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# The Thread on Which Doom Hangs: Free Will, Disobedience, and Eucatastrophe in Tolkien's Middle-earth

## **Abstract**

Scholar Guest of Honor speech, Mythcon 41. Reviews theological concepts underlying the ideas of war in heaven and free will and, touching briefly on Stanley Milgram's experiments in obedience along the way, examines various examples of disobedience in Tolkien's legendarium, their consequences, and their ultimate subservience to the eucatastrophic fate of Arda.



# THE THREAD ON WHICH DOOM HANGS: FREE WILL, DISOBEDIENCE, AND EUCATASTROPHE IN TOLKIEN'S MIDDLE-EARTH<sup>1</sup>

JANET BRENNAN CROFT

**I**N TOLKIEN'S LEGENDARIUM, A WORLD THAT SEEMS almost constantly at war at one level or another, there are many moments, large and small, where a character's disobedience—to orders, to unwritten rules and expectations, even to common sense—turns out to be a critical key to a later eucatastrophic turn of events. Why is this so? Why would disobedience, especially during a crucial time of war when obedience to orders is important, so frequently be turned to the good?

## Dualism and War in Heaven

To work towards an understanding of this, I want to start with first principles and examine some underlying concepts in comparative mythology and religion. To begin with, let's look at the concept of War in Heaven itself. The idea of an all-encompassing conflict at a cosmic level is a nearly-universal one, but there are a wide range of interpretations and nuances across and within different religious and mythological traditions. First of all, in order to have a "war in heaven," there must be an underlying concept of some sort of duality, since a war requires at least two parties. And secondly, there must be a *conflict* of some sort between these two principles. Scholars have come up with several schemes to try to classify the ways in which different belief systems have incorporated this concept (Bianchi 2507-9), which can be used to gain a clearer understanding of what Tolkien's creation is and what it is not.<sup>2</sup>

One very basic way to look at forms of dualism is to divide them into *radical* and *moderate*. *Radical* goes back to its roots, quite literally—it means "from the root." A *radical* system of dualism means that the two opposing fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> Mythcon 41 Scholar Guest of Honor Speech, Dallas, July 2010. I deeply appreciate the audience comments which helped me correct some errors in this version of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> Note that I may from time to time employ shorthand for certain concepts, for example using the term "god" with a male pronoun, or using terms like "heaven" or "Tao" or "Providence," and so on. These should be interpreted as ecumenically, generically, or symbolically as the reader feels comfortable doing; it is not my intention to narrow this discussion down to any one tradition or interpretation.

principles are co-equal and co-eternal—that is, they are both equally powerful and have existed together since the creation. *Moderate*, in this pairing, means that there was initially one primordial principle, but through some moderating event, the second principle in some way was derived from the first. In the case of Tolkien's creation story, Eru was the creator and Melkor was created by him, so we have a moderate dualism.

Another way to classify dualistic systems is to consider them *dialectical* or *eschatological*. In a *dialectical* system, the two opposing principles oppose each other eternally; there is no end or beginning to their rivalry, since a dialectical system is also always a radical one. In an *eschatological* system, there is some predicted end to the conflict, an Armageddon or Ragnarok where the two principals will meet in a final battle. Tolkien's cosmology, then, is an eschatological one, since it includes a prophesied Last Battle and the recreation of the world in the Second Music thereafter.

A third major way dualistic systems can be considered is *pro-cosmic* versus *anti-cosmic*. To simplify, in a pro-cosmic system, the created world is fundamentally good, and evil comes from some source other than directly from its creator. In an anti-cosmic system, evil is intrinsic in all matter; there is a divide between the spiritual and the physical, and in fact matter may have been created by the evil principle. While Melkor twisted aspects of physical creation in his malice, the world Eru created is not considered evil in itself. Brown ale and mushrooms, white bread and honey, are all good in and of themselves, and so Tolkien's is clearly a pro-cosmic system.

Considering the "war" part of the phrase, the two principles of a dualistic system may also be classified as either working against each other in conflict, as in a good-vs.-evil system, or working together in harmony, as in a yin/yang system. In other words, the dualistic system can be viewed as a war—or as a dance. In a radical system, this would be part of the system from the start; in a moderate system, the second principal might be either in rebellion against the first or working cooperatively with it (Armstrong 34). Tolkien's system is a struggle where one must pick a side, rather than an equilibrium where one should strive for balance. Melkor's continued and unrepentant rebellion against Eru would clearly put this into the category of a conflict system.

What I'd like to look at next is how the concept of War in Heaven operates within a moderate, eschatological, pro-cosmic system in which the second principle is in rebellion against its creator—one of the most ideal environments for it. There are three levels at which people who subscribe to such a system might interpret War in Heaven, which I will define as literal, symbolic, and internal.

We may believe that we are all, believers or not, caught up in an actual literal war in heaven—that we live in a world rife with instances of demonic

possession, miracles, prophecies and portents, revelations, natural disasters, and so on, all signs of the interaction of the cosmic with the mundane world through miraculous and supernatural means. Even if the war as conducted in heaven itself is thought of as not truly physical, it can still become that way as cosmic forces manifest corporeally to carry out their struggle in our world.

Or War in Heaven may be read as a more symbolic representation of the eternal struggle of good and evil. There is a war, but the way in which it is conducted is beyond our physical and mental comprehension. We may be part of it, but we cannot truly be aware of what roles we play. This is perhaps the most common view we encounter. To quote Chesterton's Father Brown somewhat out of context, "[W]e here are on the wrong side of the tapestry. [...] The things that happen here do not seem to mean anything; [but] they mean something somewhere else" (110). As above, so below; as below, so above.

A symbolic reading of War in Heaven can stretch to accommodate even the least religious and most scientific of atheists and agnostics; viewed this way, War in Heaven can simply be an allegorical way to symbolize our vain little attempts to delay the inevitable heat death of the universe—the ultimate "long defeat." Consider the ending of Isaac Asimov's classic short story "The Last Question," where the vast powers of the cosmic computer are dedicated to solving the only problem that matters at the end of time—how can we reverse entropy?—and the only possible solution it can see is to self-immolate and proclaim "LET THERE BE LIGHT!" (169).

Thirdly, War in Heaven can be read either mystically or psychologically as a symbolic representation of the individual's attempt to conquer sin within himself. In Islam, for example, the internal spiritual struggle was called the greater *jihad* by the Prophet Muhammad, in contrast to the lesser *jihad* of physical war. War in Heaven is in this reading the struggle to grow psychologically and spiritually and achieve a state of mature self-control by conquering one's impulse to sin or mastering the monster inside. As with other interpretations of the war, the goal may be to eradicate sinful thoughts and feelings, or it may be to achieve a peaceful inner equilibrium.

But to return to Tolkien's world—here, whether the cosmology is "true" or not, we do not see any ensouled beings interpreting the ongoing War in Heaven as anything other than real. In Arda we are involved in what Men and Hobbits, Elves and Dwarves, never doubt is a literal cosmological struggle between Good and Evil with known predictions for a final cataclysmic battle. Though we as outside readers may consider interpreting it this way, there is never a suggestion *within the text* of the *Ainulindalë* that Melkor's attempts at the destruction of Arda—raising the valleys, throwing down the mountains, spilling the seas (*Silmarillion* [*Silm.*] 12)—could be read as a symbolic representation of

geological forces shaping the earth over the course of eons.<sup>3</sup> If there are any esoteric religious scholars toiling away in the libraries of Minas Tirith or Rivendell creating exegeses and commentaries and *midrashim*, we never see them. If the High Elves are to be trusted and are not speaking in metaphor and symbol so far beyond man's comprehension as to be utterly alien, there are physical beings walking Middle-earth who have looked in the faces of archangels, and there are embodied angels interacting with the peoples of Middle-earth in the present day. Though it is true that the Valar no longer intervene as directly on the round earth as they once did, it is still possible, for example, for Gandalf to suggest that Providence had a hand in Bilbo finding the Ring in the dark under the Misty Mountains.

### **Obedience and Disobedience**

The next thing I would like to consider is obedience and disobedience. In order to have the choice of obeying or disobeying, a being must first have free will. But why would a creator run the risk of his creation disobeying him? One fairly standard line of reasoning is the idea that, "as individuals, human beings are endowed with the capacity for choice of action, for decision among alternatives, and specifically that, given an innate moral sense, humans can freely discern good and evil and choose the good, though often they do not" (Marcoulesco 3199). More specific to this particular topic, free will might also be seen as a long-term strategic policy on the side of Good. In other words, the free will of beings to disobey, even at the highest level, even though there is a risk some beings may go over to the side of Evil, is always a very powerful weapon on the side of Good in the War in Heaven.

Why is this so? It almost seems that the side of Right must allow free will under the very rules of the game, and therefore must allow the right of humans to turn evil or even to refuse to play. As we see when looking at decisions made by Sauron and Melkor in Tolkien's world, free will is something the side of evil can't control, understand, or plan for. If the aim of Evil is domination, then free will is its necessary opposite.

Evil sees allowing free will as a weakness. In describing the world of C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape*, Clyde S. Kilby says Hell "simply cannot fathom the Enemy's intention to allow man, 'the little vermin,' freedom of choice and thus make him, provided he chooses aright, godlike" (ix). Evil leaders don't allow their followers free will, or if it can't be eradicated entirely, free actions are as

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<sup>3</sup> I find it somewhat surprising that Karen Wynn Fonstad, a cartographer by training, does not interpret these events metaphorically in her *Atlas of Middle-earth*, but straightforwardly says that the "physical features [of Middle-earth] were the visible results of the struggle between good and evil, the Valar and Melkor and Sauron. They were the battle wounds of the earth" (179).

harshly punished as failure. I think this may also be part of the reason why Tolkien kept coming back to the problem of the Orcs in his later writings, as if he were scratching an itch.<sup>4</sup> It would be absolutely within character for Sauron to attempt to create soulless beings with no free will to do his bidding (or since evil cannot create beings in Tolkien's world, to try to breed will-less slaves from existing but corrupted stock), and easy for our heroes to kill such beings without a second thought. There is even a precedent in Middle-earth, in Aulë's attempted creation of the Dwarves, which we will return to later. Within our world, however, it is not possible for even the most evil follower of an evil leader to completely lack free will—and even in Middle-earth, the end of Wormtongue stands out as an example of an evil follower with one spark of free will left. And so Tolkien kept vacillating between concepts of the orcs as soulless robots or self-aware beings.

But doesn't Providence nullify the effects of free agency? Isn't it possible that right choices to disobey bad orders are simply responses to the orders of god? Not necessarily—"According to Augustine of Hippo [...], God's foreknowledge of events does not curtail the capacity to choose and indeed the necessity of doing so, since God's knowledge of eternity is somewhat akin to that of a ubiquitous present" (Marcoulesco 3200). So given this, what feels like the hand of Providence in these cases may be more usefully thought of as Free Will coming into full harmony with the Tao. I am using *Tao* here in the sense that C.S. Lewis does in *The Abolition of Man*: the Tao is "the reality beyond all predicates, the abyss that was before the Creator Himself. It is Nature, it is the Way, the Road. It is the Way in which the universe goes on, the Way in which things everlastingly emerge [...]. It is also the Way which every man should tread [...]" (11).<sup>5</sup> It is, in other words, what the universe desires to be—what feels Right.

And what is Right? I considered this question several years ago in a paper on the moral system of the Witches in Terry Pratchett's Discworld series. The mature witch, like Granny Weatherwax, illustrates the ideal of what free will means in a person in harmony with the Tao. A proper witch does not divide the world into Good and Evil but into Right and Wrong; that is, what is in harmony with the Tao and what is in opposition to it. As Granny said, "if you *do* know Right from Wrong you can't choose Wrong. You just can't do it and live" (qtd. in Croft, "Nice" 160). Because of their free will, witches can know Right and Wrong,

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<sup>4</sup> See Croft, *War* 47-50, and Tally in this issue.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis attempts to codify the Tao as a set of universal rules, or a natural law common across all religions and traditions, in his *The Abolition of Man*: the laws of general beneficence, special beneficence, justice, good faith and veracity, mercy, and magnanimity (51-61). In actuality, it is not necessary to invoke religion and culture in support of these laws; increasingly, evolutionary science is finding that they are the essential underpinnings of the interactions of all primates (and even lower animals) that live in highly social groups.

and they can make a choice; but because they do have this feeling for the Tao at a bone-deep level, they can't comfortably choose wrong.

So what is required for a situation to exist where a being with free will might choose to be disobedient? According to Stanley Milgram (and I will say more about his famous and unsettling experiments on obedience below), "an authority system [...] consists of a minimum of two persons sharing the expectation that one of them has the right to prescribe behavior for the other" (qtd. in Blass 38-39). This person has the power to "define reality for the person who accepts his or her authority" (Blass 39). The relationship allows one to "relinquish responsibility to the authority and therefore to follow his or her orders without regard to their morality" (Blass 39), or in Milgram's own words, "The most far-reaching consequence of [this] agentic shift is that a man feels responsible *to* the authority directing him but feels no responsibility *for* the content of the actions that the authority prescribes" (qtd. in Blass 39).<sup>6</sup>

This exactly describes the moral perspective of Pratchett's "good" person as opposed to his witches—the "good" person subscribes to some outside set of rules or follows some authority figure and allows it to dictate their actions, for which they are therefore not fully responsible. Someone else has decided what is good and bad *for* them; they just have to do what they're told and they'll be good. This fits in quite precisely with Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which described "six distinct stages of moral reasoning" (Linn 6) that increase in maturity and ethical responsibility. At the least developed level, a person may obey an authority simply to avoid punishment, but as the individual's moral capacity increases, he or she makes decisions based on fairness, maintaining a social role as a "good" person, upholding the law, upholding individual rights even when they conflict with the law, and at the highest level, "being guided by universal ethical principles" (Linn 7). With each "increase in the stage of moral development, the individual's judgment is more likely to be objective and fair since it is unaffected by personal and contextual constraints" (7). And therefore obedience becomes more and more a matter of judgment and consent as the individual matures.

So at the highest levels of moral development, a person should ideally consider all of her actions thoughtfully, hold herself to "universal ethical principles," and take full responsibility for her own actions. This makes obedience somewhat problematic, since even obeying a good order from a benevolent superior requires giving up some independence of thought.<sup>7</sup> But

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<sup>6</sup> It is only in the simplest case that the authority system consists of just two people. An authority might be anything from one's parents to one's superior officers to the accumulated morals of a culture's fairy tales.

<sup>7</sup> This is of course an issue that deserves far more consideration for its theological implications. Naomi Wood's article, for example, examines C.S. Lewis's insistence on



what if an acknowledged authority gives an unethical order? It might seem entirely obvious that one should disobey an evil order, even if given by a legitimate authority. But it's not as easy as one might think to do this. At this point it would be instructive to take a brief look at the Milgram experiments.

In the early 1960s, when Stanley Milgram was devising and running his experiments on obedience, the world was still trying to make sense of Nazi Germany. Adolf Eichmann was on trial in Jerusalem, and Hannah Arendt was making her bleak observations about the "banality of evil" (qtd. in Lunt 5). Milgram thought it might be situation, rather than personality or some national characteristic, that drove people to blindly obey orders that caused harm to others. The participants in his experiment were told they would be helping to determine the effect of pain on memory and learning, and they were to administer electric shocks to a participant behind a glass window in another room (who was, unknown to them, an actor, not a fellow volunteer) when they failed to repeat a word pair back correctly, increasing the voltage each time. They were told there would be no permanent damage to the learner. They were told it was essential to the experiment that they continue to increase the voltage with each error. At 150 volts, the actor would begin to cry out in pain and beg them to stop. At 315 volts the actor would feign unconsciousness or death. The participant was told to "Consider silence a wrong answer" (Slater 37). The volt meter went up to 450. The results? "Sixty five percent of the participants in the study described above completed the experiment and administered 450 volts to an apparently unconscious or dead learner" (Lunt 4). Sixty five percent obeyed the authority of the man in the lab coat with the clipboard and the authoritative voice and the connection to a prestigious university, to the point of, to all appearances, killing a fellow volunteer.<sup>8</sup>

The initial Milgram experiment was artificially set up to induce obedience; the authority of the experimenter, the way the participant's protests were calmly answered with orders to continue, even the glass separating the volunteer from the actor stacked the deck in favor of obedience. Still, disobeying

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submitting to rigid hierarchical authority and ultimately to God, as opposed to Philip Pullman's constant questioning—which is perhaps one of the reasons I cannot find myself entirely comfortable in Lewis's worlds and prefer the more fluid hierarchies of Middle-earth.

<sup>8</sup> Milgram conducted many variations on this basic experiment, finding that obedience dropped if the learner was in the same room, if the participant had to touch the learner to administer the shock, or if the participant had what looked like the option to deceive the experimenter about the level of shock given, and rose if the participant could not see the learner at all. But the original experiment has been replicated with different genders, nationalities, religions, and in more recent years, and the results still stay at about 65%. See Lunt and Blass for further discussion of these subsequent experiments.

an order is never easy, if it's given by someone whom you feel you should obey, especially if you fear being punished by them.

Consider the situation described in Lois McMaster Bujold's *The Vor Game*, where the arctic base commander orders his trainee soldiers to shoot technicians who refuse to enter a contaminated building, a situation that almost ends in mass murder, or at least mass hypothermia. Our hero Miles, fresh out of officer's academy, "knew about criminal orders [...]. His father came down personally and gave a one-day seminar on the topic to the seniors at midyear. [...] What exactly constituted a criminal order, when and how to disobey it. [...] The other instructors hated [the seminar]. Their classes were subtly disrupted for weeks afterward" (76). It took Miles standing with the techs and pulling the distasteful strings of his Vor-class connections to defuse the situation.<sup>9</sup>

To use an example from Tolkien, Faramir effectively obeys a criminal order against his better judgment when he is told to retake Osgiliath, a strategically questionable objective that will only drain strength away from the defense of Minas Tirith itself, with a grossly inadequate, exhausted, and undersupplied troop of men decidedly unequal to Sauron's endless supply of orcs (V.4.799). (It is not a criminal order of the same class as firing on civilians, but wasting lives on a pointless or unwinnable objective is still contrary to the rules of just war and in some cases can lead to a court martial.) And what is the result? The objective is not secured, a third of his men are lost, he is wounded almost unto death, and his father, realizing what he has done, is pushed over the edge into despair (802-3).

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<sup>9</sup> For an example from the Star Trek universe, consider the Starfleet training exercise called *Kobayashi Maru*. In this test students must decide whether to rescue a civilian Federation ship adrift in the neutral zone; if they do not, all the passengers will die horribly at the hands of the Klingons, but if they attempt the rescue their crew will also die and they may set off a war, depending on the version of the test. It is a deliberate no-win scenario; by participating in this exercise, cadets are expected to learn to fail and to deal with fear. In both *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Kahn* (1982) and the 2009 *Star Trek* reboot, Kirk refuses to obediently learn this lesson and he reprograms the simulation. Yes, he is disobedient, even a cheater, but if the *Kobayashi Maru* simulation had been a real-life situation, would he not have done anything—disobeyed anyone, broken any rule, even violated the laws of physics if possible—in order to change the parameters of the engagement? The eucatastrophic result in *Star Trek* is that original-timeline Spock absorbed this out-of-the-box, damn-the-rules way of thinking from Kirk and was able to apply it when needed. Sometimes disobedience means subverting the basic assumptions of the system. Another example occurs in Pratchett's *The Last Hero*, when Cohen cheats at the dice game with the gods. To win he must roll a seven, but he's only given a single die. He slices it in half in midair and lands a six and a one (139). Sometimes the deepest and most significant disobedience is to simply flip the gods the bird, as Cohen does in Paul Kidby's illustration (154-5).

### Disobedience and Eucatastrophe

This brings me back my central question—how, in Tolkien, can the right kind of disobedience lead to eucatastrophe, where obedience in the same situation could lead to disaster? When you look at events in *The Lord of the Rings* in particular, you discover that at any moment a being in full possession of free will might say “Never, never!” or “Verily I come, I come to you,” like Frodo on the peak of Amon Hen (II.10.392), or “I shall be [...] beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night,” or “I will diminish, and go into the West,” like Galadriel tempted by the Ring (II.7.356-7). As in these two key moments in *The Lord of the Rings*, at any second fate may balance on the edge of a knife. How do characters get from these moments of choice to where they need to go? How do they decide? The characters exercise their free will, look into their hearts for moral and ethical strength, and sometimes disobey the louder and more compelling voice in order to make a choice in tune with the Tao.

Even when this compelling voice is a legitimate authority giving a legal order. There is a certain amount of questioning and upsetting of hierarchy in Tolkien’s world, and disobedience is a part of this theme. The last shall be first, a small people shall trouble the counsels of the great, a woman will kill the Witch-king. Aragorn associates with hobbits and patronizes country inns like Prince Harry, and a dwarf falls in love with the highest Elf-Queen in Middle-earth. The established hierarchy is not always right, or the best way to do things, or even very good for the people involved.

I want to start with *The Hobbit*, a children’s story, so we can build up a picture of disobedience in Tolkien’s world paralleling the stages of moral development I mentioned earlier. As Naomi Wood reminds us, “Literature for children, partly because of its traditionally didactic role, often focuses on obedience as a central issue. *Obedience* is a fraught term; it may be understood as a natural and instinctive response to a superior or as coercive violation of individual choice through persuasion and/or physical force” (237). What we see in the earlier chapters of *The Hobbit* is a series of small misbehaviors and minor rebellions against social expectations, common courtesy, and fairy-tale rules, eventually building up to a major act of disobedience on Bilbo’s part that results in a eucatastrophic ending.

Even in the very first chapter we find Bilbo Baggins, that thoroughly conventional hobbit who never did anything unexpected, becoming flustered by Gandalf’s visit and breaking the rules of courtesy (by trying to brush him off), bourgeois prosiness (by waxing rhapsodic about Gandalf’s fireworks), and common sense (by neglecting to write down his engagement for tea). Since Gandalf is looking for a hobbit who is a little out of the ordinary, this extremely minor rule-breaking is just what he wants to see. And it is vindicated when

Bilbo's Tookishness gets the better of him, and again in disobedience to common sense and social expectations, he joins the dwarves on their adventure.

But let's look at a sequence that involves some more obvious rule-breaking. In "Riddles in the Dark" both Gollum and Bilbo break the rules of the riddle game, which we are told is "sacred and of immense antiquity, and even wicked creatures were afraid to cheat when they played at it" (V.90). Bilbo's question "What have I got in my pocket?" is not really a proper riddle by the rules of the game—"not a riddle, precious, no," as Gollum points out (93), and later more emphatically, "It cheated first, it did. It broke the rules" (*LotR* I.2.56)—but Bilbo insists on an answer in order to avoid forfeiting the game and losing his life. Gollum's breach of the rules is far more serious, as he intends to kill the hobbit rather than keep his promise and show him the way out. Both of these instances are rather low on the scale of moral development—they are both cheating in order to gain something they want or prevent the other party from harming them. But then it gets more complicated. Gollum loses both the game and the chance to dine on hobbit, but his misery leads to Bilbo feeling pity and empathy and sparing his life. Bilbo's very act of mercy is a disobedience to the promptings of justice and common sense, which places it at a higher level of morality, and this perhaps is why it leads to a good end. Within the story, it gets him out of the goblin caves with the Ring intact *and* without a death on his conscience. Eventually, outside the story of *The Hobbit*, this is one of the acts of Mercy that allow Gollum to be at the Cracks of Doom at the end, when he needs to be.

Once we cross under the Misty Mountains we move into a section of the book where Bilbo becomes more of a fairy tale hero, and we encounter many instances of the importance of obeying (and the risks of disobeying) fairy tale prohibitions. Generally, in this section it is the dwarves who break the rules and Bilbo who must set things right, since it seems the instant they are out of Gandalf's sight they tend to get into trouble. Shooting at the enchanted deer was not strictly prohibited in any of their instructions, but it is one of those common-sense things one is supposed to learn from fairy tales, and the result was that they wasted all their arrows and Bombur fell into an enchanted sleep. Similarly, the dwarves disobey both fairy-tale rules and common courtesy, as well as the prohibition about leaving the path, when they thrice disturb the Elvenking's feast. This at least results in the minor eucatastrophe of giving Bilbo a chance to be heroic, gain confidence, become their leader, and learn the uses of the Ring. And in the end, it turns out this gets the party to Laketown by "the only road that was any good," as all others were even more unsafe (X.203). Ultimately, through causing the Elvenking such annoyance, the eucatastrophic result is that the Elf, Dwarf, and Human armies all meet together in the right place to fight off the Goblins and Wargs.

But the really important act of disobedience within the confines of *The Hobbit* is Bilbo's concealment of the Arkenstone against Thorin's very specific orders and threats. When Bilbo first greedily picks it up, no specific order has been issued, but he has "an uncomfortable feeling" about what he has done and is afraid that "trouble would yet come of it" (XIII.249). By the time Thorin commands all his followers to look for the Arkenstone and threatens vengeance on anyone who keeps it (XVI.279), Bilbo has redeemed himself by moving beyond mere possessiveness and starting to form "the beginnings of a plan." He sneaks away and gives the gem to the leaders of the besieging elf and human army in hopes that they can use it to broker a peace with Thorin (284). A bargain is struck, as he had hoped (XVII.288), but Thorin, encouraged by the approaching armies of his cousin Dáin, treacherously plans to break it. But all the negotiating and delaying brought about by Bilbo's action has the eucatastrophic effect of holding off the battle between the Dwarves and their opponents until exactly the moment of the Goblin and Warg attack. Their victory brings peace to the north, and creates a lasting alliance between the races in that part of Middle-earth. On a more personal level, the battle allows Thorin to redeem himself for his act of treachery and die cleansed of this taint.

So in *The Hobbit*, the majority of disobedience is to simple things like fairy-tale rules and the rules of etiquette and courtesy. But as the story progresses the dilemmas become more important, the results of disobedience more significant, and the eucatastrophic events more clearly related to Bilbo's moral development.

Moving on to *The Lord of the Rings*, we find ourselves in a world at war, and the acts of disobedience and their consequences are both more meaningful and more clearly defined. I want to look at disobedience thematically rather than strictly chronologically this time, and divide incidents by motivation. *Why* do characters in *The Lord of the Rings* disobey whatever it is they are disobeying? What are the results? Part of the brilliance of *The Lord of the Rings* is that it is so tightly plotted and densely interwoven that it can be difficult to *not* see any particular act of disobedience contributing in some way to a later moment of eucatastrophe.

First let's look at a few acts of disobedience that spring from questionable motives. Boromir is a good example to start with. When we first meet him at the Council of Elrond, he speaks of following a vision that directed him to Imladris, but what he quickly glosses over was that the vision came first and most often to Faramir and the quest was clearly meant for him, and that Boromir, in his desire for glory, pressured his father into letting him go instead, against both Denethor's own better judgment and the urgings of the vision itself (II.2.240, IV.5.656, V.1.738, V.4.795). This is of a piece with his later disobedience at Parth Galen, when he goes against Aragorn's request that Frodo be given time

alone to decide on their path, and reveals his ostensible motive of saving Gondor to be tainted by the desire for his own glory when he tries to take the Ring (II.10.389). Was his disobedience only a catastrophe with no good effects? Not entirely; it was what was needed to convince Frodo to leave the company then and there, and Boromir was able to redeem himself by defending Merry and Pippin from the orcs, though it didn't save them from capture.

Pippin, on the other hand, is generally motivated by a more innocent "satiabile curiosity," like Kipling's *Elephant's Child*, when he disobeys the laws of common sense—most notably when he drops the rock in the well in Moria and when he looks into the *palantír*. He knows he is doing wrong, and those events don't turn out very well—though eventually there is a eucatastrophe, in that the Moria incident leads to Gandalf's death and resurrection, and Sauron is distracted by his appearance in the *palantír*. Pippin at least has the chance to mature and redeem himself with later acts of far more purposeful and meaningful disobedience, as we shall see.

The most interesting and fruitful acts of disobedience in *The Lord of the Rings* result from what one might term the virtue of *caritas*, or what Lewis called gift-love (*The Four Loves* 213): love for one's friends, a desire to keep others out of danger, and an urge to trust even where one was told not to. An excellent example of this is the "conspiracy" of Frodo's friends, Merry, Pippin, Fatty, and especially Sam, who, in defiance of socially correct behavior, spy on Frodo and scheme behind his back to ease his disappearance from the Shire, and in spite of his protests, plan to go with him wherever he goes. Later we see Sam sneaking uninvited into the council chamber at Rivendell, and Pippin and Merry insisting they will accompany the Fellowship even if forbidden to go by Elrond himself. At Parth Galen this culminates in the direct defiance of Aragorn's orders—Merry, Pippin, and Sam all run off in search of Frodo. But in the end their *caritas* for Frodo leads to eucatastrophe; the scattering of the Company puts Sam firmly at Frodo's side, sends Merry and Pippin off to become the pebbles that start the avalanche in Fangorn, and brings Gandalf to Edoras to cure Théoden.

There are also two major points in the plot where *caritas* for a superior prompts deliberate and knowing disobedience to his orders. One, of course, is Merry and Éowyn's disobedience in following Théoden into battle, which is eucatastrophic in putting the only people who could vanquish the Witch-king in the right place at the right time.<sup>10</sup> The other is Beregon's disobedience in fighting to save Faramir in the Tombs when his father tries to burn him alive; here Pippin redeems his earlier foolish rule-breaking by defying Denethor's orders with full consciousness of what he is doing. As he puts it quite clearly to

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<sup>10</sup> Éowyn's motives are of course complex and multi-faceted, but love for Théoden is a very large part of why she rides with him.

Beregond, it is a situation where one must choose between orders and life (V.4.809).

Giving trust where one is ordered not to is another disobedience that is a direct result of *caritas*. We witness this in two particularly important places, where someone strictly following orders to distrust strangers could derail the entire mission of the Allies. First we see Éomer's disobedience to orders in not just allowing Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli to cross Rohan unaccompanied, but in lending them horses. "How shall a man judge what to do in such times?" he asks Aragorn, who reminds him that "Good and ill have not changed" (III.2.427-8); giving trust when there is no reason not to is still a good and charitable thing to do. And then there is Faramir's parallel disobedience in allowing Frodo, Sam, and Gollum to travel unimpeded through Ithilien in spite of his orders to kill all strangers, human and animal (IV.5.650). In both of these cases the result is a mutuality of trust that benefits all. We also see trust given unearned by Frodo to Gollum; though Gollum can never truly return his trust, this is another one of the mercies that brings Sméagol to the Cracks of Doom.

How do we interpret the complex series of events at Mount Doom from the perspective of looking for acts of disobedience, their motives, and their results? A key question is: who is actually the Master of the Precious whom Gollum has promised to serve? He has left himself a certain amount of wiggle-room with his wording (IV.1.604). The spirit of his promise is clear—he is to serve Frodo. But the actual wording, of course, leaves him free to serve whomever holds the Ring—including himself. In the Chamber of the Sammath Naur we find two overwhelming urges to disobedience locked in battle. Frodo is disobeying the charge laid on him at the departure from Rivendell, to accomplish the task that Elrond felt was appointed to him and him alone (II.3.273), and betraying the faith and sacrifices of all who made his journey possible—here where it was forged, where the commanding "voice" of the Ring is simply too overwhelming to ignore. Gollum is disobeying the orders of the current Master of the Precious in trying to take it from Frodo, and as Frodo predicted, the Ring is twisting his promise—for is he not, in trying to save the Ring from the Fire, more truly serving both the Ring and the Ring's first master, its creator, Sauron himself? And yet, in the end, the eucatastrophic result is that he *does* serve Frodo, by bearing the Ring into the Fire and thus accomplishing his mission for him—and by saving Frodo at last from the madness his burden caused:

And there was Frodo, pale and worn, and yet himself again; and in his eyes there was peace now, neither strain of will, not madness, nor any fear. His burden was taken away. [...] [H]e was himself again, he was free. (VI.3.926)

As we can see, disobedience in *The Lord of the Rings* is more often about looking within to judge a right course of action against an authority that is ordering something questionable, rather than disobeying a set of rules. This more mature consideration of disobedience requires judging orders and actions by their harmony with the Tao and disobeying orders that conflict with the way the world needs to be. Intentions are vitally important; as Loy and Goodhew's Buddhist examination of *The Lord of the Rings* points out, one of its central lessons is that "good intentions lead to good results, while evil intentions are self-defeating" (8).

In *The Silmarillion* we arrive at the twin underlying acts of disobedience and rebellion that shape Tolkien's whole universe, and I want to concentrate on these to the exclusion of many other interesting examples from the background legendarium.<sup>11</sup> The foundational event of the physical universe, the Great Music that Ilúvatar instructs the Valar to sing, is marred by an act of rebellion—confirming that even the Valar are created with free will. The interesting thing to look at here is Melkor's motivation for rebelling. Melkor, the greatest of the Valar, by singing his own theme into the Music, "sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself. [...] He had gone often alone into the void places seeking the Imperishable Flame; for desire grew hot within him to bring into Being things of his own [...]" (*Silm.* 4). Why does he desire to create these things? We see later, when the Valar behold the vision of the Children of Ilúvatar, that the other Valar "love them, being things other than themselves, strange and free, wherein they saw the mind of Ilúvatar reflected anew" (7), but Melkor "desired rather to subdue to his will both Elves and Men, envying the gifts with which Ilúvatar promised to endow them; and he wished himself to have subjects and servants, and to be called Lord, and to be a master over other wills" (8); he even wanted to make the other Valar subject to him (28). So Melkor's motivation, one we will see again and again in Tolkien's depiction of evil, is the urge to dominate all other free-willed beings.

Now let's contrast this with another act of disobedience on the part of one of the great Valar—Aulë's creation of the Dwarves. Both Aulë and Melkor "desired to make things of their own that should be new and unthought of by others, and delighted in the praise of their skill" (18). But in contrast to Melkor, who "spent his spirit in envy and hate," Aulë "remained faithful to Eru and submitted all that he did to his will" (18). Aulë created the Dwarves out of his great eagerness for the coming of the Children of Ilúvatar, desiring to have

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<sup>11</sup> Two major and highly significant acts of disobedience and rebellion in *The Silmarillion* that would also be useful to analyze are Fëanor's great oath of vengeance for the theft of the Silmarils, and the act of Ar-Pharazôn that led to the drowning of Númenor. See Croft, "Túrin" 5, for a discussion of the former.



someone to teach “his lore and his crafts” to (37), and to “rejoice in [Arda]” (38). But somehow he knows what he was doing isn’t quite right, so he works in secret. Ilúvatar stops him at the very moment he wakes his creations and begins teaching them to speak, and the main point of his admonishment is that Aulë has only created automatons to dominate: “[T]he creatures of thy hand and mind can live only by” the power and authority that Eru gave Aulë, thus “moving when thou thinkest to move them, and if thy thought be elsewhere, standing idle. Is that thy desire?” (37). Aulë understands this perfectly, and though his motivation was sub-creation in imitation of and for the glory of Eru, he realizes his error and offers to destroy them. Ilúvatar grants the Dwarves awareness and free will, but insists they must sleep till the Firstborn appear. Here disobedience is born out of love and a desire to increase the bounty of the world, but with an essential misunderstanding of the gift of free will. But Aulë’s act is turned to the good, and the Dwarves themselves teach that they will be part of the rebuilding of Arda after the Last Battle.

In these two sequences we see free will at work even among the highest angels. Disobedience is clearly differentiated as to its intention: whether it occurs out of a lust for destruction and the domination of others, or out of love and sub-creative desire. Also key is the attitude towards correction by Eru—whether the disobedient Vala understands and submits to his will or continues in resistance.

I want to finish this section by focusing on Galadriel. Her story is an example of the working out of fate, free will, disobedience, and eucatastrophe over a single being’s lifetime. Unfortunately, it’s also one of the stories that Tolkien tinkered with up to the very end—Christopher Tolkien comments on the “severe inconsistencies” of the different versions (qtd. in Lakowski 96)—so it’s not entirely clear what we should consider the “true” story. What we are able to say for sure is that she was one of the Noldor who rebelled against the Valar and fled to Middle-earth against the wishes of Manwë; in *The Silmarillion* her motive is given as a “[yearning] to see the wide unguarded lands and to rule there a realm at her own will” (*Silm.* 90). As such, whether she was of Fëanor’s party or against him or acted alone, her goal was in effect to seek a place away from the direct control of the Valar where she could rule and have dominion over others. Whatever her motive, she was thus subject to the exile of the Noldor and forbidden to return to Valinor. But her long exile in Middle-earth taught her wisdom, humility, and “a deep awareness of the limitations of her power” (Lakowski 99), to the point where she is able, when presented with temptation, to reject the Ring—to willingly say “I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel” (*LotR* II.7.357). She has finally and firmly rejected the temptation to fulfill her early desire to dominate the will of others. Again, there are certain inconsistencies in the versions of the story—did she, like Dorothy, have the means to go home all along, or was permission to return to Valinor not

granted until the instant she rejected the Ring? In any case, this repentance of her earlier sin of desiring domination results in personal eucatastrophe for Galadriel—she takes ship to the Uttermost West at last. What her story shows is that free will means one may make mistakes, rebel, and be disobedient for all the wrong reasons, and still be granted the grace of another chance. The War in Heaven takes place even at the level of the individual. As above, so below; as below, so above.

### Conclusion

Disobedience resulting in eucatastrophe is part of the very fabric of Eru's universe from the beginning. Even as Melkor rebels and plays his own themes, trying to dominate the music of creation, Eru works them into the greater Music. As he proclaims,

And thou, Melkor, shall see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined. (*Silm.* 6)

This is reiterated later as Eru ponders the gifts he will grant to Men and the risks of giving them freedom from fate: "These too in their time shall find that all that they do redounds at the end only to the glory of my work" (36). So whatever disobedience or rebellion there might be in the world, it will sooner or later be worked into the pattern for good. "Sooner or later" does depend, though, on the motive for disobedience and what the being in question is rebelling against. The rebellion of a great power like Melkor, directly against his Creator, contending for the domination of all creation, and without repentance, may take all eternity and a final battle to be balanced out in the Tao. But a mere hobbit breaking a rule for the sake of love may find it working to the good in front of his very eyes.

In the eternal scheme of things, then, all evil eventually turns to the good, though we cannot grasp the full picture ourselves, as Tolkien pointed out in one of his letters:

No man can estimate what is really happening at the moment sub specie aeternitatis. All we do know [...] is that evil labors with vast power and perpetual success—in vain: preparing always only the soil for unexpected good to sprout in. So it is in general, and so it is in our own lives. (*Letters* 76)

Free Will is the chiefest weapon in the arsenal of heaven, however symbolically one interprets this statement. The free exercise of intellect allows us

to turn our thoughts to defeating entropy, if you prefer. You might even say we have free will so we *can* disobey—that disobedience is its very purpose.<sup>12</sup>

Veryl Flieger has recently written about Tolkien's Elves, Men, and the relative "fatedness" of the two races according to the gifts given to them by Ilúvatar. If you look on free will as Ilúvatar's "secret weapon" in the War in Heaven, giving Men both *more* free will than Elves *and* the gift of death makes them even more effective actors in this battle, far more than mere weapons. Their stakes are higher; the consequences of acting with free will means more. When a human acts with free will to risk his life for another, with no clear picture of what might happen to his body or soul afterwards, just knowing that it's right to do it, it quite seriously means something. And that is a huge contrast to a dark lord spending his mindless battalions without caring how many he loses.

To return to a point raised earlier, what happened to the participants in the Milgram experiments, when they were led away and told it was all a fake, that they didn't actually hurt anyone and that the whole purpose of the experiment was quite different from what they had been told? They were as much experimented on as they were observed, when one thinks about it. The records are sealed, so it is not possible to track them down and ask, to collect data and draw conclusions about them as a group. But Lauren Slater, in researching her book *Opening Skinner's Box*, did manage to get in touch with one

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<sup>12</sup> But what then of war *on* heaven? Even this must be allowed; Orual must come to her god under the impetus of her own free will, fighting her private war against heaven all the way, in C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*. Terry Pratchett offers a contrasting cosmological system and motive for War on Heaven. In Pratchett we quite often see a refusal to play a part in the War *in* Heaven as a major manifestation of free will in human characters. In *The Last Hero*, Cohen the Barbarian and the Silver Horde storm a heaven where the gods are morally ambivalent to show that free-willed humans are not toys to be played with. In other novels characters go up against the Auditors of Reality, who are the vaguely anthropomorphic embodiment of the heat-death of the universe (Pratchett and Briggs 31) and therefore are at odds with the very idea of free will. Exhibiting the slightest hint of individuality, let alone the full exercise of free will, causes them to simply disappear from existence. This refusal is especially prominent in *Good Omens*, which Pratchett co-authored with Neil Gaiman, where an Armageddon deeply desired by both sides (except for Aziraphale and Crowley) is derailed by young Adam the Antichrist's refusal to play the game at all. In Pratchett's cosmology, this is in tune with the Tao *behind* what appears to be the all-encompassing war between heaven and hell—as Crowley and Aziraphale point out to Beelzebub and the Metatron, "It might be written differently someplace else [...] Where you can't read it" (Gaiman 335). There is always a level beyond these contending powers that is the true Tao, and a being with free will, desiring to be Right instead of just Good, will find its harmony at this level. "Disobedience, then, recognizes that different stories might need to be told, that the official story is not sufficient. Disobedience is not perversity but rather creativity" (Wood 255).

of the people who obediently pushed the voltage to 450. He may or may not have been typical, of course. But his reaction was to realize how vulnerable he was to authority and begin to consciously work to develop a “strong moral center,” to change the path of his life entirely—to become, in his own words, “galvanized” by what the experiment taught him about himself (Slater 59).

What, then, can we conclude about Tolkien’s use of disobediences and its resulting eucatastrophic effects? It seems clear that unthinking obedience is not an unalloyed good in Tolkien’s Middle-earth, nor indeed our own. Something that demands unthinking obedience, dominating and denying free will, is more than likely to be evil. As the Zen *koan* instructs, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him”; if something looks like it has the answers and claims to have the right to tell you what to do, it is an illusion. Owning and exercising free will requires you to be responsible for your own actions, and learn from them; in the end, to be like the man who went through the Milgram experiment and came out changed, galvanized into self-understanding and thoughtful disobedience. For if disobedience is in harmony with the Tao, then, as Julian of Norwich said, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”



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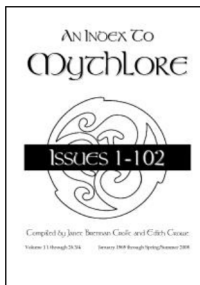
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