage about Círdan assisting Eärendil in the building of his ship Vingilot was probably based on the next passage of the late text described above.

After Círdan receives the message in his heart, he responds, "I obey" and then sees a vision of "a shape like a white boat, shining above him, that sailed west through the air, and as it dwindled in the distance it looked like a star of so great a brilliance that it cast a shadow of Círdan upon the strand where he stood." Tolkien adds that "this was a foretelling of the ship which after apprenticeship to Círdan and ever with his advice and help, Eärendil built, and in which at last he reached the shores of Valinor. From that night onwards Círdan received a foresight touching all matters of importance, beyond the measure of all other Elves upon Middle-earth" (*PoMe* 386). Based on this passage, Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull suggest in *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion* that the reference to the work of "utmost worth" that Círdan would do was the construction of the ship with which Eärendil reached Valinor (674–75).

BRINGING US TO THE OTHER SHORE

The late text in which Tolkien clarifies Círdan's history brings his role into greater focus. It is particularly telling that Tolkien emphasized that it was Círdan's "greatest desire" to seek the Blessed Realm himself, but that he forfeited that desire to fulfill a greater destiny. This greater destiny was to aid others and be the keeper of the gateway to the Blessed Realms, for Eärendil, and for others after him. Of equal significance is the way that this came about, with Círdan receiving in his heart a message which he knew was from the Valar but in a voice speaking with his own tongue. This is reminiscent of one of the most important texts in Buddhism, the Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya Sūtra, or the Heart Sutra. In 2014, Thich Nach Hahn wrote a new translation of the Heart Sutra, first in Vietnamese and then in English, entitled "The Heart Sutra: The Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore" which he published with commentaries in the book *The Other Shore*. It includes this verse:

"Bodhisattvas who practice
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore
see no more obstacles in their mind,
and because there
are no more obstacles in their mind,
they can overcome all fear,
destroy all wrong perceptions
and realize Perfect Nirvāna.

(Nach Hahn, *The Other Shore* 24-25)

In Tolkien's story, Círdan is a Bodhisattva who practices the insight that brings others to the other shore. In his commentary about the first portion of this verse, Nach Hahn writes "When we remove the idea of an object of attainment as a separate, graspable self-entity, obstacles disappear" (*The Other Shore* 102). Círdan removed the idea of his object of attainment when he gave up on his "greatest desire" – to see the Blessed Realm himself and find again there Olwë and his own nearest kin. As a result, his true destiny "of utter worth" became clear, and he was able to "see farther and deeper than any other in Middle-earth." Nach Hahn adds in further commentary about the remainder of the verse, "When we let go of our notions of a separate self and our wrong perceptions, we are no longer afraid" (*The Other Shore* 106). This letting go of notions of a separate self is reflected by the message that Círdan receives in his heart "which he knew to come from the Valar, though in his mind it was remembered as a voice speaking in his own tongue." It was this message that

led him to give up his own aspiration of seeking the Blessed Realm to “be of utmost worth,” by helping others achieve the goal of reaching the Other Shore.⁴

Seeking “the Other Shore” in Tolkien’s secondary universe can be seen as a metaphor for seeking light (e.g., enlightenment), even after the destruction of the Two Trees. As Flieger writes, “The farther from Valinor—the once literal but now metaphoric source of the light—the weaker becomes the light itself, and the perception of it” (135). Conversely, returning to the Blessed Lands represents a desire to return to that once literal and now metaphoric source of light. An example of the longing for this light is the song Galadriel sings when the Company of the Ring is leaving Lothlórien:

*I sang of leaves, of leaves of gold, and leaves of gold there grew:
Of wind I sang, a wind there came and in the branches blew.
Beyond the Sun, beyond the Moon, the foam was on the Sea,
And by the strand of Ilmarin there grew a golden Tree.
Beneath the stars of Ever-eve in Eldamar it shone,
In Eldamar beside the walls of Elven Tirion.
There long the golden leaves have grown upon the branching years,
While here beyond the Sundering Seas now fall the Elven-tears.
O Lórien! The Winter comes, the bare and leafless Day;
The leaves are falling in the stream, the River flows away.
O Lórien! Too long I have dwelt upon this Hither Shore
And in a fading crown have twined the golden elanor.
But if of ships I now should sing, what ship would come to me,
What ship would bear me ever back across so wide a Sea?*
(*LotR* II.8.372–373)

This song shows Galadriel’s great longing to return to that metaphorical source of light. When she is finally able to do so, it is Círdan who is there to facilitate it, while he himself remains behind, because he forsook his

⁴ In Indian religions, the Sanskrit term “Siddhi” is used to describe material, paranormal, supernatural, or otherwise magical powers, abilities. The term ṛddhi (Pali: iddhi, “psychic powers”) is often used interchangeably in Buddhism. One “Siddhi” often associated with Bodhisattvas is the ability to see into the future (see e.g. Wallace and Wallace 11), which is consistent with Tolkien’s description of Círdan seeing further and deeper than any other in Middle-earth. Moreover, Bodhisattvas are often depicted with facial hair. For instance, Guan Yin, the well-known Bodhisattva associated with compassion, is sometimes portrayed with a mustache even when shown in a female form. So, it is noteworthy that Tolkien describes Círdan in *The Lord of the Rings* as having a long beard (*LotR* VI.9.1030), despite stating elsewhere that beards were not found among the Eldar (see *Nature of Middle-earth* 187, but see 189n1, in which Hostetter observes that Tolkien had contradicted that statement some years earlier).

own “greatest desire” in order to do “work of utmost worth”—coming to the aid of others⁵ and helping them “to reach the Other Shore.”

It is true, of course, that other than Frodo and Bilbo (and perhaps Sam and Gimli), those who Círdan helped travel into the West were all Elves. However, as Tolkien states in a footnote to his letter to Milton Waldman and reiterates in several other letters, his “‘elves’ are only a representation or an apprehension of a part of human nature” (*Letters* 149, #131; see also 176, #144; 189, #153; 236, #181). Thus, when Círdan facilitates the Elves in sailing into the West he is serving that aspect of humankind. This is the explanation of why Círdan “saw further and deeper than any other in Middle-earth,” while remaining a seemingly less prominent figure in the legendarium than others such as Galadriel or Elrond. By his example, he is Tolkien’s bodhisattva who brings us to the other shore, which is right here.



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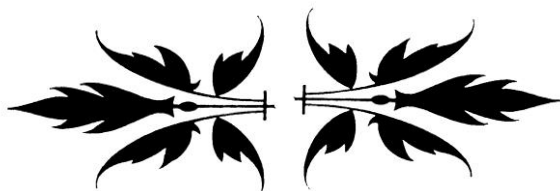
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⁵ It should be acknowledged that several of the examples of Círdan giving aid to others are in the context of military campaigns, which might seem to contradict the peaceful presentation of bodhisattvas by Thich Nhat Hanh, who first gained attention in the west as a peace activist who was exiled from Vietnam because he refused to support either side in the war and instead called for both to stop killing each other, and subsequently was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King. However, a closer look reveals that in most of these occasions the aid that Círdan gives is to rescue someone from harm, not to attack the enemy. For instance, he comes to Fingon’s aid when he was hardpressed by the army of Morgoth and outnumbered (*WotJ* 60; *Silmarillion* 160). Similarly, in the battle against Sauron’s deputy, the Witch-king of Angmar, “When Círdan heard from Arnanth son of Arvedui of the king’s flight to the north, he at once sent a ship to Forochel to seek for him” (*LotR* App. A. 1040, 1041). So, while Tolkien was no pacifist, this element is not as contradictory as might at first seem to be the case.

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