

ABSTRACT

Fate, Providence, and Free Will:
Clashing Perspectives of World Order in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth

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Mentor: Ralph C. Wood, Ph.D.

Through the medium of a fictional world, Tolkien returns his modern audience to the ancient yet extremely relevant conflict between fate, providence, and the person's freedom before them. Tolkien's expression of a providential world order to Middle-earth incorporates the Northern Germanic cultures' literary depiction of a fated world, while also reflecting the Anglo-Saxon poets' insight that a single concept, *wyrd*, could signify both fate and providence. This dissertation asserts that Tolkien, while acknowledging as correct the Northern Germanic conception of humanity's final powerlessness before the greater strength of *wyrd* as fate, uses the person's ultimate weakness before *wyrd* as the means for the vindication of providence. Tolkien's unique presentation of world order pays tribute to the pagan view of fate while transforming it into a Catholic understanding of providence.

The first section of the dissertation shows how the conflict between fate and providence in *The Silmarillion* results from the elvish narrator's perspective on temporal events. Chapter One examines the friction between fate and free will within *The Silmarillion* and within Tolkien's Northern sources, specifically the Norse *Eddas*, the

Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, and the Finnish *The Kalevala*. Chapter Two shows that Tolkien, following Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, presents Middle-earth's providential order as including fated elements but still allowing for human freedom.

The second section shows how *The Lord of the Rings* reflects but resolves the conflict in *The Silmarillion* between fate, providence, and free will. Chapter Three explores the extent to which a person can respond before powers of fate, such as the Ring and also deterministic circumstances. The final chapter argues that providence upholds the importance of every person by cooperating with his or her free will, not coercing it; however, providence reveals its authority over all things, including fate, by working through the person's final failure before fatalistic powers.

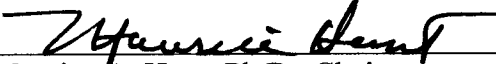
Fate, Providence, and Free Will:
Clashing Perspectives of World Order in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth

by

Helen Theresa Lasseter, Master of American Studies


A Dissertation

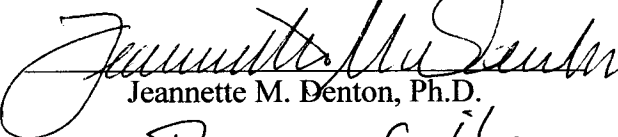
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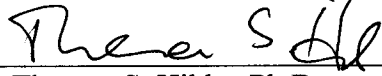

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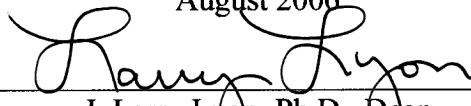
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
DEDICATION	vii
EPIGRAPH	viii
1. CHAPTER ONE: Introduction	1
2. CHAPTER TWO: Tension Between Fate and Free Will in <i>The Silmarillion</i> <i>Introduction</i>	21
3. CHAPTER THREE: Interpreting the Roles of Providence and the Person in <i>The Silmarillion</i>	69
4. CHAPTER FOUR: Free Will's Response to Fate in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> <i>Introduction</i>	110
5. CHAPTER FIVE: Providence and the Person in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> <i>Introduction</i>	164
6. CHAPTER SIX: Conclusion <i>Failure and Eucatastrophe as the Providential Design</i>	213
WORKS CITED	224

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For my parents, Rollin and Ruth, who gave me the Faith

Fiat Voluntas Tua

God has created me,
To do Him some definite service.
He has committed some work to me,
Which He has not committed to another.
I have my mission.
I may never know it in this life,
but I shall be told it in the next.
I am a link in a chain,
A bond of connections between persons.
He has not created me for naught.
I shall do good—I shall do His work,
I shall be an angel of peace,
A preacher of truth in my own place,
while not intending it,
If I do but keep his commandments.
Therefore, I will trust him.
Whatever I am, I can never be thrown away.
He does nothing in vain.
He knows what he is about.
He may take away my friends.
He may throw me among strangers.
He may make me feel desolate,
Make my spirits sink,
Hide my future from me—still,
He knows what he is about.

— John Henry Cardinal Newman
(1801–1890)

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Amid the ruins of the First World War lay the nineteenth-century's promise of Progressivism. Science and rationalism had replaced religious faith in providence for defining the course of world history; yet, in the wake of the War's devastation, Progressivism faltered and a more ancient and perennial understanding of fate controlling human life reemerged in England. Most writers and thinkers came to believe that human efforts were ultimately meaningless and human beings inescapably subject to chaotic or mechanistic forces within a purposeless universe. The Christian concept of providence was not only something most nineteenth- and twentieth-century English writers and poets had already dismissed, but something that seemed absurd in the face of the War's horrors. Yet amidst this growing resignation to fate within the artistic culture of England, J. R. R. Tolkien created a fictional world at the heart of which is a gracious deity with a providential design for the world.

Tom Shippey names Tolkien the "Author of the Century" because Tolkien's work confronts "the origin and nature of evil" (*Author* ix; cf. also *Road* 329). I would suggest that Tolkien addresses the nature of evil by examining a deeper question: what is the principle of order defining a world in which radical evil and suffering continue to flourish? The answer to this question is integral for understanding a person's place in the world. Tolkien's great contribution to the twentieth century was to answer the despair of materialism and determinism. Tolkien is the "author of the century" because he gives a response to the hopelessness caused by a sense of fated entrapment—the worthlessness of

the self and self-efforts—that much of twentieth-century literature presents but to which it does not provide an answer.

In Anglo-Saxon literature, *scops* (poets) used a single word, *wyrd*, to convey the conflicting concepts of fate and providence. The Germanic concept of *wyrd* involved fundamental questions about whether the universe is ordered or chaotic, hostile or hospitable to humankind, and whether humanity has any power before *wyrd*. The older concept of *wyrd* is particularly relevant for a modern and postmodern audience that has witnessed and participated in not only the most destructive wars of history but also the decline of what once was termed “Christendom,” the ordering of governments and culture on the foundation of Christian tradition.

In his work, Tolkien grapples with the conflicting worldviews that *wyrd* signifies in the same manner that Anglo-Saxon *scops* in their poems did. In so far as *wyrd* defined the *scops*’ understanding of world order, the two broad definitions of *wyrd*, “fate” and “providence,” have significantly different implications. *Wyrd* understood as fate disables the person’s free will; while understood as providence, *wyrd* enables it. *Wyrd*’s two senses show the interaction, intersection, and transition between pagan and early Christian beliefs. For both the ancient Christian *scops* and for the modern Christian fantasist, the struggle between *wyrd*’s dual visions was the struggle to reconcile for themselves and to express to their audience the contradictory experience of human helplessness before cosmic powers alongside the Christian claim that every person is infinitely important to the creator.

If Tolkien had written in the realistic style of his contemporaries, such as E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, or James Joyce, a war-devastated audience in not only England

but also Western Europe and America would have rejected such a false-seeming presentation of a providential universe. However, Tolkien did not write in the realistic mode of his contemporaries; rather, he returned to ancient myths and the mode of fantasy romance as the vehicle for his story. He thus scandalized his academic peers at Oxford, as well as literary critics at the time of *The Lord of the Rings*' publication in 1955. And, in his continued popularity fifty years later, he continues to offend certain academics and critics alike.¹ Matthew Dickerson points to a clash of philosophical tenets as a potential reason for this offense: "Tolkien's basic philosophical beliefs were also in contradiction to the prevailing materialist presuppositions of modernism as well as the relativism of postmodernism, especially with respect to his views on human free will and objective morality" (14).

Tolkien creates a secondary "fantasy" world that is completely consistent in itself, yet which also reflects our primary world. Through the filter of such a fictional, secondary world, Tolkien returns his modern audience to the ancient yet extremely relevant conflict between fate, providence, and the place of the person's free will. Tolkien picks up the discussion and presents it to his modern audiences in a way that they can at least hear if not accept. Tolkien uses myth and poetics, rather than direct philosophical or theological discourse, as his means for presenting anew the universal problem of human free will before deterministic forces for good or evil.

The Anglo-Saxon *scops*' insight that *wyrd* encompassed both fate and providence helped to frame Tolkien's expression of a providential structure to the world. The ambivalent meanings of *wyrd* opened for Tolkien a way to deal creatively with a world order that was fated but that also was more fundamentally providential. Reflecting his

audience's lived experience in the primary world, Tolkien presents in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* conflicting views of fate and providence as Middle-earth's underlying world order. While many Tolkien critics have analyzed the question of fate, providence, and free will in Tolkien's work, this dissertation seeks to show that all of these forces interact and are present within Tolkien's work.² This dissertation particularly contributes to the discussion of fate and providence by analyzing how Tolkien's writing reflects and incorporates the Northern concept of fate, and particularly the Anglo-Saxon understanding of *wyrd*. Tolkien, deeply admiring the pagan and Christian Northern Germanic imagination, did not dismiss the experience of fatalism that the Norse *Eddas* or Anglo-Saxon elegiac poetry convey. The following chapters will show that Tolkien enables *both* views of *wyrd* to be present in his world. His work acknowledges that the pagans were correct in thinking humanity finally will fall before the power of *wyrd* as fate; yet, contrary to an exclusively deterministic system, humanity still possesses free will in response to fated influences. Further, Tolkien's world portrays as existent a greater authority over fate—*wyrd* understood as providential not as inimical or deterministic—working not only through a person's proper exercise of free will, but more significantly exerting itself precisely through the reality of human limitations before fatalistic forces. Tolkien's providential order extends the promise to the person that he or she contributes significantly and uniquely to a greater divine order, though that contribution may never be known in this life.

The Lord of the Rings conveys to contemporary audiences Tolkien's vision of a providential order to Middle-earth more successfully than *The Silmarillion* because Tolkien changes the narrator and narrative mode while also moving further from his

Northern Germanic sources' depiction of a fated world order. For *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien creates an elvish narrator who tells Middle-earth's history from a limited perspective that is more fated than providential. For *The Lord of the Rings*, he creates a different, anonymous narrator who has a more omniscient perspective on the story's action, one that is more providential than fated. *The Lord of the Rings* resolves the tension between fate and providence found in *The Silmarillion* by clearly presenting a providential design to history and by portraying the unique involvement of people in that design.

Dissertation Chapters

Tolkien, as his own critic, once said of his work that “the real theme for me is about something much more permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality: the mystery of the love of the world in the hearts of a race ‘doomed’ to leave and seemingly lose it; the anguish in the hearts of a race ‘doomed’ not to leave it, until its whole evil-aroused story is complete” (*Letters* 246). He created the two races, Men and Elves, to represent these themes of death and deathlessness. In both races, Tolkien explores the limitations that time places on a person, whether through death itself or through deathlessness amidst a mortal world. Tolkien specifically creates an elvish narrator for the tales of *The Silmarillion* to dramatize the problem of death and immortality. The elvish perspective on time, shaped by the sadness of their immortality in a mortal world, naturally affects the tone of Tolkien's mythology, or *legendarium*, the body of elvish lore that he created over his lifetime and which his son Christopher has collected as the 12-volume *History of Middle-earth* series. While the 1977 *The Silmarillion* does not explicitly declare the narrators' identity, the *legendarium* indicates that elves are the storytellers of the history.³

The published version, however, still retains the sense of story-teller and story-listener from the first versions without explicitly naming them.

Through the device of the elvish narrator telling the history of a mythic world, Tolkien addresses the same concerns that his modern audience shares over humanity's plight before externally imposed powers. While Tolkien as author may create his world within the framework of a providential universe, he chooses to have a fictional narrator who struggles for faith in a providential order amid the lived experience of a seemingly fated world. Though some of the tales, such as "The Music of the Ainur" and "Of Beren and Lúthien," express a clear providential world order, *The Silmarillion* does not convey this vision of providence to a modern audience as fully as does *The Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps this ambiguity is intentional on the author's part for the tales of *The Silmarillion* illustrate the conflicting understandings of Middle-earth's world order and the reality of free will in response to fateful circumstances.

The first section of this dissertation will show how in *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien, relying on his Northern sources' depiction of the harsh nature of human life, creates a secondary world that sets fate, providence, and free will in conflict. *The Silmarillion* does not resolve the tension its narrators create between the conflicting orders. Tolkien presents in *The Silmarillion* his own version of the Anglo-Saxon duality of *wyrd* by first presenting *wyrd*'s providential sense in the foundational creation myth, "The Ainulindalë," and then presenting its fatalistic interpretation in the subsequent stories. This contrast could be seen as the differing perspectives from without and within time that Boethius examines in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, which King Alfred had translated into Anglo-Saxon, and that Anglo-Saxon poets focus upon in such poems as

the *Wanderer* and *Seafarer*. “The Ainulindalë” recounts what occurs in the “timeless” realm of Ilúvatar, whereas the rest of *The Silmarillion* is a history of the “time-bound” world told by elvish narrators from within their immortal, yet temporal perspective.

The first chapter examines the friction between fate and free will present both in *The Silmarillion* and in Tolkien’s Northern sources. A life-long student and commentator on the literature of the Germanic North, Tolkien was very sympathetic and receptive to the imaginative vision that the Northern narrators convey. The similarity between his tales and the poetry of his sources suggests that, through their example, Tolkien found a way to express imaginatively for himself and his readers a world with conflicting cosmic powers. The chapter will briefly examine how the Norse *Eddas*, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, and the Finnish *Kalevala* (all of which Tolkien studied, translated, and/or taught), present similar but differing depictions of the clash between fate and free will. Tolkien’s own presentation of it, filtered through his elvish narrator, suggests the paradox that fate is an inexorable power and yet persons still bear moral responsibility for wrong choices. The chapter will then examine the duality between coexisting powers of fate and free will as presented in the tales of two key figures, Túrin Turambar, the mortal, and Fëanor, the elf.⁴

The second chapter will show the providential elements of *The Silmarillion* and the way in which providence and free will interact. Turning to Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, I will show that the medievals envisioned apparently contradictory orders, such as fate and providence, as co-existing in the world. Tolkien, following Boethius’s own explanation, presents the providential order in Middle-earth as including and answering fated elements—life is viewed as determined but, providentially, still

possessing freedom to choose. The two key stories revealing Middle-earth's underlying providential order are "Of the Music of the Ainur" and "Of Beren and Lúthien." The first is Middle-earth's foundational creation myth in which the narrator clearly describes a creator's ultimate power over and design for creation. The second story shows the temporal unfolding of the creation myth's providential promises in the lives of the lovers, Beren and Lúthien. "Of Beren and Lúthien," preceding the story "Of Túrin Turambar" in the chronology that 1977 *The Silmarillion* presents, directly challenges the irrelevancy of the person in a fated world order by showing instead his or her integral place within the providential order of Middle-earth.

The second section of the dissertation shows how *The Lord of the Rings* reflects but also resolves the conflict present in *The Silmarillion* between fate, providence, and free will. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien moves away from a narrator conveying a broad history to one focused on a specific moment in that history. Tolkien shifts from telling a story presented stylistically as myths, to telling his story as a combination of mythological elements and the modern realistic novel form. Unlike *The Silmarillion*, which has an elvish narrator telling the elvish history of Middle-earth, *The Lord of the Rings* has a more omniscient narrator, like a modern novel. Tolkien, however, indicated that the story is told from the hobbit-perspective.

Unlike *The Silmarillion*'s focus upon classically understood heroes and heroism, *The Lord of the Rings*, while including examples of traditional heroism, alters the model by emphasizing the heroism of the humble, the weak, and the faithful. Through his introduction of the hobbits, Tolkien reshapes the heroic epic tradition by combining the great heroic quest with the small and ordinary life of a simple and undistinguished hero,

thus emphasizing the important role every person plays in the grander design of history. But, in contrast to the contemporary novelist, Tolkien does not make his heroes “anti-heroes”: heroic despite their weaknesses and failures. His hobbits are real men, real heroes, who attempt to overcome their natural weakness, making the most of what they have to give. The presentation of heroism that Tolkien’s work gives the modern reader is another element that has made it so attractive to modernity’s longing for the heroic.

The third chapter puts forth the argument that though fate is not the sole mover of Middle-earth’s history, there are malicious, evil powers, capable of consuming and destroying people and communities, which exist in the world. The primary example of such a fate-like authority is the Ring of Power. Through examining three distinct character sets, chapter three explores the extent to which a person can respond before fate and to deterministic circumstances.

The final chapter demonstrates that the providential world order of Middle-earth has two fundamental elements: a transcendent, beneficent ordering of history and the indispensable role of particular persons in realizing such an order. Providence does not merely act as a beneficent, heavenly despot, denying people free will and forcing them along certain paths; rather, it works in cooperation with each person’s free will in achieving its greater design. The story of *The Lord of the Rings* shows, however, that providence works precisely through a person’s weaknesses and ultimate failure before fate-like exterior powers. In this way, the narrator acknowledges as partially true the ancient understanding that fate rules the life of humankind and everyone finally will fail before it. However, because deterministic fate is not the ultimate power in Middle-earth, another higher power directs fate’s workings for its own purposes. Providence uses the

person's inevitable weakness as the means of revealing its deeper power over the person and over fate itself.

Definition of Terms

I am using several terms in my dissertation that need proper definition and clarification. *Wyrđ*, *fate*, *free will*, and *providence* are all terms whose definition has developed over time and which can be used differently by various authors and interpreted differently by readers. Because Tolkien was an orthodox Roman Catholic, his understanding and use of these interrelated concepts in his fictional world would have paralleled the doctrinal ones. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* of 1910 is a representative summary of the theology with which Tolkien would have been familiar. Its definitions of fate, free will, and providence may be helpful, then, to better define my use and interpretation of the concepts within this dissertation.

Wyrđ

The Old English sense of *wyrđ* has not directly survived into modern English. Its modern etymological descendent, "weird," has lost almost completely any real connection to *wyrđ*'s original sense. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, listing the more archaic definition for the word "weird," defines it as "the principle, power, or agency by which events are predetermined: fate, destiny." *Wyrđ* in Anglo-Saxon literature conveys multiple meanings. One is simple "chance": because *wyrđ* is simply what happens without regard to a mind or purpose behind the action, it thus can express a chaotic world view. Howell D. Chickering offers a helpful explanation of the Anglo-Saxon conceptions of the world and of *wyrđ* in this regard:

The Anglo-Saxons believed that life was a struggle against insuperable odds and that a man's *wyrd* or 'lot' would be what it would be. [. . .] Even in early pagan days, they do not seem to have believed in a supernatural conception of Destiny. *Wyrd* originally meant simply 'what happens' [. . .] There was no active malevolent force in the pagans' universe [. . .] in pre-Christian times they do not seem to have had highly developed beliefs in a personal afterlife. Perhaps it was precisely because they lacked such beliefs, because life was potentially meaningless, that they looked to the heroic notion of personal fame to find the strength to resist *wyrd*. The Anglo-Saxons had an incomparable sense of the transience and pointlessness of mortal life. (269)

Wyrd also can convey a similar meaning of fate: the power of an external force ordering the universe for and against mortals who cannot prevent, escape, or defeat it. Finally, in a contrasting meaning, *wyrd* can signify providence: a world divinely ordered so as to work with humanity's free will according to a beneficent design. In some works, as F. Anne Payne points out, poets use *wyrd* in multiple senses and interchangeably to convey a sense of power transcending human understanding (14).

Fate and Free will

The *OED* gives the synonym for *wyrd* as "fate," defining it as "the principle, power, or agency by which, according to certain philosophical and popular systems of belief, all events, or some events in particular, are unalterably predetermined from eternity." In this understanding, fate constrains the extent of a person's free will, which the *OED* defines as "spontaneous will, unconstrained choice (to do or act)." Further, free will is "the power of directing our own actions without constraint by necessity or fate." By definition, fate must preclude the free nature of a person's will and, subsequently, the moral culpability for actions. As the *Catholic Encyclopedia* indicates, fatalism, or the "determinist doctrine," "annihilates human morality," precisely because a person is only morally responsible or culpable for willed not compelled deeds (Maher 262).

Free will is a complicated concept long debated by differing philosophical and religious schools of thought. However, as Michael Maher argues, one's understanding of free will determines one's thinking regarding "the most momentous issues that present themselves to the human mind." Maher presents the problems of fate and free will thus:

On the one hand, does man possess genuine moral freedom, power of real choice, true ability to determine the course of his thoughts and volitions, to decide which motives shall prevail within his mind, to modify and mould his own character? Or, on the other, are man's thoughts and volitions, his character and external actions, all merely the inevitable outcome of his circumstances? Are they all inexorably predetermined in every detail along rigid lines by events of the past, over which he himself has had no sort of control? This is the real import of the free-will problem. (259)

Maher concludes that "fatalists, necessarians, [and] determinists" assert that any act of the will is "the inevitable outcome of [a person's] character and the motives acting on [him or her] at the time"; whereas "Libertarians, indeterminists or anti-determinists say 'No. The mind or soul in deliberate actions is a free cause. Given all the conditions requisite for action, it can either act or abstain from action. It can, and sometimes does, exercise its own causality against the weight of character and present motives'" (262). In this understanding of free will, external influences necessarily affect a person's use of the will but they do not necessitate his or her choice in a specific way.

The Augustinian position, also reaffirmed by Thomas Aquinas, is that the use of the will towards what is truly good is the only "free" use of the will. Choosing towards what is only apparently good results, as Maher points out, in a diminishment of freedom as the self distances itself from God and becomes enslaved to some vice.⁵ Every proper use of the will towards the good moves the person towards the "end" that Divine Providence intends for the created person.

Divine Providence

Providence does not preclude free will in the manner that fate does. The *OED* defines providence as “the foreknowing and beneficent care and government of God (or of nature, etc. . .); divine direction, control, or guidance.” It also is “an instance or act of divine intervention.” Leslie Walker’s entry for the *Catholic Encyclopedia* points out that Divine Providence is “God Himself”; God not understood abstractly but as he manifests himself in the specific action of ordering the universe such that all creatures might realize the end for which God created them—union with their creator. The *Encyclopedia* emphasizes the free nature God gives to his creatures by explaining further the realization of a creature’s “end”:

that all creatures should manifest the glory of God, and in particular that man should glorify Him, recognizing in nature the work of His hand, serving Him in obedience and love, and thereby attaining to the full development of his nature and to eternal happiness in God. [. . .] He acts in and with every creature in each and all its activities. (Walker 510)

Such an understanding of providence not only leaves room for but demands the exercise of human free will in participation with God’s own. Because of free will’s authentic power, humans may turn away from God’s intentions; in this way, sin, “the willful perversion of human liberty,” is present in the world as is “evil which is the consequence of sin.” Evil arises through the misuse of free will. Catholic theology is clear on the point that God never intends evil to be done so that good may result, though within Divine Providence, God turns evil into good. Catholic theology’s definition of providence encompasses the negative effects of free will: “In spite of sin [. . .] and in spite of evil [. . .] [God] directs all, even evil and sin itself, to the final end for which the universe was created” (Walker 510). My use of the above terms follows closely to the

standard definitions of the *OED* and the traditional understanding of them within Catholic theology as expressed in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

Narrator and Implied Author

Other terms needing additional discussion and clarification are “narrator” and “author.” I rely on Mieke Bal’s work on narratology in my use of the terms, placing them within the context of narrative theory. In *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Bal indicates the importance of distinguishing between the various agents the writer uses to convey the narrative. She says the agent who relates the story:

[. . .] cannot be identified with the writer. Rather, the writer withdraws and calls upon a fictitious spokesman, an agent technically known as the *narrator*. But the narrator does not relate continually. Whenever direct speech occurs in the text, it is as if the narrator temporarily transfers this function to one of the actors. When describing the text layer, it is thus important to ascertain who is doing the narration. (8)

She further distinguishes her use of “narrator,” trying to isolate its definition in the most technical and impersonal way possible. She differentiates between the narrative agents: “When [. . .] I discuss the narrative agent, or *narrator*, I mean the linguistic subject, a function and not a person, which expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text. It hardly needs mentioning that this agent is not the (biographical) author of the narrative. The narrator of *Emma* is not Jane Austen.” Bal’s separation of narrator from biographical author is a particularly important distinction when one speaks of the narrator of *The Silmarillion*. Just as Jane Austen is clearly not the narrator of *Emma*, so, too, Tolkien is *not* the narrator of *The Silmarillion*’s various myths, though he is the author. Thus, his narrators do not necessarily express his own view of Middle-earth’s world order. Bal continues to distinguish “narrator” from “implied author,” who in turn is different from the biographical author:

In speaking of the narrator, I also do not mean the so-called “*implied author*.” [. . .] The term was introduced by [Wayne] Booth (1961) in order to discuss and analyse the ideological and moral stances of a narrative text without having to refer directly to a biographical author. In Booth’s use of the term, it denotes the totality of meanings that can be inferred from a text. Thus the *implied author* is the *result* of the investigation of the meaning of a text and not the *source* of that meaning. Only after interpreting the text on the basis of a text description can the implied author be inferred and discussed. (119-120)

Not only does Bal separate narrator from biographical author, she also separates “narrator” as impersonal narrative agent from “narrator” as a character within the story.

My use of “narrator” differs from Bal’s technical usage and definition of it and follows more closely her general terming of it as the “fictitious spokesman” for the writer (8). Bal is using an impersonal understanding of narrators in order to speak purely of the textual agent by which a reader understands the course of a story. *The Silmarillion* has a personal narrator, a story-teller who is as involved in the narration itself as are his characters. Bal’s definitions are particularly helpful in their distinctions between the different story-telling agents within a narrative. I have used “narrator” in referring to the narrative agent of *The Silmarillion* to imply a story-teller, or as Bal defines it, “a fictive ‘I’ who interferes in his/her account as much as s/he likes, or even participates as a character in the action. Such a ‘visible’ narrator is a specific version of the narrator, one of the several different possibilities of manifestation” (120).

Difficulties The Silmarillion Poses to Readers and Critics

Prior to beginning a discussion of Tolkien’s work in *The Silmarillion*, it is necessary to note the many difficulties a posthumous book such as *The Silmarillion* poses to the reader. Tolkien’s son, Christopher, assembled his father’s manuscripts and published them as *The Silmarillion* in 1977, four years after his father’s death. The

published form of the work is the only version most readers know. In 1937, after Allen & Unwin had published *The Hobbit*, and in response for the publisher's request for another story with "more hobbits," Tolkien presented Allen & Unwin with a manuscript of "The Silmarillion,"⁶ but he did not have it in a form ready for publication. As Humphrey Carpenter points out, it was disorganized and bundled together (206). In 1955, Tolkien had already completed *The Lord of the Rings'* manuscript five years earlier, but he still had not finished "The Silmarillion" in a way satisfactory to him (Carpenter 240). Given that Tolkien did not assemble a manuscript he deemed ready for publication, a reader may ask how much of the published form is ordered as the author would have intended? What of the unpublished material would Tolkien have included or excluded in the published manuscript? Is the structure which Christopher assembled the form that Tolkien would have planned? Randell Helms addresses this very problem of authorial intent in a posthumous work:

Anyone interested, as I am, in the growth of *The Silmarillion* will want to study *Unfinished Tales*, not only for its intrinsic value but also because its relationship to the former provides what will become a classic example of a longstanding problem in literary criticism: what, really, *is* a literary work? Is it what the author intended (or may have intended) it to be, or is it what a later editor makes of it? The problem becomes especially intense for the practising critic when, as happened with *The Silmarillion*, a writer dies before finishing his work and leaves more than one version of some of its parts, which then find publication elsewhere. Which version will the critic approach as the 'real' story? (Qtd. in *Book of Lost Tales* 6)

While having a very close knowledge of his father's works, Christopher Tolkien had to rely on his own judgment in including and excluding material, as well as in organizing it. He chose to organize the many manuscripts written over his father's lifetime according to the history's internal chronology, not according to the composition date of each story. Thus, the age of each story's composition varies from one chapter to

another, and a reader cannot know from the published version the order in which Tolkien composed the stories or had intended them to be presented.

Despite the editorial decisions Christopher Tolkien had to make, he strongly objects to critics such as Helms who attribute *The Silmarillion* to him and not his father. In his foreword to *The Book of Lost Tales*, Christopher quotes Randell Helms's statement, "Christopher Tolkien has helped us in this instance by honestly pointing out that *The Silmarillion* in the shape that we have it is the invention of the son not the father," and responds firmly, "this is a serious misapprehension to which my words have given rise" (7). Christopher also objects to Tom Shippey, saying "while accepting my assurance that 'a very high proportion' of the 1937 'Silmarillion' text remained into the published version, [Shippey] is nonetheless elsewhere clearly reluctant to see it as other than a 'late' work, even the latest work of its author" (7). In my use of and reference to *The Silmarillion*, I am relying upon Christopher Tolkien's assertions that the 1977 *The Silmarillion* faithfully represents the intentions of the author, not those of the editor.

Tolkien's own letters seem to support Christopher's statements on this matter. For instance, in 1956, he indicates he has written "The Silmarillion" but is searching for the right order to it: "I am not writing the *Silmarillion*, which was long ago written; but trying to find a way and order in which to make the legends and annals publishable." In the same letter, Tolkien expresses his frustration at not having been able to order "The Silmarillion" in time to publish it alongside *The Lord of the Rings*, saying:

I have been forced to publish up-side-down or backwards; and after the grand crash (and the end of visibly incarnate Evil) before the Dominion of Men (or simple History) to which it all led up the mythological and elvish legends of the Elder Days will not be quite the same. But perhaps read, eventually, from beginning to end in the right order, both parts may gain. (*Letters* 252)

While in his lifetime Tolkien did not find an order to finalize the legends, Christopher was able to do so. In so doing, he accomplished the hope his father had that *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, when read together, would provide the full understanding of Middle-earth's creation and history.

Notes

1. See Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien: Man and Myth*, chapter 1, for a catalogue of “literati” who are “dismayed by the emergence of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* as the ‘greatest book of the century’” (1).
2. The three book-length works relating to the themes of providence, fate, and free will are: Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth*; Fleming Rutledge, *The Battle for Middle-earth: Tolkien’s Divine Design in The Lord of the Rings*; and Matthew Dickerson, *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in The Lord of the Rings*. Two other authors who include chapters relating to these topics are Paul Kocher, *Master of Middle-earth* chs. 3 and 4, pages 34–79; and Thomas Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, ch. 5, pages 135–176, and *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, chs. 3 and 4, pages 112–225.
3. I will address the problematic nature of *The Silmarillion* more fully towards the end of this introduction. Here, however, I want to indicate that there is a great deal of scholarly debate over what tales define “The Silmarillion” and in what order they ought to appear. Unfortunately, we do not have available to us a complete and definitive text as Tolkien would have put it together and approved for publication. We only have the work as Christopher Tolkien assembled it. Christopher acknowledges the great difficulty in collecting his father’s work and the problematic nature of publishing a posthumous work such as the 1977 version of *The Silmarillion*. There has not been a revised edition since 1977 to include the expanded and variant stories found in the *History of Middle-earth* volumes that Christopher has edited over the last thirty years. Thus, the only authoritative source of “The Silmarillion” available to the average reader remains the 1977 published version. I will be addressing almost exclusively the stories as they appear in the 1977 edition but at times I will refer to the *History of Middle-earth* volumes.
4. Unlike Túrin’s tale, which is told in one chapter, “Of Túrin Turambar,” the history of Fëanor and the Silmarils extends over several chapters. Several stories combine to tell the complete tale: “Of Fëanor and the Unchaining of Melkor,” “Of the Silmarils and the Unrest of the Noldor,” “Of the Darkening of Valinor,” “Of the Flight of the Noldor,” and “Of the Return of the Noldor.”
5. Just as one’s use of the will in resisting evil influences strengthens the will to resist evil more easily, so, too, does the improper use of the will weaken the person’s ability to resist evil. As Maher puts it:

the practice of yielding to impulse results in enfeebling self-control. The faculty of inhibiting pressing desires, of concentrating attention on more remote goods, of reinforcing the higher but less urgent motives, undergoes a kind of atrophy by disuse. In proportion as a man habitually yields to intemperance or some other vice, his freedom diminishes and he does in a true sense sink into slavery. He continues responsible *in causa* for his

subsequent conduct, though his ability to resist temptation at the time is lessened. On the other hand, the more frequently a man restrains mere impulse, checks inclination towards the pleasant, puts forth self-denial in the face of temptation, and steadily aims at a virtuous life, the more does he increase in self-command and therefore in freedom. (263)

6. Following Christopher Tolkien's example, I am using quotation marks to distinguish between the various manuscripts of "The Silmarillion" and the 1977 published manuscript of *The Silmarillion*.

CHAPTER TWO

Tension Between Fate and Free Will in *The Silmarillion*

Introduction

Tolkien stated that *The Silmarillion* was the “story of his heart” and its mythology forms the basis of his fictional world. Yet, though beginning his writing of it in the early part of the twentieth century, he never was able to bring it to a satisfactory completion. Rather, over the course of his life he invented, crafted, reshaped, and retold the legends within the collection over and over again. It is both a later and earlier work than *The Lord of the Rings*, published in 1954–1955. It is later because it was not published until 1977, four years after Tolkien’s death; yet it is earlier because Tolkien wrote it well before *The Lord of the Rings*. He had a rough draft of the manuscript which he gave to Allen and Unwin for review in 1937 and the *legendarium* was clearly developed in his mind prior to writing *The Lord of the Rings*.

Christopher Tolkien, who has spent the majority of his career organizing and bringing to publication his father’s vast amount of handwritten material, indicates, “*The Book of Lost Tales* was begun by my father in 1916-17 during the First War, when he was 25 years old, and left incomplete several years later. It is the starting-point, at least in fully-formed narrative, of the history of Valinor and Middle-earth” (*Book 8*). Tom Shippey adds to the biographical information: “In late 1916, by now on convalescent leave from the trench fever contracted on the Somme, [Tolkien] was writing a much more extended and continuous account of elvish story, completed (or at least relinquished) by 1920, and published in 1983-4 as the two-volume *Book of Lost Tales*” (*Author 227*).¹

Tolkien designed *The Silmarillion* to be a collection of myths, stories, and legends evoking a deep sense of a story behind the story. Tolkien purposefully crafted the legends of *The Silmarillion* to follow and reinforce a sense of mythology. Tom Shippey indicates that *The Silmarillion* “was even designed to feel like a summary, a compilation made much later than the events by one looking back over a great gap of time” (*Road* 258). In creating a mythology, Tolkien wrote the different myths of Middle-earth at various times in his life and was not concerned with creating them chronologically. He often went back to stories he had composed ten years earlier and altered them based on new conceptions he had of the world. Christopher Tolkien thus points out that it is incorrect for a reader to conceive of *The Silmarillion* as being written out of whole cloth.

Quite to the contrary:

the author’s vision of his own vision underwent a continual slow shifting, shedding and enlarging: only in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* did parts of it emerge to become fixed in print, in his own lifetime. The study of Middle-earth and Valinor is thus complex; for the object of the study was not stable, but exists, as it were ‘longitudinally’ in time (the author’s lifetime), and not only ‘transversely’ in time, as a printed book that undergoes no essential further change. By the publication of ‘The Silmarillion’ the ‘longitudinal’ was cut ‘transversely’, and a kind of finality imposed. (*Book 7*)

While Middle-earth’s mythology is not a stable “object of study,” its genesis myth remained fairly consistent across the decades in which Tolkien composed the *legendarium*. From the evidence of his early conception and writing of the “Music of the Ainur,” Tolkien seems to have experienced a vision of providence early on in his life, even lasting through the War when most men lost their faith in any beneficent cosmic order, yet it was a vision which he sought to reconcile with a competing experience of fate. Though this faith in providence remained with him his whole life, if one judges by

the material he brought to publication, he seems to have been able to express it to his satisfaction only in *The Lord of the Rings*.²

Though it is difficult to say definitively what is or is not an author's intention, Tolkien described what he presumed his intentions were in forming a complete and wholly consistent secondary world. Quite simply, he wanted to be a good story-teller and he believed a good story-teller must be "a successful sub-creator" ("On Fairy Stories" 37). A successful sub-creator is one who, according to Tolkien:

makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of the world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. ("On Fairy Stories" 37)

The complexity of the ultimate source of order in Middle-earth reflects the primary world's intricate nature. If human free will exists, is it responsible for moving history in such a way as to deny the free will of others who are caught in circumstances? How is the concept of providence manifest in a history which appears to be a long catalog of one destruction after another? The secondary world Tolkien creates in *The Silmarillion* raises similar questions. Through relying upon other myths, such as Norse, Anglo-Saxon, and Finnish, which also address questions of human existence in a hostile world, Tolkien creates a wholly consistent secondary world that sets powers of fate, free will, and providence in conflict. Within the limits of the secondary world, he creates a fictional narrator to recount the history as mythic lore. The tales of *The Silmarillion* do not resolve the tension they create between these forces. This chapter will examine how two central tales of the history reveal the conflict between fate and free will: the myths of Fëanor and Túrin Turambar. The next chapter will then explore Middle-earth's

foundational creation myth within a clear providential order and, thus, the tension between the competing concepts of world order.

Tolkien creates a world in which a power like fate exists while the free will of created beings still operates. The duality of fate and free will present in Tolkien's work is also present within Northern literature. The similarity between Tolkien's work and his Northern sources suggests that they offered Tolkien a model for creating a world in which powers of fate and free will both co-exist and conflict. Perhaps part of Tolkien's early and life-long interest in Northern stories is because they address mythically the clash of the human with the divine, free will with fate.

Wyrd, Fate, and Providence Influencing Tolkien's Thought

The Anglo-Saxon culture had a single word—*wyrd*—that expressed apparently conflicting concepts of world order. *Wyrd* first meant “fate,” or “what happened,” but after England's conversion to Christianity, its poets began to use *wyrd* to mean “providence.” *Wyrd* understood as “fate” implies a universal, inescapable power dominating and controlling mortals, and often forcing them to a destructive end. *Wyrd* understood as “providence” was a new concept introduced to the culture by Christian missionaries, implying a universal, beneficent power of a god who creates, controls, and guides creation towards a good end: eternal life in heaven. Thus, one use of *wyrd* suggests a world order hostile to humans, or, at the very least, dismissive of their importance and contribution to the world's design. The other use suggests an order friendly to humans and in which humans play an important part of the world's design.

Though Tolkien's narrator in *The Silmarillion* never uses the Old English word *wyrd* to express the world order of Middle-earth, the narrator replaces it with modern

English words such as “doom” and “fate.” As an Anglo-Saxon scholar, Tolkien was well aware of the various senses of both *wyrd* and “doom.” Thomas Shippey explains the older meaning of “doom,” in particular: Doom, or *dóm*, “[is] a noun related to the verb *déman*, ‘to judge’. It too meant in early times what was spoken, what people said about you (especially once you were dead), but it had also the meaning of a judicial sentence, a law or a decision.” Shippey continues: “common to both words, ‘fate’ and ‘doom’, is the idea of a Power sitting above mortals and ruling their lives by its sentence or by its speech alone. This sense is completely absent from ‘luck’ or ‘chance’; and with the waning of belief in superior Powers the more neutral words have become the common ones (*Road 253*).” Shippey recognizes that to achieve a certain “tone,” Tolkien follows the model of past cultures: “Tolkien was aiming at a tone, or perhaps better a ‘taste’, which he knew well but which had fallen outside the range of modern literature: a tone of stoicism, regret, inquiry, above all of awe moderated by complete refusal to be intimidated. The complexities of ‘fate’ and ‘doom’ show us the intention clearly enough” (*Road 256*). Like the Anglo-Saxon *scops*’ use of *wyrd*, the narrator of *The Silmarillion* uses “doom” and “fate” in a way suggestive of a deterministic control. Yet the narrator’s fatalistic judgments contrast directly with other central myths in *The Silmarillion*, such as the “Music of the Ainur,” describing providential world order. The narrator’s repeated use of “fate” and “doom” in the different myths of *The Silmarillion* increases the work’s fatalistic tone and creates a tension between fate, free will, and providence similar to that created by *wyrd* in Anglo-Saxon literature.

The Anglo-Saxons’ dual-conception of *wyrd*, as well as the Norse depiction of the dualistic battle between good and evil powers, may have provided Tolkien with models

for his secondary world, in which fatalistic powers and human wills clash. Both cultures express fate's power metaphorically—fate works through the active hostility of monsters toward humanity. In Norse mythology, *etins* (giants) and monsters as fate's instruments ultimately destroy all of creation. In the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, monsters also work like fate to finally destroy the hero. In the stories of both Northern cultures, the hero resists his inevitable destruction by fighting to the death against the monsters. In the Northern vision, fate is an imposed outside power, which, though indifferent or hostile to humanity, is always victorious over human life. A hero's freedom is limited to choosing between resistance or surrender to the monsters, but either choice will result in death and destruction.

Fate and Free will in Norse Mythology

Two stories from Norse mythology, the *Voluspa* and the *Grípisspá*, illustrate well the Norse conception of human limitations as they convey an understanding of a fatalistic world order similar to that expressed in Tolkien's mythology. Even if there is not a direct textual connection between the two systems of mythological construction, a reader who understands the restriction of a person's will within a fated world order will better understand the deterministic elements Tolkien places within Middle-earth.

The *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas* contain the series of "lays," or songs, which have come to define Norse mythology. The first lay of the *Poetic Edda* is the *Voluspa*, which, like Tolkien's "Music," is the central creation myth of Norse mythology. The myth details the world's creation and destruction, revealing from the world's beginning what its final end also will be. The tale also defines the place of humanity within a world inevitably moving towards final destruction. The lay's narrator, a prophetess, makes

clear that all events are leading to a final battle between gods and human warriors versus monsters and giants—the *Ragnarök*, the “twilight of the gods.” At the climax of the last battle, fire will consume the world tree, Yggdrasil; the monsters will extinguish the sun, moon, and stars; and the monsters and giants will destroy both the immortal gods and the mortal heroes. The poem establishes a ruinous future as a *fait accompli*, a pattern that subsequent lays repeat. Human freedom in such a fated world lies in the choice to fight or to refuse to fight against the monsters both prior to and at the final battle. Though destruction and defeat are the inescapable ends of his actions, the hero retains the ability to act courageously or to cower in fear; in other words, he can be destroyed either as a hero or as a coward.

The *Grípisspá* also depicts the Norse conception of free will before fate’s stronger power. Lee Hollander, a critic and translator of the *Poetic Edda*, argues that the *Grípisspá*’s placement shows the *Edda*-collector’s “lack of critical discernment,” and because it contains elements from other lays, Hollander rather harshly dismisses the lay as “poetically worthless” (205). If one judges it according to style or new content, then perhaps Hollander is correct in dismissing its importance. Yet, if one examines the lay as part of the *Poetic Edda*’s whole structure, the *Edda*-collector may have purposefully placed and constructed it, for it reinforces the overarching plot pattern established in the *Voluspa* by foreshadowing the events that occur in detail within subsequent lays.

The *Grípisspá* summarizes the whole story of the hero, Sigurth, including his final fate—betrayed and slain in his bed by his brother-in-law. To briefly review the lay: Sigurth meets Grípir, an oracle, and demands to know his fate, or the course of his life. Despite his reluctance, Grípir reveals Sigurth’s whole fate, making Sigurth’s life seem

predetermined. The pre-established course of Sigurth's life brings into question his freedom of will to choose alternatively. For instance, Sigurth uses the past tense in asking Grípir to tell him of his future actions; however, Grípir is foretelling *future* events, not past actions. Sigurth asks: "How now, Grípir, give me answer: *did* in truth I betray the king?" (25.48, emphasis added). Upon hearing Grípir's affirmative response, Sigurth displays the Norse resignation to fate's power: "over fate wins no one / Thou'st done my bidding as best thou could'st; / a fairer fate thou fain had's't told me, / Grípir, ungrudging, if granted it were" (25.52). There is no suggestion that Sigurth can avoid his fate or that he even tries to do so, as Greek tragic heroes such as Oedipus attempt unsuccessfully to do. Sigurth resignedly proceeds to his future as if it has already happened—for the future is indeed determined for Sigurth. That Sigurth speaks of time as preordained suggests that human will cannot counter fate's omnipotence. Yet, as in the *Voluspa*, Sigurth remains able to act courageously with the full knowledge of his ultimate powerlessness before greater forces.

Bertha Phillpotts's analysis of choice in Norse tales clarifies the nature of freedom within Tolkien's Middle-earth. She argues that the stories reveal a keen interest in a person's external actions in response to a "no win" situation. For Norse heroes and heroines, she says, "there is simply the awful choice between two evils." Phillpotts emphasizes that the possibility of choosing between two evils reveals the presence of choice within an otherwise predetermined world:

[. . .] the point is that there is a choice. It may be no more than a choice between yielding and resisting to the uttermost what is bound to happen: it may be only a choice between two courses each of which is hateful. But the intense interest of poets in this type of story does seem to show that the aristocracies of the Nordic peoples felt that man's will was free and, therefore, in some way superior to the Fate that crushes him. (5)

Though Phillipotts argues for the presence of free will within the Northern fatalistic imagination, her description indicates the drastic limits of free will in a fated world. The will is not free to choose an alternative to destruction, and thus there is no way out of the fatalistic circumstances that entrap a person. In the Norse tales, fate gives the hero only two evil choices, and the hero has sure knowledge that the result of either choice will be disastrous to himself and those around him. However, the choice of *inaction*, the choice of cowardice, and of suicide as a form of cowardice, is one that the Northern hero never makes.

Fate and Free will in Beowulf

As other critics have well documented, Tolkien's scholarly work with Anglo-Saxon texts, such as *Beowulf*, influenced his literary work. The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, like the Norse lays, foreshadows inevitable destruction for both humans and their works, and Tolkien creates a narrator for *The Silmarillion* who uses foreshadowing in a way similar to that of the *Beowulf*-poet. The technique of foreshadowing in *Beowulf* suggests the inescapable nature of fate, or *wyrd*, as the Anglo-Saxons named it. But in contrast to the Norse myths, the *Beowulf*-poet, by introducing a greater extent of human freedom for the hero, makes him bear a greater responsibility than Norse heroes for unleashing fate's destructive powers upon himself. In expanding human responsibility, the *Beowulf*-poet thus also raises the level of morality in heroic action above that of the Norse tales. As the hero's freedom to choose increases, so, too, does the moral responsibility for that choice.

One example of foreshadowing in *Beowulf* is the poet's opening description of the great hall, Heorot. The poet describes the hall's destruction in the very sentence in which

he describes its construction: “The hall towered high, cliff-like, horn-gabled, awaited the war-flames, malicious burning; it was still not the time for the sharp-edged hate of his sworn son-in-law to rise against Hrothgar in murderous rage” (Chickering 80-85). Built into the great hall’s construction are the seeds of its destruction—the enmity between two families connected by marriage. This description places the inevitable ruin of Heorot in the front of the audience’s mind, so that the hall’s coming annihilation is, literally, a foretold conclusion. This brief description of foreshadowed destruction is a pattern the poet repeats in both individual episodes and also in the structure of the whole poem. As Tolkien indicates in his critical essay on *Beowulf*, the poet sets up a pattern such that “disaster is foreboded. Defeat is the theme. Triumph over the foes of man’s precarious fortress is over, and we approach slowly and reluctantly the inevitable victory of death” (*Monsters* 30).

Beowulf may also serve as Tolkien’s model for depicting the tension between fate and free will. The Anglo-Saxon work offers an interesting combination of the external power of fate and the internal power of human freedom in bringing about devastation. The power of fate that destroys Heorot and later destroys the hero, Beowulf, is partially wrought through human choices. Hrothgar’s son-in-law *chooses* to attack his father-in-law, thus bringing about the burning of the hall. Beowulf *chooses* to fight the dragon himself rather than direct his *comitatus* in the battle, thus bringing about the destruction of himself and his kingdom after his death.

In a way similar to Tolkien’s own depiction of free will facing external influences, *Beowulf* suggests the negative use of free will is partially responsible for a mortal’s own destruction, while also indicating that its positive use can successfully resist

fatalistic powers. A conversation between Beowulf and Unferth offers just such an intertwining of a person's free will and his fate. In response to Unferth's skeptical opinion, Beowulf defends his legendary ocean-swimming contest with Brecca. Beowulf declares: "fate often saves / an undoomed man when his courage holds" (*Wyrð oft nereð / unféagne eorl, þonne his ellen dēah*) (Chickering 572b-573). Beowulf's statement enmeshes fate as an external force with the internal power of the hero. In this case, *wyrð* saved Beowulf both because it was not his preordained time to die, but also because he demonstrated courage in the face of death. He fought valiantly against death in the waters, just as *wyrð*, spoken of here as an active power, also saved him from defeat.

Another instance of free will's positive role in response to external powers is found in Beowulf's initial choice to come to Heorot in order to confront Grendel, who has terrorized the kingdom for years. Regarding the outcome of his upcoming battle with Grendel, Beowulf simply declares, "fate will go as it must" (*Gáð ā wyrð swā hīo scel*) (Chickering 455). By placing himself within the path of *wyrð*, Beowulf acknowledges *wyrð*'s power, not his own skill, in determining the victor. In this first battle, *wyrð* determines Beowulf the victor, but he is so only because of his freely made decision to submit fully to *wyrð* and risk death by eschewing weapons and armor in the encounter with Grendel. His subsequent battles with evil monsters suggest that a hero can never destroy evil completely nor fully overpower *wyrð*, as Tolkien's characters in Middle-earth will also discover. Beowulf's choice to continue in the struggle against evil and to place himself within *wyrð*'s destructive path is what Tolkien calls "northern courage" (*Monsters* 20). In the heroes of Middle-earth, Tolkien mirrors the depiction *Beowulf*

offers of the hero's confrontation with evil despite knowing "the wages of heroism is death" (*Monsters* 26).³

Though the poem suggests human freedom is partially responsible for unleashing powers of fate, *Beowulf* also presents fate as separate from human control or responsibility. Some things the hero cannot affect, for he is subject to the destructive movement of powers external to himself. Tolkien comments upon the poem's inevitable movement towards destruction, as well as the hero's courageous stance before such movement: "men with courage as their stay went forward to that battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat" (*Monsters* 18). Similar to the *Eddas*' conception of history as moving towards the *Ragnarök*, the progress of *Beowulf* is also towards decay and ruin, not only of evil monsters, but also of great kingdoms and *hæled under heofonum*, "heroes under heaven." Tolkien argues that "it is in *Beowulf* that a poet has devoted a whole poem to the theme [of good versus evil], and has drawn the struggle in different proportions, so that we may see man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time" (*Monsters* 18). Both the *Eddas* and *Beowulf* depict creation's powerlessness before *wyrd*'s overpowering movement towards ruin. Tolkien's narrator in *The Silmarillion* sounds a theme similar to that heard in Anglo-Saxon and Norse literature—the world is moving towards destruction, not progressing to utopia.

Fate and Free will in The Kalevala

The Silmarillion establishes a greater element of personal responsibility than is present in either the *Eddas* or *Beowulf*. The Finnish epic, *The Kalevala*, assembled and created by Elias Lönnrot in the mid-nineteenth century, may have been the inspiration

and model that enabled Tolkien to introduce a greater role of free will interacting with fate without losing what Thomas Shippey distinguishes as the dark “tone” of the Northern works (*Road* 256).

The Kalevala so deeply influenced Tolkien’s youth that he credits it for being an impetus for his own writing: “the germ of my attempt to write legends of my own to fit my private languages was the tragic tale of the hapless Kullervo in the Finnish *Kalevala*.” Tolkien transformed *The Kalevala*’s “Kullervo” story into the “Tale of Túrin Turambar.” Of his use of “Kullervo,” Tolkien admits he “entirely changed [it] except in the tragic ending” (*Letters* 345). Shippey relates some of the Túrin story’s history and its relation to the rest of *The Silmarillion*: “Tolkien was working on something which might be seen as the seed of a section of *The Silmarillion* at least as early as 1913, when he began to write ‘The Story of Kullervo’, a ‘prose-and-verse romance’ never yet published which resembles in outline the story of Túrin, eventually chapter 21 of the 1977 *The Silmarillion*” (*Author* 227).

The Kalevala suggests that each person creates circumstances that then spin out of his or her control. It is distinct from Tolkien’s other sources in its introduction of the moral responsibility a person freely bears in bringing about his or her fate. In *The Kalevala*, guilt and responsibility influence a person’s “fate” in a way that is not present in the Norse *Eddas*, and that is only beginning to be present in *Beowulf*.⁴ *The Kalevala* hints that a person could avoid a destructive fate by heeding the prophetic wisdom of another. Repeatedly, however, the characters do not listen to others but take willful action, so that the foretold event happens. *The Kalevala* portrays free will bringing about a disastrous fate, which persons then cannot defeat by either strength or wit.

A reader familiar with the Kullervo story can see quickly the parallels in both content and theme between Lönnrot's Kullervo and Tolkien's Túrin Turambar.⁵ Kullervo's story, like that of Túrin, is of a life seemingly doomed from its inception by external circumstances. The Kullervo tale also combines questions of moral culpability for bad actions with questions of fate entrapping the protagonist in forced circumstances. Towards its conclusion, the tale of Kullervo hints at the presence of mercy as the unexpected means of redeeming the condemnation for one's culpable actions. Though mercy is available to him, Kullervo believes his life to be wholly fated to ruination; he rejects mercy and, in despair, commits suicide.⁶

Kullervo does not at first see that he may be to blame for his actions. Rather, he blames fate for placing him in circumstances beyond his control. He also expresses a sense of hopelessness embodied in a fated world when, having found out he has slept with his sister, he cries out to his mother:

“What did you create me for / and why carry this mean one? / I would have been better off / had I not been born, not grown / not been brought into the world / not had to come to this earth; / doom did not deal straight / disease did not act aright / when it did not kill me, not / lose me as a two-night old.” (35: 278-287)

Though external powers of fate may have brought Kullervo to the situation where he sleeps with his sister, Kullervo wrongfully but freely chooses to kidnap and rape a strange woman who then turns out to be his sister. Kullervo is correct that it is bad luck and bad circumstances that the woman he rapes happens to be a relative. Yet had Kullervo acted rightly toward the stranger in the first place and not raped her, he could have avoided his subsequent fate. By implicating the person's role in bringing about

apparently fated circumstances, the tale introduces an element of moral responsibility for actions.

The Kullervo episode also introduces a distinct element absent from an exclusively fated worldview: the presence of mercy for evil deeds—a suggestion that is strangely absent in the Túrin tale, but which may have significance in considering the mercy open to figures in *The Lord of the Rings* who commit egregious evil, such as Saruman, Denethor, Boromir, or Sméagol. Kullervo’s mother tells him not to seek death as a way to remove guilt. Rather, she says, “There’s lots of room in Finland / and within murky Savo / for man to hide from his crimes / to feel shame for evil deeds / to hide for five years, for six / for nine years in all / till time brings mercy / and the years ease care” (35: 351-358). She counsels Kullervo to be patient because in time he will receive mercy despite his actions. The mother uses the phrase “time brings mercy” rather than “time brings forgetfulness” because this episode is not offering a parallel to the forgetfulness of the river Lethe in Greek myths. The mother’s words offer forgiveness and mercy for an evil deed without any diminution of the deed’s sin or its painful consequences for others. With the introduction of mercy, *The Kalevala* suggests that there is an alternative to the vicious circle of cause and effect a fated world order entails.

However, Kullervo refuses to accept the mercy his mother declares to be available. Despairing of life, Kullervo seeks death in war, as a good Norseman or Anglo-Saxon would do. Yet, when he does not die in battle as he had desired, he takes his own life, which is something a good Norseman or Anglo-Saxon would not do. He returns to the place where he raped his sister, asks his sword if it will slay him, and the sword responds in language that Túrin’s sword paraphrases: “Why should I not eat what I like

not / eat guilty flesh / not drink blood that is to blame? / I'll eat even guiltless flesh / I'll drink even blameless blood" (36: 328-333). Kullervo then commits suicide by stabbing himself.

This episode from *The Kalevala* combines the moral element of free will with the morally neutral element of fate. On the one hand, fate seems to be an imposed force, driving Kullervo's life in ways beyond his control. Yet, on the other hand, Kullervo's immoral choices lead to disastrous consequences making it appear that he leads a cursed and fated life. He does not see his own complicity in the events of his life until the very end. Then he responds by refusing to ask for and accept mercy, instead condemning himself and taking his own life directly by his own hand.

The Tone of Fatalism in The Silmarillion

Tolkien's work emphasizes human freedom and responsibility more strongly than either the Anglo-Saxon or Norse sources. The following sections show first the characteristics of fatalism present within Middle-earth that are similar to the Norse and Anglo-Saxon mythic depictions, and second, the responsibility Tolkien's characters bear for their own fate.

Tom Shippey, examining the question of personal freedom within Middle-earth, asks: "Are people free to determine their own fate, one might ask, or are they 'the stars' tennis balls, struck and bandied / Which way please them'?"⁷ Shippey goes on to argue:

To accept the second alternative would have been, for Tolkien, to go against an orthodox Christian doctrine; to state the first positively would have lost for him that sense of interlacing, of things working themselves out, of a poetic justice seen only in the large scale. [. . .] Individual will and external force, in other words, notoriously cooperate. (*Road* 255)

In some respects, Tolkien's characters have little control over their world because circumstances force them into specific roles; yet they are not simply "the stars' tennis balls." Tolkien's Middle-earth does not mimic the fated world order of the Norse precisely because Tolkien introduces a greater degree of free will, and thus responsibility, for his characters. Yet, such an increase in freedom also makes Middle-earth's history more tragic than the Norse mythology. History could have been different had characters used their free will wisely in service to others rather than foolishly in benefit only to themselves.

Tolkien follows and furthers the moral demands present within Northern works by suggesting that his characters need to adhere to heroic moral responsibility. Because a beneficent divine creator has given creation greater freedom of will in Middle-earth, the creature is more responsible for the proper or improper use of that gift. Because morality and moral responsibility are of serious concern to the story, not only do characters within the story judge others, such as Túrin and Fëanor, according to their use of free will, but the reader also should do so.

The stories of Túrin and Fëanor are central to the movement of Middle-earth's history, and their tales illustrate the tension between fate and free will present within *The Silmarillion*. The first example, Túrin Turambar, shows the complex interaction of imposed external forces, fate, and internal choices, free will. Fate seems to overshadow Túrin's life from its outset; yet he still retains a free will, which he uses badly. The second example of Fëanor examines his great responsibility in bringing about the "doom of the Noldor." While this doom is put justly upon Fëanor in consequence of his actions,

it takes on fatalistic characteristics as it extends beyond guilty parties to ensnare innocents throughout the history.

Characteristics of Fatalism in The Silmarillion: Expectation of Defeat and Destruction

Tolkien's work conveys a sense of fatalism through the narrator's expectation of defeat and destruction similar to the fatalistic expectation inherent in the Norse and Anglo-Saxon literature. The *Eddas* depict humankind as born into a world in which higher powers—gods and giants—are constantly at war with each other and in which the gods (and humans) eventually will lose to the giants. Tolkien also creates a tension between good and evil supernatural forces which entrap weaker creatures—elves and humans. He creates an elvish narrator to “tell” Middle-earth's history as a battle between good and evil forces. Yet, unlike Norse myths and an Anglo-Saxon work such as *Beowulf*, Tolkien's story reveals that destruction and ruin are not intrinsic but contrary to the divine creator's intended natural order. Evil, thus, is not defined as a being but, in a classic Augustinian sense, as the absence of being, or good itself. In other words, something is evil insofar as it is counter to the natural order, or the will of the creator. Before elves or men are brought into existence, Melkor's rebellion against Ilúvatar and his loyal subjects, the Valar, has already marred the world. While Ilúvatar did not intend for evil to corrupt the world, and while his power could have prevented it, he permits evil to be done because he will not force his creatures to obey him. Once elves and humans enter the world, their improper use of free will, as well as Melkor's persistent malevolence against Ilúvatar's creation, contribute to continued destruction.

Tolkien expands *Beowulf's* depiction of evil as part of the natural world order by moving it from the natural into the supernatural realm; thus, Tolkien follows more closely

to an Augustinian concept of evil than does the Anglo-Saxon imagination. Within *Beowulf*, evil is symbolized by three monsters of increasing strength that are all part of the natural order. Human intrusion upon the monsters' realms awakens their malevolence against humanity. Describing the natural world's hostility to humanity in *Beowulf*, Tolkien says: "[Beowulf] glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts; [. . .] we look down as if from a visionary height upon the house of man in the valley of the world. A light starts [. . .] and there is a sound of music; but the outer darkness and its hostile offspring lie ever in wait for the torches to fail and the voices to cease" (*Monsters* 33). The "house of man" resists the natural world but cannot do so forever. Tolkien moves away from simply mirroring the fatalistic world order of Northern mythologies by addressing the nature of evil more directly than either Norse mythology or the *Beowulf*-poet does.

While the *Beowulf*-poet and Tolkien both depict evil's resilience in the world, the world of *Beowulf* is naturally hostile to humankind whereas Tolkien's Middle-earth, though marred by evil, is not by nature antagonistic to humanity.⁸ *The Silmarillion* transforms *Beowulf*'s depiction of evil into a supernatural being who is malevolent and actively hostile to the natural ordering of the world and its inhabitants. Melkor's disturbance of Arda's proper creation suggests that evil, though it is intertwined with the creation of the world, is not natural to it.

Though Tolkien differs from the *Beowulf*-poet in making the proper ordering of the world fundamentally hospitable, he similarly depicts evil's persistence within creation. The elves' presentation of evil as unabated and undefeatable increases *The Silmarillion*'s tone of fatalism. Throughout the tales, the Valar repeatedly subdue Melkor,

but he returns, becoming more powerful and destructive than before. In the first war with Melkor, which occurred “before Arda was full-shaped,” the Valar cannot defeat him until Ilúvatar sends a new Vala, Tulkas, to assist them; then, “Melkor fled before his wrath and his laughter, and forsook Arda” (35). However, Melkor returns to Middle-earth; gathering more power to himself, he builds a fortress, perverts captured elves into orcs, and uses the traitorous Maiar, whom elves later name the Balrogs, to assist him in his goal to dominate creation. The Valar again victoriously oppose him, yet they cannot fully defeat Melkor or change the consequences of his evil deeds. Though, “[Melkor] was bound with the chain Angainor that Aulë had wrought, and led captive; and the world had peace for a long age,” the narrator makes clear in the next sentence that Melkor’s evil influence remains and has spread to other things: “Many evil things still lingered there, and others were dispersed and fled into the dark and roamed in the waste places of the world, awaiting a *more evil hour*” (51, emphasis added). Desiring to destroy and twist Ilúvatar’s original design, Melkor once again returns to the world after this second exile.

The phoenix-like pattern of evil’s destruction and reemergence continues throughout the work. Even *The Silmarillion*’s concluding postscript indicates the persistence of evil apart from Melkor. Though Melkor, the original source of rebellion and evil, is bound eternally in the “Void,” the consequences of his evil deeds remain: “Yet the lies that Melkor, the mighty and accursed, Morgoth Bauglir, the Power of Terror and of Hate, sowed in the hearts of Elves and Men are a seed that does not die and cannot be destroyed; and ever and anon it sprouts anew, and will bear dark fruit even unto the latest days” (255). While such emphasis on the resilience of evil seems fatalistic, the

narrator also suggests the existence of free will and moral responsibility despite coercive circumstances. The following section shows first the tragic life of Túrin Turambar, who seems doomed to destruction but whom the narrator also seems to hold accountable for his actions.

Fate as an External Force: The Tale of Túrin Turambar

Powers of fate and free will blend within the tale of Túrin Turambar and are seemingly more balanced in it than in the story of Fëanor and the Silmarils. In telling Túrin's story, the narrator struggles with understanding the providential world order "The Ainulindalë" establishes. His presentation of the story suggests both fate and free will are responsible for Túrin's destruction, but the narrator does not acknowledge how a providential design may be working in the events of this character's life. Though a providential hand is absent, the tale does not entirely follow the logic of a fated world. Similar to *The Kalevala's* depiction of fate and free will, the story of Túrin shows circumstances entrapping him, while also implying that he brings about these circumstances through his wrong choices.

The Túrin episode suggests that, even in a world devoid of divine providence, a person still bears responsibility for choices. *The Kalevala* only implies that Kullervo is culpable for his and his family's downfall; however, Tolkien's narrator makes more explicit that, because of his pride and refusal to obey others, Túrin squanders his potential for greatness and causes the ruin of those around him. Yet, while the narrator of the Túrin tale shows him badly using his freedom, strangely he condemns Túrin's deeds less strongly than *The Kalevala*-narrator condemns Kullervo's incestuous actions. Part of the narrator's sympathy for Túrin may come from a belief that Melkor's curse dooms Túrin

to act as he does. These similar and dissimilar aspects of the two works show the influence of the Kullervo episode upon Tolkien's writing, but they also show Tolkien moving away from his source text to describe a more complicated vision of the world order and the human place in it.

The Túrin tale begins with a classic, mythological motif of a curse cast upon the protagonist at or prior to his birth. The curse and its power display the characteristics of fate. The power that the narrator and characters attribute to this curse implies, on the one hand, that the wheels of fate have inexorably caught Túrin. Yet, on the other hand, the events also suggest that Túrin brings fated disaster on himself and others through the use of free will. The tale makes it difficult to determine which of these two powers—fate or freedom—plays the greater role in the course of Túrin's life. The tale of Túrin, following elements of both the Norse and Anglo-Saxon views of world order, suggests that such a power as fate exists, forcing humans into circumstances beyond their control. But, following *The Kalevala's* presentation, the tale also suggests that humans still retain freedom to respond to circumstances; thus they bear some responsibility for the evil that befalls them.

Fate Versus Free Will

Melkor's curse upon Túrin as a form of fate. The 1977 *Silmarillion's* "Of Túrin Turambar" is part of a longer tale, the *Narn I Hîn Húrin*, or "Tale of the Children of Húrin," in *Unfinished Tales*. While both versions tell of Melkor's curse, the *Narn* version makes the role of Morgoth's curse more explicit than the 1977 account. In the longer description of the Túrin episode, the narrator presents a dialogue between Morgoth and Húrin, Túrin's father, regarding fate and providence. Morgoth declares he has

dominion over all events and people within Arda, while Húrin expresses faith in Ilúvatar's promise that a higher power controls Morgoth and his deeds. Despite being imprisoned and tortured by Morgoth, Húrin denies the other's supreme authority. In response, Morgoth declares he will reveal his dominion by destroying Húrin's family:

The shadow of my purpose lies upon Arda, and all that is in it bends slowly and surely to my will. But upon all whom you love my thought shall weigh as a cloud of Doom, and it shall bring them down into darkness and despair. Wherever they go, evil shall arise. Whenever they speak, their words shall bring ill counsel. Whatsoever they do shall turn against them. They shall die without hope, cursing both life and death. (*Unfinished Tales* 67)

Placed in the context of Morgoth and Húrin's debate over fate and providence, Túrin's disastrous life seems to be the curse's fulfillment, proving Morgoth's claim to be "Master of the fates of Arda." The narrator presents the curse as quite real, both within the longer, unpublished version, as well as the 1977 version, which simply states that Melkor "cursed Húrin and Morwen and their offspring, and set a doom upon them of darkness and sorrow" (*Silmarillion* 197).

The more one attributes power to the curse in affecting Túrin's life, the less one can uphold the free nature of his will. If Melkor's curse negatively affects Túrin's freedom, then he bears less, if any, culpability for his actions. Regarding the curse's presence from the tale's outset, Paul Kocher observes:

In reflecting upon this grim tragedy of incest and suicide the reader is likely to ask sooner or later whether it is consistent with the doctrine underlying the whole of *The Silmarillion*, that Elves and Men have been created with wills free to choose between right and wrong. This is to ask whether Morgoth's curse upon Húrin and his children succeeded, and this in turn is to ask whether Morgoth or Ilúvatar by his Providence governed the course of their lives. (*Reader's* 198-199)

Kocher points us to the central dilemma that the elvish narrator is attempting to resolve. If within the context of Tolkien's world such curses as Melkor's have binding power, then is Túrin subject to the higher power of Melkor's curse and thus bound to act in the destructive manner that he does? In other words, to what extent is Túrin's will free?

Throughout the story, the narrator repeatedly attributes the course of Túrin's life to fate, or Melkor's curse. When Túrin is only a child, his mother sends him for safety to the elven realm of Doriath under the protection of King Thingol. The narrator, in interpreting the events as he understands them, says, "thus was the fate of Túrin woven." Further, the narrator declares: Túrin's life is "woven with the fate of the Silmarils and of the Elves; and it is called the Tale of Grief, for it is sorrowful, and in it are revealed most evil works of Morgoth Bauglir" (198-199). Later in the tale, when Beleg rescues Túrin from orcs, the narrator names fate as the reason that Beleg's sword cuts Túrin's foot, causing Túrin to slay Beleg in a crazed rage. The narrator says, "fate was that day more strong, for the blade slipped as he cut the shackles, and Túrin's foot was pricked" (207). In this assessment, the narrator seems to accept either that bad luck (neither fate nor providence, but simply random events) or a malevolent force causes the sword to slip. The consequence of the blade slipping, though, is to enrage Túrin, who has been horribly tortured by his captors, so that without thinking he slays his friend.

To accept the power of fate over free will is to remove responsibility for one's actions and the subsequent consequences of those actions. When Túrin declares, "Morgoth has laid a curse upon [Húrin] and all his kin" (209), he demonstrates his own conviction of the curse's efficacy, thus excusing his own responsibility for events. Commenting on the *Narn*-version of the story, Shippey maintains that the real blame for

Túrin's future lies with his mother, Morwen, who decided to send him away as a child: "She is given very clear advice by her husband before he leaves, '*Do not be afraid!*' and '*Do not wait!*' She remembers this, but she ignores it, because 'she would not yet humble her pride to be an alms-guest,' even of Thingol. [. . .] All this comes from Morwen's bad decision to separate from her son, and one of its roots is pride" (*Author* 253-253). While Shippey tries to argue that free will moves events rather than fate, his argument actually supports another form of fate in which external circumstances beyond Túrin's control force him towards a determined, ruinous future. If Shippey is correct about Morwen's responsibility for her son's tragic life, then fate continues to be the power behind Túrin's life because an outside agent limits his freedom by predetermining his life's course.

The dragon's power over Túrin as a power of fate. In recounting Túrin's story, the narrator not only reminds the audience of fate's power to move Túrin's life in a specific direction, but he also shows the overpowering force that an evil superhuman being can have over a mortal's weaker body and mind—*The Lord of the Rings* reiterates such power through the Ring's dominance of others. In the mythology of *The Silmarillion*, the dragons are the most evil and powerful of Melkor's corrupted servants, and neither elves nor humans can resist them. In the Túrin episode, a dragon, Glaurung, quickly overwhelms the elvish defenses when he attacks the realm of Nargothrond; and when Túrin tries to attack Glaurung, the dragon easily stops him by casting a spell over him: "Without fear Túrin looked into [Glaurung's serpent-eyes] as he raised up the sword; and straightway he fell under the binding spell of the lidless eyes of the dragon, and was halted moveless" (213). The narrator makes clear that the dragon is much stronger than Túrin and that the dragon's spell binds Túrin "moveless."

The spell's power over Túrin's body and mind brings into question the freedom of Túrin's later decisions. While Túrin is entranced, Glaurung deceitfully lays out to him two choices, both of which have bad results. Paralleling the characteristic Norse dilemma, the bewitched Túrin is caught in the "awful choice between two evils" (Phillpotts 5). Glaurung says either Túrin can rescue the elf-maiden, Finduilas, or he can rescue his mother and sister. Rescuing one party will result in the death of the other. Túrin saw the orcs capture Finduilas, but he only hears the report that his family is in mortal danger from the dragon. Though an evil consequence will result from either choice, Túrin chooses to abandon Finduilas in order to rescue his family. Túrin discovers belatedly that the dragon had lied to him regarding his family's endangerment and his realization of the truth breaks the spell of the dragon: "Then Túrin's eyes were opened, and the last threads of Glaurung's spell were loosed." Only once the spell is lifted does the narrator indicate that Túrin angrily understands "the lies that had deluded him" (215). He sees the fullness of truth and the depth of his deception only after it is too late to choose correctly by saving Finduilas from her immediate danger.

While the narrator suggests that the dragon's spell limits Túrin's ability to make a free choice, the narrator also implicitly blames Túrin not only for his pride in thinking he could defeat a dragon, but also for the foolishness of simply crediting a dragon. Túrin saw with his own eyes that the orcs had taken Finduilas captive, along with the other women of the fallen elvish city, whereas he needed to trust Glaurung's report about his family. In his decision to pursue his family, Túrin believes an enemy while rejecting the wisdom of a friend, Gwindor, who had prophesied that Finduilas "alone stands between thee and thy doom. If thou fail her, it shall not fail to find thee" (213). Túrin does fail

her; and, as a consequence of his choice, Túrin saves neither group of women, thus enabling the doom of which Gwindor spoke to come closer to fulfillment.⁹

Túrin's trust seems foolish to a reader in light of the situation, and yet, according to both Norse mythology and Tolkien's own narrative, deception is one of a dragon's key powers. The strength of the dragon's deceptive and persuasive powers may be such that they fully impair another's ability to reason and judge properly, thus diminishing the responsibility a person bears for the choices made. The power of the evil creature over the person may explain why the Vala, Ulmo, warned the elves to avoid and prevent the confrontation with the dragon. Túrin should have chosen to heed Ulmo's advice while he still *was* able to choose. The extent of Túrin's free will subsequent to meeting the dragon is not clear, for fate-like powers seem to take the upper hand.

Another more serious example of apparently fated circumstances checking Túrin's freedom can be discerned in his incestuous marriage to his sister, Nienor. The narrator creates a particularly acute tension between fate and free will in the examination of this relationship and the responsibility the participants bear in it. Unavoidable circumstances seem to force Túrin's life in a specific way, circumventing his free will such that he and Nienor, who did not know each other as siblings, meet and fall in love. Nienor, disobeying the order to remain in the safety of Doriath, chooses to search for her brother. She is captured by orcs, escapes from them, but loses her sanity. A crazed woman, she runs naked into the woods where Túrin finds her but does not know her to be his sister. Other critics have noted the Kullervo story from the *Kalevala* as the model for the Túrin story,¹⁰ but the narrator gives a significant twist to the Finnish account. Following the pattern of Kullervo, the tale of Túrin also shows that external

circumstances beyond the characters' control bring Túrin and Nienor together. Yet, unlike Kullervo who forces himself sexually upon a maiden, Túrin strictly follows chivalric behavior towards the vulnerable woman. He rescues her from death, takes her under his protection, and finally they fall in love with one another, marry, and conceive a child. They commit incest in complete ignorance of their blood relationship, while following a proper code of conduct. In many ways, once they meet, they do not have control over their love for one another since there is no reason that they know of why they should not love each other. Though they have complete control over the actions that eventually lead to their incestuous marriage, they have no way of knowing that their choices will be so disastrous. Because they do not have proper knowledge of their actions, they are not morally culpable for their choices; rather, destructive fate seems to be the cause directing their lives toward disaster.

Despite not being culpable in marrying his sister, Túrin holds himself liable, as do others. This presentation of accountability follows F. Anne Payne's description of *wyrd*, understood here as "fate," in the life of a hero. She argues that the hero meets his *wyrd* when he has transgressed, unknowingly but irreversibly, the boundaries of *wyrd*. Though she is analyzing the power of fate in *Beowulf*, Payne's argument is applicable to the events of Túrin's life:

Wyrd is the force that eventually destroys the lives of the violators of unknowable universal order in the world of *Beowulf*. It is the agent in the most terrible experience of the day of death. It is the opponent of man in the strange area of the most intense perception and consciousness. Though it may hold off for a while, the individual in the end makes an error in choice and releases forces whose consequences at the moment of crisis he controls no longer and *Wyrd* is victorious. (16)

The Túrin episode follows the pattern of *wyrd* as Payne shows it in one of its forms—merciless fate that condemns a person for transgressing laws of which he has no knowledge. Túrin makes a choice to marry Nienor but it is a decision based on misinformation. Subsequently yet unknowingly, he violates a universal law against incest, thus releasing forces he cannot control. Túrin despairs at the situation in which fated circumstances have placed him, condemning himself for the destruction he has caused. Fully accepting fate's power over him, Túrin abandons hope of mercy for himself and makes the final choice to take his own life.

Free Will Brings One's Fate

Though the narrator's tale seemingly suggests that fate controls Túrin's life even to its suicidal end, the narrator does not deny the freedom Túrin retains before fated circumstances. Rather, he suggests that, precisely because of free will, Túrin bears responsibility for his increasingly significant choices. Circumstances do affect Túrin; but he remains free in his response to them, yet, repeatedly, he responds badly. For instance, having the ability to respond in anger or patience at the taunting of an elf, Saeros, Túrin chooses to respond angrily, throwing a cup at him. Saeros, in turn, later ambushes Túrin, who not only defends himself but then chases down Saeros. The elf accidentally falls to his death in a chasm, and Túrin, believing he will be punished for the elf's death and refusing to submit to judgment, flees. While Saeros is wrong to taunt Túrin, Túrin's violent response is also wrong. The actions of the two escalate, finally resulting in Saeros's accidental death and Túrin's running away. Túrin's angry response is only a partial cause of Saeros's death; however, he is fully responsible for refusing to accept judgment upon himself by running away. Subsequently, he chooses to join a band of

outlaws, indiscriminately attacking others—orcs, elves, and humans. No external power or circumstance forces Túrin to become an amoral bandit. His motivation in choosing such a life is unclear but may stem from a belief that having chosen badly once, he is then trapped in the effects of his choice. Following the mode of his literary predecessor, Kullervo, Túrin also may not believe that mercy and forgiveness for evil deeds are possible.

Túrin rejects the many chances he has to return, be forgiven, and rejoin the elvish community. When his elf-friend, Beleg, seeks him out to offer the King's pardon and to ask Túrin's help in defending Doriath against orcs, Túrin arrogantly refuses to be pardoned and refuses to assist those who had been his benefactors: "in the pride of his heart Túrin refused the pardon of the King, and the words of Beleg were of no avail to change his mood" (201). His denial of Thingol's request to return to Doriath, to accept forgiveness, and to protect the surrounding lands is the central choice that unleashes a series of tragedies. This apparently free decision begins a chain of events, eventually leading to Nargothrond's destruction, numerous elves' deaths, his sister's suicide, and then, climactically, his own. Shippey states that "one root of the tragedy [. . .] is obviously that Túrin brings his troubles on himself: again and again he lashes out and kills the wrong person" (*Author* 251). But more than simply lashing out and killing the wrong person, Túrin repeatedly rejects others' love and wisdom. Instead, he relies upon his own power, justifying evil actions on the grounds that he is living out a cursed life.

Another character, Gwindor, echoing the narrator's own interlacing of fate and free will, voices both a belief in the curse's power over Túrin and also a suspicion of its cause. On the one hand, Gwindor warns Finduilas against loving Túrin: "A doom indeed

lies on him, as seeing eyes may well read in him, but a dark doom. Enter not into it!” (210). While his warning to Finduilas suggests his belief in Túrin’s fatality, he also questions it by saying to Túrin: “the doom lies in yourself, not in your name.”

Túrin already has chosen to refuse King Thingol’s pardon, showing himself an ungrateful member of the King’s court in his refusal to defend the people who raised him. His refusal is a rejection of the love and mercy that Thingol showed towards him. Túrin’s pride makes him incapable of loving. The narrator shows him isolating himself from the friendship and wisdom of others. His behavior has particularly devastating effects when he refuses to heed even the counsel of the Vala, Ulmo, who controls Middle-earth’s waters. Having heard of Glaurung’s approaching assault upon the kingdom of Nargothrond, Ulmo knows that neither an elf nor a human is strong enough to stand against the dragon. He thus sends the following warning to the realm: “Shut the doors of the fortress and go not abroad. Cast the stones of your pride into the loud river, that the creeping evil may not find the gate.” The elves in the realm want to obey the message, but the narrator clearly indicates why Túrin dismisses it: “Túrin would by no means hearken to these counsels, and least of all would he suffer the great bridge to be cast down; for he was become proud and stern, and would order all things as he wished” (212). This foolish, prideful decision results in the enemy’s sacking of the city when the great dragon leads an orc army against it.

Túrin’s failure before the dragon’s greater power reveals the limits of human resistance to evil. Paul Kocher points out a certain parallel between Túrin’s actions in the dragon episode and his later actions in the marriage to his sister: when Túrin has the ability to choose rightly, he does not, and his choices lead to circumstances which then

bind his will. Kocher asserts that while Túrin has no will power to overcome the dragon, he had the ability to avoid the encounter and should have done so: “Before and after the trances, [. . .] free choices are made by Túrin which develop his situation in a direction leading toward his suicide” (*Reader’s* 174). By his decision to ignore a Vala’s wisdom and to believe in his own strength, Túrin sets up the circumstances that first lead to an encounter with a power far exceeding himself, and that then begin to set loose the chain of events ending in Túrin’s incestuous marriage and suicide. Kocher’s argument supports the idea that Middle-earth is not exclusively a fated world and that Tolkien’s characters are not merely pawns of fate. Though external circumstances may affect and even bind the characters, they retain the freedom to respond. As Kocher’s work implies, though freely made choices produce fatalistic consequences, the outcome could have been otherwise had people chosen rightly.

The marriage of Túrin to Nienor clearly sets the powers of fate and free will in conflict with each other; and, in fact, it offers the clearest example of the wheels of fate catching up unwilling persons. However, as Kocher points out, the circumstances leading to the marriage are the result of several previous choices Túrin has made. Though he is not morally responsible for the act of incest itself, the effects of Túrin’s wrong choices set up circumstances from which he and his sister cannot later escape. For instance, he chose to refuse Beleg’s request on behalf of Thingol to return to Doriath and, as a consequence, he is not reunited there with his mother and sister. Yet it is not simply one bad choice that results in an unbreakable chain of cause and effect, for Túrin constantly rejects the chances to choose rightly and thus to alter the chain of fate. Thingol repeatedly offers Túrin mercy, but upon each occasion, Túrin rebuffs him. Túrin

is also given the chance to alter the chain of fate by loving Finduilas, but he both rejects her love and betrays her trust in him when he abandons her to a horrible end with the orcs. Had he accepted and returned her love, he then never would have entered into the “doomed” marriage with his sister. Túrin also has the chance to choose rightly by heeding Ulmo’s advice and tearing down the bridge into Nargothrond, but he willfully refuses to obey another, even a Vala.

In the Túrin episode, the narrator depicts fate as existing in the world, but he also questions its exclusivity in controlling life. The narrator sets Túrin in a complicated situation, which does not wholly entrap him. On the one hand, the narrator tells the story as illustrating and fulfilling Melkor’s curse. Yet, on the other hand, the story repeatedly shows the protagonist making bad choices that result in evil consequences. His repeated refusals escalate in significance, resulting in greater, more devastating consequences to his life and the lives of those around him. What makes Túrin’s final self-destruction so poignant is the combined nature of both fateful circumstances and his own free choices. Though fate appears extremely strong and active in forcing Túrin’s life in a specific direction, it does not preclude Túrin’s responsibility for what happens to him or to those connected with him. The Túrin tale shows the creation of a self-imposed prison of bad choices leading irrevocably to bad consequences. Repeatedly, the different narrators of *The Silmarillion* show free will used wrongly, in discord with a beneficent design, as flawed characters willfully choose to deny the good, thus unwittingly moving towards personal destruction. However, as the next chapter will show, the tale of Beren and Lúthien stands in contrast to that of Túrin, as it shows the protagonists properly using free will in cooperation with Ilúvatar’s initial promise of providential power in history.

Fate as Inescapable Consequence of Choice: The Tale of Fëanor and the Silmarils

The sense of fatalism within Middle-earth is not a simplistic one, nor one that merely repeats previous pagan models. As the tale of Túrin shows, characters bear partial responsibility for their own outcome. The story of Fëanor shows the narrator's understanding shifting away from fate towards free will as the power responsible for destruction.

Fëanor's potential for greatness increases his responsibility for the destruction he causes. The narrator describes Fëanor as the most skilled of all the Noldor, the group of elves who left Middle-earth to join the Valar in Valinor. Having mastered the art of gem-making, he creates the Silmarils, whose essence is the light of Valinor's two trees. Yet the narrator immediately states that Fëanor's love for these gems is intemperate. He does not love them because of the joy they give others, but because they offer tribute to his own power: "Fëanor began to love the Silmarils with a greedy love, and grudged the sight of them to all save to his father and his seven sons; he seldom remembered now that the light within them was not his own." Immediately following the emergence of this improper love among the Noldor, the narrator then indicates that the elves begin making weapons to protect the objects of their love, the Silmarils. Furthermore, the narrator says Fëanor "began openly to speak words of rebellion against the Valar" (69). The Valar cast Fëanor out of Valinor for raising his sword against his half-brother, Fingolfin. Their father, Finwë, out of a greater love for Fëanor, follows him into exile.

The Fëanor-tale does not simply depict elven agency without also suggesting the presence of fatalistic powers negatively influencing the characters' use of free will. Though the narrator implies that Fëanor is responsible for his exile, he also tempers that

responsibility by suggesting that fate catches Fëanor within its power. For instance, prior to telling of Fëanor's birth, the narrator foreshadows the evil results that will come to Fëanor and the Noldor. The Valar, out of love for Ilúvatar's children and fearing for their safety before Melkor's malicious power, summon the elves to leave Middle-earth and come to live in Valinor. The Valar debate this decision among themselves with some arguing that the elves should be "left free to walk as they would in Middle-earth, and with their gifts of skill to order all the lands and heal their hurts"; but the majority of Valar choose to order the elves to move. In response to this ultimate decision, Mandos declares, "So it is doomed." "Doom" in this sentence could mean either "judged" or "fated." Given the Valar have made their decision in council, then Mandos could mean "judged," but the narrator's next sentence implies the more fatalistic sense of "doom": "From this summons came many woes that afterward befell" (52).¹¹ Fëanor's parents obey the command, leaving Middle-earth to come to Valinor where Fëanor is born. Fëanor, thus, is born into a situation that he cannot control but to which he can respond.

Another event beyond Fëanor's control furthers the suggestion that Fëanor's life is fated. Fëanor's mother, deeply beloved by his father, Finwë, dies and Finwë chooses to marry another. Fingolfin is the child of Finwë's second marriage. The narrator shifts some of the blame for Fëanor's later actions to Finwë: "In those unhappy things which later came to pass, and in which Fëanor was the leader, many saw the effect of this breach with the house of Finwë, judging that if Finwë had endured his loss and been content with the fathering of his mighty son, the courses of Fëanor would have been otherwise, and great evil might have been prevented" (65). As the *Kalevala* suggests

with regard to Kullervo's rearing, so, too, does the narrator suggest that Fëanor's improper upbringing influences his willful, rebellious, and destructive behavior.

Another example of Fëanor's life being fated is Melkor's influence over him. Fëanor is born in Valinor after the Valar have released Melkor from his imprisonment and allowed him back into their company. Melkor, as a Vala with far superior strength and status, exerts an evil influence over Fëanor's mind, creating suspicion and mistrust between Fëanor and the Valar. Because the other Valar hold Melkor accountable for Fëanor's corruption, readers may question Fëanor's ability and freedom to resist Melkor.

Though Melkor may have caused Fëanor to distrust the Valar, Fëanor himself bears the blame for the kinstrike against his brother that leads to his banishment. As the narrator says, "Fëanor was not held guiltless, for he it was that had broken the peace of Valinor and drawn his sword upon his kinsman. [. . .] Thus the lies of Melkor were made true in seeming, though Fëanor by his own deeds had brought this thing to pass" (70-1). The story, like the Túrin tale, conveys a sense of a world order partially determined by fate, while also honoring free will's role in affecting events. It makes more explicit the person's responsibility than does the Túrin tale by repeatedly offering alternative paths that Fëanor could but refuses to choose.

The story emphasizes how significantly Fëanor and his freely made choices shape Middle-earth's sad history. During Fëanor's exile, Melkor attacks Valinor with Ungoliant, the light-and being-absorbing spider who withers the two great trees of light, causing darkness to fall over the whole world. Since the Silmarils are the only objects left containing the essence of this light, the Valar ask Fëanor to give up the gems. Fëanor has a clear choice before him: either he can selflessly sacrifice the jewels in order to re-

light the world, or he can selfishly keep them intact while leaving the world in darkness. Despite knowing full-well the good such sacrifice will do, Fëanor, explicitly invoking his autonomy, refuses to give up his work: “This thing I will not do of free will” (79). Fëanor, because of his pride, chooses evil. At the same moment when Fëanor is refusing to give up the Silmarils, unbeknownst to him, Melkor seizes the gems after first killing Fëanor’s father.

In reflecting upon whether there was any point to Fëanor’s choice since Melkor had already stolen the gems, the narrator says, “all one it may seem whether Fëanor had said yea or nay to Yavanna; yet had he said yea at the first, before the tidings came from Formenos [of their theft], it may be that his after deeds would have been other than they were. But now the doom of the Noldor drew near” (79). The narrator makes clear in this statement that Fëanor’s choice was free and his selfish decision negatively affects him and others. Verlyn Flieger questions the narrator’s judgment declaring that it seems odd “in view of the fact that the Music of creation is ‘as Fate’ to all except Men in Tolkien’s world. If Fëanor cannot change the Music, if he is bound by it, how could a different answer have made his subsequent deeds ‘other than they were’?” (*Splintered* 113). She goes on to analyze the contrast between fate and free will in Tolkien’s world that Fëanor’s refusal highlights:

In making the provocative and puzzling statement about Fëanor’s choice of saying yea or nay, Tolkien’s point is neither the fate of the Silmarils nor the ultimate destiny of Fëanor, but rather his attitude and motives in the face of “the order that tests individual will.” If he could have freely given up the Silmarils (even though it was no longer in his power to do so), he would have been free of his bondage to them, and his inner darkness might have been dispelled. Subsequent events or deeds would not be externally different, but the motives behind them could be different [. . .] Tolkien’s purpose here is to show that free will is more important as a factor in

internal governance than as a determiner of external events. (*Splintered* 114-115)

Flieger's textual analysis generally follows a Jungian interpretation of the text, seeking to analyze the internal psychological conflicts of a person. While such a reading may be helpful in understanding Fëanor's descent into an internal psychological darkness through his selfish use of free will, a Jungian interpretation diminishes the real power Tolkien gives to the concept of free will. Flieger argues that because the music of the Ainur binds the elves, then the course of Fëanor's life is also bound by the predetermined patterns that the Ainur have made. As Flieger points out, Fëanor's choice to say "nay" reveals the selfish inclination of his own character and his "bondage" to his creation (*Splintered* 114). But, contrary to Flieger's assertion that events are preset and Fëanor's will affects only his internal self, the text suggests Fëanor could have chosen to surrender the Silmarils and his refusal to do so directly unleashes a series of consequences, resulting in wide-spread divisiveness, destruction, and death. Rather than revealing the Jungian aspects of the internal good and evil of a person in a fated world, Fëanor's refusal of the Valar's request reveals the true power to affect the course of events both in one's own and others' lives.

The effects of Fëanor's blatant refusal take further shape in the terrible oath that he and his seven sons subsequently swear. The results of Fëanor's increasingly important and significant decisions are examples of what Shippey describes as Tolkien's exploration of evil: "Tolkien remained keenly interested in the hidden roots of evil or of disaster, in the way that minor outbreaks of selfishness or carelessness mean more than they seem: snowballs leading to avalanches once more" (*Author* 251). Fëanor's initial greedy love for the Silmarils is a minor failing—the "snowball" of Shippey's metaphor—

but it quickly expands into a mountainous desire for exclusive lordship over the Silmarils, which in turn expands into a desire for domination over all Middle-earth. Fëanor exhibits his wish for autonomous authority when he declares: “when we have conquered and have regained the Silmarils, then we and we alone shall be lords of the unsullied Light, and masters of the bliss and beauty of Arda. No other race shall oust us!” Having expressed this desire for supreme dominion, Fëanor and his sons:

swore a terrible oath. [. . .] They swore an oath which none shall break, and none should take, by the name even of Ilúvatar, calling the Everlasting Dark upon them if they keep it not [. . .] vowing to pursue with vengeance and hatred to the ends of the World Vala, Demon, Elf or Man as yet unborn, or any creature, great or small, good or evil, that time should bring forth unto the end of days, whoso should hold or take or keep a Silmaril from their possession. (83)

Fëanor and his son’s freely, if rashly, make their oath that will lead to the ruin of many.

Such oaths are binding within the world order of Middle-earth, as the narrator indicates: “so sworn, good or evil, an oath may not be broken, and it shall pursue oathkeeper and oathbreaker to the world’s end.” By attributing such binding power to the oath (like the curse Melkor casts upon Túrin), the narrator continues to place fate’s power alongside that of free will. The oath in some aspects plays a similar role to that of the imposed outside power of *wyrd* in the Norse and Anglo-Saxon conception of the world order. Yet, Tolkien shifts the original conception of *wyrd* as exclusively an outside power imposing itself upon the person to suggest that human free will is responsible for creating *wyrd*’s binding machinery of consequences.

The oath’s negative effects quickly spiral out of control, catching up innocents and causing the ruin of later generations. According to the narrator’s interpretation of events, the oath motivates the horrible kin-slaying that soon follows, as it also reemerges

throughout the stories as reason for distrust, schism, and murder among the three races—elf, human, and dwarf. All but two of Fëanor’s seven sons die from carrying out the oath, and his final two sons, Maedhros and Maglor, debate whether the oath truly binds them, or whether they have the ability to break it. Maedhros, believing he is not free but bound by his vow, despairs of being forgiven for what he has done in carrying out the oath: “But how shall our voices reach to Ilúvatar beyond the Circles of the World? And by Ilúvatar we swore in our madness, and called the Everlasting Darkness upon us, if we kept not our word. Who shall release us?” (253). Maedhros sees the oath as binding because it is rooted in Ilúvatar’s ultimate power, and he believes that through fulfilling the oath he has cut himself off from Ilúvatar’s forgiveness. He and perhaps the narrator interpret the oath as a man-made power whose authority derives from a divine source. Despairing of his ability to escape the oath’s power, Maedhros commits suicide: “he [cast] himself into a gaping chasm filled with fire,” carrying one of the Silmarils with him to his death (254).

Paul Kocher describes the oath’s natural consequences to the entire House of Fëanor, arguing that the oath actually shows the presence of the providential within the story:

Ilúvatar, it would seem, does not need to intervene in the events which ensue. They come about quite naturally by the very characters of those who enact them. The natures of Fëanor and his sons being what they are, the natures of the other Noldor princes being what they are, and the past between them being what it has been, the future can scarcely be otherwise. All that Ilúvatar needs here is foreknowledge of the natural workings of character to know what will happen. And this is another species of his Providence, allowing the free wills of all parties to operate as they will, even to their own destruction. (*Reader’s Guide* 26)

The story of the oath clearly indicates the role free will plays in a mortal’s own destruction. However, the narrator of the Fëanor story does not reveal how these ruinous

actions make manifest Ilúvatar's providential hand, except that Eru allows his creatures the freedom to choose, even to choose their own destruction.

While not showing the ways in which Ilúvatar uses evil actions for an unforeseen good, the narrator of the Fëanor myth does begin to imply that personal freedom holds a greater power than fate. Manwë, the greatest of the Valar, prophesies the ruin that will befall the elves if they leave Valinor, clearly warning them: "Go not forth! For the hour is evil, and your road leads to sorrow that ye do not foresee. No aid will the Valar lend you in this quest; but neither will they hinder you; for this ye shall know: as ye came hither freely, freely shall ye depart." Manwë reminds Fëanor that he is wrong to think that he can defeat the Vala, Melkor: "The lies of Melkor thou shalt unlearn in bitterness. Vala he is, thou saist. Then thou hast sworn in vain, for none of the Valar canst thou overcome now or ever within the walls of Eä, not though Eru whom thou namest had made thee thrice greater than thou art" (85). In this speech, Manwë also expressly indicates that the elves will not receive any supernatural aid, directly telling them that without it, they will never overcome Melkor because their created nature is weaker than his. Nature itself will prevent their victory, and the inescapable end of the elves' departure from Valinor will be sorrow, ruin, and defeat. Yet he maintains that the elves will be responsible for bringing this end upon themselves because of their refusal to return to Valinor. Manwë makes evident that the elves are free in their choice to accept or reject good, to obey or disobey the Valar.

Fëanor defies Manwë's warning, choosing to leave, and the rest of his household follow him. The first fulfillment of the foreshadowed sorrow arrives when Fëanor decides to seize forcefully the boats of his kinsmen, the Teleri. Fëanor and his army slay

the other clan and steal the boats in order to approach Melkor's realm more swiftly.

Their end—the desire to destroy the evil of Melkor—is good, but their means are evil. In judgment for this killing, Mandos solemnly declares to the whole host the “curse and prophecy, which is called the Prophecy of the North, and the Doom of the Noldor” (87).

The narrator emphasizes their responsibility for their misery: “all heard the curse that was uttered upon those that would not stay nor seek the doom and pardon of the Valar.”

Mandos proclaims their consequent infernal condemnation:

Tears unnumbered ye shall shed; and the Valar will fence Valinor against you, and shut you out, so that not even the echo of your lamentation shall pass over the mountains. On the House of Fëanor the wrath of the Valar lieth from the West unto the uttermost East, and upon all that will follow them it shall be laid also. Their Oath shall drive them, and yet betray them, and ever snatch away the very treasures that they have sworn to pursue. To evil end shall all things turn that they begin well; and by treason of kin unto kin, and the fear of treason, shall this come to pass. The Dispossessed shall they be for ever. (88)

Even within this decree, Mandos, like Manwë, keeps open the possibility of altering choice. Mandos seems clearly to lay a binding judgment upon Fëanor and his sons, but Mandos says it “*shall* be laid” on all those that “*will*” follow Fëanor. Even after having committed murder, the elves are still able to escape this “doom” if they admit their offense, forsake their allegiance to the House of Fëanor, and return to Valinor for judgment.

The oath's binding nature, as well as the responsibility the elves bear in their own punishment, exposes the tension the narrator creates between powers of fate and free will within Middle-earth. While the narrator blames the oath as the cause for future inescapable disaster, he also suggests that the characters retain the power to alter the destructive consequences of the oath. The Valar lay the doom of the Noldor upon all

those who, despite having sworn allegiance to Fëanor and having refused once before to return to Valinor for forgiveness, now still again *choose* to go forward. The narrator's story shows that even after the elves have rebelled against the Valar and murdered innocents, an alternative to the fated consequences of the oath is possible for those who choose it. Just as in *The Kalevala* mercy is present to Kullervo, so mercy is present to the Noldor if they will accept forgiveness by acknowledging their wrongdoing.

The possibility of altering one's consequences stands counter to the Norse depiction of fate in such examples as the *Grípisspá's* prophecy of Sigurth's predetermined life (*Poetic Edda* 25.51), or the *Voluspa's* prophecy of the world's end (*Poetic Edda* 1.56) in which an alternative to foreshadowed destruction is not possible for either heroes or gods. Some elves, such as Finarfin and his household, repent of their actions and choose to return to Valinor, accepting judgment and mercy. Of them the narrator says: "in that hour Finarfin forsook the march, and turned back, being filled with grief, [. . .] and many of his people went with him, retracing their steps in sorrow." They returned to Valinor and "received the pardon of the Valar and Finarfin was set to rule the remnant of the Noldor in the Blessed Realm" (88). By showing that Finarfin and others *are* able to forsake the oath and escape its power, the narrator indicates that, despite apparently binding powers, elvish freedom remains intact.

After the narrator recounts the Valar's judgment on Fëanor's household, he then begins to show how the wheels of fate catch up the Noldor with inevitable destruction as the end. Yet while such a fate does catch up the Noldor, they have placed themselves within the inescapable wheel-like movement. As Mandos had foretold, Fëanor is unable to destroy Melkor, and he dies battling Melkor's army. In his final moment of life, he

understands as true what Mandos had said to him, yet he still persists in calling for his sons to renew their allegiance to himself and to the destructive oath: He “knew with the foreknowledge of death that no power of the Noldor would ever overthrow [the towers of Morgoth]; but he cursed the name of Morgoth thrice, and laid it upon his sons to hold to their oath, and to avenge their father” (107).

While the Doom of the Noldor is a just response to their willed disobedience of the Valar, the oath resembles the external power of *wyrd* as it also injures the innocents. The Doom of the Noldor ensnares the Sindar elves who never came to Valinor during the Valar’s initial summoning, and who took no part in the rebellion against the Valar or the murder of the Teleri. The Doom also descends to later generations of both elves and mortals who were not even present on Middle-earth when the initial events occurred. The elves’ abiding sorrow is traced directly to the Doom of the Noldor and remains throughout the ages of Middle-earth, present within *The Lord of the Rings* also. Mandos says, “those that endure in Middle-earth and come not to Mandos shall grow weary of the world as with a great burden, and shall wane, and become as shadows of regret before the younger race that cometh after. The Valar have spoken” (88). Thus, though the judgment is just in response to the guilty elves, it takes on fatalistic characteristics by expanding well-beyond the lives of the culpable members to affect innocents. The narrator suggests that choices have irrevocable and inescapable consequences, which, like fate, are indiscriminately destructive to the guilty and innocent alike.

The tale of Fëanor shows a world order in which both internal and external powers—free will and fate—contribute to the unfolding of historical events. Created beings are not slaves to fate because they have freedom to choose a course counter to

destruction. However, repeatedly, Fëanor chooses poorly and thus travels a path of destruction. Fëanor cannot, then, avert the path's consequences, and the higher powers of the Valar will not avert them for him. The Valar will not repeatedly extend mercy and forgiveness to elves and humans in response to their evil choices. The narrator implies, in fact, that the Valar absent themselves from the events of the world once the elves again reject forgiveness and mercy: "the Valar sat now behind their mountains at peace; and having given light to Middle-earth they left it for long untended, and the lordship of Morgoth was uncontested save by the valour of the Noldor" (103). While suggesting the Noldor's personal responsibility for the Valar's abandonment, the narrator's story becomes similar in tone to the Norse myths in that elves and mortals, like the heroes of Norse literature, are left alone by the gods to fight evil and live as best they can in a fallen world. Yet, contrary to the Norse, the elves' isolation is a self-imposed one directly resulting from their rebellion and hardness of heart.

Conclusion

Tolkien's narrator depicts in his stories a world order in which *wyrd* is ambivalent in its implications: the *wyrd* of Middle-earth suggests that external control and free choice with its necessary consequences are both present as the movers of history. Outside powers negatively affect the lives of created beings, but created beings also retain the freedom to resist these imposed influences. While innocents suffer unjustly from the "sins of the fathers," the world order of *The Silmarillion* still suggests that they can choose for the good despite their evil circumstances. Tolkien's characters are not pawns of fate, and, though evil forces affect their choices, people remain free to choose for or against their own destruction in a manner echoing the scriptural dictate: "Today I

set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:19, *New Jerusalem Bible*). Tragically, though, the heroes in *The Silmarillion*, elves and humans, repeatedly choose wrongly, the consequence of which is the continuing pattern of death and destruction detailed by the work. While the narrators of *The Silmarillion* focus on the evil communal consequences of “sinful” individual decisions, we will see in the following chapters, that *The Lord of the Rings* emphasizes the positive communal results of personal “piety,” the choice to achieve a good outside of oneself for the good’s own sake.

Notes

1. John Garth offers throughout the recent biography, *Tolkien and the Great War*, the most detailed information regarding Tolkien's early composition during the war and post-war years.

2. Tolkien gave an incomplete and disordered manuscript of "The Silmarillion" to Allen & Unwin publishers in 1937 (Carpenter 206-207). The publisher showed interest, but Tolkien was never able to complete the manuscript to his satisfaction, never resubmitting it to a publisher. Even in 1952, though Tolkien had already completed *The Lord of the Rings* manuscript, Carpenter notes, "*The Silmarillion* was still not ready for publication" (240).

3. In this line, Tolkien is clearly playing off the well-known verse from Paul's letter to the Romans: "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23, KJV).

4. *The Kalevala* is distinct from myths of the earlier cultures because, though it is a collection of ancient oral Finnish myth, the collector of these myths, Elias Lönnrot, wrote and compiled *The Kalevala* in the mid-19th century. Like Snorri Sturluson, whose concerns over the loss of the artistry and poetry within Icelandic culture due to Christian influences led him to compile the *Prose Edda* in the 12th-century, Lönnrot's modern concerns also naturally affect the collection. Lönnrot presented the collection as an authentic one of old lore, and yet the lore he gathered was necessarily interpreted by and filtered through him.

Twentieth-century scholars have brought into question the historical authenticity of Lönnrot's work. The question certainly arises as to what of *The Kalevala* is authentic tradition and what is Lönnrot's own creative invention. Of Lönnrot's work in shaping oral narratives into a coherent whole, Keith Bosley, a major translator of the work, says, "Lönnrot did his work so well that some people thought he had restored a lost epic from its scattered fragments" (xxxix). For instance, even the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1911 lists the entry for Elias Lönnrot as "Finnish philologist and discoverer of the *Kalevala*" (emphasis added. http://56.1911encyclopedia.org/L/LO/LONNROT_ELIAS.htm). Not knowing the current historical clarification, Tolkien, when he encountered *The Kalevala* in the 1900s, thought it was an authentic collection of ancient Finnish lore and mythology similar to the collection of Norse mythology in the *Prose Edda*.

5. *The Kalevala* may be unfamiliar to many readers of Tolkien; therefore, a brief summary of the Kullervo story may be necessary to point out the connections between the stories of Kullervo and Túrin Turambar, as well as *The Kalevala*'s influence upon Tolkien's depiction of Middle-earth's world order. As a newborn infant, Kullervo survives the slaughter of his family and the attempt upon his life by his uncle, who then sells him into slavery. The poem states that had he been raised properly instead of as a slave, Kullervo would have turned out well: "[Kullervo] did not come to grasp things / have a man's understanding / for he'd been crookedly reared / stupidly lulled as a child / with someone crooked raising / with someone stupid lulling" (35.5-10). Kullervo's poor upbringing may suggest that he does not bear responsibility for his actions and that he is,

thus, simply a victim of bad circumstances. He does not mature into a heroic figure but rather remains a lazy and untalented man. He unjustly and violently kills his master's wife, who is rightly angry at him for not working, then runs away to his family's lands where he discovers that his family is still alive. One of his sisters, though, has disappeared and the family mourns her absence. While out one day, Kullervo comes upon a beautiful maiden whom he kidnaps and rapes. The maiden turns out to be his long-lost sister, who commits suicide after revealing her true identity to Kullervo.

6. For the modern reader, influenced by Enlightenment philosophy, individual freedom to establish and shape life according to one's will is fundamental. If other powers inescapably deny or preclude one's freedom or autonomy, then suicide becomes the only means to reclaim the fundamental right of self-definition. But the modern acceptance of suicide in response to fatal circumstances does not reflect the Northern ethos of either the Norse or Anglo-Saxon cultures. Lönnrot's depiction of Kullervo's despair and suicide may particularly reveal the modern influences upon *The Kalevala*.

7. Shippey is quoting here John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, Act V, scene 4 (1623).

8. The creation of the world, "Eä," or "Arda," begins through the gracious work of the faithful Valar who intend the world to be a hospitable place for the "Children of Ilúvatar." However, Melkor mars their creative efforts. The hostility of the elements seems to come about because of Melkor's maliciousness (*Silmarillion* 20-22; 35-39)

9. Note that in *The Two Towers*, Aragorn chooses to save Merry and Pippin who have been captured by orcs. Though Aragorn, too, faces an evil dilemma, the peril of Merry and Pippin is actual, whereas Frodo's danger remains potential. Frodo is more "deserving" of protection given that he bears the Ring, but Merry and Pippin are the weak ones in clear and present danger. Aragorn chooses rightly in pursuing the two young hobbits because he chooses ethically, not pragmatically.

10. See T. A. Shippey, *Author* 250, and *Road* 261-262.

11. The narrator gives an interesting secondary reason for the Valar's justification of summoning the elves from Middle-earth. Ostensibly, they want to protect the elves, but the narrator goes on to indicate a more significant motivation: the Valar "were filled moreover with the love of the beauty of the Elves and desired their fellowship" (52). While the narrator is silent regarding the propriety of the Valar's decision, an implication remains that they exceeded their authority over Ilúvatar's children, improperly interfering with their lives despite the beneficent motivations for doing so. It may be because of the Valar's inappropriate assertion of authority that the summons results in "many woes" for the elves. Tolkien's "essay on the Istari," which Christopher Tolkien includes in *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*, supports this reading of the text. In describing the reason that the Valar send the Istari, or the wizards, to Middle-earth in the form of Men, Tolkien writes, "this the Valar did, desiring to amend the errors of old, especially that they had attempted to guard and seclude the Eldar by their own might and glory fully revealed" (389).

CHAPTER THREE

Interpreting the Roles of Providence and the Person in *The Silmarillion*

The providential world order that is foundational to *The Silmarillion* is set in tension with the narrator's more fatalistic interpretation of unfolding events. The elves' genesis myth, the "Ainulindalë," or the "Music of the Ainur," is built on a providential world order that does much to limit the narrator's fatalistic tone in the darker stories. Yet, the creation myth does not resolve the tension between the powers of fate, free will, and providence, but, rather, adds an additional level of meaning that readers must take into account when striving to understand Middle-earth's complex foundations. Another story, however, shows the promise of the creation myth in the lives of two creatures, Beren and Lúthien. While "The Music" outlines how providence will work in the world, "Of Beren and Lúthien" exhibits the details of this promised design, as we shall see at the end of this chapter.

The Elvish Narrator of The Silmarillion

Tolkien creates the two races of Elves and Men to convey differing views of life and death in a world marred by evil's presence. Tolkien wrote:

Elves and Men are just different aspects of the Humane, and represent the problem of Death as seen by a finite but willing and self-conscious person. In this mythological world the Elves and Men are in their incarnate forms kindred, but in the relation of their 'spirits' to the world in time represent different 'experiments', each of which has its own natural trend, and weakness. The Elves represent, as it were, the artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Humane raised to a higher level than is actually seen in Men. That is: they have a devoted love of the physical world, and a desire to observe and understand it for its own sake and as 'other.' (*Letters* 246)

In creating a race that is similar to humans except in the key aspect of immortality and by making his fictional narrator an elf, Tolkien is able to present a perspective on time that differs from that of his readers—mortals in the primary world. The elves enjoy an immortal existence within a mortal world; and, thus, their perspective upon time and a slowly dying world is naturally very different from the human one, and it affects the tone of the myths.

The 1977 *Silmarillion* does not state the narrator's name, though a narrator's voice within the work is clear and it contains many textual references to the fact that an "insider," rather than an omniscient external narrator, is telling the story. *The Book of Lost Tales*, which contains the earliest version of Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth, names the elvish narrator as Rúmil who tells the creation myth, "The Music of the Ainur," to a human, Eriol the mariner. The original version of "The Music" makes clear that the myths are told by a narrator, acting as a bard to a rapt fictional audience. The absence of an explicit narrator in the 1977 version can give rise to the mistaken interpretation that the narrator is also the author despite the fact that, even within the 1977 version, a sense of story-teller and listener remains.

The elvish understanding of the world is similar to the Anglo-Saxon perception of *wyrd* as fate. Tolkien uses the immortal life of the elves to provide a narrator who can survey the course of history over centuries and even millennia. The elvish narrator's perspective on history is such that he should be *better* equipped to see providential patterns to events, if any such pattern exists. However, while the elvish narrator may see the broader picture, he is never able to remove himself from the temporal perspective and observe the whole course of events, as an eternal perspective allows. Tolkien's analysis

of the elvish perspective indicates why his elvish narrator is more inclined to interpret history as evidence of fate or chance rather than providential design. He says that the elves must “endure with and within the created world, while its story lasts. When ‘killed’, by the injury or destruction of their incarnate form, they do not escape from time, but remain *in* the world, either discarnate, or being re-born. This becomes a great burden as the ages lengthen, especially in a world in which there is malice and destruction” (*Letters* 236). Tolkien emphasizes that the elves are “immortal” but not “eternal”; thus, though not experiencing natural death through physical decline, they remain confined within a temporal realm decaying around them. The elves are, in fact, deeply attached *to* the world, paradoxically viewing it from a perspective more temporal in nature than short-lived mortals. The history the narrator sees and recounts concerns the conflict between good and evil powers, leading to the inescapable destruction of created things either by evil intent or simply by natural decay.

The elves fully experience the ravages of time not in their own body but in the decay, loss, and death of the world around them—including their own realms and kingdoms, the violent death of their kinsmen, and the violent and natural death of humans. Ralph Wood’s argument on the dangerous temptation to immortality the Ring offers also applies to the elvish experience of immortality in a mortal world:

For fallen creatures to go on living endlessly would be a terror to the world and a torment to themselves. [. . .] if we had no prospect of dying, we would commit the two evils that undermine the good—pride and despair: pride that we will always have time to do the things that we ought to have done; despair that we will never cease doing the things we ought not to have done. (114)

The elvish tendency in *The Silmarillion* seems to be towards despair rather than pride, regretting the destructive actions that have led and keep leading to ruin.

Through not experiencing natural death, elves, like Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings*, live long enough to see the rise and fall of every created thing. Yet elves resist the changes that naturally must occur over such long periods of time. Tolkien states that development and mutability are intrinsic to Middle-earth: “Mere *change* as such is not represented as ‘evil’: it is the unfolding of the story and to refuse this is of course against the design of God. But the elvish weakness is in these terms naturally to regret the past, and to become unwilling to face change” (*Letters* 236). In always looking, even clinging, to the past, the elves resist the providential plan of Ilúvatar.

As an interpreter of history for his audience, the elvish narrator has difficulty seeing events that necessarily bring alteration and destruction as lying within a providential order. He also has difficulty accepting that *both* elves and humans retain the power of free will. Tolkien’s original version of “The Music of the Ainur” describes the elvish perspective of their place within a wider world order.¹ In *The Book of Lost Tales*, Rúmil indicates that elves believe a type of fate binds them that does not bind humans. Rúmil quotes Ilúvatar as saying, “I love the world, and it is a hall of play for Eldar and Men who are my beloved. But when the Eldar come they will be the fairest and the most lovely of all things by far; and deeper in the knowledge of beauty, and happier than Men. But to Men I will give a new gift, and a greater.” Rúmil goes on to indicate the nature of Ilúvatar’s gift to Men:

[Ilúvatar] devised that Men should have a free virtue whereby within the limits of the powers and substances and chances of the world they might fashion and design their life beyond even the original Music of the Ainur that is as fate to all things else. [. . .] Even we Eldar have found to our sorrow that Men have a strange power for good or ill and for turning things despite Gods and Fairies to their mood in the world; so that we say: “Fate may not conquer the Children of Men, but yet are they strangely blind, whereas their joy should be great.” (59)

Rúmil, as one bound by fate, does not understand why mortals do not recognize and respond with joy to their freedom and power. He suggests that elves are jealous of Ilúvatar's gift despite knowing that its price for mortals is a brief life: "It is however of one with this gift of power that the Children of Men dwell only a short time in the world alive, yet do not perish utterly for ever, whereas the Eldar dwell till the Great End unless they be slain or waste in grief (for to both of these deaths are they subject), nor doth eld subdue their strength, except it may be in ten thousand centuries" (*Book 59*). In Rúmil's view, elves do not have the same freedom as humans to counter fate's demands, even though "fate" in this depiction is understood as the Valar's beneficent design for the world.

Many critics have taken this passage as evidence that elves do not have free will—the Ainur's Music binds them to specific, determined actions.² Yet, such an interpretation fails to consider the fact that the elves are the ones interpreting what *they* perceive as true, not necessarily what *is* true. Matthew Dickerson thus challenges those who deny the elves' freedom: "the Elves are responsible for their choices. We see this especially in the case of Fëanor [. . .]. That Fëanor rebels at all shows that he, like Men, has freedom. That he and his evil will be judged shows not only that he is free but that he is responsible for his freedom" (109).

Despite Rúmil's delineation of the difference in freedom between elves and humans, specific stories serve to question the accuracy of his analysis, and bring into question Tolkien critics who have accepted Rúmil's view as authoritative. As the previous chapter indicated, both the myths of Túrin and of Fëanor temper the idea that fate constrains the free will of either humans or elves. Even more significantly, as the

following sections will show, the Beren and Lúthien story directly counters the elvish assumption that they are fated by showing the elf, Lúthien, clearly exercising free will alongside her human beloved, Beren.

Boethian Concepts within Middle-earth's Providential Order

Similar to the Anglo-Saxon depiction of dual, interacting world orders is Boethius's explication of fate and providence in the *Consolation of Philosophy*.³ Boethius's work is foundational not merely to Tolkien's literary imagination but to the Catholic tradition of divine providence.⁴ Boethius's work increased in influence in the middle to late medieval ages when King Alfred authorized a translation of it from Latin to the vernacular of England.⁵

In Tolkien's work, Middle-earth's providential order parallels Boethius's explanation of providence encompassing fate; and, the elvish narrator's limited temporal perspective seems also to reflect the Boethian understanding of the contrasting temporal and eternal perspectives. Boethius's depiction of fate as dependent on providence but providence as independent of fate may have assisted Tolkien in solving the apparent conflict between the Northern Germanic understanding of fate and the Christian concept of providence. Fate, Boethius indicates, is simply the power of providence as it works within the temporal order. Boethius defines providence as "divine reason itself. It is set at the head of all things and disposes all things." He compares the understanding of fate to providence as follows:

Providence includes all things at the same time, however diverse or infinite, while Fate controls the motion of different individual things in different places and in different times. So this unfolding of the plan in time when brought together as a unified whole in the foresight of God's mind is Providence; and the same unified whole when dissolved and unfolded in the course of time is Fate. (*Consolation* 104)

As the eternal order always encompasses the temporal, thus providence always encompasses fate. Boethius asserts that the perspective of an interpreter is essential for understanding events as fated or providential; only when a person can see all events from an eternal perspective can he or she understand providential order. People call fate those events and occurrences which are God's providential workings as they happen within time's linear structure.

Tom Shippey speaks to the importance of perspective in understanding entire patterns. He says while world events "appear chaotic and unplanned," such an interpretation is "a subjective one founded on the inevitable limited view of any individual." Suggesting that temporal observers are like ants on a Persian carpet, "lumbering from one thread to the other and observing that there is no pattern in the colours," Shippey concludes, "If individuals could see more widely—as we can by virtue of the narrative structure of *The Lord of the Rings*—they would realise that events have a cause-and-effect logic, though there are so many causes that perhaps no one but God can ever see them all at once" (*Road* 165).

Kathleen Dubs also argues that the discussion of fate and providence in Alfred's translation of Boethius may have been a major influence on Tolkien's own understanding of the concepts ("Providence" 133). Dubs guides her reader through Boethius's definitions of providence and fate, chance and free will, to demonstrate how Tolkien's fiction manifests these definitions. Dubs, explicating Boethius's argument, says "fate is this same unfolding of events as it is worked out in time, as we perceive it in the temporal world. We as human beings are unable to know providence. All we can know is fate" (135).

The original Latin version of Boethius's *Consolation* offers a metaphor of "revolving concentric circles," which Alfred alters in his Anglo-Saxon translation into an axle and a wheel, to explain the interaction of fate and providence. The innermost central circle is providence, while the outer circles connected to the innermost one are fate. Lady Philosophy says to Boethius: "The relationship between the ever-changing course of Fate and the stable simplicity of Providence is like that between reasoning and understanding, between that which is coming into being and that which is, between time and eternity, or between the moving circle and the still point in the middle" (105). F. Anne Payne translates the concentric circles within Boethius as the "wheel of *wyrd*" (16). Providence (the axle) controls fate (the wheel). The wheel without the axle is useless and powerless. Each person is somewhere on the wheel, either far from the center, the axle, or else close to it. The greater the distance from the axle, the more one experiences the movement of the wheel as radical and traumatic. The closer to it, the less one experiences the wheel's violent motion.

Fate, Boethius implies, exists as a power different from Providence. Fate's purpose is to move the perfectly ordered motions of nature—time and the seasons, the physical motion of the world and the stars, for example. The ebb and flow that humans experience with all things are part of the providential plan (Boethius 106). To the degree, then, that human life is bound to the natural order, thus subject to the laws of the physical world, fate moves human life. But, to the extent human life is also a spiritual reality, participating in the spiritual realm, fate cannot control it. Humans, unlike the rest of natural creation, have the power of free will to disrupt the natural patterns, and, when they do so, F. Anne Payne argues humans then place themselves within the power of

wyrd. Moreover, Payne says, “because the wheel of *Wyrd* binds all men together, the acts of one man can engage the consequences that involve others besides himself” (16). Payne argues for the interconnected, not independent, relation of humans to the world. Not only can one person’s good actions positively affect many others, but conversely, bad actions also negatively affect many others. Tolkien’s work particularly demonstrates the motion of the “wheel of *wyrd*” in the two tales of Túrin and Fëanor in which a single man’s evil choices create wide-spread, long-lasting, negative consequences for both the innocent and the guilty.

Providence and Free will in “The “Ainulindalë”

“The *Ainulindalë*” differs from the other tales in the *legendarium* because, within the context of the mythology, the elves believe that the chief Vala, Manwë, revealed it directly to them. Rúmil indicates to Eriol that Manwë first told the story to Rúmil’s grandfather and that Eriol is the first mortal to hear it. Thus, Rúmil suggests that this myth is not his or another elf’s invention but is divinely inspired, having a higher being as its source and authority. Rúmil says: “Hear now things that have not been heard among Men, and the Elves speak seldom of them; yet did Manwë Súlimo, Lord of Elves and Men, whisper them to the fathers of my father in the deeps of time” (*Book 52*). In his commentary on this passage, Christopher Tolkien states, “Thus it was that the *Ainulindalë* was first to be heard by mortal ears, as Eriol sat in a sunlit garden in Tol Eressëa. Even after Eriol (or Ælfwine) had fallen away, Rúmil remained, the great Noldorin sage of Tirion [. . .] and *The Music of the Ainur* continued to be ascribed to him” (*Book 49*). In only this one story does the elvish narrator stand as an amanuensis for a Vala, the angelic beings directly below the one god, Ilúvatar, who are sent by him to

guide and protect the world. Manwë reveals a story with an explicitly providential perspective on creation and temporal events. The centrality of “The Ainulindalë” to the rest of the mythology demonstrates the providential foundation of Tolkien’s creative vision for Middle-earth.

Christopher Tolkien, using chronology as the criterion for assembling his father’s vast manuscripts into the posthumous work of *The Silmarillion*, placed “The Ainulindalë” first in the collection since it tells of the beginning of the universe and world. The myth’s placement at the start of the 1977 *The Silmarillion* text is appropriate not only because it begins the story of Middle-earth, but also because it was one of the first tales Tolkien wrote about Middle-earth. He wrote it while recovering from “trench fever” after participating in the Battle of the Somme in World War I. The writing of such a providence-centered story suggests that, despite his witnessing the horrors of the war, Tolkien’s faith in the presence of a providential God remained and that this faith contributed to the shaping of his fictional world. In the only biography to examine in-depth the influence of World War I on Tolkien, John Garth states:

Straight after the war Tolkien set about the task of completing ‘The Book of Lost Tales’ in earnest, starting out with a grand myth of world-making, ‘The Music of the Ainur.’ [. . .] Elevated subject and style should not obscure the tale’s pertinence to the terrible times Tolkien had known. It is nothing less than an attempt to justify God’s creation of an imperfect world filled with suffering, loss, and grief. (254–255)

Christopher Tolkien supports the argument that the work sprang from not despite Tolkien’s horrible experience of war, perhaps as a testimony to the hope in providence remaining with Tolkien even in the trenches. He indicates that “Of the Music” was one of the earliest stories that his father wrote and also one which underwent the fewest of revisions during his life. He says that while there is some ambiguity regarding when

precisely his father first composed “Of the Music,” he indicates Tolkien definitely wrote the myth sometime between the end of 1918 and the spring of 1920 (*Book 45*):

In later years the Creation myth was revised and rewritten over and over again; but it is notable that in this case only and in contrast to the development of the rest of the mythology there is a direct tradition manuscript to manuscript from the earliest draft to the final version: each text is directly based on the one preceding. [. . .] Moreover, and most remarkably, the earliest version, written when my father was 27 or 28 and embedded still in the context of the Cottage of Lost Play, was so evolved in its conception that it underwent little change of an essential kind. There were indeed very many changes, which can be followed stage by stage through the successive texts, and much new matter came in; but the fall of the original sentences can continually be recognized in the last version of the *Ainulindalë* written more than thirty years later, and even many phrases survived. (*Book 61-62*)

Given his father’s extensive revisions of the *legendarium*, Christopher Tolkien’s revelation that the creation myth remained relatively unchanged in its essential content throughout the fifty year growth, expansion, and metamorphosis of *The Silmarillion* is surprising. Christopher stresses that, though there are differences between the various stages of the creation myth, “when all differences have been observed, they are much less remarkable than the solidity and completeness with which the myth of the Creation emerged at its first beginning” (*Book 62*).

The myth demonstrates three central aspects of a providential world order in Middle-earth: a divine design to all temporal events, love as the basis of all creation and creative activity, and, finally, the importance of free will within the divine design. These three aspects, while shown initially in the tale of Beren and Lúthien, find full expression in *The Lord of the Rings*.

First, “The *Ainulindalë*” establishes a divine design for the universe, including Middle-earth. The narrator says Ilúvatar gives the Ainur a glimpse of his design: “they

saw a new World made visible before them, and it was globed amid the Void, and it was sustained therein, but was not of it. And as they looked and wondered this World began to unfold its history, and it seemed to them that it lived and grew” (*Silmarillion* 17).

Ilúvatar, however, does not act alone creating the world, for the lesser “deities,” the Ainur (later named the Valar), also assist him.⁶

Tolkien uses the medieval metaphor of the music of creation to convey that while the universe’s creation is communal in nature, the creation “song” is guided and judged by a single director.⁷ The Ainur’s song begins melodiously but ends discordantly because Melkor refuses to sing in accord with the others. He places himself and his talents apart from the community, and, as a result, the music becomes cacophonous, harsh, and contrary to Ilúvatar’s symphonic design. Ilúvatar must stop the music twice to urge Melkor to follow divine guidance. When Ilúvatar and the Ainur begin the music anew, Melkor continues in his refusal to create in harmony with them.

At the third discordant song Ilúvatar becomes angry with Melkor’s repeated rebellion. He stops the dissonant music and speaks to Melkor. Though Ilúvatar does not force Melkor to obey his guidance by following the harmony, which would violate Melkor’s freedom, he warns him of the futility of taking the creation process away from Ilúvatar’s control. Melkor may believe he is forming creation according to his own design, but Ilúvatar makes clear that Melkor’s power remains well within his own order. Ilúvatar indicates his guidance and power over the cosmic design when he warns Melkor, “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” (17). The

earlier variant in *The Book of Lost Tales* expands the depiction of providential power and design in Middle-earth.⁸ The abbreviated 1977 version and the expanded earlier version together emphasize the same end: Ilúvatar will not simply change evil into good, but will weave everything Melkor mars into something more beautiful and good. The narrator in Tolkien's early version of the myth even implies that seemingly malign events, which temporal observers describe as "misery and sorrow, terror and wickedness," will actually produce the "mightiest and loveliest" of Ilúvatar's deeds (*Book* 54-55). Every rebellious act that Melkor commits, though he thinks it will benefit only him, leads eventually to the greater glory of Ilúvatar. If evil exists as a corruption of the good, as the creation myth depicts, then it can never surpass the good since a corrupt form of being can never be superior or even equal to the proper, or intended, being. This is the promise for Middle-earth that the narrator conveys in the opening tale of *The Silmarillion*—a promise of providential divine care amid a hostile world.

The narrator's description of Ilúvatar's authority over the unfolding of both good and evil events parallels Boethius's description of their relation: "Evil is thought to abound on earth. But if you could see the plan of Providence, you would not think there was evil anywhere" (110). The Anglo-Saxon translation of Boethius clarifies the concepts of good and evil, providence and fate, in the way that "Of the Music" also reveals their workings in earth:

Though it appear to us complicated, partly good, and partly evil, it is nevertheless to him singly good, because he brings it all to a good end, and does for good all that which he does. [. . .] But this is evidently known that the divine predestination is simple and unchangeable, and governs everything according to order, and fashions everything. Some things, therefore in this world are subject to fate, others are not at all subject to it. But fate, and all the things which are subject to it, are subject to the divine providence. (Fox 221)

The second aspect of providential order that the myth reveals is the centrality of love in Ilúvatar's creative action. The ability to love and to accept another's love relates to the ability to embrace the world as either fated or providential. If the world is providential, then a person must accept and respond to the love of a creator who creates not simply the world but the specific person within the world. The person's response to this primary and initial love is either rejection or acceptance, pride or humility. Whereas, if a world is fated, then there can be no love of a transcendent deity for persons. Thus, there is no necessity for the person to respond to the primary love, but only to resist the antagonistic powers intent on destroying the person or the person's beloved. Though the pagan world upheld physical self-sacrifice in battle as virtuous, it did not call for the person to sacrifice or surrender his or her interior self in proper response to a loving deity.⁹ While the majority of the Ainur accept and return Ilúvatar's initial love for them, Melkor rejects it because he will not admit any power over him. He seeks instead to dominate others and to be worshipped by them out of fear, not love.

The third aspect of Middle-earth's providential nature is the importance of the person's free will and own creative abilities alongside divine intent. Because Ilúvatar loves his creation, he thus allows it to be free. One of the fundamental descriptions of providence that the creation myth offers is the interplay of free will between Ilúvatar and his creation. In describing the Ainur's role in shaping and forming the universe, Ilúvatar affirms both his control of the universe and the significance of his creatures' participation. Ilúvatar does not crush their creative freedom, but rather desires them to remain within the community of creator and creatures, using their freedom for the advancement of good. As the narrator states, Ilúvatar "declared to [the Ainur] a mighty

theme, unfolding to them things greater and more wonderful than he had yet revealed; and the glory of its beginning and the splendour of its end amazed the Ainur.” Integral to the design is the Ainur’s participation in it. Ilúvatar emphasizes the Ainur’s free nature by saying, “I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will. But I will sit and hearken, and be glad that through you great beauty has been wakened into song” (15). He reveals to them a brief glimpse of his overarching vision, which requires the Ainur’s contributions, even including Melkor’s selfish intentions. He says: “Behold your Music! [. . .] each of you shall find contained herein, amid the design that I set before you, all those things which it may seem that he himself devised or added. And thou, Melkor, wilt discover all the secret thoughts of thy mind, and wilt perceive that they are but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory” (17). The Ainur help to form the cosmos and the world but their involvement always lies within Ilúvatar’s designs.

Evil in a Providential World Order

As Boethius did not dismiss the misery resulting from evil deeds, so does Tolkien not ignore nor dismiss the real damage and grief that evil causes. Some critics maintain, however, that the presence of evil in *The Silmarillion* denies a providential world order and follows more closely a Manichean view of good and evil powers ruling the world. Verlyn Flieger is a key proponent of the dualistic, Manichean structure of the themes in Tolkien’s work. She argues:

the alternation between the vision of hope and the experience of despair—between light and dark—is the essence both of Tolkien and of his work. [. . .] The light-dark polarity operates on all levels [. . .] its interplay becomes the interplay of good and evil, belief and doubt, free will and fate. Light and dark are contending forces in Tolkien’s fiction, but the

emotional weight is on the dark side. [. . .] Each needs the other. The shadow defines and thereby reveals the light as the brightness of the light sharpens the shadow. Opposite points on the circle, they are held in tension by simultaneous attraction and repulsion. Their interdependence embodies all the polarities in Tolkien's theme, for, as light cannot be known without darkness, so hope needs the contrast of despair to give it meaning, and free will opposes, yet is defined by, the concept of fate. (4-5)

Tom Shippey, strangely, affirms the presence of "dualism" in Tolkien while also acknowledging Tolkien's own rejection of a Manichean philosophy. He argues, on the one hand, that Tolkien's One Ring embodies the "philosophical duality" between the Boethian view of evil as an internal force and the Manichaeian view of it as an external power (*Road* 142). On the other hand, Shippey, responding to Gandalf's statement in *The Lord of the Rings* that black is mightier than white, says, "The implications of that *could* be alarming. It sounds Manichaeian. However, [. . .] Tolkien was careful to voice rebuttals of Manichaeism and assertions of the non-entity of evil many times throughout" (*Road* 156).¹⁰

Other critics argue that the work's presentation of evil follows the Augustinian principle of *privatio boni*, an absence of the good. Joseph Pearce says the "over-riding influence" in Tolkien's work is "Augustinian theology. Evil, as symbolized by darkness, has no value of its own but is only a negation of that which is good, as symbolized by light" (93). Kocher, indicating Tolkien follows both Augustinian but also Thomistic philosophy, says, "Evil is not a thing in itself but a lessening of the Being inherent in the created order" (*Master* 78). Ralph Wood, arguing against Manichaeism, maintains, "Tolkien's world is not the product of a struggle between good and evil deities, as in many pagan religions. Life in Middle-earth is not a contest between equally malign and benign forces" (*Gospel* 20).

The opening creation myth depicts evil as the domination of others, an image which Tolkien repeats throughout *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In writing of the nature of evil in *The Lord of the Rings*, Matthew Dickerson says the manifestation of evil is the Ring's power to dominate others and deny them free will (95). Domination reflects the Augustinian principle of *privatio boni* because it refuses to acknowledge the holistic being of another; thus by attempting to dominate another, one attempts to deny being to them. In "The Ainulindalë," the narrator conveys the belief that the One, Ilúvatar, never dominates his creation. He creates the Ainur and also his "Children"—elves and men—to have free will, which they ought to use to realize the perfect intention of Ilúvatar. He works in consort with the wills of his creatures, and they, in turn, work in unity with Ilúvatar's loving guidance of his creation, not his forceful domination. He does not prevent the evil that Melkor will do, nor does he destroy him, though Melkor persists in his disobedience. Ilúvatar certainly *has* the power to stop or prevent evil, but he does not do so because of his greater love for his creation's freedom. He wants his created beings to do good by their own free will in cooperation with his own purposes. Ilúvatar's actions are a model for others to follow or be judged against: one creature's will—whether good or evil in intent—should not preclude, deny, or enslave another's will. While Ilúvatar allows his creatures to sin and to cause evil, his covenant with them is to transform all evil actions and their consequences into a greater good, glorifying himself and his obedient creation.

Unlike *The Lord of the Rings*, in which examples of providential presence abound, the narrators of *The Silmarillion* convey only a few examples of how providence works or reveals itself in Middle-earth. While *The Silmarillion* is more overtly

theological than *The Lord of the Rings*, as a work it does not convey a providential theological order as effectively as *The Lord of the Rings*. Though there are several examples of the Valar and Maiar working in Middle-earth, the narrators rarely show Ilúvatar's providential design in action within the history.

“Of Beren and Lúthien” Manifesting “The Music’s” Providential Order

The narrators of *The Silmarillion* struggle to connect the elves' creation myth and its description of providential design to subsequent events of elvish history. The Túrin Turambar story reveals a narrator examining the conflict between fate and free will; the Beren and Lúthien story, however, has a narrator who not only presents the clash of fate and free will, but who also brings the providential element back into the account. The story of the two lovers, Beren and Lúthien, resembles the other myths within the *legendarium*; yet, the story alters the formula of the more fatalistic Norse and Anglo-Saxon source texts by adding a two-fold element of providential activity: the possibility of an alternative future and free will's cooperation with providence in achieving this future.

Though a web of circumstances seems to ensnare Beren and Lúthien, the two lovers exercise their free will properly, positively responding to love and using their free will for the sake of others. Unlike Túrin, who names himself “Master of Fate,” neither Beren nor Lúthien so regard themselves. In recognizing their weakness before forces beyond their control, they unintentionally find strength. In his analysis of an earlier version of the Beren and Lúthien tale, the “Story of Beren and Lúthien the Elfmaiden,” Tolkien comments upon the accidental discovery of strength through confessed weakness:

[. . .] we meet, among other things, the first example of the motive (to become dominant in *Hobbits*) that the great policies of world history, ‘the wheels of the world’, are often turned not by the Lords and Governors, even gods, but by the seemingly unknown and weak—owing to the secret life in creation, and the part unknowable to all wisdom but One, that resides in the intrusions of the Children of God into the Drama. (*Letters* 149)

Without knowing or intending it, Beren and Lúthien move the “wheels of the world” in the direction that Ilúvatar intends through properly using their power of free will, the gift of Ilúvatar to his “Children.”

The elves call this story the “Lay of Leithian,” which means “release from bondage,” for in the end, Lúthien escapes from the confines of the world by choosing the ultimate expression of weakness—mortality and death. Her embrace of death becomes the means by which Lúthien overcomes fate, revealing her immense power over it. The elvish narrators, recognizing her power, honor her for it. Instead of being an account of fated destruction and ruin, as the majority of *The Silmarillion* tales are, the Beren and Lúthien tale moves to a successful end that is poignantly joyful for both the two central characters as well as the audience.

Some critics would disagree that the tale is one of victory, however. Tolkien himself points out the disastrous consequences of Beren and Lúthien’s “successful” quest: “the capture of the Silmaril, a supreme victory, leads to disaster. The oath of the sons of Fëanor becomes operative, and lust for the Silmaril brings all the kingdoms of the Elves to ruin” (*Letters* 149). Though the Silmaril’s recapture brings disaster on the elvish kingdoms, the downfall is not due to Beren and Lúthien’s choices but to those of others—Fëanor and his sons—to retrieve the Silmarils at all costs. While the earlier “sins” of the Noldor continue to have devastating consequences, the “reparation” Beren, Lúthien, and

others subsequently make also initiates a series of good, constructive consequences.

While Tolkien does not make these explicit, Richard C. West, however, notes them:

“With irony typical of Tolkien, this victory leads not only to the death of King Thingol and the destruction of his kingdom of Doriath but also, later, to the successful voyage of Eärendil the Mariner to plead with the Valar [. . .] for the aid that ultimately overthrows Morgoth. And the repercussions continue throughout the history of Middle-earth” (260).

The beneficial consequences of Beren and Lúthien’s actions continue even into the “Third Age,” the end of which *The Lord of the Rings* details.

The world order the narrator presents in “Of Beren and Lúthien” contrasts with that presented in the Túrin tale. Tom Shippey accurately points out: “A case could be made for seeing Tolkien’s other major ‘human story’, the tale of Beren and Lúthien, as the philosophical antithesis to Túrin. It is a story of love across the species of elf and human, rather than a tale of incest; [. . .] Lúthien masters fate and death in a way that Túrin cannot even aspire to” (*Road* 254). While the story of the two lovers shares with Túrin elements of fatalism, it more strongly presents the nature of providential activity within Middle-earth—the important cooperation between creaturely freedom and providential power within an underlying historical design.

The love between Beren and Lúthien reflects Ilúvatar’s initial love set forth in the “Ainulindalë.” Yet, the presence of love within the providential world order of Middle-earth does not negate sadness and suffering, as the Beren and Lúthien story makes quite evident. The elvish narrator begins the tale by stating: “Among the tales of sorrow and of ruin that come down to us from the darkness of those days there are yet some in which amid weeping there is joy and under the shadow of death light that endures” (162). The

love of Beren and Lúthien forms a community in which each lover wants the other's good, for it is in the other's good that the self finds its own happiness. Yet, being loved, and reciprocating such love, also results in an increased sadness when the lovers are separated through death. The Beren and Lúthien story explores the nature of love and providence as existing within a world of sadness, death, and loss.

The Narrator's Use of Fatalistic Language in "Of Beren and Lúthien"

Like the Túrin narrator, Beren and Lúthien's narrator also uses fatalistic language as a way to explain events, but unlike Túrin, no curse overshadows Beren's life, defining or determining it. The absence of a clearly fatalistic force in Beren's life makes it more difficult for the narrator to depict a clear mover behind events, yet he still ascribes events to fate. He thus creates a scenario for Beren and Lúthien similar to Túrin's, in which external powers seem to force them into specific circumstances beyond their control.

Shippey declares that:

“doom” and “fate” determine the tone especially of the stories of Beren and of Túrin Turambar. What these words imply is in a sense illogical or self-contradictory. They indicate the presence of controlling powers, in whose toils the heroes are “caught”, “meshed”, “ensnared”; yet people can be told, as Túrin is, ‘the doom lies in yourself’. “Fate” and “doom” may be “wrought” or “devised” by people, and yet can take on a volition of their own. (*Road* 255)

The elvish narrator repeatedly names “fate” or “doom” as the cause of action, even as the characters also explain events in ways suggesting their personal conviction that fate rather than providence controls the world. For instance, Melian makes a portentous prophecy about Beren well before his actual birth: “one of Men, even of Bëor's house, shall indeed come, and the Girdle of Melian shall not restrain him, for doom greater than my power shall send him; and the songs that shall spring from that

coming shall endure when all Middle-earth is changed” (144). Melian speaks of “doom” as a personified force of fate. Shippey also hears undertones of fatalism in the story: “intentions are not always known to the intenders. This is the sense of ‘doom’ which Tolkien strives to create from oaths and curses and bargains, and from the interweaving of the fates of objects, people and kingdoms. At moments in the tale ‘Of Beren and Lúthien’ it comes through strongly” (*Road* 261). Doom, or fate, becomes the active force compelling Beren to enter Doriath, as he confesses to the king: “My fate, O King, led me hither” (166). It also produces his encounter with Lúthien and their seemingly predestined love match. The narrator first references “fate” as directing Beren’s life when he tells the audience that “being defended by fate” (164), Beren escaped from certain death at the hands of orcs. Fate preserves Beren’s life for an unknown purpose, allowing him to find his way into the hidden realm of Doriath, a task the elves thought impossible given the extremely powerful spells concealing and protecting the realm from all intruders.

When Beren sees Lúthien dancing in the moonlight, her beauty literally enchants him. As the narrator declares, Beren “came upon Lúthien, daughter of Thingol and Melian, at a time of evening under moonrise, as she danced upon the unfading grass [. . .]. Then all memory of his pain departed from him, and he fell into an enchantment [. . .] and he became dumb, as one that is bound under a spell.” It is only after the “spell of silence fell from Beren” that he is able to call out to her. Just as Beren falls under an enchantment when he looks at Lúthien, she too comes under a spell that seems inescapable, like fate: “but as she looked on him, doom fell upon her, and she loved him” (165). Immediately after some unnamed power has cast the spell of love upon Beren and

Lúthien, she disappears. The narrator explains that Beren was then “stricken with sudden blindness [. . .]. Thus he began the payment of anguish for the fate that was laid on him; and in his fate Lúthien was caught, and being immortal she shared in his mortality, and being free received his chain; and her anguish was greater than any other of the Eldalië has known” (165-166).

Free Will Countering Fatalism

Though the narrator’s language maintains the general sense of fatalism overshadowing the elvish history, the story of Beren and Lúthien does not reveal a fated world order precisely because it emphasizes Beren’s and Lúthien’s repeated moments of choice. While most of *The Silmarillion* stresses the power of choice through showing the evil consequences arising from bad choices, “Of Beren and Lúthien” is one of the few tales to show the good consequences arising from the proper exercise of free will. The tale suggests that free will is used well when the person intends to achieve a good outside of the self, deliberates the best way to achieve that end, and finally, freely cooperates with the providential intentions of an external power.

The narrator expresses this sense of cooperation through repeatedly using the passive voice, implying an unnamed actor influencing the subject, a technique Tolkien uses throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. For instance, the narrator uses the passive voice to describe Beren’s quest for the realm of Doriath: “it was put into his heart that he would go down into the Hidden Kingdom, where no mortal foot had yet trodden.” This unstated force could be the “doom” about which Melian speaks and which Beren calls “fate.” Yet, while the narrator suggests an unnamed mover placing desire into Beren’s heart, Beren still *chooses* to respond to this desire by seeking and finding a path into Doriath despite

the clear danger to himself. The land through which Beren travels is particularly dangerous because the opposing powers of two Maiar clash there. As the narrator says, Doriath is the region “where the sorcery of Sauron and the power of Melian came together, and horror and madness walked.” This journey, the narrator says, “is not accounted least among the great deeds of Beren, but he spoke of it to no one after, lest the horror return into his mind.” The narrator highlights Beren’s unique decision to risk the path by stating that “none know how he found a way, and so came by paths that no Man nor Elf else ever dared to tread to the borders of Doriath” (164). While an unnamed power directs Beren along ways he could not have found alone, he also cooperates with its intention.

In another use of the passive voice, suggesting cooperation of wills, the narrator says: “Beren looking up beheld the eyes of Lúthien, and his glance went also to the face of Melian; and it seemed to him that words *were put* into his mouth. Fear left him, and the pride of the eldest house of Men returned to him” (166, emphasis added). The narrator describes Beren as speaking with another’s voice. Melian may be the one who puts words into Beren’s mouth or it may be another unseen power, but in any case, Beren still chooses to risk death by asking for Lúthien’s hand in marriage from Thingol.

In describing the clash between Beren and Thingol over the proposed marriage to Lúthien, the narrator contrasts the selfish use of the will with the selfless, showing the significant difference in consequences of each usage. Thingol reacts angrily to Beren’s request to marry Lúthien. Despite not wanting to allow the marriage, Thingol agrees to a price for his daughter’s hand—one Silmaril: “Bring to me in your hand a Silmaril from Morgoth’s crown; and then, if she will, Lúthien may set her hand in yours” (167). Beren

agrees to the pact while pointing out the materialistic nature of Thingol's love: "For little price do Elven-kings sell their daughters: for gems, and things made by craft. But if this be your will, Thingol, I will perform it. And when we meet again my hand shall hold a Silmaril from the Iron Crown" (168). Beren knows he will probably die in the attempt to recover a Silmaril; yet, he shows a proper ordering of his loves in that he is willing to sacrifice his life to wed Lúthien, and he is willing both to find and surrender a Silmaril because of his love for her. Beren's character thus stands in sharp contrast with Thingol, who subordinates a proper fatherly love for his daughter to an improper lust for a beautiful object, a Silmaril.

Thingol's evil use of his free will results in the destruction of his realm.

Following the technique of "entrelacement,"¹¹ Tolkien weaves the thread of the Fëanor story into Beren and Lúthien's. Though Thingol was not involved in nor even present at Fëanor's oath-taking and kin-slaying, he brings upon himself the consequence of Fëanor's perfidy by demanding a Silmaril in exchange for his daughter: "Thus he wrought the doom of Doriath, and was ensnared within the curse of Mandos" (167). Another king, Finrod, softens Thingol's selfishness by attributing Thingol's demand to the oath's power: "it seems that this doom goes beyond [Thingol's] purpose, and that the Oath of Fëanor is again at work. For the Silmarils are cursed with an oath of hatred, and he that even names them in desire moves a great power from slumber" (169). While Fëanor's original oath regarding the Silmarils may contribute to Thingol's own lust for the gems, it remains Thingol's choice to perpetuate the oath's effects.

In the Beren and Lúthien tale, the narrator presents two alternating suggestions regarding the constraints of fate and the extent of providence. On the one hand, he tells a

story in which the ill effects of a badly used free will—Fëanor’s oath—continue to constrain innocents, thus diminishing the extent of their free will. But on the other hand, he suggests the possibility of altering those consequences, of escaping the constraints of fate, through properly using free will. The story examines the same power, free will, as both resisting and furthering a fated world order. Verlyn Flieger, while recognizing this tension between fate and free will, ultimately concludes that free will is constrained: “the interactions of fate and free will are more tellingly presented here than in any other episode of *The Silmarillion*. Thingol’s actions are bound by the Music. Beren’s are not. Who then is free, and who bound when their paths and actions intersect? Thingol’s response to Beren’s declaration of love for Lúthien fixes Thingol’s own doom and that of his kingdom” (137). Flieger accepts the elvish belief that elves are bound by the Ainur’s music whereas Men are not. If Flieger (and the elvish perspective) is correct that fate, or the “Music,” binds Thingol to choose as he does simply because he is elvish, then his daughter, Lúthien, must also be bound by that same fate in her actions.

The text itself counters such a conclusion by showing that Lúthien has two clear moments of free choice: the first when she chooses to accompany Beren into Morgoth’s realm, and the more important second moment when she chooses mortality—a decision running directly counter to the very “Music” of the Ainur. In neither choice does the narrator imply that an external power, such as fate, or a Vala, or even Ilúvatar himself, forces her to a specific end. While Flieger offers the helpful character-analysis paralleling Thingol’s possessiveness of his daughter and Fëanor’s possessiveness of the Silmaril (138), she ignores the free and thus responsible decisions made by Beren and Lúthien.

Because both an elf and a mortal *can* choose rightly, their proper actions highlight the abuse of free will by other characters of both races—in particular Thingol, Fëanor, and Túrin. Though the narrator shows the continued effects of Fëanor's initial choices regarding the Silmarils, he does not present simply a story of inescapable destructive consequences. The agency of others negatively affects Beren and Lúthien, but it does not negate their freedom to escape the deterministic cycle of a fated world order. They are not inexorably ensnared in circumstances, but, by their own choices and actions in accordance with Ilúvatar's will, they are able to turn evil conditions into a partial good. For instance, Beren and Lúthien turn Thingol's evil desire for Beren's death into a good he neither intended nor foresaw; they reclaim a Silmaril from Melkor, an action whose consequences lead eventually to the Valar's permanent removal of Melkor from Middle-earth.

The presentation of free will's power becomes more dramatic as the characters themselves come to realize the potential consequences of their choices. At the edge of Morgoth's realm, discerning its overwhelming strength. Beren believes that his choice must lead to death. He thus recoils—not for fear of his own life but for that of Lúthien—and considers forsaking his sworn oath by abandoning the quest. Unlike Fëanor and his sons, who refuse to recant their oath even in the face of its obviously evil outcome, Beren shows that he is not constrained by a single act of his will, the earlier oath. His oath has its own unalterable consequences, but Beren still remains free to exercise his will in response both to new circumstances, as well as the consequences of old choices. Standing on the edge of the enemy's realm, Beren is again free to choose whether or not to go forward.

Huan, the “hound of Valinor,” voices the power that Beren still possesses, describing a limited freedom similar to the one Norse poets offer to their protagonists, according to Bertha Phillpotts: “the awful choice between two evils” (5). Huan says, “You can turn from your fate and lead [Lúthien] into exile, seeking peace in vain while your life lasts. But if you will not deny your doom, then either Lúthien, being forsaken, must assuredly die alone, or she must with you challenge the fate that lies before you—hopeless, yet not certain” (179). Huan sees two paths open to Beren, both of which have bad ends: Beren can turn away from his certain “fate” of death in Morgoth’s realm, but if he does, he will never have peace thereafter. If he chooses to continue into Angband, then he must either abandon Lúthien, who may die without him, or he must allow her to accompany him to their certain and mutual death.

Though Huan offers a moment of choice to Beren, Lúthien also exercises her own free will in choosing to remain with him whether he wills it or not. Beren is not an isolated hero for Lúthien also has a say in Beren’s choice. Recognizing her determination, Beren “sought no longer to dissuade her.” Richard West emphasizes that Lúthien’s decisions and actions result in the quest’s success:

[Lúthien] does far more to achieve the quest of the Silmaril than does Beren, even urging him on when he is ready to abandon it rather than put her at risk. [. . .] It is Lúthien who gets them past the wolf guardian of Morgoth’s stronghold by putting Carcharoth into an enchanted sleep, and it is Lúthien’s dancing that enspells the Dark Lord’s retainers and Morgoth himself, while Beren is hiding beneath the throne in perfectly understandable terror. (265)

While Lúthien’s contributions are key, she achieves the quest only in working with Beren. Mutually strengthened by the love and companionship of the other, they *both* show the resolve and courage to continue into the heart of Morgoth’s realm. Beren

makes the choice to go forward despite believing he will not survive or be victorious in the quest, and Lúthien chooses to assist, not abandon, him, even at the cost of death at Beren's side. The episode illustrates the virtue of "northern courage" that Tolkien defined in his essay on *Beowulf* as "the creed of unyielding will" (21)—heroes refusing to retreat even before the face of death. Yet, the Northern sources, such as *Beowulf*, typically do not present any reward for the hero's proper action beyond that of *lof*, fame after death. The Beren and Lúthien myth, by contrast, does suggest such a reward.

The Beren and Lúthien story, while portraying the virtue of courage without expectation of success, also suggests that within a providential world order choosing to show courage is even more significant precisely because one's choices may be the very catalyst required to avert "fated" destruction. As Huan states, Beren and Lúthien's actions are "hopeless, yet not certain." Though perhaps not recognizing this himself, Huan introduces a new element to the pagan formula of doomed choice—hope that lies beyond destruction, hope that an unforeseen something or someone may intervene in the action to assist the protagonist.

Huan paradoxically places fatalistic and providential powers together. If fate defines Middle-earth, then Beren and Lúthien's future would be certain and hopeless. If the future is truly hopeless, then it is certain; yet if it is not certain, if alternatives are possible, then it is not hopeless. Like the narrator himself, Huan, though he speaks prophetically, does not speak omnisciently—he admits that part of the future is dark to him. Huan does not consider that an unseen power may emerge to assist the characters.

Such a secondary power does intervene twice in the story. First, when Beren and Lúthien encounter the monstrous wolf, Carcharoth, at the gates of Angband, the narrator

declares that “suddenly some power, descended from of old from divine race, possessed Lúthien, and casting back her foul raiment she stood forth, small before the might of Carcharoth, but radiant and terrible”; and Lúthien, or the other power, casts Carcharoth into a deep sleep (180). Lúthien descends in part from the Maiar, the beings slightly lower than the Valar in the hierarchy of creation. Thus, the power to which the narrator alludes could be an internal, elvish might hidden from Lúthien herself prior to the encounter with the wolf, or it could be the external, divine power of the Valar. In either case—whether it is an internally awakened power or an externally conducted power—something intervenes in the course of events by enabling Lúthien to overcome Carcharoth. The narrator neither shows Lúthien acting autonomously against a more powerful foe, nor suggests a third party pushing her aside to defeat the enemy. Rather, the description shows the essential nature of providence within Middle-earth—a force enabling and cooperating with Lúthien’s own strength. A higher, transcendent power never violates Lúthien’s being, particularly her free will, but rather works through her abilities to overpower the great wolf. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the narrator repeatedly shows such providential power at work in the story’s action, but in *The Silmarillion*, the narrator remains less certain as to whom to attribute such interventions or how to explain such moments of history.

While not being able to articulate fully the role of providence as originally described in the creation myth, the narrator tells of a second example of providential involvement in the story—the direct transcendental intervention in rescuing Beren and Lúthien from death. Beren, having cut one Silmaril from Morgoth’s crown, foolishly decides to excise another; and in doing so, his knife snaps, slicing the sleeping Morgoth

and breaking the spell Lúthien's song had cast on him. "The hosts of Morgoth were awakened," and Beren and Lúthien flee before them. Lúthien's elven power now spent, Beren seeks to guard her from the second assault of the now-awakened Carcharoth, but the wolf snaps off his hand, clutching the Silmaril. Though the wolf goes berserk from the pain of the powerful jewel inside its stomach and runs away from them, Beren and Lúthien are now too weak and wounded to defend themselves against the coming hosts of Morgoth. As the narrator states: "Thus the quest of the Silmaril was like to have ended in ruin and despair; but in that hour above the wall of the valley three mighty birds appeared, flying northward with wings swifter than the wind. [. . .] they lifted up Lúthien and Beren from the earth, and bore them aloft into the clouds" (182). Since the eagles act here as a *deus ex machina*, the rescue of Beren and Lúthien raises many questions about the nature of such beneficial "coincidences." Is it random chance that the eagles happen to be present just when Beren and Lúthien are in mortal danger? Were the eagles sent to look for them by someone who knew they would be in need of rescuing? The narrator does not explicitly connect Manwë's assistance in this episode, but the eagles are under his province (though *not* his domination), and their appearance suggests the Vala's involvement in saving Beren and Lúthien. Providential intervention continues to work in conjunction with the action of other intelligent, created beings—in this case, the eagles. The eagles save Beren and Lúthien, as they also will save Frodo and Sam after the Ring's destruction, though questions pertaining to the eagles' prompting or motivation remain unanswered.

Beren and Lúthien's rescue is an example of what Ralph Wood calls the "mercy that transcends justice" (*Gospel* 97). Beren's greedy decision to take more than one

Silmaril from Morgoth's crown awakens the enemy armies; however, Beren and Lúthien are spared from the consequences of Beren's overreaching. Furthering his argument on the operation of mercy within Tolkien's world, Wood writes: "God's mercy precedes his justice and serves as its very basis. [. . .] Tolkien repeatedly demonstrates his understanding of this profound paradox that mercy is not contrary to justice but the true realization of it. Over and again we encounter characters who have done wrong and who deserve punishment, but who receive justice in the form of mercy" (*Gospel* 97). Though most of *The Silmarillion's* tales do not make manifest Ilúvatar's initial promise to be present in all things, the Beren and Lúthien episode does demonstrate how beneficent divine power often rescues creatures who have abused their free will.

Death in the Providential Design

The elvish title given to the story of Beren and Lúthien is the "Lay of Leithian," meaning "Release from Bondage" (162). The tale moves inevitably toward Beren's death, Lúthien's bereavement at their parting, and her great moment of choice between the elvish and the human "doom." From the elvish translation of the title, the narrator suggests that by choosing mortality, Lúthien finds a release from the elvish bondage to the temporal realm. Yet, it is not merely death itself that is Lúthien's deliverance, for many elves die in battle, but their violent deaths are not accorded the same honor as Lúthien's. The key difference is that Lúthien knowingly *chooses* to surrender her immortality in order to join her mortal Beren in life and death.

Tolkien's mythology inverts the innate desire of mortals for immortality presented in the mythologies of nearly all human cultures, including of course the Norse. Instead, Tolkien presents a race of immortals desiring mortality. Pengoloð, another elvish

narrator who tells a version of “The Ainulindalë,” says, “the sons of Men die indeed, and leave the World; wherefore they are called the Guests, or the Strangers. Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar unto them, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy” (*Morgoth’s Ring* 21). The narrator’s treatment of death in the Beren and Lúthien saga shows the elvish perplexity over how something like death, which causes such grief, can also be a special gift—one that they both fear and desire.

While acknowledging natural death as a unique “gift” for men, immortal elves cannot fully understand it. Elvish life can be cut off by violent means, or else by grief, but they do not experience the body’s slow decay inevitably resulting in death. Because death is the barrier separating the mortal and the immortal races, Lúthien’s decision to cross over the divide causes great grief to Melian, her mother: “Melian looked in [Lúthien’s] eyes and read the doom that was written there, and turned away; for she knew that a parting beyond the end of the world had come between them, and no grief of loss has been heavier than the grief of Melian the Maia in that hour” (188).

In a further contrast to the more fatalistic stories of Fëanor and Túrin, “Of Beren and Lúthien” does not simply end with Beren’s death while defending Thingol against Carcharoth. The Beren and Lúthien tale, while having debts to the Norse sagas and *Beowulf*, varies greatly from these sources both through its portrayal of a providential world order and also through its depiction of the hero’s death. Both *Beowulf* and the *Sigurth Eddas* conclude with the hero’s death and funeral. The Fëanor and Túrin tales also follow this pattern, ending with the protagonist’s death. The tale of Beren and Lúthien, in contrast, reveals how Beren’s death exhibits the providential design to life more clearly. In the conclusion of the tale, Tolkien uses the classical, pagan Orpheus-

myth in a way similar to *Sir Orfeo*, the *Pearl*-poet's unique fourteenth-century adaptation of the myth.¹² After Beren dies, Lúthien, who like Sir Orfeo has the gift of music and song, travels to the halls of the dead, which are named eponymously, Mandos, after the Vala. Lúthien sings a song so beautiful and powerful that Mandos takes pity on her: "The song of Lúthien before Mandos was the song most fair that ever in words was woven, and the song most sorrowful that ever the world shall hear. For Lúthien wove two themes of words, of the sorrow of the Eldar and the grief of Men [. . .] and Mandos was moved to pity, who never before was so moved, nor has been since" (187).

Out of mercy and love for Lúthien, Mandos appeals to Manwë, the highest of the Valar in Middle-earth, to bring Beren back from the dead and to make him immortal like Lúthien. Though Mandos is similar to a god of the afterlife, Manwë replies that neither he nor any Vala has the power to "change the fates of the Children of Ilúvatar. [. . .] For it was not permitted to the Valar to withhold Death from [Beren], which is the gift of Ilúvatar to Men" (187). The Valar are also bound by the laws they established for the world, as well as the laws Ilúvatar established for his own children. Yet, the narrator indicates that Manwë sought counsel from Ilúvatar concerning this petition, and then declares that Lúthien, "might return to Middle-earth, and take with her Beren, there to dwell again, but without certitude of life or joy. Then she would become mortal, and subject to a second death, even as he" (187). Given Manwë's earlier assertion that the Valar do not have the power to alter the elves' "fates," his permission of Beren to return to life must mean that Ilúvatar, answering the Valar's petitions, granted such approval. Tolkien makes this precise point in his *Letters*: "Immortality and Mortality being the special gifts of God to the *Eruhíni* ["Children of Eru"] [. . .] it must be assumed that no

alteration of their fundamental kind could be effected by the Valar even in one case: the cases of Lúthien (and Túor) and the position of their descendants was a direct act of God” (194).

Having been given the authority to alter the fates of the *Eruhíni*, Manwë then presents Lúthien with two difficult choices in response to her poignant plea. These two choices, unlike the earlier options that Huan presented to Beren, do not follow the pagan pattern that Phillpotts indicates, for either choice will issue in joy tinted with the necessary sadness of sacrifice and suffering. Unlike Beren’s dilemma of equally bad alternatives, Lúthien will find blessings within whichever path she chooses. In this way, Tolkien integrates the pattern associated with a fated world order into a more providential view. Lúthien may either choose to live in Valinor until the end of time, so that her love for Beren will be completely removed from her memory, and thus she will experience no grief at her separation from him; or else, Lúthien can give up her own immortality—thus accepting her own future death—and have Beren sent back to Middle-earth for a brief extension of his life. In the first choice, she will live forever without final sorrow but also, by necessity, without her love for and memory of Beren. In the second, she must surrender her own immortality, accepting mortality in order to be reunited with Beren, if only for a short time. This second choice, as Manwë clearly states, does not guarantee a second life of unabated joy without suffering. Lúthien chooses the riskier second path of mortality, returning to Middle-earth to join Beren as a fellow mortal.

Her motivation for such an apparently foolish, short-term decision supports the story’s anti-pagan theme. She freely chooses to abandon immortality out of a love which is greater for another than herself. Such a loving choice implies a deep trust. The story is

clear that, while Lúthien chooses knowing that death must be the inevitable consequence, she is not guaranteed consequential happiness. As in Huan's warning to Beren, so is Lúthien's future as a mortal uncertain, yet not hopeless. Her choice suggests her underlying hope and faith in Ilúvatar's promise—that mortality *is* his gift. Elves have no idea how this is so or what happens to men after death, but Lúthien is willing to rely on Ilúvatar's promise and thus to experience death. Lúthien chooses mortality without sure knowledge of the future either within or beyond life, but she chooses out of trust, hope, and love—the essence of faith.

Conclusion

Though Beren and Lúthien's final end is unknown—or at least not part of the annals of elvish lore—the consequences of her choice to become mortal and to be united with Beren—the first of only a few unions between the two races of Ilúvatar's creation—bring about huge, unexpected, and lasting results.¹³

Though a providential vision is at the heart of Tolkien's formation of Middle-earth, those still within the design cannot always see it. The mythology as told by the elves in *The Silmarillion* reveals the limitations of a time-bound perspective. Tom Shippey appropriately points out that “in spite of Eärendil,” the mariner who persuades the Valar to return to Middle-earth and rout Melkor, “the later-published work [*The Silmarillion*] feels blacker and grimmer than the earlier [*The Lord of the Rings*]; the sense that ‘chance’ or ‘luck’ may contain a providential element is not so strong” (*Road* 253). While this is certainly the case, the problem may not be that providence is absent, but that the narrators of the *legendarium* cannot comprehend the divine design of which—so they have been told—they are a part. The narrator of Beren and Lúthien comes closest to

reconciling Ilúvatar's providential promises with the experience of living in a flawed world amid hostile powers. It is not coincidental that the Beren and Lúthien story is similar in tone and action to *The Lord of the Rings*, for it is one basis for the larger work.¹⁴ Yet it is not until *The Lord of the Rings* that Tolkien's narrator is capable of more fully reconciling the apparent clash of faith and doubt, freedom and fate, and thus of more fully conveying the providential design of Middle-earth.

Notes

1. According to Christopher Tolkien, the original version of “The Music of Ainur” is not very different from the later versions his father wrote during his lifetime and the version Christopher used for the published work. The central vision, or core, of the myth remains throughout the various versions and, rather than changing the story, Tolkien simply expanded it (cf. *Book* 61-62). Christopher states that, in the early version, his father formally expresses the “different fates of Elves and Men” (*Book* 62-63), but in the published version, this discussion of the two races is not included. Again, Christopher does not make clear his reasons for excluding this rather important extended description of the nature of elvish and human being.

2. Verlyn Flieger in *Splintered Light* is one such critic, though she also acknowledges the clash with free will that the mythology presents.

3. As a counselor to the Ostrogoths and influenced by the Germanic culture, Boethius’s understanding of fate and providence may already have been closer to the Anglo-Saxon view of *wyrd* than the Roman and Greek cultures’ understanding of *moira*. The Germanic cultural link existing between Boethius and the later Anglo-Saxon poets and homilists is an area for further study.

4. Saint Augustine’s *City of God* is another source for exploring the contrast between fate and providence in the Roman Catholic tradition.

5. Boethius uses the Latin words *fatum* and *providentia* to distinguish between the concepts of “fate” and “providence.” King Alfred’s Anglo-Saxon translation uses the word *wyrd* for *fatum* and *forþanc* for *providentia* to provide a similar conceptual distinction.

6. I am hesitant to refer to the Ainur as deities because Tolkien does not create a pantheon of gods for Middle-earth. However, while the Ainur are not gods, they also do not mimic the way Hebrew or Christian literature presents angelic beings. The Ainur are closer in kind to angels than to gods, but Tolkien gives them a greater degree of creative power and authority within the world than Hebrew or Christian scripture gives to angels. This variance between the Ainur and angels is one piece of evidence supporting the fact that Tolkien is not allegorizing the Judeo-Christian creation story of Genesis. Another key difference is that the one God, Eru, or Ilúvatar, does not directly create the world. Ilúvatar has a design for it and shows the Valar a brief glimpse of it, but he allows the Valar a key role in its formation in accord with the differing personalities of each Vala. Also, following the pattern of Norse mythology rather than Genesis, Tolkien’s creation myth presents elves and humans as born into a world in which higher, god-like powers of good and evil are already at war and have already corrupted the world. An elvish “fall” (and presumably a human one though we are not told of it) takes place, but Melkor has already marred the created order of the world well before the elves’ “fall.”

7. Bradford Lee Eden shows that Tolkien's use of music as a creative force calls to mind medieval sources which depicted the Christian God's creative abilities in musical terms:

The medieval concept of the "music of the spheres" was grounded in ancient and classical philosophy, discussed and theorized by Plato and Aristotle, through the early Christian writers and the third-century pagan philosopher Plotinus, up to its eventual standardization by Boethius in the early sixth century. [. . .] as a classicist and medievalist, the "music of the spheres" concept would have been deeply ingrained in his educational training, and his Catholic background would also have influenced his thought and creative process. (183)

For a modern reader to understand the medieval concept of the "music of the spheres," Eden refers to Boethius's work *De institutione musica*, which divides music into "three specific kinds, in order of priority and importance: the music of the universe, human music (vocal), and instrumental music. The first kind, the music of the universe, is embodied in the movement of celestial bodies, the harmony of the four elements and the four seasons" (185). Within the medieval connection of music and creation is the understanding that, just as there is a fundamental order to music, so there is fundamental order to creation.

8. The longer version is as follows:

Thou Melko shalt see that no theme can be played save it come in the end of Ilúvatar's self, nor can any alter the music in Ilúvatar's despite. He that attempts this finds himself in the end but aiding me in devising a thing of still greater grandeur and more complex wonder: -- for lo! through Melko have terror as fire, and sorrow like dark waters, wrath like thunder, and evil as far from my light as the depths of the uttermost of the dark places, come into the design that I laid before you. Through him has pain and misery been made in the clash of overwhelming musics; and with confusion of sound have cruelty, and ravening, and darkness, loathly mire and all putrescence of thought or thing, foul mists and violent flame, cold without mercy, been born, and death without hope. Yet is this through him and not by him; and he shall see, and ye all likewise, and even shall those beings, who must now dwell among his evil and endure through Melko misery and sorrow, terror and wickedness, declare in the end that it redoundeth only to my great glory, and doth but make the theme more worth the hearing. Life more worth the living and the World so much more wonderful and marvellous, that of all the deeds of Ilúvatar it shall be called his mightiest and his loveliest. (54-55)

9. Martin Buber's work *I and Thou*, though not directly related to my topic, helps to explain the two forms of personal response, which I argue a providential or a fatalistic world order dictate. Buber indicates that two fundamental relationships exist, the "I-Thou" and the "I-It." The "I-Thou" relationship is a person to person relationship

recognizing the complete personhood of the other; whereas the “I-It” dynamic is that of a person to an object, not recognizing the other holistically but reducing him or her to a part or function. The “I-Thou” relationship is particularly relevant for understanding the relationship of God to man as, Buber asserts, God’s love for humanity is an “I-Thou” relationship. God does not love his creation as objects but as unique, whole beings; and, Buber says, each person repeatedly has opportunities to respond to the “Eternal Thou” of God, accepting or rejecting the “I-Thou” personal relationship. Of the human response to God’s love, Buber says, “The *Thou* meets me through grace—it is not found by seeking. But my speaking of the primary word to it is an act of my being, is indeed *the* act of my being. The *Thou* meets me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one” (11). Buber asserts that the act of speaking the “primary word,” which is naming the other as a “Thou” or an “It,” “includes a sacrifice and a risk. This is the sacrifice: the endless possibility that is offered up on the altar of form. [. . .] This is the risk: the primary word can only be spoken with the whole being. He who gives himself to it may withhold nothing of himself” (10).

10. Given Manichaeism holds that good and evil powers are equally balanced, Shippey’s interpretation of Gandalf’s statement here does not accurately follow the Manichean understanding. If black were mightier than white, or evil mightier than good, then this would not reflect a Manichean system.

11. Tom Shippey points out that “entrelacement” is a medieval technique that Tolkien made an essential part of his narrative structure. Shippey details the frequent examples of *entrelacement* in *The Lord of the Rings*, while also arguing that “*The Silmarillion* is even more tightly constructed than *The Lord of the Rings*, and it would be easy to trace its *entrelacements* further” (*Road* 253).

12. Richard West, among other critics, notes the clear similarity of Tolkien’s myth to *Sir Orfeo*. He also indicates that several other cultures include a story of a descent into the underworld to reclaim a soul, but that Tolkien’s myth differs from these others precisely because of its happier ending: “Lúthien reenacts the descent into the underworld of Orpheus in Greek mythology or of Ishtar in Babylonia to recover a loved one, but with a happier result: much as in the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*, itself derived from the myth of Orpheus and a favorite romance of Tolkien’s, the hero is successful in retrieving his wife” (265-266). While Richard West asserts that, “Source studies are a chancy business, but especially so with Tolkien,” he also argues, “What I think we do get over and over are echoes, even when we cannot pinpoint an exact source. Tolkien studied and taught myths and legends and fairy tales all his life, and they were an integral part of his mental furniture and imaginative make-up” (264).

Shippey criticizes the tale of Beren and Lúthien for the clear reliance upon other sources such as *Sir Orfeo*: “Tolkien had not yet freed himself from his many sources—as if trying to bring in all the bits of older literature that he liked instead of forging a story with an impetus of its own” (*Road* 259). Shippey cites the many source texts that the tales reference: the “wizards’ singing contest (from the *Kalevala*), the werewolves devouring bound men in the dark (from the *Saga of the Volsungs*), the rope of hair let down from a window (the Grimms’ ‘Rapunzel’), the ‘shadowy cloak’ of sleep and invisibility which recalls the **heoloðhelm* of the Old English *Genesis B*” (*Road* 259).

However, while Shippey censures Tolkien for relying on these sources as too derivative and imitative, thus weakening the originality of the Beren and Lúthien myth, Tolkien may not have intended to “free himself” from these earlier sources. Rather, his work seems to show an intentional use of older sources both as motifs for his own stories and also as a way to root his work in the world of the more ancient tales. Tolkien, following the tradition of Anglo-Saxon poets and medieval writers, interweaves multiple texts and storylines from a variety of literary traditions into a new story that a modern audience may accept or understand more easily than the premodern model.

13. Beren and Lúthien begin the line of both the Numenorean kings and the half-elven descendants. The Beren and Lúthien tale is the model for the love of Aragorn and Arwen, who are themselves descendants of Beren and Lúthien. Arwen as an immortal elf is three generations removed from Beren and Lúthien, whereas Aragorn as a man is hundreds of mortal generations removed from his ancestral parents. Aragorn sings the “Tale of Tinúviel” at Weathertop, likening his love for Arwen to that between Beren and Lúthien. Bradford Eden states:

The adventures of these two other couples take up the majority of the rest of *The Silmarillion*, for they represent the best of both races, and as such their combined doings and their offspring are the stuff of legend. And as such, we find the link to the Third Age of Middle-earth, when we are introduced to the twin sons of Eärendil/Elwing, who are given the choice to be either Elven or human. Elrond, son of Eärendil and Elwing, chooses to become fully Elven and thus continues to fight Melkor’s creations on Middle-earth into *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; while his brother Eros chooses to become fully human and the first king of Numenor in the Second Age. And it is Arwen who weds Aragorn in the final union of Elves and Men at the end of the Third Age of Middle-earth and thus brings the circle to full close. (189)

14. Tolkien explains the connections between *The Silmarillion* to *The Lord of the Rings*: “Sam points out [. . .] this history [of the Third Age] is in a sense only a further continuation of [the tale of Beren and Lúthien]. Both Elrond (and his daughter Arwen Undómiel, who resembles Lúthien closely in looks and fate) are descendants of Beren and Lúthien; and so at very many more removes is Aragorn” (*Letters* 180).

CHAPTER FOUR

Free Will's Response to Fate in *The Lord of the Rings*

Introduction

The Lord of the Rings, remaining consistent with *The Silmarillion*, also acknowledges the existence of malevolent, fate-like forces. However, the story's tone shifts as the story-teller changes between the two works. By not creating a human narrator for either his *legendarium* or for *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien offers a fresh perspective upon world order for his primary audience. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien uses an omniscient narrator, neither elvish nor human, who focuses upon hobbits as the central actors and commentators. In his *Letters*, Tolkien clarifies the matter of perspective in his two works:

But as the earliest Tales are seen through Elvish eyes, as it were, this last great Tale, coming down from myth and legend to the earth, is seen mainly through the eyes of Hobbits: it thus becomes in fact anthropocentric. But through Hobbits, not Men so-called, because the last Tale is to exemplify most clearly a recurrent theme: the place in 'world politics' of the unforeseen and unforeseeable acts of will, and deeds of virtue of the apparently small, ungreat, forgotten in the places of the Wise and Great (good as well as evil). (*Letters* 160)

Tolkien does *not* say that hobbits are the story-tellers, or narrators, though the tale of the Ring is said to be based upon a hobbit creation, *The Red Book of Westmarch*.¹ Clearly, the hobbit perspective differs from the other races in Middle-earth; yet, by telling tales from complementary vantage points, Tolkien enables his primary audience to better interpret or understand events.

Though *The Lord of the Rings*' implied author also presents such deterministic powers as the Ring affecting characters, he more clearly establishes a providential role guiding and assisting them. By placing a fate-like power within Middle-earth, Tolkien acknowledges that such a force also exists within the primary world. People, thus, are not completely mistaken to interpret their life as fated. The fact that unjust circumstances often entrap people seems to indicate that the world is either simply chaotic—a form of fate—or it is controlled by a malicious cosmic power, amusing itself to see human struggles. However, Tolkien describes his characters as possessing the ability to respond to imposed conditions. To the same set of circumstances, one person may react despairingly, allowing the events to control life, while another person may react hopefully, altering the outcome of his or her life in a significant manner.

The Lord of the Rings suggests that just such personal power exists by presenting characters who react differently to similar circumstances. Three character sets or foils—Gandalf and Saruman, Théoden and Denethor, as well as Frodo, Bilbo, and Gollum—demonstrate the reality of fatalistic powers imposing themselves upon humanity while also revealing each person's potential to respond properly.

In particular, Denethor and Saruman openly reject any reliance on transcendent order. Their words and actions instead imply their apparent belief in a god who either has abandoned humanity to evil powers, or who is one with the evil forces seeking to destroy humanity. Interestingly, Denethor and Saruman are also the two characters who exhibit the most “modern” traits. In Saruman's words, the reader hears direct echoes of the progressive philosophy of the nineteenth century, as well as the twentieth century penchant for doing evil in the name of progress or survival.² In Denethor, the reader sees

the despairing bitterness of one who, in the face of pain and suffering, has rejected the demands of a higher moral order. While the average western reader could accept providence and the loving god at its center when advancements in science and technology, as well as political systems, were improving life, the outbreak of war in 1914 horribly broke the promises of utopia, bringing into question the modern progressive faith. Saruman's and Denethor's responses are reflections of the twentieth-century's cultural backlash against progress and the acceptance of fate in its place emerging from the world wars.

The Ring as a Power of Fate

Through a physical object, the Ring, Tolkien creates a fate-like power. Margaret Visser argues that a perfect circle is “a metaphor for fate”: “a ring symbolizing encirclement by force is an embodiment of fate, a thing of power and oppression, like the Ring of the Niebelung, which curses whoever owns it. The One Ring in Tolkien's saga is always associated with fate as imprisonment” (22-23). The Ring's prominence suggests that there are supernatural powers in Middle-earth beyond mortal strength intent on destroying creatures. The Ring is Tolkien's acknowledgement to his Anglo-Saxon predecessors that such a power as *wyrd* exists—a power to which all must respond.

The Ring plays an active, central role within the novel, yet it is not an autonomous evil force, as Scott Davison points out. Davison reminds the reader that the Ring derives its strength exclusively from Sauron, who infused his own power into it: “The Ring is not an example of the Manichean idea of an independent evil force in the world, since it is animated by Sauron's will and power” (100). The Ring takes its evil

quality from Sauron's own being and the two, the Ring and Sauron, are co-dependent on the other's existence.

While the Ring is not an "independent Evil principle" (Davison 100), the extent of its power, or Sauron's power through it, associates it with fate's key characteristics—an external force that denies personal freedom and usually destroys the person. Along with overpowering and then usurping a person's free will, the Ring also physically and spiritually corrupts its bearer.

Central to the Ring's essence is its preternatural power, which the Ring's two main characteristics, invisibility and long life, make manifest.³ Anne C. Petty, connecting power with evil, says: "to have a meaningful discussion of evil in Middle-earth, we need to think in terms of Power as a primary theme. In Tolkien's terms that meant the domination of someone's will over others" (104). Matthew Dickerson, furthering the critical discussion on the nature of evil and the Ring, also states the Ring's particular power "that makes it fundamentally evil and corrupting [. . .] is the power to dominate other wills" (95). Ralph Wood argues further that the "the essence of the Ring's evil is coercion as well as seduction: it enslaves the will" (69). Stratford Caldecott asserts that the "[Ring's] circular shape is an image of the will closed in upon itself. Its empty centre suggests the void into which we thrust ourselves by using the Ring. Becoming invisible [. . .] cuts us off from human contact and relationship" (36). The more the wearer uses the Ring, the more he desires to use it, thus increasingly becoming its slave. The Ring's power is not communal, as Gandalf will point out to Saruman, because the nature of the power it both emanates and gathers is a tyrannical one, demanding the subjugation of others for the wielder of the Ring to dominate.

From the story's opening, Gandalf lays out the central problem and paradox of the Ring: it must be destroyed because Sauron's power is linked to the Ring's existence; yet, at the same time, no one is strong enough to destroy it, not even the Ring's maker, Sauron himself. If it remains in existence, it will reunite with Sauron, who will then enslave the entire world to his will. The question naturally arises how can a vincible person conquer or destroy such an invincible force?

Insofar as the Ring usurps free will, it parallels the power of fate. Gandalf says to Frodo, the Ring is "far more powerful than I ever dared to think at first, so powerful that in the end it would utterly overcome anyone of mortal race who possessed it. It would possess him." In describing the Ring's power further, Gandalf implicitly connects it with a key attribute of the Norse conception of fate's power over humanity—the inevitable victory of evil (the monsters) over the good (gods and humans). Gandalf says, "sooner or later—later, if he [the possessor] is strong or well-meaning to begin with, but neither strength nor good purpose will last—sooner or later the dark power will devour him" (1: 56).

Gandalf makes clear that the Ring's power surpasses a mortal's, and yet "immortals" also refuse the Ring for fear of its influence over them. Both Gandalf and Galadriel understand that corruption is linked directly to a person's potency, and, because they both possess immense power, their capacity for evil deeds is greater than, for instance, a hobbit's. Not only will the Ring easily overcome a mere mortal, but Gandalf's and Galadriel's refusal to take it implies that it is too much even for a Maia or an elf-lord to control.

If mortals are too weak to resist the Ring and if immortals fear their own inability to withstand it, then from the opening of *The Lord of the Rings*, fate's triumph seems assured. Frodo's quest to destroy the Ring appears doomed from its inception. If Frodo is unable to toss the Ring into a small hearth fire in the Shire, then there is little hope of his being able to cast it into the primordial fires of Mount Doom. As Huan said to Beren regarding his future, Frodo's quest, too, is "hopeless, yet not certain." The implied author of *The Lord of the Rings* indicates more clearly than did Huan that the reason for hope in the face of a hopeless situation is the existence of an unseen and unnamed power exceeding that of Sauron and his Ring. While identifying fate as a type of power, the author through Gandalf states that other forces exist to oppose the Ring. Gandalf includes himself among the resisting parties, but he also implies the existence of a transcendent force, which he neither names nor defines. Given the reality of the Ring's influence and the needed resistance to it, the implied author explores how different characters respond to its temptation to power.

Three Pairs of Contrasting Perspectives on the World

The Lord of the Rings presents three sets of perspectives upon world order as regards fate and freedom. The contrasting characters present the possibility of responding differently to similar circumstances. One character responds through challenging and resisting fate, while the other despairs before it. The characters' response shows both the extent and limitation of free will before such powers as *wyrd*. These pairings indicate that those who accept a fatalistic world order also cling to individual power, while those who reject fate's necessity upon their lives are also those

who sacrifice their power. In choosing either path, however, the character exercises his own will.

Saruman and Gandalf: the Angelic Response to Place in the World

The Silmarillion indicates that Saruman, Gandalf, and Sauron are of the same race—they are Maiar, the creatures immediately below the Valar in creation's hierarchy, though Saruman and Gandalf are lesser Maiar in the hierarchy. The wizards, however, were sent to Middle-earth by an unnamed authority, most likely Ilúvatar, to guard Ilúvatar's children against Sauron (*The Silmarillion* 300).⁴ Though they are lesser Maiar in power, Saruman and Gandalf still share the same essence as Sauron; thus, they personally understand the extent of his power; yet their responses to his misuse of power differ, thus defining their acceptance or rejection of Ilúvatar's rule over Middle-earth.

Saruman abandons the idea of defeating Sauron, and instead desires to acquire comparable strength with him. Saruman was instrumental in initially pushing Sauron into exile, so in some ways Saruman's defeatism is odd. Since he had already demonstrated his partial authority against Sauron, one would assume he would try again to thwart him and his evil works. Gandalf acknowledges the other wizard's clout—"Saruman the White is the greatest of my order"—while also pointing out how much Saruman has done to resist evil: "Saruman has long studied the arts of the enemy himself, and thus we have often been able to forestall him. It was by the devices of Saruman that we drove him from Dol Goldur" (1: 270). Yet, Gandalf indicates that Saruman's corruption springs from studying the enemy too closely. His reaction to Sauron's increasing strength seems to be one of envy and fear—envy that Sauron has been able to establish a kingdom for himself; fear that Sauron's growing power will diminish his own.

In deserting his assigned task to protect Ilúvatar's children, Saruman either loses faith in Ilúvatar as the world's supreme ruler, or he directly refuses to submit to Ilúvatar's plan because it includes his own humbling. From his actions, the latter seems the case.

Gandalf, by contrast, responds to Sauron's mounting strength by preparing an active defense and assault against him. Gandalf's resistance demonstrates not only his obedience to Ilúvatar's will, but also his hope in Ilúvatar's underlying design in which good ultimately will overcome evil. He accepts that he could experience the temporary triumph of evil, including his own destruction; but even in the face of evil's apparent victory, Gandalf remains constant—always resisting evil and always protecting those creatures too weak to resist it. Like Saruman, he also fears Sauron's rise to power, but unlike Saruman, he fears it out of love for lesser creatures—elves, humans, and hobbits to name a few—whom he was sent to guard. Throughout the events, Gandalf steadfastly conveys his hope in a providential power, as well as demonstrating his obedience to providence even to the point of death.

Saruman's rejection of providence. Fearing his own diminution of power, Saruman abandons his guardian function and seeks to redefine himself according to his own designs. Abandoning the color white—presumably a high ranking among the Maiar—to adopt a new color, Saruman attempts to define himself. Through taking on the whole spectrum of tinctures, by making himself “Saruman of Many Colours,” he sets himself apart from the Wise—an ordered community that the Valar, or Ilúvatar himself, initially established. Adopting all colors signifies Saruman's refusal to accept personal limits. Saruman defines his new identity by seizing unauthorized power and setting himself up as Sauron's rival, not his enemy.⁵ Not only is his multi-colored cloak

evidence of Saruman's redefinition of himself, but further, he explicitly renames himself, changing his originally given title, "Saruman the Wise," into his newly adopted one, "Saruman Ring-Maker" (1: 272), a title more appropriate to Sauron than himself.

Saruman's selfishness skews his perception of Sauron's increasing power. His counsel to Gandalf reveals his rejection of providence. Rhetorically, Saruman first establishes his premise that because the present world is different from the one that they originally entered, the old hierarchy of world rulers should also change: "The Elder Days are gone. The Middle Days are passing. The Younger Days are beginning. The time of the elves is over" (1: 272). The elves' departure from Middle-earth has created a power void, which Sauron is filling. While this circumstance is factually correct, Saruman's response is wrong.

Saruman attempts to deceive Gandalf into believing that he has a concern for Middle-earth rather than a desire to acquire power. He initially tries to persuade Gandalf to accept his argument: If Sauron's victory is inevitable, then the Wise should join with him to maintain their mission, Middle-earth's defense. Saruman reasons that they cannot help anyone if they are destroyed, and so the only choice besides destruction is to side with the alleged enemy. Saruman makes an argument familiar to a twentieth- and twenty-first century audience—to achieve some good ends, the wizards must work with evil means:

A new Power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all. There is no hope left in Elves or dying Númenor. This then is one choice before you, before us. We may join that Power. It would be wise, Gandalf. There is hope that way. Its victory is at hand; and there will be rich reward for those that aided it. As the Power grows, its proved friends will also grow; and the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it. We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the

way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things that we have so far striven in vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak or idle friends. There need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means. (1: 272-273)

Saruman first urges Gandalf to unite with Sauron in order to influence the world's restructuring. Yet his statement also reveals Saruman's desire for control. Indicating that his individual power will grow alongside that of Sauron's "Power," Saruman desires, when the time is ripe, to take the Power for himself. He makes clear that his own power loss before Sauron's victory motivates him to resist Sauron more than his fear of the destruction of innocents. When Gandalf immediately dismisses this initial argument, Saruman then presents a second potential response to evil's triumph: to use the Ring against its maker. He argues that while the first response is a "wise course," a "better way" is to seize the "Ruling Ring" for themselves: "If we could command that, then the Power would pass to *us*" (1: 273). They could rule in place of Sauron. Saruman does not admit that the Ring's power is evil nor accept that using the Ring must result in corruption; rather, he desires it for the effect it promises, domination over others.

Insofar as Saruman clings to his own power through any possible means, he portrays his conviction that this is a fated world order in which evil will in the end dominate, and that a person may extend life only by temporarily gathering as much strength to himself to stave off doomsday. Saruman sees his circumstances fatalistically because he refuses to submit himself to any power—good or evil—beyond himself. He seeks to abuse his rightful authority by making of himself a god and ordering lesser beings to his own will and purposes. While Saruman once may have accepted a

providential design to the world, he has come to reject it if it entails the demise of his own power or personhood.

Gandalf's faith in providence. Blinded by pride, Saruman does not see his judgment of the circumstances brought about by Sauron to be corrupt. Gandalf's proper rejection of Saruman's counsel, however, draws attention to the other's failing. By refusing to share Saruman's response or solution, Gandalf reveals an alternative answer to the real problem of evil facing him. His refusal to despair or to compromise himself and his vocation simply in order to survive testifies to his faith in and adherence to a providential design. Working in accord with a design beyond his direct knowledge, Gandalf shows, not only in his confrontation with Saruman but throughout the story, his willingness to sacrifice his personhood for others' sake.

Gandalf dismisses the choices Saruman lays before him, scoffing at Saruman's suggestion that they could save themselves by siding with Sauron. Ridiculing Saruman's reputed wisdom, Gandalf retorts: "I have heard speeches of this kind before, but only in the mouths of emissaries sent from Mordor to deceive the ignorant. I cannot think that you brought me so far only to weary my ears" (1: 273). Contrary to Saruman's desire to possess the Ring, Gandalf seeks to destroy it; thus, he swiftly counters Saruman's temptation to share the Ring between them: "only one hand at a time can wield the One, and you know that well, so do not trouble to say *we!*" (1: 273). Rejecting what Saruman accepts—the Ring as an instrument that can be wielded for good—Gandalf recognizes that such all-consuming power is also all-corrupting.

Directly countering the exclusivity of Saruman's two choices before evil's triumph, Gandalf offers a third choice—the refusal to choose between evils: "the choices

are, it seems, to submit to Sauron, or to yourself. I will take neither. Have you others to offer?" (1: 273). In absolutely rejecting the twin choices, Gandalf suggests that circumstances never fully necessitate that one knowingly commit an evil act. In this third way, though, Gandalf must be willing either to be killed or to live with diminished power.

By entirely rejecting evil means, Gandalf chooses to act in accord with his vocation without any preknowledge of a reward for faithful behavior. In his willingness to sacrifice his power and his life, he demonstrates his submission to a good apart from and higher than himself. Arguing for the place of both duty and freedom within the providential order of Middle-earth, Thomas Hibbs points out that "the notion of submission to one's proper part within the whole means that one's ultimate destiny is not in one's own hands" (171). "Providence," Hibbs continues, "may help us see our path, but it can never promise ease or peace. The finite intellect's limited apprehension of ends should teach us patience and determination in the endurance of suffering and deprivation" (173). While Gandalf is one of the Wise, he has a finite intellect and thus shows proper humility by acknowledging that he cannot see all ends. In his humility, he acts from an implicit hope in an infinite design—a design, which, though he has played a crucial part in furthering, may now require him to depart. In his willingness to submit his desires, he displays a trust that in his stead a higher power will continue to protect the creatures that Gandalf loves.

Gandalf's self-abandonment will be manifest again in Moria when he battles the Balrog, a demon-Maia presumably on the same hierarchical level as Gandalf. The next chapter will discuss Gandalf's sacrifice as evidence of providential action but the scene proves that Gandalf's faith in providence is justified. Gandalf sacrifices himself by

physically shielding the Company from the Balrog, even though, in slaying the Balrog, he also dies. Gandalf's death, or seeming-death, testifies to an unstated power's ultimate control over events. His total faithfulness and obedience are vindicated when the unnamed power sends him back into the world as an even stronger and more confident wizard. Gandalf, contrary to Saruman, lives out his faith in a providential world order through his willingness to submit himself to a supernal authority. Paradoxically, he gains true power through his complete willingness to abandon false power, while Saruman loses all his authority by seeking to acquire more.

Gandalf faces the same circumstances as Saruman but he responds out of a providential conviction; instead of despairing before evil, he works more diligently to protect others from it. Gandalf is figuratively a messenger of providence to Middle-earth, urging other characters to act rightly out of hope. He reminds others of the hidden power—the unnamed force behind the scenes, the one who “sends” Gandalf back—but at times, he himself also serves as the “external power,” not coercing but urging others to choose rightly. Despite his superior strength and his clearer knowledge of the providential design, he never violates another's will to achieve its proper ends. Rather, in accord with his knowledge of providence, Gandalf guides and assists others in making right choices.

Théoden and Denethor: the Mortal Ruler's Response to Fated Circumstances

As with Saruman and Gandalf, Théoden and Denethor demonstrate their regard for providential order through their response to evil. In both rulers' cases, overwhelming enemy forces are poised on their borders to destroy them. Both face an enemy ruler far exceeding their own power—Denethor faces Sauron, while Théoden faces Saruman—so

that the destruction of themselves and their kingdoms appears inevitable. Furthermore, both men lose their sons and thus know that the hope of lineal inheritance is destroyed. These are the dire circumstances in which both Denethor and Théoden find themselves, circumstances over which they have no control, but to which they have the freedom to respond. Confronted with the grim reality of their situation, both leaders experience a paralysis of the will, but they respond to such disillusionment in opposite ways. Through Gandalf's assistance and through a deliberate act of the will, Théoden resists the defeatism that fear engenders, and, in his willingness to lose his life for others, he proves himself willing to sacrifice all individual power. Denethor, on the other hand, gives in to despair, becoming immobilized by it, and ultimately chooses suicide as the final means of vindicating his autonomy. Each acts and chooses according to a particular paradigm of world order—Théoden's actions and decisions reflecting a providential model, while Denethor's choices reveal a fatalistic one.

Théoden. When the reader first encounters Théoden, his physical demeanor reflects his interior state. Influenced by Wormtongue, who exaggerated Rohan's isolation and weakness before superior enemy forces, Théoden believes he is already defeated and his gaunt body physically reflects his interior attitude. When Gandalf first enters the hall, he sees a decrepit man: "Upon [the gilded chair] sat a man so bent with age that he seemed almost a dwarf; but his white hair was long and thick and fell in great braids from beneath a thin golden circlet set upon his brow" (2: 116).

The narrator suggests that Théoden has given up his willpower, allowing another, Wormtongue, to rule in his stead. At first, when Gandalf and the company approach the Golden Hall, Théoden still appears in control, for the guards initially declare, "It is the

will of Théoden King that none should enter his gates save those who know our tongue and are our friend.” But Wormtongue’s real control comes to light as the guards clarify how they gained knowledge of Théoden’s “will”: “Wormtongue came to us and said that by the will of Théoden no stranger should pass these gates” (2: 112, 113). Blaming Wormtongue for Théoden’s loss of will power, Gandalf says: “And ever Wormtongue’s whispering was in your ears, poisoning your thought, chilling your heart, weakening your limbs, while others watched and could do nothing, for your will was in his keeping.” Wormtongue gained control over Théoden’s will by manipulating the King’s justified fears as Gandalf clarifies: “He was crafty: dulling men’s wariness, or working on their fears” (2: 126).

Théoden’s response to Gandalf’s greeting is terse, focusing on the fact that the wizard’s appearance means more bad news. Wormtongue, immediately taking over Théoden’s role, continues the King’s speech, scolding Gandalf for being a bearer of ill tidings. Their complaint against Gandalf does not deny the realm’s desperate situation, but suggests the futility of resisting it. Théoden says to Gandalf, “You have ever been a herald of woe. Trouble follows you like crows, and ever the oftener the worse”; while Wormtongue likens Gandalf to “pickers of bones, meddlers in other men’s sorrows, carrion-fowl that grow fat on war. What aid have you ever brought, Stormcrow? [. . .] Do you bring men? Do you bring horses, swords, spears? That I would call aid; that is our present need” (2: 117-118). The imagery Wormtongue associates with Gandalf is that of a battlefield after a war is over, leaving behind only carnage. This is the imagery he has fed to Théoden, who has accepted the defeatist vision that Wormtongue (and Saruman as the force behind Wormtongue) desired to engender. The reality of his situation

overwhelms Théoden because he sees no alternative to a desolate future. His fear of Rohan's destruction results in an inability to make decisions, which must, he believes, necessarily result in failure. Wormtongue thus fills the power void that the King's indecisiveness creates.

However, Théoden moves from a self-enclosed, paralyzed position to an active response against evil's encroaching power. He is able to act not simply through his own willpower but with the assistance of another. Having silenced Wormtongue, Gandalf then tells Théoden, "Not all is dark. Take courage, Lord of the Mark; for better help you will not find. No counsel have I to give to those that despair." Gandalf asks Théoden to listen to his advice and to leave the darkness of the throne room. Théoden's initial reassertion of his own will comes in his choice to heed Gandalf's counsel and to accept his assistance.

Théoden's ability to exercise his will in rejecting despair is not instantaneous. He laments his predicament, retaining the dark vision which still impedes his will: "I fear that already you have come too late, only to see the last days of my house. Not long now shall stand the high hall which Brego son of Eorl built. Fire shall devour the high seat. What is to be done?" To which Gandalf makes the succinct and telling response, "Much" (2: 120). Even as he slowly reasserts his freedom, Théoden's fear of destruction continues to reemerge, threatening to overcome him again. Expressing a natural reaction to sorrowful circumstances, Théoden cries out, "Alas! [. . .] that these evil days should be mine, and should come in my old age instead of that peace which I have earned. Alas for Boromir the brave! The young perish and the old linger, withering" (2: 121).

Gandalf's remedy to Théoden's continued malaise is action and deeds despite fear of defeat: "Your fingers would remember their old strength better, if they grasped a sword-hilt," he tells the king. Éomer offers Théoden a sword and the narrator describes a decisive moment when the king could reject or accept the weapon. The choice symbolizes his freedom to take one of two paths: either the path of delay and defeat, which he has already been on through Wormtongue's prompting, or the path of action and risk, a declaration of war:

For a moment of silence Théoden stood looking down at Éomer as he knelt still before him. Neither moved.

"Will you not take the sword?" said Gandalf.

Slowly Théoden stretched forth his hand. As his fingers took the hilt, it seemed to the watchers that firmness and strength returned to his thin arm. Suddenly he lifted the blade and swung it shimmering and whistling in the air. Then he gave a great cry. His voice rang clear as he chanted in the tongue of Rohan a call to arms. (2: 122)

To heed another's advice, one must be willing to set one's own pride aside; Théoden, unlike Denethor, shows his humility in doing so. Théoden demonstrates through deeds, not simply words, his affirmative response to Gandalf's various suggestions to him: he leaves his throne room and goes outside (2: 119), he casts aside his cane "prop" (2: 120), he takes up his sword (2: 122). While these responses reveal Théoden slowly reclaiming his willpower, the culmination of his reassertion of will comes when he ultimately chooses *not* to follow another's prompting. Gandalf, assuming Théoden will stay behind the battle line with the weak, tells him to "lead your people swiftly to the Hold of Dunharrow in the hills!" Théoden replies decisively, "Nay, Gandalf! [. . .] It shall not be so. I myself will go to war, to fall in the front of battle, if it must be" (2: 123). Despite still fearing destruction, Théoden expresses his willingness to sacrifice himself for others, thus surrendering all individual power through his death.

Gandalf shows him, and the reader as well, that the future is uncertain; thus, Théoden rightly fears it because it does not assure them victory. However, it also does not assure them defeat. The future in a providential order is always potential not actual time. Gandalf indicates the very potentiality of the future for which a providential world order allows. Revealing to Théoden the quest to destroy the Ring in Mordor, Gandalf points to the paradox: “that way lies our hope, where sits our greatest fear. Doom hangs still on a thread. Yet hope there is still, if we can but stand unconquered for a little while” (2: 121). Significantly, Gandalf does not promise personal victory for Théoden or Rohan but argues that a more universal victory remains possible through the courageous self-sacrificial stance of warriors such as Théoden. Without confidence of success but also not despairing of it, Théoden chooses to resist actively the enemy, even if his own death is the result.

Unlike Saruman and Denethor, who refuse to submit to any authority other than their own self-will, Théoden expresses a confidence in a larger design to which he contributes but which in the end does not center on himself. He is willing to accept his and his kingdom’s defeat to achieve a good that will be realized beyond himself and even beyond his people. Aragorn acknowledges that Théoden’s self-sacrificial willingness to die in battle will also have a temporal reward: “Then even the defeat of Rohan will be glorious in song” (2: 123). Aragorn’s statement also suggests that their sacrifice of life will inspire a people to continue making and reciting songs of valor. At the darkest moment of the battle at Helm’s Deep, Théoden repeats this hope: “Maybe we shall cleave a road, or make such an end as will be worth a song—if any be left to sing of us

hereafter.” (2: 144-145). This sentiment is in perfect accord with Tolkien’s Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition.

Théoden accepts the likelihood of his death while also knowing his direct line of descendants is broken. But in contrast to Denethor’s response to his own loss of his heirs, Théoden does not allow the fear of losing royal power to prevent him from fulfilling his vocation as leader of the Rohirrim. In his farewell to the remnant of the people in the city, he says, “I go forth, and it seems like to be my last riding [. . .]. I have no child, Théodred my son is slain. I name Éomer my sister-son to be my heir. If neither of us return, then choose a new lord as you will” (2: 127). By naming his nephew as heir, and, more significantly, by allowing the people to choose a new ruler democratically if both he and Éomer die, Théoden clearly reveals his willingness to surrender even the fundamental power of kingship in order to defend against Saruman and Sauron. By freely surrendering his power, Théoden demonstrates the true, selfless nature of proper authority. He becomes the servant of his people, and in so doing, acquires even greater authority as their ruler.

The battle of Helm’s Deep reveals Théoden’s firm resolve to resist the enemy at all costs. Even prior to the battle, Théoden knew his small force could not defeat Saruman’s greater army, yet Théoden still engages the enemy. Responding to the battle’s apparently hopeless outcome, Théoden expresses some regret at having followed Gandalf’s advice: “How shall any tower withstand such numbers and such reckless hate? Had I known that the strength of Isengard was grown so great, maybe I should not so rashly have ridden forth to meet it, for all the arts of Gandalf. His counsel seems not so good as it did under the morning sun.” Aragorn, reaffirming the wizard’s counsel about

the openness of the future, reminds the king “do not judge the counsel of Gandalf, until all is over.” Despite not fully sharing Aragorn’s assurance, Théoden confirms his decision made at Edoras to go forth to war, proudly declaring that he will face death brazenly, rather than die defensively: “I will not end here, taken like an old badger in a trap. [. . .] When dawn comes, I will bid men sound Helm’s horn, and I will ride forth” (2: 144).

Théoden’s life is spared, however, by one of several providential interventions occurring throughout the story. Several events converge at one moment to achieve surprising triumph at Helm’s Deep, as they also will converge at Mount Doom to accomplish the final victory over Sauron and the Ring. As Théoden makes his last charge, unexpected and unforeseen aid comes from Fangorn Forest as a battalion of ents musters on the battlefield’s edge, at the same moment that Gandalf reenters the battle with reinforcements. The convergence of these three events works together to rout the enemy army, which “passed under the waiting shadow of the trees; and from that shadow none ever came again” (2: 147). Though Théoden is fully willing to lose his life for a good outside of himself, providential intervention spares him, for, like Gandalf, Théoden still has a role to play within the story.

Théoden’s role, however, ends on Gondor’s Pelennor Fields. Initially, he experiences the terror engendered by the Ringwraiths and is “stricken suddenly by anguish, or by dread” as he views the battlefield. He sits “motionless” for a moment contemplating what lies before him, but then he makes an unspoken interior decision revealed to the reader by his actions:

the bent shape of the king sprang suddenly erect. Tall and proud he seemed again; and rising in his stirrups he cried in a loud voice, more clear than any there had ever heard a mortal man achieve before:

*Arise, arise, Riders of Théoden!
Fell deeds awake: fire and slaughter!
spear shall be shaken shield be splintered,
a sword-day, a red day, ere the sun rises!
Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor!*

With that he seized a great horn from Guthláf his banner-bearer, and he blew such a blast upon it that it burst asunder. And straightway all the horns in the host were lifted up in music, and the blowing of the horns of Rohan in that hour was like a storm upon the plain and a thunder in the mountains. (3: 112)

His willed resistance against despair inspires others to do the same, and, in defiance of the Ringwraith-power, Théoden charges first into the enemy lines, which flee before him. So wholehearted is Théoden's decision to engage the enemy that he has no regard for his own safety as he rides faster than his own entourage. The implied author compares his resolve and battle-fury to one of Middle-earth's "gods" saying, "the battle-fury of his fathers ran like new fire in his veins, and he was borne upon Snowmane like a god of old, even as Oromë the Great in the battle of the Valar when the world was young" (3: 112-113).

Yet, Théoden is not a Vala but a mortal man—limited in what he can face and overcome. He again wholly offers his life in battle; but this time the ultimate sacrifice is accepted and Théoden dies in his encounter with the wraith king. While Théoden fully expects his death by leading the charge against Sauron's army, he does not directly intend it, a key ethical distinction when contrasting his death with Denethor's suicide. Neither at Helm's Deep nor at the Pelennor Fields does Théoden undertake a suicidal charge, for the direct intention of his willed action is not to die, though he accepts that death could be the result. Théoden's willingness to die battling the dual enemies, Saruman and Sauron,

results in a higher good for which he had hoped, a good beyond simply his own personal preservation or fame. As Matthew Dickerson says, “though he falls slain in the physical battle, he is victorious in the *moral* battle to choose well” (36). His choices and actions lead directly to the defeat of Saruman and his army—and thus ultimately to the victory over Sauron. The ride of the Rohirrim with Théoden in the lead helps to preserve Gondor, thus allowing the Men of the West to ride against Mordor, which distracts Sauron from the Ring’s immediate presence and peril. Théoden achieves *lof*, personal glory through death, though fame was not his goal when he decided to act.

Denethor. Denethor and Théoden move in opposite directions, serving as character foils to one another. While Théoden progresses through the story, moving from paralysis to action, from despair to hope, Denethor regresses. When the reader first meets him, he is the active leader of his people. He has set his men to repairing the wall (though Gandalf indicates this repair is too little and too late), he prepares a sortie to help rescue Faramir’s men from the failed defense of Osgiliath, as he asserts his sole authority to rule Gondor. But Denethor, in contrast to Théoden, becomes totally paralyzed, abandons his leadership through inaction, and despairs of victory, all the while refusing to sacrifice his own individual power. Denethor expresses a fatalistic vision of history—if divine powers exist, they have unjustly abandoned Gondor to destruction; any goodness or honor that Gondor had created during its history is gone; evil will inevitably dominate the forces of good; and resistance to evil’s supremacy is pointless. Denethor has come to respect only Sauron’s tyrannical demonic power as supreme, a power which mortals have no adequate strength to resist. He perversely responds to this fatalistic vision through suicide.

Gondor's decline from the great city of the Kings and Stewards it once was contributes to Denethor's despairing view of reality. Just as Saruman correctly sees the change that is occurring with the passing of the Elder Days, so Denethor also correctly sees the decline that has come about through Gondor's weakened state. Historically, Gondor has always stood guard against Mordor, and as Gondor's strength has decreased over time, Mordor's has proportionately increased. In describing the city, the narrator reveals the realm's status through Pippin's vision of it: "Pippin gazed in growing wonder at the great stone city, vaster and more splendid than anything that he had dreamed of; greater and stronger than Isengard, and far more beautiful. Yet it was in truth falling year by year into decay; and already it lacked half the men that could have dwelt at ease there" (3: 24). Gondor is certainly in decline, but Denethor, like Saruman, incorrectly responds to its reality.

Contrary to Théoden's self-sacrificial choices as ruler, Denethor selfishly clings to power and authority for their own sake. In confronting Mordor's encroachment, he first chooses to act tyrannically and then not to act at all. When the narrator introduces Denethor into the narrative, the steward is already preoccupied with his and his family's glory, neglecting the immediate demands of his position. He self-indulgently mourns Boromir's death, thinking he would have brought Gondor back to prominence, while rejecting his younger son, Faramir, as weak and disloyal. Asserting his power over Faramir, Denethor orders him to lead a pointless assault against the enemy, perhaps secretly hoping that he might be killed. Unlike the scene at Helm's Deep when Théoden leads an apparently futile charge, Denethor could still assemble his army in a defensive position. In fact, Denethor's "Council of Gondor" advises him to regroup the battalion,

not to go on the offensive: “all the captains judged that because of the threat in the South their force was too weak to make any stroke of war [. . .] they must man the walls and wait” (3: 89). Denethor will not listen to their advice, however, asserting his authority as Gondor’s ruler in order to counter what he perceives as Gandalf’s usurpation of it. The exchange between Denethor and Faramir discloses Denethor’s selfish desire for submission:

‘I will not yield the River and the Pelennor unfought—not if there is a captain here who still has the courage to do his lord’s will.’

Then all were silent. But at length Faramir said: ‘I do not oppose your will, sire. Since you are robbed of Boromir, I will go and do what I can in his stead—if you command it.’

‘I do so,’ said Denethor. (3: 90)

While Théoden acted out his role as ruler through a willingness to sacrifice himself, Denethor speaks of his leadership in a directly opposite way, making a disturbing parallel between himself and Sauron. After Pippin innocently asks if the Dark Lord himself has entered the battle, Denethor laughs at his ignorance: “He will not come save only to triumph over me when all is won. He uses others as his weapons. So do all great lords, if they are wise, Master Halfling. Or why should I sit here in my tower and think, and watch, and wait, spending even my sons? For I can still wield a brand” (3: 92). Denethor expresses the more pragmatic attitude of a general over an army—the commander leads from the back of the field, not the front. Yet the reader has already been given an opposite example in Théoden, who refuses Gandalf’s advice to preserve himself by commanding from the rear. Thus, Denethor’s assessment of his leadership, like Sauron’s, as “great” and “wise,” as well as his justification of using others as “weapons,” pales before the greater selfless example that Théoden embodies. Denethor’s understanding of power also reveals his perversion of his vocation. He is a steward,

which is intrinsically a servant's position, but he refuses to serve anyone, making of himself a tyrant, even tyrannizing his own son.

Denethor takes Faramir's apparent death as justification for his embrace of a fated future as he refuses any alternative other than his own dark, despairing vision. In response to Faramir's seemingly mortal injuries and the presence of the enemy forces surrounding Gondor, Denethor abandons his vocation as steward by abdicating leadership, refusing to respond either offensively or defensively to the enemy army. Expressing his own version of the Norse *Ragnarök*, he declares: "soon all shall be burned. The West has failed. It shall all go up in a great fire, and all shall be ended. Ash! Ash and smoke blown away on the wind!" (3: 128). When Gandalf tells Denethor that his defeatist response is wrong because it "will make the Enemy's victory certain indeed," Denethor surprisingly reveals, as Saruman's words to Gandalf also revealed, that the deeper cause of his anger lies not in Sauron's inevitable victory over the West but in the diminishment of his own power. Denethor angrily retorts:

Thy hope is to rule in my stead, to stand behind every throne, north, south, or west. I have read thy mind and its policies. [. . .] With the left hand thou wouldst use me for a little while as a shield against Mordor, and with the right bring up this Ranger of the North to supplant me.

But I say to thee, Gandalf Mithrandir, I will not be thy tool! I am Steward of the House of Anárion. I will not step down to be the dotard chamberlain of an upstart. Even were his claim proved to me, still he comes but of the line of Isildur. I will not bow to such a one, last of a ragged house long bereft of lordship and dignity. (3: 129-130)

Denethor's wrath springs from his fear of losing power if Sauron is victorious or if Aragorn, the rightful King of Gondor, returns. Given his refusal to abandon supremacy, the future for Denethor necessarily is bleak because external circumstances will take his

ruling authority from him. Since Denethor refuses to surrender temporal power, defeat inescapably awaits him.

In this way, Denethor accurately looks upon a type of fate's victory over himself. He responds to this inevitable loss of power by reasserting the control he holds over his own life. He claims the power of self-definition in choosing to incinerate himself together with his wounded son, Faramir. Gandalf rebukes Denethor for taking such improper authority unto himself: "authority is not given to you, Steward of Gondor, to order the hour of your death [. . .]. And only the heathen kings, under the domination of the Dark Power, did thus, slaying themselves in pride and despair, murdering their kin to ease their own death" (3: 129). While Denethor's will seems paralyzed, Gandalf emphasizes that Denethor can still choose a path other than self-destruction: "What then would you have [. . .] if your will could have its way?" Denethor's response, however, reveals his willed refusal to accept his own diminishment:

I would have things as they were in all the days of my life [. . .] and in the days of my longfathers before me: to be the Lord of this City in peace, and leave my chair to a son after me, who would be his own master and no wizard's pupil. But if doom denies this to me, then I will have *naught*: neither life diminished, nor love halved, nor honour abated. (3: 130)

Denethor desires the original power and glory that the past offered to him and his family, not Gondor's diminished survival, much less the triumphant return of Aragorn as King of Gondor.

Denethor's response to personal and political loss differs very much from Théoden's. While a willingness to give up power motivates Théoden to risk death, a refusal to give up authority motivates Denethor to kill himself. Denethor expresses a vision of the world's end very similar to the *Ragnarök*, but his suicidal response does not

follow the Northern model. Denethor's suicide is a more modern than ancient response to seemingly fated circumstances. Facing inevitable defeat, Norse and Anglo-Saxon heroes never hasten death by slaying themselves, but rather resist it to the final end, taking as many enemies to the grave as possible. Denethor, however, refuses such resistance. Suicide is Denethor's final claim to self-assertion and rule, as he declares to Gandalf: "in this at least thou shalt not defy my will: to rule my own end" (3: 130). Defying Gandalf and asserting his own right to define both his life *and* his death, he retains his perverse authority over himself, leaping upon the pyre with the last symbols of his earthly rule, his "staff of stewardship" and the palantír.

This contrast between the two human rulers shows the difference in their free exercise of will. Though Denethor believes himself trapped by his situation, Théoden's choices reveal that both he and Denethor remain free in facing similar circumstances. That Théoden is able to reject despair and to act courageously in a self-sacrificial manner suggests that Denethor could also have acted similarly but willfully refused. Théoden is Denethor's foil in the narrator's presentation of free will facing an apparently fated end.

Gollum, Bilbo and Frodo: the Ringbearers' Response to the Ring

Gollum, Bilbo, and Frodo more acutely show the response of a person's freedom to a fate-like power such as the Ring. To authentically and fully disclose the extent of personal efficacy before stronger powers, the story needs these complementary figures. Bilbo's and Frodo's ability to choose rightly despite the Ring's negative influence brings into question its seemingly irresistible power over Gollum's will, suggesting that the Ring did not immediately deny his freedom. Yet Gollum's present enslavement to the Ring also implies the limits of a person's power before greater forces, pointing towards

the inevitable restriction of Frodo by the Ring's greater strength. Thus, while Bilbo and Frodo suggest that Gollum originally was a person with operative freedom, Gollum stands as a warning against the mortal's real limitations to transcendent demonic power.

Sméagol/Gollum. Gandalf distinguishes Gollum's and Bilbo's initial ownership of the Ring. He indicates that Sméagol violently seized the Ring by killing his cousin, Déagol, who had initially found it by "chance." Bilbo also finds the Ring by "chance," yet retains it from Sméagol by showing pity and not killing him. Gandalf as narrator does not indicate Gollum-then-Sméagol's moment of choice when the Ring first may have tempted him to usurp power from another; yet, given that the Ring does not force Bilbo to murder Gollum, one may suspect that the Ring could not and did not immediately impel Sméagol to his murderous act. Thus does Bilbo's example help the reader to understand better the nature of Sméagol's free will prior to his long "addiction" to the Ring.⁶ The Ring offers the illusion that its possessor could become the supreme power in Middle-earth by asserting supremacy over weaker others. Sméagol, by murdering Déagol, asserts ultimate power over another, continuing then to wield the Ring for selfish gain, accumulating what personal advantage he can. His petty ambitions match his limited capacity for greatness; yet he shows a selfishness and lust for power to the full extent that his shallow character allows.

Over time, Sméagol's ability to distinguish self from object decreases, and as he becomes more dehumanized and animalistic, his ability to exercise his free will virtually vanishes. Verlyn Flieger tries to maintain that while Sméagol freely chooses to abandon the good, he is also fated to do so. In other words, Sméagol exercises free will while also being *constrained* to use it for evil. She states that the contrast between Frodo and

Gollum continues the duality within *The Lord of the Rings* between light and darkness, good and evil. She argues that the opposing figures are “the ultimate refinement of Tolkien’s concern with interactive fate and free will, for [Frodo] willingly accepts his fate while [Gollum] is fated to follow his will.” Claiming that Sméagol retains his freedom while also being constrained by fate, Flieger concludes, “Gollum is destined to be driven by his own desires. [. . .] Both have left the light to go into the dark, Frodo reluctantly, Gollum by free choice” (151). Matthew Dickerson, by contrast, points out that a person cannot be at once forced and free to act in a specific way. Responding to the twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell’s argument against free will, Dickerson connects the denial of free will with the rejection of “moral responsibility.” If, as Russell argues, metaphysical forces or constraining circumstances force people to act in determined ways, then, Dickerson concludes, “we cannot possibly be held responsible for any of our actions” (15). Flieger, thus, unintentionally places Sméagol in an impossible situation: while believing that fate obliges Gollum to act deterministically, Flieger also holds him accountable for freely choosing to leave the light for the dark. Sméagol, thus, is morally responsible for a choice he had no choice but to make.

Bilbo’s and Frodo’s contrasting responses to the Ring counters the argument that the Ring totally overwhelms Gollum’s will. Because both Bilbo and Frodo are able to resist the Ring’s power, their actions cast doubt on the statement that Gollum does—at least once did not—have the similar capacity to reject the Ring. Gollum, over the course of many centuries, as he makes no moral effort to choose otherwise, allows the Ring to dominate him, decreasing his ability to choose rightly—away from selfish desires and self-power. In many ways, he directs his will along the same trajectory as the Ring’s

temptation—away from the good. Thus, while it may appear that Gollum can no longer choose against the Ring, the disturbing reality may be that he never wanted to choose against it. His will is in almost complete conformity with the Ring's.

Gandalf acknowledges that while Gollum's distinct self, including his free will, is almost non-existent due to his possessing the Ring for so long, an inkling of his will remains active. Expressing the possibility existing within a providential order that Gollum could change his use of the will, Gandalf says, "I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least" (1: 69). Further, Gandalf makes this hopeful estimate of Sméagol:

He had proved tougher than even one of the Wise would have guessed—as a hobbit might. There was a little corner of his mind that was still his own, and light came through it, as through a chink in the dark: light out of the past. [. . .] Alas! there is little hope of [being cured] for him. Yet not no hope. No, not though he possessed the Ring so long, almost as far back as he can remember. (1: 64)

Thus, while Gandalf states that the Ring will overpower its possessor, he also qualifies its unabated power by implying that something still restricts the Ring's ability to possess a person completely. Gollum's chance for repentance, which the next section will discuss, shows that the Ring does not have full possession of him.

Bilbo. Bilbo's decision to leave the Ring to Frodo directly counters the argument that an external force, such as the Ring, compels Gollum to act in an evil way, or that it immediately and fully denies his free will. Bilbo's choice is not easily made, however, as he struggles against the Ring's influence without realizing the source that is causing him so much inner turmoil. When the decisive moment finally comes and Bilbo must part

from the Ring, he debates between giving it up or retaining it: “Now it comes to it, I don’t like parting with it at all, I may say. And I don’t really see why I should.” As the desire for power, which possessing the Ring increases, arises in Bilbo, he at first he refuses to give it up willingly, suspecting that Gandalf’s intentions are actually selfishly motivated.

The narrator relates the conversation between Bilbo and Gandalf:

“Why do you want me to [leave the Ring]?” he asked, and a curious change came over his voice. It was sharp with suspicion and annoyance. “You are always badgering me about my ring [. . .]”

“I had to badger you,” said Gandalf. “I wanted the truth. [. . .] I think *you* have had it quite long enough. You won’t need it any more.”

Bilbo flushed, and there was an angry light in his eyes. His kindly face grew hard. “Why not?” he cried. “And what business is it of yours, anyway, to know what I do with my own things? It is my own. I found it. It came to me. [. . .]. It is mine, I tell you. My own. My precious.”

[. . .].

“It has been called that before,” [Gandalf] said, “but not by you.”

“But I say it now. And why not? Even if Gollum said the same once. It’s not his now, but mine. And I shall keep it, I say.” (42)

Recognizing the Ring’s power to enslave its owner, Gandalf says to Bilbo, “It has got far too much hold on you. Let it go! And then you can go yourself, and be free.” Only by releasing the Ring can Bilbo have true freedom, but the Ring’s hold on him is strong:

“‘Well, if you want my ring yourself, say so!’ cried Bilbo. ‘But you won’t get it. I won’t give my precious away, I tell you.’ His hand strayed to the hilt of his small sword.”

Bilbo is prepared to fight Gandalf to keep the Ring despite the fact that Gandalf has no intention of forcefully taking the Ring, as he makes clear later on to Frodo. While revealing some of his Maian strength in warning Bilbo to calm down, Gandalf does nothing to coerce Bilbo’s mind or will into relinquishing the Ring. The Ring’s pernicious influence creates the sudden hostility between the long-time friends. A tense moment of silence follows Gandalf’s rebuke, and in that moment Bilbo makes an internal decision to

give up the Ring rather than to abandon his friendship with Gandalf. He chooses in favor of his love for Gandalf rather than his love for the Ring. In this scene, the Ring's coercive effect upon the person's will is clearly present and strong, but it is not all-consuming or overpowering.

Fleming Rutledge argues to the contrary, however. She interprets this scene as revealing that "Bilbo's will is not strong enough to resist [the Ring's] attraction without Gandalf's active intervention" (52). Though Rutledge acknowledges that Gandalf tells Frodo how Bilbo "gave [the Ring] up in the end of his own accord," she argues, "this is not exactly what happened. [. . .] we are going to see that no mortal can resist the Ring of his own 'free will.' [. . .] In no sense does Bilbo give up the Ring of his own volition. Gandalf's intervention is clearly necessary" (54-5). Because Rutledge's interpretation is counter to the text itself, she struggles to explain Gandalf's own statement that Bilbo freely gave up the Ring. While Bilbo does not make an isolated, individualistic choice countering the Ring, it is not accurate to assign credit exclusively to Gandalf's power, thus reducing Bilbo's moral responsibility for keeping or rejecting the Ring. Bilbo does need Gandalf's help to assist him in rejecting the Ring, but Gandalf acts more like an assistant who strengthens Bilbo's best instincts, rather than an intervener who prevents the person from choosing badly.

The scene between them emphasizes the will's role in decision-making and indicates the Ring's particular effect upon free will. Bilbo expresses his own surprise at his inability to act, saying, "I don't seem able to make up my mind." While not realizing it, he is experiencing the Ring's corruption of his will. Matthew Dickerson argues that the "power to compel other wills to one's own will" (100) is a central manifestation of

the Ring's strength; Bilbo, thus, experiences the Ring's compulsive power. Gandalf, however, already suspecting the Ring is Sauron's One Ruling Ring, responds to Bilbo's self-doubts by saying, "Then trust mine. [. . .] [My mind] is quite made up. Go away and leave it behind. Stop possessing it. Give it to Frodo, and I will look after him." Bilbo's will again wavers, but once again he makes an unspoken decision to give up the Ring. Having made this final resolution, "he sighed. 'All right,' he said with an effort. 'I will'" (1: 43). The simplicity of Bilbo's final response highlights his unique freedom. He does not say "I will leave the Ring to Frodo," or even "I will do so," but he says simply "I will," indicating his intention to follow Gandalf's advice and, at the same time, emphasizing his ability to assent to the summons laid upon him.

The Ring tries to exert itself over Bilbo's body one last time. After he has decided to leave the Ring to Frodo and is placing it on the mantel, "[Bilbo's] hand jerked back, and the packet fell on the floor. Before he could pick it up, the wizard stooped and seized it and set it in its place. A spasm of anger passed swiftly over the hobbit's face again." But this last temptation to keep the Ring, retaining its power for himself, subsides more quickly than the previous moments. Adverbs of motion, "swiftly" and "suddenly," suggest Bilbo's quick internal choice to relinquish the Ring. This final inner decision results in Bilbo experiencing a release of the constriction that the Ring imposes: "Suddenly [the look of anger] gave way to a look of relief and a laugh" (1: 43). Bilbo senses a certain joy in choosing for the good, in abandoning selfish power and recovering the ability to "make up his mind," or, in other words, to reassert his true personhood over against the Ring. Having freed himself with Gandalf's help from the Ring's constraints, Bilbo is able to realize what he truly longs for: not the abstract sense of individualistic

power that the Ring conveys, but the freedom that travel and companionship represent.

As he bequeaths the Ring to Frodo, Bilbo steps out of his door and declares, “What fun to be off again, off on the Road with dwarves! This is what I have really been longing for, for years!” Instead of feeling grief, sorrow, anger, or envy, Bilbo indicates an unexpected feeling of happiness apart from the Ring: “I am as happy now as I have ever been, and that is saying a great deal” (1: 44).

Despite Bilbo’s successful assertion of his own freedom over the Ring’s compulsion, it must be noted that he never wills its destruction. Bilbo just barely counters the Ring’s intentions by handing it over to Frodo, for neither Bilbo’s will, nor anyone else’s, is strong enough to overcome fully the Ring’s power by deliberately destroying it. His decision to leave the Ring behind, thus conferring to another the fearful power it promises, is itself a unique one, as Gandalf points out: “as far as I know Bilbo alone in history has ever gone beyond playing, and really done it. He needed all my help, too. And even so he would never have just forsaken it, or cast it aside” (1: 64-65).

Frodo. Frodo joins Bilbo in standing as a foil to Gollum. Frodo and Gollum reveal both fate’s power over the will and the will’s significant freedom over fate. By repeatedly resisting the Ring’s temptation to acquire individual power, Frodo shows his ability to respond properly, in contrast to Gollum’s unbridled acquisitiveness in using the Ring. Yet Sméagol’s degradation into the creature Gollum is a warning to Frodo of the stronger power that the Ring ultimately has over its possessor. Though Frodo cannot completely counter the Ring’s power, he repeatedly and fully exercises his will in resisting and rejecting the Ring’s temptation to power.

The author suggests that a variety of fate-like powers exist, imposing themselves upon weaker creatures. The person could construe from this reality that he or she is powerless before the movements of fate. However, a dialogue between Gandalf and Frodo on this matter suggests that every person has the ability to respond appropriately to fated circumstances. Gandalf resists such resignation to fate's control by explaining to Frodo Sauron's new rise to power: "Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again." Frodo responds, "I wish it need not have happened in my time." "'So do I,' said Gandalf, 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us'" (1: 60). Despite the real constraints that circumstances place on a person, Gandalf emphasizes not merely the ability but the necessity of every person responding properly in resisting the "Shadow."

Gandalf's description of the Ring's history proves that there are powers intent on doing evil in the world, but he also suggests that other forces exist that are actively working to counter evil's objectives. Gandalf leaves these other forces unnamed. While the Ring intended to leave Gollum in order to return to Sauron, it did not intend for Bilbo to find it. Gandalf says, "Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought" (1: 65). Paul Kocher asserts that, while using such a word as "meant" may indicate a foreordained goal, "Gandalf does not assume that Frodo will necessarily do what he was intended to, though he should." In contrast to Fleming Rutledge's argument, Kocher makes the significant observation regarding divine

and human purposes: “the option not to cooperate with the grand design is open to Frodo’s will” (*Master* 36).

Frodo hesitatingly accepts his call to bear the Ring because he recognizes his own weakness before its immense power: “I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?” Gandalf again emphasizes that Frodo has been chosen by an Other: “Such questions cannot be answered. [. . .] You may be sure it was not for any merit that others do not possess; not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have” (1: 70). Though Gandalf makes clear that an unnamed power selects Frodo to keep the Ring, Frodo still must accept another’s calling of him. The text makes this moment of acceptance clear when Gandalf, having told the Ring’s history and described the reality of the situation as far as he knows it, stresses the point, “And now [. . .] the decision lies with you.” The narrator says, “there was a long silence” in which Frodo thinks about what he has been asked to do. Gandalf again inquires, “Have you decided what to do?” Frodo offers his hesitant acceptance: “No! [. . .] Or perhaps yes. As far as I understand what you have said, I suppose I must keep the Ring and guard it, at least for the present, whatever it may do to me” (1: 71).

Frodo accepts his vocation in a humble manner, repeatedly reaffirming his inadequacy throughout the story. By accepting the Ring and agreeing to Gandalf’s advice to take it out of the Shire, Frodo must divest himself of the power of wealth and status within his small community. He chooses to become an exile because he desires the well-being of others at the cost of his own. The author emphasizes the need for and ability of the person to relinquish position and possessions through Frodo’s repeated use

of the word “leave”: “I ought to leave Bag End, leave the Shire, leave everything and go away” (1: 71). Frodo’s willingness to surrender his enjoyment of what he loves for the beloved’s own preservation shows his greater concern for others rather than for himself: “I should like to save the Shire, if I could [. . .] I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable: I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold even if my feet cannot stand there again” (1: 71). Further, Frodo humbly recognizes his own limitations before the evil powers contending against him: “I feel very small, and very uprooted, and well—desperate. The enemy is so strong and terrible” (1: 72).

Frodo does not simply make a one-time resolution that then permanently binds him, but he constantly reaffirms his vocation, thus participating actively in what could be deemed a providential calling. Such repetition of choice emphasizes the free, not coerced, nature of his will. When in the Shire he first decides to accept the Ring, Frodo theoretically knows the strength of malevolent powers in the world, but he has no practical experience of them. He gains such empirical wisdom during his journey from the Shire to Rivendell.

At the Council of Elrond, Frodo learns in greater detail the dire situation before the free people of Middle-earth. The Council comes to the definite decision that someone must take the Ring to its destruction in Mount Doom. In taking the Ring from the Shire to the temporary safety of Rivendell, Frodo wholly fulfills what Gandalf had initially asked of him. Thus, while nothing compels him to continue as the Ringbearer, he again offers himself up to do so. When he renews his choice to keep the Ring, he does so even

more freely than he did in the Shire, for he now has a greater knowledge of the dangerous consequences his choice must entail.

The author describes Frodo's second acceptance of his calling in a way that, upon a first reading, challenges the idea that Frodo is free: "At last with an effort [Frodo] spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. 'I will take the Ring,' he said, 'though I do not know the way'" (1: 284). The implication of "some other will using his small voice" is that an Other forces Frodo's will to accord with the Other's purposes. While a closer reading shows that this is not the case, a reader initially could interpret the author's words to imply that a higher power violates Frodo's will, using him as a tool to achieve its own end. Fleming Rutledge seems to make this argument. Connecting the action of *The Lord of the Rings* to biblical examples, Rutledge asserts that the Bible repeatedly shows "insignificant, and untried persons who are commandeered into the Lord's service *through no wish of their own.*" Frodo, like the Scriptural figures whom Rutledge cites, would exhibit true *hubris* if he thought himself capable of bearing the Ring, and thus chose to do so without first being chosen by an Other for such a great task. Tolkien's characters always must respond to promptings external to themselves. The problem in Rutledge's interpretation is her footnoted indication that while the person called by God could theoretically "refuse this conscription," practically the person cannot do so (67). In other words, Rutledge implies that Frodo does not have a will free to refuse a "providential" calling. Rutledge's purpose in this argument is to emphasize the role of divine intention over that of individualistic choice. The autonomy of the will should be deemphasized because repeatedly the work shows that the will never operates in isolation. However, by

suggesting providential power obliges Frodo to act according to a specific template, Rutledge decreases the free nature of Frodo as a unique person. Theologically, Rutledge's argument also decreases the providential nature of Middle-earth as she increasingly argues for a more Calvinistic understanding of Predestination in which the person cannot resist God's election of him or her.⁷

Elrond's response, while indicating the unnamed power's role in electing Frodo, also clearly suggests its *lack* of coercion. In other words, Frodo remains free to reject the Other's election of him. Elrond first suggests the unnamed actor's presence by saying, "I think that this task is appointed for you, Frodo," but shifting focus upon Frodo's importance as actor, Elrond then says, "if you do not find a way, no one will." Directly countering the argument that another's will coerces and usurps Frodo's, Elrond emphasizes the free nature of Frodo's choice: "it is a heavy burden. So heavy that none could lay it on another. I do not lay it on you. But if you take it *freely*, I will say that your choice is right" (1: 284, emphasis added). The converse implication of Elrond's statement is that if Frodo does not take the burden freely, if another power coerces him for any reason, then his choice is wrong. The rightness of his choice connects directly to its uncoerced nature.

Frodo freely takes the burden again in this second affirmation of his vocation, knowing the nature of the enemy more deeply at this second moment of choice. The decision to take up the Ring again is not an easy one to make, just as Bilbo's choice to give up the Ring was not easy, but the narrator's description of Frodo's internal struggle shows his choice is free. While Frodo senses that he remains chosen by an Other for the task, he struggles between the known consequences of again accepting the Ring and the

option that remains open to him of refusing the task, of letting the Ring go to another and remaining in the peace of Rivendell, protected by others: “A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo’s side in Rivendell filled all his heart” (1: 284). His deep longing is to stay in Rivendell, but he directly chooses against his desires in declaring, “I will take the Ring [. . .] though I do not know the way.” He willfully acts against his inclinations but in accord with what he believes the unnamed power is prompting him to do.

The third key demonstration of the will’s free nature before both the external influences of the Ring and the unnamed power opposing the Ring occurs on Amon Hen. Frodo has withdrawn from the fellowship to determine what path he should take with the Ring—either the direct path to Mordor or a detoured path through Gondor. Boromir, overcome by a lust for the Ring, attempts to seize it from Frodo who puts it on to escape. While wearing the Ring, Frodo perceives Sauron in his disembodied form of the searching Eye, and despairs of success before Sauron’s might— “all hope left him.” Frodo experiences an internal conflict as he seems caught between two opposing powers, which the implied author names “the Voice” and “the Eye”: “The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so.” The author makes very clear it is not the two powers which are “perfectly balanced” but the person, Frodo, who is placed in perfect balance between them.⁸ One power urges him to reveal himself to the Eye, while the other power puts the thought into his mind, “Fool, take it off! Take

off the Ring!” Neither power, though, denies Frodo’s will. Matthew Dickerson argues this point, saying that in the passage,

we see again the emphasis that Frodo is “free to choose.” [. . .]. It is not only that he is free to choose, but that the *essence* of his existence as Frodo—what he remembers when he becomes “aware of himself”—is this freedom to choose. He is neither the Voice nor the Eye; he is not *compelled* to do Good or to do Evil, but must choose on his own which he will do. [. . .] It is his awareness of himself that makes him aware of his freedom to choose. Why? Because the freedom to choose is fundamental to what it means to be a self. (86)

The author emphasizes the moment when Frodo realizes his own ability to respond:

“Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger” (1: 417). In taking off the Ring, Frodo chooses to follow the Voice, the “other point of power,” and to reject the Eye. Having acknowledged, as Dickerson says, his “freedom to choose,” or his true self, Frodo then freely renews for the third time his decision to fulfill his vocation: “A great weariness was on him, but his will was firm and his heart lighter. He spoke aloud to himself, ‘I will do now what I must’” (1: 417).

In this third example of Frodo’s ability to exercise the will before external influences, he once again demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice himself in service to the unnamed power’s designs. Just as he abandoned his own comfort in the Shire and his sense of peace in Rivendell, so he now chooses to forfeit fellowship in order to go forward as the Ringbearer. For his friends’ sake, and not for his own, he chooses to go alone: “This at least is plain: the evil of the Ring is already at work even in the Company, and the Ring must leave them before it does more harm. I will go alone. [. . .] At once” (1: 418). Frodo shows his preparedness to abandon even the last vestiges of community in order to fulfill his quest. Yet, just as Théoden’s sacrifice of life is not accepted when

first extended at Helm's Deep, so, too, Frodo's sacrifice of fellowship is not accepted. Beyond Frodo's expectations or even willed intentions, Sam tracks down the escaping Frodo and insists on accompanying him on the journey. Sam, like Frodo, also freely chooses to continue on the quest, and his properly motivated choice is integral to the quest's ultimate success, as the next chapter will discuss in further detail. Frodo, acknowledging the intention of the unnamed mover and designer, accepts Sam's decision: "Come along! It is plain that we were meant to go together" (1: 423).

While Frodo demonstrates free will's authentic power to respond to circumstances and outside influences, he also shows the will's ultimate limitations. The isolated person is incapable of defeating stronger forces and another power's assistance is necessary. Without providential guidance and assistance, a solitary and autonomous person does not have the power to overcome malevolent cosmic forces intent on his or her destruction. The following chapter will discuss how Frodo's repeated failures of the will before the Ring's greater strength open the door for the unnamed power to reveal itself working in the story.

Chances for Repentance in a Providential World Order

Middle-earth's providential world shows that characters are able to amend their evil use of free will. Bad choices do not force further bad decisions, but rather repentance and amendment of life remain open to characters. Such an option counters fatalism in which a person becomes irrevocably ensnared by consequences of their own making. Like a game of chess, one bad move dictates the rest of the game. Margaret Visser, arguing that guilt and forgiveness "liberate human beings from fate," says, "in recognizing wrongdoing as sin, we do not lessen its enormity, but we do deprive it of its

fatality. [. . .] It is possible for a sinner to change—to express regret, accept punishment, make reparations” (44). A person cannot change the effects of a choice and may very well suffer its consequences, but *The Lord of the Rings* suggests that persons remain free to alter and repair bad choices. Thus, in a providential world order, the option is always present for the person to turn from choosing evil and to choose good. The narrator shows this option open to four key figures: Denethor, Saruman, Gollum, and Boromir—though only Boromir chooses amendment.

Denethor

Neither forced circumstances nor a supernatural power obliges Denethor to commit suicide; rather, up to his very end, he is able to make an alternate choice, which he refuses to do. Gandalf tells him to change his mind, to leave the pyre he has built to burn himself, and “to go out to the battle of your City, where maybe death awaits you.” If Denethor chooses to fight the enemy, death would not be his direct object but it could be a possibility; thus Gandalf is not counseling Denethor to avoid death at all costs but to live out his life fully. Despite Gondor’s desperate situation before the enemy armies, Gandalf suggests that Denethor’s life still has a purpose even if Denethor himself does not know it. As Gandalf says, “there is much that you can yet do.”

The narrator again uses the motif of a moment’s silence in which an unspoken inner choice is offered, but in Denethor’s silent deliberation he again chooses for himself and his own perceived self-interests: “Denethor followed [Gandalf], and stood trembling, looking with longing on the face of his son. And for a moment, while all were silent and still, watching the Lord in his throes, he wavered” (3: 129). In response to Gandalf’s offer, Denethor has the chance, like Théoden, to choose rightly despite the situation

which his previous choices have created; however, he freely rejects the proper choice and commits suicide. Gandalf expresses the fitting response of horror and grief at such a deliberate and free act. The fact that Denethor retains his freedom shows that in Middle-earth, fate can not force the person to choose evil willfully, resulting in self-destruction; but rather, characters like Denethor and Saruman reject their opportunities for salvation, causing their own ruin through free use of the will.

Saruman

In the person of Saruman, the implied author of *The Lord of the Rings* shows even more clearly that circumstances do not entrap characters. The world order is such that even the corrupt person's will remains free to accept forgiveness and to repent. Gandalf calls Saruman to this repentance by telling him to amend his actions and to help defeat Sauron. In yet another example of a person making a decision in silence, Saruman considers the option open to him: "A shadow passed over Saruman's face; then it went deathly white. Before he could conceal it, they saw through the mask the anguish of a mind in doubt, loathing to stay and dreading to leave its refuge, for a second he hesitated, and no one breathed. Then he spoke, and his voice was shrill and cold. Pride and hate were conquering him" (2: 187). Saruman momentarily considers choosing well—of amending his past misuse of the will—but he, like others, rejects the opportunity.

Because Saruman has the ability to choose well, he thus bears moral responsibility for not doing so. Gandalf clearly indicates that the decision is Saruman's to make: "I am giving you a last chance. You can leave Orthanc, free—if you choose." Expounding on the serious implications of freedom's reality, Gandalf continues, "when I say 'free', I mean 'free': free from bond, of chain or command: to go where you will,

even, even to Mordor, Saruman, if you desire.” Saruman directly refuses the grace that Gandalf extends to him because he will not abandon self-aggrandizing power which accepting pardon necessitates. Responding to Gandalf’s final extension of forgiveness, “Saruman’s face grew livid, twisted with rage, and a red light was kindled in his eyes.”

Pippin asks Gandalf a question that many readers also may like to pose regarding the freedom of a person, who has been long in the habit of choosing poorly, to choose properly. Pippin asks whether Gandalf really expected the exchange with Saruman “to end any other way” but badly (2: 189). As the figure of Gollum shows, freedom diminishes the more the person abuses its use, and as one habitually chooses selfishly, the ability to choose well, away from the self and its acquisition of power, decreases. Thus a corrupt person’s chances of amending his or her use of free will *are* slim—but still present. Gandalf concedes that the odds of Saruman choosing other than he did were “not likely [. . .] though they came to the balance of a hair. But I had reasons for trying; some merciful and some less so.” The episode’s central point, however, is that an external power neither forces nor entraps Saruman to choose as he does, as Gandalf’s word also indicate:

I gave him a last choice and a fair one: to renounce both Mordor and his private schemes, and make amends by helping us in our need. He knows our need, none better. Great service he could have rendered. But he has chosen to withhold it, and keep the power of Orthanc. He will not serve, only command. (2: 190)

Saruman prefers destruction rather than the willed loss of commanding power.

Reiterating that Saruman’s ruin is in consequence of his freely made choice, Gandalf says, “he will be devoured. [. . .] Often does hatred hurt itself!” Providence in Middle-

earth never dooms the person to self-destruction or damnation but gives the person ample opportunity to avert it.

Gollum

Gollum is the one character whose freedom seems most in doubt. His free exercise of the will is more limited than either Saruman's or Denethor's, and yet, despite possessing and being enthralled to the Ring for centuries, he, too, retains an element of freedom. Repentance is possible even for Gollum, though his nature has sunk very low through his misuse of free will. The narrator describes this opportunity for repentance when Gollum, having returned from finalizing his plans to trap Frodo and Sam in Shelob's lair, comes upon the two sleeping hobbits. For a moment, Gollum deliberates whether or not to betray them. If the Ring's will has fully taken the place of Gollum's, then he ought not to hesitate in betraying them given that through their death, he will reclaim the Ring. Yet, the narrator makes Gollum's hesitation clear, suggesting that he nearly chooses to repent:

Gollum looked at them. A strange expression passed over his lean hungry face. The gleam faded from his eyes, and they went dim and grey, old and tired. A spasm of pain seemed to twist him, and he turned away, peering back up towards the pass, shaking his head, *as if engaged in some inner debate*. Then he came back, and slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo's knee—but almost the touch was a caress. For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing. (2: 324, emphasis added)

Sadly, though Sam is partially responsible for Gollum's decision, he does not decide to change his traitorous plans.

Circumstances give Gollum a moment to experience a selfless love for another and to choose for that other's well-being, but Sam's harsh remark drives Gollum back into himself. In reflecting on the story, Tolkien said he was "most grieved by Gollum's failure (just) to repent when interrupted by Sam" (*Letters* 221). While Sam is at fault in hindering rather than helping Gollum to choose away from evil, the scene suggests that Gollum still possesses, even if slightly, the ability to reject evil.

Earlier in the story, Gandalf had expressed a hope that Gollum could change, as he similarly hopes for all such corrupt figures, including Denethor and Saruman, because he understands a providential world order does not predetermine any person's future for an evil end. Gandalf's hope for wayward people and his desire for every person to choose properly reflect the intention of the higher power that sent him into Middle-earth as a protector. Such hope is possible only within a providential framework that allows for the possibility of turning from the path of personal destruction. In a providential world order, one's past does not predetermine one's future, nor do circumstances, either in which one is forced or which one creates for oneself, force one's decisions. Providential intention is never for the creature's destruction and, while providence extends opportunities to the person to use free will rightly, the person must choose to accept these chances. Repeatedly, Tolkien indicates that the person will not surrender individual power by humbling the self, admitting wrong, and accepting forgiveness. Saruman, Gollum, and Denethor each have the chance, even at the last minute, to turn aside from the inevitable consequences of their past decisions. Their free choice to not do so shows that within Middle-earth the person, not providence, furthers his own destruction.

Boromir

Boromir is the one figure who accepts his chance for repentance. His ability to repent shows that the offer is not a false or merely apparent possibility for others but is actual for all. Boromir chose badly in coveting the Ring and in attempting to seize it from Frodo; in so doing, he breaks apart the fellowship and causes harm to others. One could make the argument, however, that the Ring possesses Boromir and thus that he is not culpable for his actions against Frodo. While there is some validity in that argument, however, from the moment the reader meets him at the council, Boromir already manifests his improper desire to use the Ring for his own purposes—the glory of Gondor and himself. He chooses to accompany the fellowship, yet his motives for doing so are not to accomplish the Ring’s destruction but to persuade the group to take it to Gondor. He reveals this continued secret desire when the company camps in Lothlórien. Thus, when Boromir has the opportunity to seize the Ring, his will is not strong enough to resist its prompting. He falls under its influence, but the full denial of Boromir’s free will in this matter is questionable. While the Ring may lead him into temptation, he chooses to do what he has had an inclination to do since the Council of Elrond. Thus does the temptation coincide with his own selfish desires. His previous intentions contribute to his inability to resist the Ring’s promptings when he is presented with the first clear opportunity of achieving his end. He acts, then, in accord with his desires, a pattern similar to that of Gollum’s actions. What he says to Frodo in the confrontation on Amon Hen is simply an extension of the argument he put forth in Rivendell and then also in Lothlórien.⁹ He declares:

True-hearted Men, they will not be corrupted. We of Minas Tirith have been staunch through long years of trial. We do not desire the power of

wizard-lords, only strength to defend ourselves, strength in a just cause. [. . .] It is a gift, I say; a gift to the foes of Mordor. It is mad not to use it [. . .]. The fearless, the ruthless, these alone will achieve victory. What could not a warrior do in this hour, a great leader? What could not Aragorn do? Or if he refuses, why not Boromir? The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner! (1: 414).

Boromir seems to hold himself, not the Ring, accountable for his actions and their evil consequences. After he chases Frodo, Boromir trips and falls, lying silent for a long time. This is yet another moment when the person silently reflects and comes to a decision. The narrator says, “Catching his foot on a stone, [Boromir] fell sprawling and lay upon his face. For a while he was as still as if his own curse had struck him down; then suddenly he wept.” Boromir weeps because he realizes his culpability for what has happened: “He rose and passed his hand over his eyes, dashing away the tears. ‘What have I said?’ he cried. ‘What have I done? Frodo, Frodo!’ he called. ‘Come back! A madness took me, but it has passed.’” (1: 416).

Despite his sorrow and repentance for what he has just done, Boromir cannot take back nor erase the consequences resulting from his actions. Though the fellowship breaks apart in chaos, he is able to make some reparation for his deeds and does so by sacrificing his life in defense of the fellowship’s weakest members, Merry and Pippin. Boromir chooses to follow Aragorn’s command: “Boromir! I do not know what part you have played in this mischief, but help now! Go after those two young hobbits, and guard them at the least even if you cannot find Frodo” (1: 421). He dies guarding them; and, in his final conversation with Aragorn, Boromir suggests that he offered his life willingly in reparation for what he had done and what he had intended to do with the Ring: “I tried to take the Ring from Frodo. [. . .] I am sorry. I have paid.” Ralph Wood indicates the

similarity of this scene to the Catholic sacrament of penance and reconciliation: “Boromir admits his sin, as if the future king were also a priest hearing his last confession. [. . .] Aragorn absolves the dying hero by emphasizing the real penance Boromir has performed in fighting evil to the end. [. . .] We know that Boromir has received his pardon, for his last gesture is a smile” (154-155). Though Boromir is not victorious in saving the hobbits but dies in the attempt, his choice to repair what he had done is right.

The presence of repentance enabled by mercy breaks the destructive cycle of choice and consequence. It suggests the existence of a beneficent unseen power offering forgiveness and the real ability of the person to accept that forgiveness. Boromir’s positive response demonstrates that the invitation to repent is authentic; thus, the rejection of the invitation by Saruman, Denethor, and Gollum is freely made

Conclusion

The implied author of *The Lord of the Rings* shows that neither the past use of free will nor present circumstances bind a person to choose in an evil and self-destructive manner. The story never entraps a character in a hopeless situation, but instead always offers the possibility of an alternative. As this chapter has shown, the implied author repeatedly creates chances for the person to repent of evil deeds and shows the person’s ability to respond to the predicament in which “fate” places him. The possibility of repentance for past choices and of responding to forced situations indicate that circumstances do not force the person on, or to remain on, a ruinous path. Circumstances of either the character’s own or of another’s making do not bind the person and deny free will. As examples from both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrate, the

person in Middle-earth remains free before external powers, and the reader may judge the character by how well or poorly he or she responds.

The implied author questions and attempts to answer through the narrative what the person's place is within the larger order of the world. Through the differing choices the characters make in response to their circumstances, the author highlights the important personal response before fatalistic forces in light of the providential world order. While fate is not the mover of history, fate-like powers exist in the world, which, though subject to providence, still can overpower mortals. The following chapter shows the privileged place the person holds within the fundamentally providential order of Middle-earth; yet it will analyze how providence works not merely through the person's successful use of free will but, more significantly, through the person's inevitable failure before powers like fate.

Notes

1. In the prologue of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien creates a fictitious historical account of hobbits and the history of the Third Age. Writing as if he were giving an authentic historical account of the story's origins, Tolkien says that "this account of the end of the Third Age is drawn mainly from the Red Book of Westmarch. That most important source for the history of the War of the Ring [. . .]. It was in origin Bilbo's private diary, which he took with him to Rivendell." Tolkien then proceeds to give the long history of the story's development and maturation over many years and through the artistry of multiple authors (1: 23-25).

2. Tom Shippey says that Tolkien created Saruman and Denethor as the two characters with the most "suggestiveness" to a modern reader (*Road* 170). Shippey argues that "Saruman is the most contemporary figure in Middle-earth, both politically and linguistically" (*Author* 76), and he shows how his name connects him with industrialism (*Road* 170) and his actions with Socialism (*Road* 172). Shippey connects Saruman with industrialism by pointing out "*Searu* in Old English [. . .] means 'device, design, contrivance, art'. [. . .] The word implies cleverness, but is nearly always linked with metal. [. . .] These cruxes all form part of Saruman's character. He is learned, but his learning tends to the practical." (*Road* 170-171). Saruman's actions in remodeling the Shire link him with Socialism, which Shippey says is Saruman's "one distinctively modern trait" (*Road* 172). Whereas Denethor, Shippey asserts, is "an arch-conservative," mingling an "excess of heroic temper [. . .] with a mean concern for his own sovereignty and his own boundaries: a combination that unusually and in this one particular case makes no sense at all before 1945 and the invention of the 'great deterrent'" (*Road* 173).

3. By individual power, I mean one person's efforts to gain increased control and authority over another through denying the equal nature of the other's being. Thus one person gains individual power only through subjugating another.

4. Tolkien, writing parts of *The Lord of the Rings* story "backwards" into *The Silmarillion* tales (*Letters* 264), wrote sketches of the Istari's coming to Middle-earth. Christopher included part of these writings as the appendix, "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age," to the 1977 *The Silmarillion*. Further fragments and what Christopher calls "the essay on the Istari" by Tolkien are found in *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*, pp. 388-402. In this essay, Tolkien clearly indicates that the Valar send the wizards to Middle-earth with the approval of Eru, or Ilúvatar. However, "the emissaries were forbidden to reveal themselves in forms of majesty, or to seek to rule the wills of Men or Elves by open display of power, but coming in shapes weak and humble were bidden to advise and persuade Men and Elves to good" (389).

The fragments that Christopher Tolkien has of his father's writings regarding the Istari also show that Saruman, originally named "Curumo" or "Curunír," was already selfishly inclined towards power, rather than humbly accomplishing the Valar's will, when he came to Middle-earth. To the contrary, Gandalf, originally named "Olórin," consistently shows himself to be humble and submissive to the Valar's will. In summarizing the fragments of his father's notes, Christopher describes the Valar's council in which different Vala choose a specific wizard as an emissary: Manwë "wished

Olórin to go as the third messenger to Middle-earth [. . .]. But Olórin declared that he was too weak for such a task, and that he feared Sauron. Then Manwë said that was all the more reason why he should go, and that he commanded Olórin” (393).

5. “Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age” describes Saruman’s envy of Sauron. Tolkien’s narrator writes: “Curunír had turned to dark thoughts and was already a traitor in heart: for he desired that he and no other should find the Great Ring so that he might wield it himself and order all the world to his will. Too long he had studied the ways of Sauron in hope to defeat him, and now he envied him as a rival rather than hated his works” (*The Silmarillion* 301).

6. Tom Shippey describes the Ring’s nature as “addictive,” furthering his argument that Tolkien’s description of the Ring is a modern one. Making an analogy between drug addiction and the Ring’s effects, Shippey doubts the moral culpability of characters who succumb to the Ring’s power. He says, “to expect [heroin addicts] to break their syringes and throw away their drugs by will-power alone [. . .] is to confuse an addiction, which is physical, with a habit, which is moral” (*Road* 139). Shippey thus seems to suggest that the Ringbearer is not morally culpable for actions committed under the Ring’s influence.

7. Rutledge’s tendency towards interpreting Providence as Predestination seems confirmed in her conclusion when, in speaking of Lúthien’s choice, Rutledge asserts: “The ‘choice’ of Lúthien is in a sense not a choice at all, for it is her destiny from before all time [. . .]. Could the virgin Mary have said no to the angel Gabriel at the time of the Annunciation?” (354). Traditional Catholic teaching would answer Rutledge’s rhetorical question: Yes. Mary could very well have said no to the angel Gabriel. Rutledge, however, objects to the positive answer to her question, saying “Many would say yes, putting the stress on Mary’s choice. But [. . .] that is to put the emphasis on the wrong place.” Rutledge concludes that Mary’s, like any other person’s, real “freedom” lies in being elected by God and then submitting to God’s plan.

True “freedom” does lie in submitting to God’s will, for in doing so the person cooperates with grace and is free from any false or enslaving views of reality. While every person desires what is perceived as good, a person’s knowledge of true good is limited and often corrupt; thus the person often chooses a lesser good, or even an evil, to their own detriment. Because God is limitless and is goodness itself, through his eternal omniscience he knows better than the person what the proper good is for that person. Everyone ought to respond positively to God’s calling of him or her; however, the person retains the free ability to reject God’s calling or election. Contrary to Calvin, and contrary to Rutledge, too, Catholic theology asserts that the person is able to resist God’s grace precisely because grace does not compel. It invites and enables the person to know and choose the good.

8. Tom Shippey says that the scene on Amon Hen furthers the “uncertainty over evil” that “dominates the entire structure of *The Lord of the Rings*” (*Road* 145). Either evil is external or internal, “sentient creature or psychic amplifier,” Shippey states. These two views “correspond respectively to the ‘heroic’ view of evil as something external to be resisted and the Boethian opinion that evil is essentially internal, psychological,

negative” (142). Shippey concludes that decisions would be easier for characters (and perhaps readers) if evil were clearly Manichean or Boethian in nature. “If evil were only the absence of good, for instance, then the Ring could never be anything other than a psychic amplifier [. . .] if evil were merely a hateful and external power without echo in the hearts of the good, then someone might have to take the Ring to the Cracks of Doom, but it need not be Frodo” (145).

9. At the Council of Elrond, Boromir initially responded to the clear indication of the Ring’s corruptive power by stating:

Saruman is a traitor, but did he not have a glimpse of wisdom? Why do you speak ever of hiding and destroying? Why should we not think that the Great Ring has come into our hands to serve us in the very hour of need? Wielding it the Free Lords of the Free may surely defeat the Enemy. [. . .] Valour needs first strength, and then a weapon. Let the Ring be your weapon if it has such power as you say. Take it and go forth to victory!” (1: 281).

In Lothlórien, the implied author more subtly describes Boromir’s continued desire for the Ring’s power. As the company is discussing Galadriel’s “searching” of their minds and hearts, the narrator states: “each had felt that he was offered a choice between a shadow full of fear that lay ahead, and something that he greatly desired: clear before his mind it lay, and to get it he had only to turn aside from the road and leave the Quest and the war against Sauron to others.” Boromir shares his experience: “Maybe it was only a test, and she thought to read our thoughts for her own good purpose; but almost I should have said that she was tempting us, and offering what she pretended to have the power to give. It need not be said that I refused to listen. The Men of Minas Tirith are true to their word.” The narrator comments, though, “what he thought that the Lady had offered him Boromir did not tell” (1: 373).

CHAPTER FIVE

Providence and the Person in *The Lord of the Rings*

Introduction

While guiding all events and actions to an ultimate good, Providence never denies creatures their freedom. The creation myth indicates that Ilúvatar permits his creation to do evil actions because he is powerful enough to bring good from them, ultimately turning all deeds toward a greater good. While the tales of *The Silmarillion* do not show this covenant working itself out in the world, *The Lord of the Rings* does offer a narrative model of Ilúvatar's promise to his creation. The story's action shows that the person is integral to a providential world order; yet the person's inherent limitations, exposed through personal failure and defeat, reveal the constant presence of a higher and greater authority within the world.

While arguing for the person's role in furthering the providential design, the chapter will conclude that the exercise of free will is neither limitless nor autonomous; rather, the person is dependent upon providence. Tolkien masterfully presents the person's limitations within a providential world order, suggesting the greater need for and role of a divine presence within human activity in the world. This chapter will argue that Gandalf's and Frodo's moments of limitation, failure, and defeat before opposing forces paradoxically open the door for a providential power to achieve the greater, unforeseen end which Ilúvatar promised.

The Pity of Bilbo Rules the Fate of Many

The pity that various characters show to Gollum throughout the story is the key example of rightly used free will contributing to the providential design. No evident good can come out of being merciful to Gollum, but several key figures still choose to do so. Their pity is a type of love for him as a fellow creature stemming from a greater love for creation's proper end. The bestowal of pity is an example of properly using the free will for another's sake, not one's own. To show pity signifies both one's power over a more vulnerable person and also one's refusal to abuse that power. The stronger person *has* the strength to assert his will over the weaker person, but he chooses *not* to demonstrate such dominance, thus properly restraining his possession of power. While Gandalf foreshadows that Gollum may still play an important role in the story, the characters showing him pity and mercy do not do so expecting any reward of some kind. They show him pity and mercy simply for his sake. They choose, then, not for themselves but for the other person.

Bilbo's Choice to Pity

Bilbo sets the standard of proper behavior toward an undeserving other. In *The Hobbit*, the reader sees Bilbo's deliberation over whether to slay Gollum or not. After having found the One Ring by "luck," and after having runaway from Gollum when their riddle game ends, Bilbo finds that the other blocks his escape. Wearing the Ring, Bilbo stands in the tunnel looking at the murderous Gollum and hearing him mutter death-threats. Bilbo's first thought is naturally for his own self-preservation and escape: "[Bilbo] was desperate. He must get away, out of this horrible darkness, while he had

any strength left. He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him.”

Bilbo does not kill Gollum, however, for two reasons. The first is Bilbo’s innate sense of justice: “No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him, or tried to yet.” The second reason Bilbo chooses to spare Gollum’s life, however, is the more significant. The narrator describes Bilbo’s pity for Gollum as springing from a perception of the corruption of the person before him:

A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo’s heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering. All these thoughts passed in a flash of a second. He trembled. And then quite suddenly in another flash, as if lifted by a new strength and resolve, he leaped. (*Hobbit* 97)

Bilbo does not see Gollum as an animal or a monster but as a person, terribly corrupted from what he once was and ought still to be. While the Ring tempts its wearer to seize power, wielding it over others, Bilbo begins his ownership of it by refusing to exert the advantage it offers him over Gollum. In showing mercy to an enemy, Bilbo sets a high standard of behavior for others to follow. He risks his own death by choosing not to kill Gollum in the tunnel, but he chooses to take this risk, sacrificing his own position of power for the sake of an other, even an enemy.

The Pity of Gandalf, Aragorn, and the Elves

Other characters iterate Bilbo’s example: Gandalf, Aragorn, and the elves all show mercy to Gollum by sparing his life, recognizing a person who is now “old and very wretched” (1: 69). Gandalf, as one of the Wise and thus most clearly seeing the providential design to the world, repeatedly indicates the miniscule but still existent hope

that Gollum can be “cured”—or, in other words, that he can regain his personhood with its concomitant freedom rather than remain in his current state as an enslaved, animalistic creature. When Gandalf and Aragorn capture Gollum, they pity him, recognizing who he once was. They properly lament the gap between the then-Sméagol and the now-Gollum. Frodo, to the contrary, initially does not see the lamentable nature of Gollum’s descent, degrading him into a non-person by calling him “Gollum-creature.” Gandalf, however, calls Frodo to task for dehumanizing Gollum, personalizing him for Frodo: “I think it is a sad story. [. . .] And it might have happened to others, even to some hobbits that I have known.” Gandalf and Aragorn, though showing clemency to Gollum, cannot trust him, and they give him to the elves to hold captive.

The elves, like Gandalf and Aragorn, also see Gollum’s fallen nature and pity him. Yet the elves are more trusting of Gollum, or else they are more deceived by his apparent weakness and docility, and he escapes from their watch. Gollum does not deserve the others’ pity and his base behavior reinforces his lack of merit; yet, despite Gollum repeatedly proving his unworthiness, Gandalf’s important words to Frodo admonishing him to pity another echo throughout the work.

The Pity of Frodo

Gandalf’s discussion with Frodo about Gollum’s involvement in the Ring’s history introduces the concept of pity almost at the story’s very opening. Properly understanding the word is essential for the reader to see the role pity plays in countering the dominating power associated with the Ring. *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary* gives the primary definition of “pity” as “a sympathetic sorrow for one suffering, distressed, or unhappy”; and the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “a feeling or emotion of

tenderness aroused by the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, and prompting a desire for its relief.” The *Merriam-Webster* defines “mercy” as “a compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one’s power.”

The implied author plays upon the differing nuances of the word “pity” through first Frodo’s and then Gandalf’s differing uses of it. Frodo uses pity in its secondary meaning as “something to be regretted” when he says, “What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!” Gandalf, though, converting the word from Frodo’s usage, uses it in its primary sense while also adding to it the companion word, “Mercy”: “Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity” (1: 68-69). The author’s capitalization of “Pity” identifies a proper noun signifying a specific meaning. By coupling Pity with capitalized “Mercy,” Gandalf suggests that Bilbo not only could pity Gollum but also occupied a dominant position over him, which Bilbo did not exploit.

In calling for Gollum’s merited death, Frodo expresses a world order defined entirely by justice. He counters Gandalf’s argument for mercy by presenting the classical argument of justice—receiving in proper measure what one is due. Frodo says, “I do not feel any pity for Gollum.” Gandalf replies, “You have not seen him.” “‘No, and I don’t want to,’ said Frodo. ‘I can’t understand you. Do you mean to say that you, and the Elves, have let him live on after all those horrible deeds? Now at any rate he is as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy. He deserves death.’” (1: 69). Justice as the inescapable judgment for deeds is a key element of *wyrd* in defining a fated world order. As F. Anne

Payne says, a hero knowingly or unknowingly transgresses the laws of *wyrd* and it exacts punishment on him (16). The purpose of *wyrd*, like the purpose of justice, is to maintain and restore order. Through offering a new foundation for proper action in pity and mercy rather than justice, the implied author implicitly undermines the traditional role of *wyrd*.

Gandalf, using Frodo's own view of justice, questions it as a guide for moral action. He answers Frodo's statement that Gollum deserves death by saying, "Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends." Gandalf implies there are "ends" to see because there is a providential plan to the world's workings. True justice is possible only if the judge of a person's actions is in a position to see the *telos* toward which all things are ordered. Because created beings cannot see "all ends," because they only can judge from their limited perspective within time, they cannot know Ilúvatar's providential plan; thus, they should be wary in using only justice as a guide.

Pity and Mercy joined with Justice are the pillars of Middle-earth's providential world order. Ralph Wood, arguing for the religious implications of Tolkien's work, says, "Christian tradition overcomes the limits of human justice by insisting that it can never be divorced from divine mercy [. . .]. [God's] judgment is but the enforcement of his mercy [. . .] mercy is not contrary to justice but the true realization of it" (96-97). Mercy neither negates justice nor the need for it. A person must make reparation for evil conduct and the extension of mercy does not simply wipe clean the slate of accountability. The mercy that Gandalf advocates is not an ineffectual virtue but a vigorous and demanding reinterpretation of the classical sense of justice that places a deeper responsibility on the

person's conduct. The individual characters who act rightly by showing pity and mercy to undeserving others are choosing the more difficult option away from the self and its interests. In so doing, by their proper choice, they contribute to the actualization of the providential plan.

Over the story's course, Frodo comes to pity Gollum. Frodo's initial refusal to do so springs from a haughty attitude that, if continued, would be similar to Gollum's initial possession of the Ring—a ruthlessness and pitilessness for others. His experiences bearing the Ring enable him to act in a way he could not in the Shire. Gandalf had suggested that Frodo did not pity Gollum because he had only heard stories about him without ever seeing him. When Frodo does encounter him for the first time, he has true sympathy for him. Frodo, having experienced evil's power manifested in the Ring and the Ringwraiths, now can see himself in Gollum. He now affirms Gandalf's dark assessment that Gollum's corruption "could have happened even to some hobbits I have known." Frodo acknowledges the Ring's corruptive influence on Gollum because he experiences it eroding himself; and, in being compassionate towards him, Frodo is also showing pity to the potential creature he could become. Sam observes the two Ringbearers' similarity: "For a moment it appeared to Sam that his master had grown and Gollum had shrunk: a tall stern shadow, a mighty lord who hid his brightness in grey cloud, and at his feet a little whining dog. Yet the two were in some way akin and not alien: they could reach one another's minds" (2: 225).

When he first meets Gollum face to face, Frodo must put into practice Gandalf's words regarding pity. Having caught Gollum, who has been following them since Moria, Frodo and Sam debate whether or not to kill him. Still following a code of justice and

echoing Bilbo's initial reasons for not killing Gollum, Frodo says that they cannot kill him because he has not hurt them, nor can they kill him to prevent the potential harm Gollum could do them. Reflecting his still-latent tendency toward justice rather than mercy, Frodo says, "if we kill him, we must kill him outright. But we can't do that, not as things are. Poor wretch! He has done us no harm. [. . .] What he means to do is another matter." The narrator describes an important moment of silence in which Frodo must determine whether to slay Gollum or not: "It seemed to Frodo then that he heard, quite plainly but far off, voices out of the past." Frodo hears the voice of his former pitiless self who wanted Gollum dead. At this point, the narrator repeats the precise exchange between Frodo and Gandalf that had occurred in the Shire. Such repetition of dialogue emphasizes pity and mercy's importance to the author's story. In that moment of silence, responding to and altering his former self's disdain for pity, Frodo chooses mercy over justice: "Very well [. . .] But still I am afraid. And yet, as you see, I will not touch the creature. For now that I see him, I do pity him" (2: 222).

Frodo chooses pity knowing full well the danger Gollum poses to him. Mercy is not naiveté about evil and the danger it poses. Though refusing to kill Gollum, Frodo declares, "But we won't let you go either. You're full of wickedness and mischief, Gollum. You will have to come with us, that's all, while we keep an eye on you." Knowing Gollum is a threat to him yet still showing him mercy, Frodo makes a choice without any self-interest. Killing Gollum would seem to be in Frodo's best interest, but Frodo, following Bilbo's example, denies his own benefits and for another's good. Such an act of mercy is possible only out of concrete love for another's personhood—what the person should have been, what he is, and what he still might be.

During his journey, Frodo's initial desire for justice becomes a desire for mercy, both for the sake of another and for the sake of himself. Frodo's experience of the Ring's power and its ability to corrupt its bearer assists him in coming to pity Gollum. Given that he bears the Ring, Frodo wields a particularly strong power over Gollum, who still worships the Ring; yet Frodo resists the temptation to dominate the other. While he still has the ability to do so and without any purpose or foreknowledge that he will later benefit from his decisions, Frodo uses his free will properly by not subjugating Gollum to his power. When the force of the Ring later overpowers his physical self and his ability to exercise free will, the repercussions of his proper use of it do serve to benefit him.

The Pity of Sam

Sam is the one character who does not pity Gollum when he sees him, instead showing him meanness and even cruelty. Sam considering only Gollum's unworthiness, follows the rule of justice towards him and wants him executed. Sam is not wrong to suspect Gollum of evil intentions, but he is wrong in refusing to recognize and mourn Gollum's descent into corruption. While Sam in his use of free will shows great selflessness to those he loves, he does not display the same love for his enemy, despite having two such models of behavior to emulate—Bilbo and Frodo.¹

In their first and violent encounter with Gollum, Sam is astounded at Frodo's clemency. While Sam does not kill Gollum after they have fought because "he could not avenge himself: his miserable enemy lay groveling on the stones whimpering" (2: 221), he nonetheless urges Frodo to bind him and to let him die. Sam, arguing from the just basis of a preemptive measure, advises Frodo to execute Gollum: "he meant to [harm us], *and* he means to, I'll warrant." After Frodo has made the decision not merely to pity

Gollum but to command him to lead them to Mordor, Sam's response continues to be one of mistrust and disgust. Even as Frodo has a greater sympathy for Gollum and treats him with greater dignity, Sam sympathizes with him less, treating him with less dignity:

"[Sam] suspected him more deeply than ever, and if possible liked the new Gollum, the Sméagol, less than the old" (2: 225).

Sam's lack of pity culminates in what J. R. R. Tolkien called the saddest moment of the book (*Letters* 221). Sam wakes up to see Gollum touching Frodo and interprets the gesture as, "Gollum— 'pawing at master.'" He responds "roughly," as he has been in the habit of doing, without properly interpreting the "softness" of Gollum's response:

"Nothing. [. . .] Nice master!" Sam's refusal to accept that a corrupt person like Gollum could repent contributes to Gollum's very decision not to do so. Sam belatedly

understands the authenticity of Gollum's beneficent behavior but only after witnessing his regression back into his angry, malicious self in response to Sam's accusations. Sam regrets his treatment of Gollum, as the narrator indicates: "Sam felt a bit remorseful,

though not more trustful." In his limited way, he tries to make amends for his actions by justifying them to Gollum: "I'm sorry, but you startled me out of my sleep. And I

shouldn't have been sleeping, and that made me a bit sharp [. . .] Sorry" (2: 324). As

indicated in the previous chapter, this scene reveals the remnant of Gollum's free will,

but it also equally reveals one of Sam's chances either to retain his hardness of heart or to

soften his stance towards Gollum. While revealing Gollum's decision to reject a type of

grace and its accompanying pity, the episode equally shows Sam's decision to accept that

grace and to show the mercy such grace enables. Circumstances give these two

characters the same grace-filled moment, which one freely accepts while the other sadly rejects.

Though Sam serves as a “stumbling block” to Gollum’s repentance (Tolkien, *Letters* 221), Gollum’s betrayal of them to Shelob validates Sam’s suspicions about and hatred for the other. Further, Gollum’s actions also justify Sam’s renewed rejection of mercy in favor of justice as he vows to kill his enemy at the first opportunity. However, at the entrance to Mount Doom, when Sam has his first opportunity to exact vengeance on Gollum, he chooses instead to show pity and mercy. In his internal deliberation, Sam contrasts mercy with justice in a way similar to Gandalf’s and Frodo’s initial conversation: “Sam’s hand wavered. His mind was hot with wrath and the memory of evil. It would be just to slay this treacherous, murderous creature, just and many times deserved; and also it seemed the only safe thing to do.” While clearly understanding the nature and demands of justice, Sam hesitates to carry it out.

Though Gollum has not changed, Sam now possesses an expanded capacity for sympathizing with his enemy. Sam is able to understand Gollum as a degraded person better than he could earlier, for not only has Sam borne the Ring, but more, he has seen the degradation of Frodo—physically and spiritually—before its power. Sam ultimately follows the precedent set by Bilbo, Gandalf, and Frodo in pitying Gollum, choosing to show him mercy, not the justice he has long desired to mete out, as the narrator indicates:

deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched. He himself, though only for a little while, had borne the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum’s shriveled mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief ever in life again. But Sam had no words to express what he felt. (2: 222)

Given the reader's expectation that Sam will slay his nemesis and is justified in doing so, this act of mercy becomes one of the more important displays of pity and mercy in the work.

Sam demonstrates pity to Gollum without any disillusionment about the reality of Gollum's deeply corrupt nature. In releasing Gollum from his power, Sam declares, "I don't trust you, not as far as I could kick you; but be off." Through using his will in direct opposition to his natural desire to kill Gollum, Sam contributes to the providential design of the Ring's destruction. Sam lets Gollum live; thus is Gollum present at the end to bite the Ring off Frodo's finger and to fall into the mountain's fire, destroying the Ring along with himself. Sam's unreasonable choice to spare Gollum results in the unintended consequence of saving Frodo. When he shows mercy to Gollum, Sam does not follow his past primary motivation for acting, the protection of those people and things he loves; yet, through such an unexpected choice, Sam unintentionally achieves his fundamental intentions. While no thought of personal benefits motivated Sam to choose to act rightly, he does benefit from the effects of his proper choice—the salvation of Frodo and all of Middle-earth, including Sam's beloved Shire, from destruction or enslavement.

Providence Cooperating with and Enabling Free Will's Proper Agency

One of the central themes *The Lord of the Rings* reiterates is the person's important ability to choose rightly. As the characters' interactions with Gollum also show, the proper choice has little to do with the chooser's personal desires or benefits, often even going against self-interests. But the story indicates that characters intentionally, but more often unintentionally, thwart evil and achieve good purposes through deliberating and choosing well simply for the good's own sake. The characters'

proper use of their free will in both minor and major decisions becomes part of a larger providential design for the story.

While *The Lord of the Rings* shows the ability and importance of free will in responding to external influences, it does not present free will as fully independent of those external influences. In the world order of Middle-earth, a person's ability to choose does not occur in individualized, morally neutral circumstances, for external influences for good or evil also affect characters in their key moments of choice. Despite the author's clear establishment of good's greater power over evil in Middle-earth, the author also makes clear that malevolent powers directed against the person exist, and the person, left to his own devices, would be overcome by them. The person is able to overcome evil power not merely through personal effort but through an even greater power's enabling and assisting of the person. In this way, the narrator suggests Ilúvatar is not a "clockwork" god, creating the universe then leaving it to play itself out, but remains present and active, though unseen and unnamed, in people's lives and the world's history. As Paul Kocher states, "Tolkien cannot allow his cosmic order to be a fixed, mechanistic, unchangeable chain of causes and effects. The order must be built flexibly around creaturely free will and possible personal providential interventions from on high" (*Master* 39). Even though the narrator never directly names the intervening providential power, he indicates its presence through the characters' affirmation or faith in it and also through establishing a link between an unnamed power's presence and the person's proper use of free will.

Sam's Use of Free Will Aided by Providence

Sam is a model throughout the story of one who chooses repeatedly for another's sake rather than his own. In that he desires another's good, Sam's will is in accord with providence. As the previous section discussed, Sam's limitation is that he does not extend the desire for good beyond those he loves. Though he repeatedly shows unkindness to Gollum, thwarting his conversion, Sam ultimately chooses mercy even for Gollum because he experiences an interior development during his final march with Frodo through Mordor. During the final path to Mount Doom, circumstances force Sam to make decisions first on his own and then on behalf of himself and his master, Frodo, who is increasingly incapable of exercising his will. The author links Sam's moments of choice and action with either Sam's own affirmation of a higher, guiding power, or the implication of such power's presence within the action.

The first instance that shows providence working with the person's will is in Sam's battle with Shelob. Sam waits for the spider's final deadly stroke against him, as the narrator observes: "Even as Sam himself crouched, looking at her, seeing his death in her eyes, a thought came to him, as if some remote voice had spoken, and he fumbled in his breast with his left hand, and found what he sought: cold and hard and solid it seemed to his touch in a phantom world of horror, the Phial of Galadriel." The narrator implies that Sam is transcendently prompted to turn from his expectation of death towards a means of defense. The narrator in the next paragraph again mentions "voices," connecting the implicit "remote voice" of the previous paragraph to the explicit voices of the elves. As soon as Sam grasps the Phial, he "faintly" says the name "Galadriel!" And the narrator directly declares that, following the invocation, Sam then "heard voices far

off but clear: the crying of the Elves as they walked under the stars in the beloved shadows of the shire, and the music of the Elves as it came through his sleep in the Hall of Fire in the house of Elrond.”

The scene reveals Sam acting in consort with other powers prompting then strengthening him to act. He first cries out Galadriel’s name “faintly,” but upon hearing the voices clearly, Sam’s “tongue *was loosed* and *his voice* cried in a language which he did not know: *A Elbereth Gilthoniel / o menel palan-diriel, / le nallon sí di’nguruthos! / A tiro nin, Fanuilos!*” (2: 338, emphasis added). The narrator’s use of the passive voice separates Sam as actor from Sam as “voice,” suggesting providential power working through Sam. Tolkien comments upon this passage, indicating that Sam was “‘inspired’ to make this invocation in a language he did not know.” Tolkien’s further translation and explanation of the “invocation” makes quite clear it is a petition to a transcendent power, specifically invoking the power of Varda (Elbereth Gilthoniel) who dwells with her “spouse,” Manwë, in “Amon Uilos,” a connection to the “Fanuilos” of Sam’s prayer. Tolkien states: “I think it is composed or inspired for his particular situation. It means, more or less: ‘O Elbereth Starkindler [. . .] from heaven gazing-afar, to thee I cry now in the shadow of (the fear of) death. O look towards me, Everwhite!’” (*Letters* 278). Paul Kocher argues that “what finally routs Shelob is a prayer to Elbereth in the elfin tongue” (*Master* 47).

However, while another power inspires Sam to pray for the Valar’s intercession on his behalf, in answering his prayer, other powers do not replace Sam; rather, the narrator describes a mutual working between the supernal powers and Sam’s own will. His prayer for help seems to infuse him with the power to act against Shelob.

Immediately after the prayer, the narrator first says Sam “staggered to his feet”; and then more significantly, Sam acknowledges himself as an active person: he “was Samwise the hobbit, Hamfast’s son, again.”

After acknowledging his personal weakness by praying and then asserting himself in response to his prayer, Sam demonstrates to the reader that another power strengthens him, while at the same time his actions increase the other’s power. He holds up the Phial and the narrator says, “As if his indomitable spirit had set its potency in motion, the glass blazed suddenly like a white torch in his hand. It flamed like a star that leaping from the firmament sears the dark air with intolerable light” (2: 339). The narrator’s description of the Phial directly connects the prayer Sam has just made, in which he calls upon the “Starkindler,” to the action of the Phial, flaming “like a star [. . .] leaping from the firmament.” Clearly, the Phial has a potency of its own apart from Sam, and yet the Phial does not “blaze like a white torch” on its own or by itself. Sam’s will and courage releases, or reveals, the inherent power the Phial contains or channels. In the inter-working of the Phial’s power with Sam’s own, the narrator describes an instance in which neither Sam alone nor an external power exclusive of Sam defeats the monster, Shelob. Rather, as the Beren and Lúthien narrator also describes it, the two things—providence and the person—work with one another to defeat a power greater than the person alone.

Sam further demonstrates the important role the person’s will plays within Middle-earth’s providential design when, like Beren, he chooses not to despair and to give up the quest but to continue the journey into Mordor. Before the face of Sauron’s apparent might, Sam suddenly sees the other’s demonic strength as extremely weak and transitory in comparison to the might of other permanent powers. Sam’s expression of

his sudden insight articulates, as nowhere else in the entire epic, Tolkien's own vision of the foundational providential world order in which goodness will ultimately prevail:

There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. His song in the Tower had been defiance rather than hope; for then he was thinking of himself. Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master's, ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles and laid himself by Frodo's side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep. (3: 199)

In this moment, Sam experiences the assurance of good's ultimate and supreme authority over evil's false façade of power. The image of the star also calls to mind Sam's earlier invocation to Elbereth Gilthoniel, whose name translates into "Starkindler," or "Queen of the Stars." He responds to this vision out of a faith that he and Frodo are part of the design for the Shadow's passing away. In casting himself into a deep untroubled sleep, Sam entrusts himself and Frodo into the power that he defiantly invoked earlier in Shelob's lair and that he now tranquilly discerns in the glimmering of the star.

After expressing this clear affirmation of good's power and Sam's hope in it, the narrator then describes an apparent vacillation of Sam's convictions. He moves from total confidence in good's victory to an apparent total loss of confidence. The sudden shift in Sam's outlook seems strange and incongruous given Sam's stalwart, even stubborn, character. Yet, the narrator clearly indicates that Sam reaches a point in which he has no more hope of success. The occurring shift between hope and hopelessness is a shift between definitions of the term. Just as the implied author makes a word play upon the differing definitions of lower- and upper-case pity, so too does the implied author make the same play upon understandings of lower- and upper-case "hope," or as Josef

Pieper—the 20th-century Thomist philosopher and contemporary of Tolkien—terms them, “natural” and “supernatural” hope.² Natural “hope” is the expectation or desire of temporal success or accomplishment; while supernatural “Hope” refers to the second of the three theological virtues: it is the expectation of God’s fulfillment of his promises both in and apart from time.

Hope is the integral virtue in a Christian providential world order. Josef Pieper defines the supernatural virtue of hope in his work on the three theological virtues:

hope is a steadfast turning toward the true fulfillment of man’s nature, that is, toward good, only when it has its source in the reality of grace in man and is directed toward supernatural happiness in God [. . .] hope experiences this firmness of orientation toward good above all as a God-given turning to God, that is, as a theological virtue. (100)

Sam’s loss of “hope” does not signify a loss of “Hope”; rather, as Sam loses temporal hope he gains the more essential virtue of Hope. Pieper’s work further helps to explain the narrative’s shift between temporal hopelessness and eternal hopefulness. He says it is a critical misunderstanding to think “the fulfillment of supernatural hope must occur through the fulfillment of natural hope” (112). Thus, Sam’s increased resolution to continue *despite* the loss of “hope” makes more sense in light of Pieper’s clarification between the two understandings of hope as natural or supernatural.

In the heart of Mordor, Sam loses the remaining personal motivation for choosing well, the natural hope of his and Frodo’s survival after the Ring’s destruction. The narrator describes the moment when Sam realizes that he and Frodo might be able to destroy the Ring, but they certainly will not live to return to the Shire:

Never for long had hope died in his staunch heart, and always until now he had taken some thought for their return. But the bitter truth came home to him at last: at best their provisions would take them to their goal; and when the task was done, there they would come to an end, alone,

houseless, foodless in the midst of a terrible desert. There could be no return. (3: 211)

He reaches a point where he chooses to continue knowing death and destruction will be the ends of his path. At this point of destitution, Sam's decision is only based in an unstated supernatural Hope—he accepts, as other character examples do, that simple survival is not true victory. His individual, outward victory within the temporal order and the good's ultimate triumph outside of it are separate things. While losing natural hope that he and Frodo will survive, he continues to live out the supernatural hope that the earlier vision of the star infused in him: evil is not dominant but transient.

In resolving to destroy the Ring, Sam once again chooses against his inclinations. His desire is to return to the Shire, but he decides to complete the task that the Council gave to Frodo and himself, acknowledging his willingness to lose his life in the attempt. While Sam may have lost natural hope, his supernatural hope helps him to reject despair. His alter-ego argues with him over continuing the quest, emphasizing that since they cannot succeed, they should stop, dying now rather than later. Sam, expressing the same defeatist stance as Denethor, says to himself, “It’s all quite useless. [. . .] You are the fool, going on hoping and toiling. You could have lain down and gone to sleep together days ago, if you hadn’t been so dogged. But you’ll die just the same, or worse. You might just as well lie down now and give it up. You’ll never get to the top anyway” (3: 216). Sam rejects this temptation and having made a choice, the narrator says of him, “his head seemed clear again. No more debates disturbed his mind. He knew all the arguments of despair and would not listen to them. His will was set, and only death would break it” (3: 217). While Frodo's ability to exercise the will is finally consumed by the Ring's coercive power, Sam's will actively resists its temptation to despair, to turn

inwards upon himself and his fear of death; instead of becoming paralyzed by fear, Sam bears the burden of the Ring by picking up Frodo and carrying him up Mount Doom's slope.

Pieper defines despair as the opposite of hope: "a perverse anticipation of the nonfulfillment of hope" (113). Contrasting the modern psychological use of "despair" as a state one falls into against the will, Pieper says despair is a sin precisely because it "describes a decision of the will." *Acedia*, or sloth, "is the root of despair," according to Pieper (117), and the "one who is trapped in *acedia* has neither the courage nor the will to be as great as he really is. He would prefer to be less great in order thus to avoid the obligation of greatness" (119). Pieper's argument regarding *acedia* echoes the narrator's statement that Sam refuses to heed "all the arguments of despair":

Temptations to *acedia* and despair can be overcome only by the vigilant resistance of an alert and steady watchfulness. Despair [. . .] is not destroyed by "work" but only by that clear-sighted magnanimity that courageously expects and has confidence in the greatness of its own nature and by the grace-filled impetus of the hope of eternal life. (122)

Having offered an implicit illustration of hope, the integral virtue in a providential world order, the narrator then makes an explicit reference to the unnamed agent enabling the character's will: "Suddenly a sense of urgency which he did not understand came to Sam. It was almost as if he had been called: 'Now, now, or it will be too late!' He braced himself and got up. Frodo also seemed to have felt the call. He struggled to his knees" (3: 219). Despite their utter exhaustion, they both choose to respond to the external prompting by crawling up the slope, until Sam finally must carry the debilitated Frodo. The story clearly presents Sam as a person able to choose freely without coercion, using his free will in service to others, and ultimately in service to his understanding of the

good itself. His choices result in consequences that contribute to the realization of the providential design—the triumph of good over evil on a broad scale and, on a personal scale, his own and Frodo’s physical salvation.

Frodo’s Key Moments of Choice Assisted by Providence

Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, hidden or unnamed forces work to guide, assist, and protect all of the characters against evil powers exceeding their limited capacity to overcome. Even while Frodo, for instance, remains free and able to reject the Ring, he does not exercise his will autonomously. Suggesting that an unstated presence aids Frodo’s ability to choose rightly, the narrator always pairs an implicit or explicit affirmation of providence with Frodo’s key moments of choice to reject the Ring and its offer of dominating power.

The narrator connects Frodo’s first use of the will to accept the Ring’s burden with an explicit affirmation of providence’s continued role in the Ring’s history. Frodo could not control the circumstances that forced the Ring onto him, though he did not at first know the corruptive nature of his possession. When he finds out the truth, he chooses to keep the Ring from the enemy until told otherwise or relieved of it by another, yet he makes this choice within the context of providential intention. Gandalf suggests the presence of a providence that intends for Frodo to keep the Ring by indicating that Bilbo did not find the Ring by pure chance; thus, in the same way, Frodo did not get it by chance, either: “Behind that [Bilbo’s finding of the Ring] there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought” (1: 65). Frodo affirms his

belief in divine agency by not scoffing at Gandalf's words, but simply questioning the unstated power's reasoning in choosing a weak figure such as himself for such an important task: "Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?" Because the providential intentions are not clear to any one of the characters within the temporal setting of the action, Gandalf explains that, "Such questions cannot be answered. [. . .] But you have been chosen" (1: 70).

The narrator repeatedly uses the passive voice to convey the active presence of an unseen power. Because the passive construction implies an actor, the reader should respond to the passive construction, "you have been chosen," by asking "chosen by whom?" or converting the passive to an active question: "Who has chosen you?" The author does not answer such questions, but, by using such rhetorical devices, the author makes the unnamed mover continuously present in the story's action while never calling it by name. Frodo trusts in the providential choosing of him, however, and Gandalf's expression of this providential summons enables Frodo to accept the role to which another power calls him. He says, "As far as I understand what you have said, I suppose I must keep the Ring and guard it, at least for the present, whatever it may do to me" (1: 71).

Weathertop. The narrator pairs the external power with Frodo's own will in two significant scenes of action, not deliberation: Frodo's resistance of the Ringwraiths at Weathertop and at the Ford of Rivendell. Both of these scenes will be discussed in the ensuing section as revealing the person's limitations before greater powers, but I want to note here the link between providential power and Frodo's subsequent ability to resist actively, if unsuccessfully, the enemy forces.

On Weathertop, Frodo succumbs to the temptation to put on the Ring while also showing his willed resistance to the wraiths. The narrator uses a combination of active and passive verb tenses to convey the intermingling of Frodo's and another's will in defying the evil before Frodo: the wraith "sprang forward and bore down on Frodo. At that moment Frodo threw himself forward on the ground, and he heard himself crying aloud: *O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!* At the same time he struck at the feet of his enemy." Though he is stabbed, Frodo manages both to remove the Ring and to keep it from the wraiths: "with a last effort Frodo, dropping his sword, slipped the Ring from his finger and closed his right hand tight upon it" (1: 210). The verb tense moves from active to passive to active as Frodo shifts from actor ("he drew his own sword") to passive observer ("he heard himself crying aloud") and back to actor ("he struck at the feet of his enemy," and he "slipped the Ring from his finger"). As Sam's invocation of Gilthoniel assists him in overcoming the greater evil of Shelob, so Frodo's passive invocation of Varda better protects him against the wraith than does his sword, enabling him to remove the Ring from his finger, thus guarding it from the wraiths. Because of the immense power of the Ringwraiths, other characters rightly marvel at a mere hobbit's ability to resist, but the narrator suggests that Frodo's ability to do so is linked with his invocation of the Valar's power. Aragorn also notes that, while Frodo does manage to stab the wraith, "more deadly to him was the name of Elbereth" (1: 211). Thus a beneficent power assists Frodo in defending himself and guarding the Ring against the enemy.

Ford of Rivendell. Frodo again invokes the Valar in defying all nine of the wraiths. Aragorn had surmised that the reason the wraiths did not complete their attack on Weathertop was because there were only five present, not the full company of nine.

However, when Frodo encounters them at the Ford of Rivendell, he not only faces their full force, but he also is very close to the shadow world in which the wraiths live and rule. Thus, not only is the enemy at its strongest point, but Frodo is at his weakest. He fully sees the grimness of his situation as he seems defenseless before the enemy's strength. As the narrator indicates, "There were Nine Riders at the water's edge below, and Frodo's spirit quailed before the threat of their uplifted faces. He knew of nothing that would prevent them from crossing as easily as he had done." But regardless of knowing his own weakness before the enemy, Frodo, as he did on Weathertop, still courageously resists them. Whereas earlier he faced the Riders and "heard himself" invoking the Valar, here at the Ford, Frodo actively and openly invokes these higher powers. In defiance of the Riders, Frodo lifts his sword and cries out, "by Elbereth and Lúthien the Fair [. . .] you shall have neither the Ring nor me!" (1: 226-227). Though, as the following section will show, Frodo is not capable of holding back the full company of wraiths, his ability to withstand them even to his limited extent is connected with his invocation of divine powers, such as Elbereth (the Vala) and Lúthien (the elf maiden who chose to be mortal).

Council of Elrond. The author's pairing of an external power with Frodo's deliberation continues at the Council of Elrond. As a means of showing that the author of *The Lord of the Rings* does not establish a fated world order for the characters, the previous chapter focused on the Council scene specifically to show the free nature of the person's use of free will. This section, demonstrating the fundamental authority of providence, will examine the episode as a means of showing that in Middle-earth the person is not an isolated being, choosing without reference to or influence of something

beyond the self; an external providential power enables the person to use free will properly.

Elrond opens the council by repeating Gandalf's belief in an outside power's intentional purposes bringing representatives of the world's kingdoms and races to Rivendell. What appears as coincidence—the arrival of a dwarf, human warrior, and an elf lord, together with Aragorn, Frodo, and the Ring—is not. Elrond says:

What shall we do with the Ring [. . .]? That is the doom we must deem. That is the purpose for which you are called hither. Called, I say, though I have not called you to me, strangers from distant lands. You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet it is not so. Believe rather that is so ordered that we, who sit here, and none others, must now find counsel for the peril of the world. (1: 255)

Elrond moves beyond Gandalf's subtle and implicit hints to reference explicitly the role of an unnamed third party as having the authority to call and bring together the disparate groups of people for a purpose—the Ring's destruction. Elrond's dismissal of the purely coincidental nature of the divergent groups' coming together affirms Gandalf's original assessment of "chance": "Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ringmaker" (1: 65). Analyzing the Council scene, Paul Kocher argues that it reveals the work's pattern of providence and human free will cooperating: "the whole purpose of assembling its leaders was not to force any course of action upon them but to have them freely debate it for themselves. The conclusions of the Council are not predetermined in any way, though its summoning was" (*Master* 41).

The council scene begins and ends in an affirmation of a providential design to all events in Middle-earth. Elrond opens the council by stating another power had brought the group together to decide what to do with the Ring. The scene concludes with Elrond again stating his faith in a purpose and design to events. After discussing the Ring's

history and the necessity of destroying it, the group is silent regarding who should carry the Ring to Mount Doom. Frodo breaks the silence by offering to be the Ringbearer. As the previous chapter indicated, Frodo freely makes this decision with no coercion from the “calling” power that Elrond affirms; however, another power contributes to Frodo’s proper use of the will. Implying the presence of this power when Frodo makes his decision, the narrator says, “At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice” (1: 284). Just as on Weathertop, Frodo “heard himself crying aloud” when he invokes the name of Elbereth (1: 208), so in this scene, Frodo again hears himself speaking, as if he is the passive not active agent. The author indicates that, while never coercing Frodo, the outside providential power is necessary to enable him in rejecting evil but also to prompt him in accepting the good. Frodo needs providential assistance to withstand the Ringwraiths, but he also needs its assistance to be able to accept the errand of carrying and destroying the Ring. As the next section will indicate, the person’s will is not capable of accomplishing such a Herculean task, requiring providence to work through the person’s limitations before evil cosmic powers.

After Frodo’s decision, Elrond again uses language suggesting that another entity possesses the authority to appoint people tasks. Mirroring Frodo’s own conditional clause when he first accepted the Ring in the Shire (“As far as I understand what you have said, I suppose I must keep the Ring” [1: 71]), Elrond says, “If I understand aright all that I have heard [. . .] I think that this task is appointed for you, Frodo; and that if you do not find a way, no one will. This is the hour of the Shire-folk [. . .]. Who of all the Wise could have foreseen it? Or, if they are wise, why should they expect to know it,

until the hour has struck?” (1: 284). Elrond does not proclaim providential design with utter certainty but modestly expresses his confidence that the future is not foreseeable precisely because it is not predetermined.

Lothlórien. In Lothlórien, Galadriel further defines the nature of time and the interaction of divine and human wills in actualizing the future. By describing the future as not predetermined, both Elrond and Galadriel immediately place the context of Middle-earth’s world order outside a fated perspective. In a fatalistic system, external powers, denying the person’s freedom, inevitably compel him or her towards a forced future, usually destructive in nature. Elrond and Galadriel counter such determinism. Being limited by their place in a temporal framework, Galadriel, Elrond, and Gandalf, some of the “truly Wise,” cannot predict the future precisely because unknown agents are present making it unfixed, such as the person’s free will, the power of evil but also the greater power of good interceding in the course of events.

The “Mirror of Galadriel” serves as the object by which the implied author can better convey how the temporal order unfolds within Middle-earth and what place the person has within it. The “Mirror,” Galadriel indicates, “shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be” (1: 377). She specifically does not say that the Mirror shows things that *will* be. Because the future is not a set dimension, the Mirror shows potential, not absolute, future events. Thomas Shippey adds the Mirror passage to the numerous other prophecies made by and about characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. He says these prophecies may “seem to deny the idea of free will being left intact by the forces of providence” because they suggest that “some things are bound to happen regardless of what people do or choose.” Shippey concludes, however, that it is

wrong to reach such conclusions (*Road* 168). He says Galadriel's description of the Mirror shows that prophecies within the work do not signify a fated world order; instead, they point to an interaction between fate and free will:

[Galadriel] articulates a theory of compromise between fate and free will once more at least a millennium old. [. . .] It is important to realize, though, that antiquarian as Tolkien's motives often were, and 'pre-scientific' as the opinions of Galadriel [. . .] seem, what Tolkien was writing about is still in a way a live issue. [. . .] Tolkien in other words never lost his belief in the reality and continuity not only of language and history, but of human nature and of some intellectual problems. (*Road* 168)

The Mirror and its "cross-temporal flashes," to use Shippey's description, contrast with the Norse *Eddas'* prophecies, which are determined.

When Sam sees "some devilry at work in the Shire" and his "gaffer" evicted from Bagshot Row, he accepts the vision as true. Galadriel slightly chastises Sam for his impetuous reaction of wanting to drop all current responsibilities and race back to the Shire: "You did not wish to go home without your master before you looked in the Mirror, and yet you knew that evil things might well be happening in the Shire" (1: 378). Galadriel explains that because the future is in flux, a person plays a role in bringing it to reality. The disaster that a person sees in the Mirror may be brought about precisely through the person trying to avert it.³ In order to prevent the foretold future, the person must reject or abandon the duty which he or she has in the present moment. She reminds both Sam and Frodo of the greater importance of remaining faithful to the task before them in the present, actual time rather than reacting impetuously to the visions of potential future events: "Remember that the Mirror shows many things, and not all have yet come to pass. Some never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent them. The Mirror is dangerous as a guide of deeds" (1: 378).

Given Galadriel's words to Sam, Frodo is more prepared to distrust the Mirror's images. When he first looks into it, Frodo sees a vision of himself as a player and participant in a wider story: "many swift scenes followed that Frodo in some way knew to be parts of a great history in which he had become involved" (1: 379). The narrator is vague about what "the swift scenes" are and how exactly Frodo understands his involvement in them. Yet, if readers are familiar with the broader context of *The Silmarillion*, then they may infer that Frodo sees his personal role in the Ring's broader history, perhaps even perceiving Middle-earth's greater history before and apart from the Ring. Even if Frodo only sees his small part within a broader series of events, then he witnesses a pattern in past events leading to his particular place in the present moment. He observes a chain of events and that he himself has become a link in that chain, thus partially understanding a providential pattern to history. Events that seem chaotic when the person is experiencing them become ordered as the person's temporal perspective widens.

Having affirmed a pattern to history, the narrator then describes Frodo realizing that he has the ability and thus the accountability either to resist or to succumb to Sauron's will, shown in the Mirror as the unblinking Eye. Through Frodo's vision of the Eye, the narrator describes the nature of evil within Middle-earth in clearly Augustinian terms. When Frodo looks into the Eye, he sees nothingness; the Eye opens on a "black abyss," and "the black slit of its pupil opened on a pit, a window into nothing." As Frodo stares into the Eye in the Mirror, "[he] knew with certainty and horror that among the many things that it sought he himself was one. But he also knew that it could not see him—not yet, not unless he willed it" (1: 379). Frodo understands his own ability to

expose or hide himself from Sauron. Despite a Maia extending all of his power to discover the Ring, Frodo still retains the power to resist the other's intent while losing the physical strength to resist the Ring/Sauron's greater power, a weakness that will become clearer as he approaches Mount Doom. Even while Frodo wills his resistance to Sauron's power, the Ring physically pulls his neck down toward the Mirror's surface and into the Eye shown there (1: 380).

While revealing Frodo's role in furthering or resisting evil, the narrator also shows his weakness standing alone against greater powers. Galadriel's intervention is needed to break the Ring's power over Frodo who is incapable of freeing himself. The narrator says that as Frodo was "slipping forward" towards the Mirror's water, Galadriel "softly" says, "Do not touch the water!" Immediately, the "vision faded, and Frodo found that he was looking at the cool stars twinkling in the silver basin." Whether Galadriel is commanding the Ring to "not touch the water," or whether she is calling Frodo back from it is not clear, for the object of her words could be either the Ring or Frodo. However, what is clear is that at Galadriel's command, the Ring's pull ceases, the searching Eye disappears from the Mirror, and Frodo has possession of himself again.

In this example, providential protection works through another person, Galadriel, who, like Gandalf and Elrond, is far superior in power to Frodo. The author establishes her authority for the reader as she indicates to Frodo the extent of her defensive power against Sauron: "do not think that only by singing amid the trees, nor even by the slender arrows of elven-bows, is this land of Lothlórien maintained and defended against its Enemy. [. . .] I perceive the Dark Lord and know his mind, or all of his mind that

concerns the Elves. And he gropes ever to see me and my thought. But still the door is closed!” (1: 380).

Though, as an elf, she is further removed from Ilúvatar than Gandalf, she, like the wizard, is also an example of a character who has fully aligned her will with her faith in providence. Galadriel serves as another messenger of providence in Middle-earth, affirming and explaining for characters, as well as the reader, the guiding presence of providence in history. She indicates to Frodo that whether he succeeds or loses, the elves’ power in Middle-earth will end: “Do you not see now wherefore your coming is to us as the footsteps of Doom? For if you fail, then we are laid bare to the Enemy. Yet if you succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away.” While not knowing what the elves’ future will be, Galadriel recognizes that their time in Middle-earth is coming to a close. Yet, she does not simply acknowledge that life as she has known it is ending, but she also faithfully accepts it as proper. While never explicitly saying so, she implies that the “fading” of Lothlórien lies within a providential design. Referring to the future of Lothlórien and the elves, Frodo asks Galadriel what she wishes to happen; she simply responds, “That what should be shall be” (1: 380). The language of this response conveys Galadriel’s belief in and acceptance of a design for future events. She does not say, “that what will be will be,” the mid-twentieth century’s “*que sera sera*” proverb, which unwittingly conveys a determined view of the future. Rather, she suggests that since there is a good design to world events, then that design *ought* to come into being because it ultimately contributes to the greater good of all. In this statement, Galadriel expresses her desire for the fulfillment of providential intention, while humbly acknowledging and accepting the end

of elvish power, her own not the least. Galadriel knows Lothlórien must fall when the Ring is destroyed, yet she reminds Frodo of what she had earlier told Sam. She, the hobbits, and other figures must fulfill their duties in the present time rather than the potential future: “For the fate of Lothlórien you are not answerable, but only for the doing of your own task” (1: 380). Galadriel willingly accepts her own diminution in exchange for the greater providential design’s actualization, and she calls Frodo to remain faithful to the task directly before him—the task that, as Elrond had told him, “was appointed” to him.⁴

While acknowledging fate-like powers exist, which a person has the power to resist, the author also shows that providence most fully reveals itself working in Middle-earth when the person, having fully extended himself against hostile forces, is ultimately overcome by the “monsters.” The author uses the formula of the fated world order—namely, the expectation of inevitable defeat before fate’s invincible powers—but turns defeat into the surprising avenue for providence to triumph. By grounding the extent of free will’s operation within the reality of the person’s strengths *and* limitations, the narrator sets a limit upon creaturely freedom to resist or reject evil. As the previous sections have shown, characters do not withstand the power of evil beings such as the Ringwraiths or Shelob, or of objects such as the Ring, exclusively by the strength of free will, nor do evil powers fully deny the person’s exercise of free will. Rather, the narrator links characters’ abilities to withstand evil with an affirmation of a providential authority’s presence and assistance. Thus does providential power both aid a person in properly using free will and protect him from an evil power that otherwise would defeat him.

Providence Working Within Creaturely Limitations

This section will show the way in which providence works through the very limitations and failures of the person both physically and spiritually when confronting hostile cosmic powers of Middle-earth. Examples of providence working through characters' failures abound within the text, but two prime examples revealing this pattern are Gandalf's fall in Moria and Frodo's fall in Mordor.

The Fall of Gandalf

Gandalf's battle with the Balrog reveals the limits of his power. Though slaying the Balrog, Gandalf falls alongside his enemy. Gandalf possesses immense strength far surpassing the rest of the characters within Middle-earth, and the characters and the reader could mistake him for the sole power working for the promotion and defense of the good. The story needs to reveal Gandalf's own weakness as a creature in order to show that he is not the source of providential power in Middle-earth. His confrontation with the Balrog, who is classified as a Maia like Gandalf, shows such limitation. Through presenting Gandalf as a created, limited being like the other characters, the narrator highlights the fact that there must be one greater than Gandalf who is the real agent behind the story.

It is precisely through Gandalf's defeat in Moria, not his triumph, that the providential power reveals its far greater authority and guidance over Middle-earth, transforming defeat into a greater and unforeseen victory. By means of his own strength, Gandalf is able to defeat his Maia-counterpart but only at the cost of his own existence within time. He cannot reenter time and history by his own will power; thus his return to Middle-earth affirms for others the much greater will and far-reaching eternal power of

an unnamed Other. Gandalf directly attributes his return to another source, saying that “darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell. Naked I was sent back—for a brief time, until my task is done” (2: 106). Gandalf is sent back to Middle-earth as a more powerful being than he was—he is now “Gandalf the White”—and having moved from the eternal realm back into the temporal one, he understands more deeply the providential order of things. His unexpected reentrance into the story brings joy not only to other characters but to the reader as well, offering proof of the hope and deliverance from permanent destruction that a providential order proffers.

In his return, Gandalf is not only more powerful but more joyful than before his defeat. He indicates that while his perspective on the whole of events is closer to the eternal one, his ability to see the immediate present is not clear: “I have forgotten much that I thought I knew, and learned again much that I had forgotten. I can see many things far off, but many things that are close at hand I cannot see” (2: 98). He remains unsure of the immediate end regarding the War of the Ring, as he makes clear when declaring his new confidence to Gimli, “I have spoken words of hope. But only of hope. Hope is not victory” (2: 103). However, because he trusts in and has partial experience of the ultimate triumph of Ilúvatar’s design, he now has a greater confidence and a mirth within him in the face of imminent physical destruction. Even facing Mordor and its encroaching darkness, Gandalf is able to laugh, understanding the false façade of dominance that evil power projects. The narrator says:

Pippin glanced in some wonder at the face now close beside his own, for the sound of that laugh had been gay and merry. Yet in the wizard’s face he saw at first only lines of care and sorrow; though as he looked more

intently he perceived that under all there was a great joy: a fountain of mirth enough to set a kingdom laughing, were it to gush forth. (3: 31)

Gandalf's resilient joy before Sauron's apparent victory is only possible through his belief in and experience of a providential agent guiding the events. Like Galadriel, Gandalf also desires that "what should be shall be," while also knowing that his and others' actions help to make manifest the providential design. The deepening of Gandalf's faith and hope in providence, and the reader's subsequent confidence in such guidance, is possible only through his departure from the temporal order of Middle-earth and his subsequent empowered return after defeat.

The Fall of Frodo

Frodo's repeated failures before the forces of Sauron offer the clearest evidence of providence working through a person's limitations. While Frodo remains heroic in his courageous and steadfast resistance to evil forces, his will unassisted is ultimately unable to defeat them. Throughout the work, the reader can see repeated evidence that Frodo's free will is active, not bound nor enslaved by fate-like circumstances, but the story also repeatedly shows the limitations of his free will. In the following section, I will indicate that present within each of Frodo's minor moments of failure are also minor revelations of providence. Given the story's narrative pattern, the reader should not be surprised that, at the story's climactic moment, Frodo is finally unable to complete the quest by destroying the Ring. But equally, the reader should fully expect a providential involvement working to accomplish the good.

Frodo's failure in the Shire. The first hint the implied author gives that Frodo will be incapable of completing the task occurs before Frodo has even started on it. While

still in the Shire, Frodo's will is not strong enough to overcome the Ring's intentions, for he cannot even cast it into a small hearth fire. In response to Frodo's declaration that someone should destroy the Ring, Gandalf challenges him to try to will its destruction by casting it into the fire, which Frodo then attempts to do:

When [Frodo] took it out he had intended to fling it from him into the very hottest part of the fire. But he found now that he could not do so, not without a great struggle. He weighed the Ring in his hand, hesitating, and forcing himself to remember all that Gandalf had told him; and then with an effort of will he made a movement, as if to cast it away—but he found that he had put it back in his pocket. (1: 70)

In this instance, there is no need for providential intervention to protect Frodo from evil and thus the providential power remains veiled. Gandalf, however, articulates his faith in its active presence working to accomplish a specific design—what appears as “chance” is actually intentional design.

While Frodo is still far from Mordor, in the relative security of the Shire, the Ring's power again seems to dominate his will. A Black Rider is nearby, calling for the Ring, and Frodo experiences an overwhelming temptation to put it on, thus exposing its presence to the wraith: “Once more the desire to slip on the Ring came over Frodo; but this time it was stronger than before. So strong that, almost before he realized what he was doing, his hand was groping in his pocket” (1: 88). Nothing prevents Frodo from putting on the Ring, and the only reason he does not is the sudden and apparently coincidental appearance of High Elves who cause the Rider to retreat.

In Frodo's second experience of the Ring's commanding authority, he needs the help of other forces to assist him in not succumbing to the Ring. The stronger powers in this scene explicitly are the High Elves, but the name of a Vala is also present, implicitly connecting divine as well as temporal assistance to the hobbits. As he will do throughout

the narrative, the implied author associates a character's naming or invocation of Elbereth Gilthoniel with the unexpected appearance of aid to the person in need. As they walk through the woods, the elves unintentionally drive away the evil wraith because they are singing a song about Elbereth. Hearing the song's language, Frodo cries out: "These are High Elves! They spoke the name of Elbereth! [. . .] Few of that fairest folk are ever seen in the Shire. Not many now remain in Middle-earth, east of the Great Sea. This is indeed a strange chance!" (1: 89). However, Gildor, the elves' leader, questions Frodo's statement that their meeting is coincidental, or "strange chance," saying that elves rarely cross paths with non-elvish races by "chance or purpose." He reflects upon the encounter with the hobbits, saying, "In this meeting there may be more than chance; but the purpose is not clear to me" (1: 94). While the episode exposes Frodo as too weak to resist the Ring, it also shows the unexpected appearance of other powers driving away the malevolent forces, thus saving Frodo from his weakness before the Ring.

Frodo's failure outside the Shire. While, as the previous section of this chapter argued, providential power enables Frodo to resist the Riders, empowering him to take off the Ring and keep it from the enemy, Frodo's failure at Weathertop reveals the greater providential power present but unnamed in the action. When several Ringwraiths converge on the company at Weathertop, the Ring's strength overwhelms Frodo's resistance and he puts it on. The Ring's influence added to the wraiths' own power clearly pressures Frodo's will, as the narrator's description indicates:

[Frodo's] terror was swallowed up in a sudden temptation to put on the Ring. The desire to do this laid hold of him, and he could think of nothing else. He did not forget the Barrow, nor the message of Gandalf; but something seemed to be compelling him to disregard all warnings, and he longed to yield. Not with the hope of escape, or of doing anything, either

good or bad: he simply felt that he must take the Ring and put it on his finger. [. . .] He shut his eyes and struggled for awhile; but resistance became unbearable, and at last he slowly drew out the chain, and slipped the Ring on the forefinger of his left hand. (1: 207-208)

The description of Frodo's temptation at Weathertop foreshadows the even greater degree of temptation that Frodo will experience as he continues on the journey, approaching the Ring's source of power. Frodo's failure at this point enables another power to make itself manifest. In this case, providential intervention occurs through Frodo invoking Gilthoniel's protection (1: 208), and then Strider suddenly attacking the Riders, thus protecting Frodo from the wraiths and keeping the Ring from them. Repeating the pattern of the Shire scene, the implied author shows both divine and human intervention saving Frodo.

Frodo's understanding of evil increases through experiencing the Ring's temptation of him and he begins to perceive the external nature of the Ring's promptings. His analysis of his own weakness before the Ring suggests that Frodo's will, while desiring the right thing, does not always have the strength to defeat forces opposed to the good—a dichotomy of desire and fulfillment that will become clearer when Frodo is at Mount Doom. The narrator says, Frodo “bitterly regretted his foolishness, and reproached himself for weakness of will; for he now perceived that in putting on the Ring he obeyed not his own desire but the commanding wish of his enemies” (1: 211).

While at Weathertop Frodo shows his spiritual weakness before the Ring's dominance, at the Ford of Rivendell, he displays his bodily limitations before more dominant, malevolent incorporeal beings. His physical inability to defend himself from the wraiths at the Ford demonstrates the need for another power to save him and to keep the Ring from Sauron. Despite his serious wound, his increasing entrance into the

shadow world of the wraiths and their power over him, Frodo verbally and physically rebukes and resists evil:

With a great effort Frodo sat upright and brandished his sword. ‘Go back!’ he cried. ‘Go back to the Land of Mordor, and follow me no more!’ [. . .] His enemies laughed at him with a harsh and chilling laughter. ‘Come back! Come back!’ they called. ‘To Mordor we will take you!’ ‘Go back!’ he whispered. ‘The Ring! The Ring!’ they cried with deadly voices [. . .] ‘By Elbereth and Lúthien the Fair,’ said Frodo with a last effort, lifting up his sword, ‘you shall have neither the Ring nor me!’

Though Frodo resists evil’s power to his fullest extent, evil, represented by the Ringwraiths, is more powerful than Frodo’s strength to defeat it—a foreshadowing of what will occur on Mount Doom. In response to Frodo’s defiance of Sauron, the narrator says, “the leader, who was now half across the Ford, stood up menacing in his stirrups, and raised up his hand. Frodo was stricken dumb. He felt his tongue cleave to his mouth, and his heart labouring. His sword broke and fell out of his shaking hand” (1: 227). When Frodo can do no more either physically or spiritually to keep the Ring from the enemy, then other powers must intervene on his behalf. Again, following the pattern of the previous examples, intervention occurs at the Ford first through Frodo’s calling upon the Valar as his defense, and then earthly forces arriving providentially to save him. Elrond and Gandalf combine their powers to send floodwaters upon the wraiths, drowning their horses and disabling the riders.

Frodo’s failure on the edge of Mordor. One of the clearest statements of free will’s resistance to but ultimate failure before the fate-like power of the Ring occurs on the borders of Mordor. The narrator unmistakably describes the immense pressure bearing down on Frodo’s will and freedom: “[Frodo] felt, more urgent than ever before, the command that he should put on the Ring. But great as the pressure was, he felt no

inclination now to yield to it. He knew that the Ring would only betray him, and that he had not, even if he put it on, the power to face the Morgul-king” (2: 315-316). However great Frodo’s desire is to resist the Ring’s temptation, his physical body does not follow his own will. Rather, the Ring seems to possess his body directly contrary to his will.

The narrator continues:

There was no longer any answer to that command in his own will, dismayed by terror though it was, and he felt only the beating upon him of *a great power from outside*. It took his hand, and as Frodo watched with his mind, *not willing it* but in suspense (as if he looked on some old story far away), it moved the hand inch by inch towards the chain upon his neck. (2: 316, emphasis added)

In a way similar to the occurrence at Weathertop, Frodo’s hand moves against his will, but unlike the earlier scene, Frodo is now fully aware of what is happening to him and what the source of influence is. On Weathertop, “resistance became unbearable” and Frodo put on the Ring. In this scene, however, Frodo “felt no inclination now to yield to [the pressure]” to put it on; yet his hand still moves to do so.

The narrator thus describes the greater force that a malevolent non-human power can have over the resisting human will; however, the will remains present if powerless to confront the enemy directly. This scene supports Ralph Wood’s argument that evil can “brutally enforce its will” as “the Ring creates a compulsion, in short, that cannot be broken with mere human strength of will” (70-71). In this climactic moment of the Ring’s compulsion, Frodo’s will reasserts itself not to reject the Ring, which he cannot do, but to seek help elsewhere, from the Phial of Galadriel. While the Ring’s power forces Frodo’s hand to take the Ring, the narrator says, Frodo’s “own will stirred; slowly it forced the hand back and set it to find another thing, a thing lying hidden near his breast. Cold and hard it seemed as his grip closed on it: the phial of Galadriel, so long

treasured, and almost forgotten till that hour. As he touched it, for a while all thought of the Ring was banished from his mind.” The light in the Phial works as the providential intervention to save Frodo. The Phial’s light is part of the Valar’s power from Middle-earth’s original creation, something it shares with the Silmarils, and this type of providential power, though external to Frodo, works internally, strengthening the person who seeks recourse to it. The Wraith-king moves away. Suggesting through a passive construction that the strength Frodo receives is external, the narrator surmises, “maybe the elven-hoods defied [the Wraith’s] unseen eyes, and the mind of [Frodo] his enemy, being strengthened, had turned aside his thought” (2: 316).

These instances should show the reader that well before the final test on Mount Doom, Frodo is never fully able to counter fully the Ring’s influence. If Frodo, while carrying the Ring in its weaker state far from Mordor, is unable to destroy it willingly, to resist its temptation, or to physically withstand the stronger powers of Sauron’s representatives, then no one should expect that Frodo, after he has been beaten down by his sufferings along the journey, will be able to be finally victorious at Mount Doom.

To the contrary, however, Fleming Rutledge, states that she was completely surprised at Frodo’s failure, arguing that most other readers are as well: “Up to now, most readers will have assumed that the dogged devotion of the hobbits will triumph in the end.” Rutledge continues, “If any reader has foreseen [Frodo’s claiming of the Ring], he or she must be extraordinarily percipient. Surely this is one of the most staggering turns of plot in all literature” (336). While Frodo’s claiming of the Ring is staggering, it is not a “plot turn” in any way. Readers are staggered by the story’s climax precisely because Tolkien completely alters the expected successful conclusion of the individual hero and

the heroic quest that most modern sentimental literature follows. Wood argues that many readers want Frodo to triumph by throwing the Ring to its destruction into the lava because “Such an ending would have provided us with a traditional hero whom we could have exalted and acclaimed as one of our own. It would have also assured us that evil can be defeated by dint of human and hobbitic effort.” Wood cautions, however, that “Tolkien refuses such illusions” (73). Given the repeated instances the narrator gives to the reader that Frodo’s task is an impossible one, his final failure on Mount Doom should *not* surprise the attentive reader. Frodo’s will is strong enough to resist the Ring only to a point, and his eventual fall before it is the culmination of his will’s limitation before a fate-like coercive power.

Frodo’s ultimate failure at Mount Doom. In Frodo’s final failure at Mount Doom, the author shows that human free will has limitations in its resistance to cosmic powers. While Tolkien does not hold to a Manichean view of good and evil, he does acknowledge that there are supernatural forces, demonic in nature, superior to mortals. Tolkien, in explaining his motivations for creating this final scene, indicates his belief in the reality of evil powers aligned against lesser creatures—a truth that holds both within the primary world as well as Tolkien’s secondary realm. Tolkien says the final scene’s catastrophe calls to mind the true meaning of the last lines of the Lord’s Prayer: Tolkien states that “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil [. . .] is the harder and less often considered petition.” Tolkien implies that these lines acknowledge the existence of evil powers, suggesting that a person must pray he or she does not encounter them because, if met, they will inevitably overcome the person. While never being able to defeat this type of evil, the person still must resist it until falling before it. Tolkien

says he intentionally places Frodo in such a losing predicament. Calling such fatalistic situations “sacrificial,” in which the person must fail before greater powers, Tolkien goes on to say:

[such] positions in which the ‘good’ of the world depends on the behaviour of an individual in circumstances which demand of him suffering and endurance far beyond the normal—even, it may happen (or seem, humanly speaking), demand a strength of body and mind which he does not possess: he is in a sense doomed to failure, doomed to fall to temptation or be broken by pressure against his ‘will’: that is against any choice he could make or would make unfettered, not under the duress. Frodo was in such a position: an apparently complete trap: a person of greater native power could probably never have resisted the Ring’s lure to power so long [. . .] The Quest [therefore] was bound to fail as a piece of world-plan, and also was bound to end in disaster as the story of humble Frodo’s development to the ‘noble’, his sanctification. (*Letters* 233-234)

Tolkien thus creates the situation in which his main character, Frodo, comes face to face with a superhuman power of evil and cannot defeat it. Stratford Caldecott, continuing Tolkien’s analysis, points to the will’s limitations:

On the very brink of success, his free will having taken him as far as it can, Frodo renounces the Quest and claims the Ring for his own. His ability to cast it away has been eroded by the task of bearing it to Mount Doom. His very assertion of ownership over the Ring signifies the loss of his self-possession, and the words he uses betray this [. . .] Note that he does not say, “I choose . . . I do”, but rather “I do not choose . . . I will not do”. (“Horns of Hope” 37)

As Caldecott points out, the language Tolkien uses emphasizes non-choice. Frodo says, “I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine.” Though Caldecott does not point this out, while still keeping the same sense, the word order of this last sentence may be rearranged to say “I *do not will* this deed,” pointing more clearly to Frodo’s lack of will in finally claiming the Ring. Caldecott’s analysis of the contrast between what Frodo wills and what he does is quite helpful in supporting an argument that an external power, such as the Ring, does indeed defeat

Frodo. Rutledge reminds her reader of the words of scripture regarding sinful inclinations: “St. Paul observes, ‘I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate’ (Romans 7:15). There is a malign power at work beyond Paul’s (and Frodo’s) own will” (84).

The non-operational nature of Frodo’s will is important to establish in order to show that the providential power does not counter Frodo’s *will* in any way in accomplishing its purposes. Providence does not use Frodo as an unwilling tool to realize a good counter to Frodo’s own desires. His prior moments of choice reveal that if he could choose, he would choose according to the intentions of providence—for the good and against the Ring. In carrying the Ring to the brink of its destruction, however, Frodo is pushed beyond the limits of the physical and spiritual self. Past the point of Frodo’s limited self, another limitless power must reveal itself as present in the action. Frodo’s failure and defeat allows for providence to make itself newly manifest in the world and to achieve an end impossible by the person alone.

When evil power proves itself ultimately capable of mastering the person, providence intervenes, as it has intervened on every prior occasion of Frodo’s failure. A rapid succession of events occurs after Frodo has claimed the Ring and put it on. The narrator describes the rapidity of action saying, “Sam gasped, but he had no chance to cry out, for at that moment many things happened.” The “many things happened” is the sudden convergence of the consequences of many people’s use of free will. Continuing to act as it has throughout the story, providence uses Frodo’s earlier free acts, combining them with apparently random past acts, into a unified, purposeful end. Tolkien indicates that the Quest “would and did [fail] as far as Frodo considered alone was concerned. He

‘apostatized.’” But Tolkien continues analyzing the scene to show the important consequences of properly used free will in effecting the person’s good:

But at this point the ‘salvation’ of the world and Frodo’s own ‘salvation’ is achieved by his previous *pity* and forgiveness of injury. At any point any prudent person would have told Frodo that Gollum would certainly betray him, and could rob him in the end. To ‘pity’ him, to forbear to kill him, was a piece of folly, or a mystical belief in the ultimate value-in-itself of pity and generosity even if disastrous in the world of time. He did rob him and injure him in the end—but by a ‘grace,’ that last betrayal was at a precise juncture when the final evil deed was the most beneficial thing any one cd. [*sic*] have done for Frodo! By a situation created by his ‘forgiveness,’ he was saved himself, and relieved of his burden. (*Letters* 233-234)

The repeated moments of properly used free will by many figures—Bilbo, Frodo, Sam, and others—combine to allow for Gollum’s presence at the very moment when the Ring finally overpowers Frodo. Caldecott argues that the Ring’s destruction and Frodo’s salvation are “in fact the consequence of Frodo’s earlier (and freer) decision to spare Gollum’s life.” From Tolkien’s assessment that Frodo’s earlier pity results in his deliverance, Caldecott concludes: “Thus in the end it is not Frodo who saves Middle Earth at all, nor Gollum. It can only be God himself, working through the love and freedom of his creatures. The scene is a triumph of Providence over Fate, but also a triumph of Mercy, in which free will, supported by grace, is fully vindicated” (37).⁵

The Lord of the Rings presents providential power not as a deistic force looking idly down on the world, but as omnipresent both within and beyond the created realm and temporal order. Thus, within the story’s pattern of providential activity, providence reveals its authority through a combination of both divine and human means that save Frodo from the Ring’s power and destroy the Ring itself. While powers such as fate exist and are powerful enough to destroy the person, the person is not alone in facing them.

Tolkien's story depicts the person as neither isolated nor autonomous, but participating in and protected by providential powers that overshadow and encompass hostile forces.⁶

Conclusion

The events on Mount Doom call to mind Manwë and Mandos's conversation in *The Silmarillion* regarding evil deeds, in which Manwë says, "Thus even as Eru spoke to us shall beauty not before conceived be brought into Eä, and evil yet be good to have been." Mandos, however, quickly rebukes the other's conclusion regarding evil's nature, saying it will "yet remain evil" (98). The Ring's consuming of Frodo and his fall before it "yet remain evil," as does Gollum's choice to seize the Ring from Frodo by violence; but the evil of both events is turned to a greater good, revealing a partial fulfillment of Ilúvatar's covenant in the "Ainulindalë" to transform evil deeds into an unforeseen greater glory. Without the person's failure, the merciful authority of the providential presence would not be fully revealed to either the characters or readers of Middle-earth. The story, thus, acknowledges while transforming the ancient concept expressed in *The Wanderer*, "wyrð bið ful āræd," *wyrð is* fully inexorable; but it is within the person's ultimate failure before fatalistic forces such as *wyrð* that providence finally asserts itself.

Notes

1. Much of Sam's suspicion of Gollum comes from his xenophobic suspicion of foreigners, even "foreign" hobbits outside Hobbiton. He manifested the same initial suspicious hostility towards Strider when they met in Bree and only during the arduous journey to Rivendell does he overcome his mistrust.

2. Interestingly, Josef Pieper, another Roman Catholic, wrote his treatise "On Hope" (*Über die Hoffnung*) in 1934, during the remilitarization of Germany after the rise of Hitler's National Socialism party. Approximately at the same time in England, Tolkien was attempting to express through fiction his own faith and hope in a providential design to the world.

3. Sophocles's *Oedipus* cycle presents fatalistic tragedy in this manner. The Delphic oracle tells Oedipus his "fate," that he will kill his father and marry his mother, and precisely by trying to escape from it, Oedipus fulfills it.

4. In 1940, Tolkien echoes this fictional presentation of faithfulness to present duty in a letter he wrote to his son, Michael, who at the age of nineteen had cut short his academic training at Oxford to train as an anti-aircraft gunner. Tolkien writes, "in times of peace we get, perhaps (and naturally and for the purpose rightly), too engrossed in thinking of everything as a preparation or training or a making one fit – for what? At any minute it is what we are and are doing, not what we plan to be and do that counts" (*Letters* 46).

5. While my argument agrees with Caldecott's assessment of providential victory in *The Lord of the Rings*, I expand upon his analysis by showing how the concept of fate also is present within Middle-earth's providential order. Caldecott's central focus in his essay is the manner in which heroism takes a particularly Christian form within Tolkien's work. He also argues, as do I, that Tolkien's appeal lies in his offer of hope to his despairing modern audience. However, I assert that equally important to the depiction of providential victory in Middle-earth is the acknowledgement of fate's strength, as well. Tolkien's portrayal of providence as the supreme power in Middle-earth holds even more weight for a modern audience because Tolkien also shows as real the power of fate over a person. He thus does not dismiss as unreal the cause of his culture's sense of despair, but he also offers hope by suggesting the person's worth and influence on history, and by showing the existence of a providential power encompassing fate. In other words, he respects the reader's sense of powerlessness before external forces while showing that the deeper power of providence is ever present, conquering fate precisely when the person fails before it.

6. In achieving the Ring's destruction, the providential power does not violate nor negate the role of the person's free will. Here is where I would disagree the most with Fleming Rutledge's analysis of providence in *The Lord of the Rings*. Too often, she seems to suggest that providence is a deterministic power that overrules free will in achieving the good end. While Rutledge implicitly is relying on traditional Catholic theological arguments pertaining to the nature of the will as only free when choosing for,

not away, from the good, she seems to slip into a more Calvinistic theological understanding of the will and predestination. For instance, she states that “throughout the book we will continue to point out the seamless way in which Tolkien has woven the paradoxical themes of free choice and predestination (election) into his plot.” Clarifying her terminology in a footnote, Rutledge says, “The word ‘predestination’ has acquired unfortunate connotations because it became associated with hardened forms of ‘double predestination’ whereby some were elected for salvation and some for condemnation. This is not the place for that argument, but I ask the reader to understand that I am not using the word in that way” (110). Though Rutledge remains close to her stated intentions, too often and at crucial parts of her textual analysis, she seems to erase the person’s moral responsibility by implying providential power forces one person to choose good and another person to choose evil.

For example, though she has indicated that she is not following the “hardened forms of ‘double predestination,’” her argument directly implies that Frodo is chosen to follow the path of redemption and Gollum the path of damnation. In reference to the scene on Amon Hen, Rutledge states, “Frodo becomes ‘free to choose’ because of the intervention of ‘some other point of power.’ [. . .] It was the overriding of the Eye by that other power that makes Frodo able to rise to his feet and embrace with an unburdened heart *what has already been determined for him*” (144, emphasis added). In commenting upon Gollum’s role in destroying the Ring, Rutledge asks rhetorical questions implying providence maintained Gollum’s existence precisely in order that he would do evil:

The preservation of Gollum’s wretched life, which we have traced all through this history results in Frodo’s—and Middle-earth’s—deliverance from damnation. Gollum was destined to be part of the great history all along [. . .]. What is his ultimate fate? What, for that matter, is the ultimate fate of Judas Iscariot, since there is a suggestion that even though ‘Satan entered into him’ (Luke 22:3), he was playing a predestined role (Matthew 26:54, 56)? (340)

Connecting Gollum’s actions with Judas’s, Rutledge suggests that God intended Judas to betray Christ in order to achieve God’s plan. If Judas had no choice or free will in betraying Christ, if he was forced to do so by God, then he would bear no moral culpability in his action. While Rutledge does not directly state this, her premise leads to such a radical conclusion, one which an author such as Dante certainly does not hold as he places Judas in the innermost circle of hell, Satan’s mouth, indicating the free nature of Judas’s choice to betray Christ. Tolkien most likely would also disagree with Rutledge’s conclusion regarding Judas and her subsequent parallel of Christ’s betrayer with Gollum. Tolkien states that he does not know Gollum’s precise fate (*Letters* 330) because no mortal person can presume to know the final mercy of God for creation. However, the inability to know God’s mercy towards the person does not negate the person’s culpability in sin nor the observer’s responsibility in naming sin as sin, or evil as evil.

Rutledge’s conclusion that providence intends one person to do good and another person to do evil does not follow from the pattern that the story establishes of the person’s proper use of free will (a pattern that Rutledge herself notes as true). At Mount

Doom, providence does not force Gollum to choose evil, nor does it intend his destruction, but it does use Gollum's greed and lust for the Ring—the culmination of his own lack of any resistance to the Ring's power—to destroy the Ring and Gollum with it.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Failure and Eucatastrophe as the Providential Design

Tolkien's work holds encouraging and empowering implications regarding the person's place within a providential world order. The reality of malicious and destructive actions or forces does not deny the existence of providence; rather, Tolkien's story suggests that providence proves its authority precisely through the inevitable failures of humans in a corrupt world. Fatalistic forces, while overwhelming humanity at times, do not fully consume the person and never overpower providence. The person has the ability and thus the responsibility to resist and reject evil even if he or she dies in the attempt.

What appears as personal defeat before fate becomes the means of the faithful person's vindication and the triumph of providence—an expression of Tolkien's theory of the "eucatastrophe," the catastrophe that is transformed into the greatest blessing. In his essay "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien argues that the fairy story's most significant attribute is "the Consolation of the Happy Ending." "Tragedy," Tolkien says, "is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite – I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function" (68). Such a tale reveals the "good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn,'" as Tolkien describes it. Significantly, however, Tolkien emphasizes, the fairy-tale "does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of

deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (68). *The Lord of the Rings*, following Tolkien’s model of the fairy-story, details only a foreshadowing of the good’s ultimate and final triumph over the powers of evil. Frodo’s personal failure, the Quest’s apparent catastrophe, becomes the means for the “joyous turn,” by which the unseen power is victorious, and through which the reader experiences, as Tolkien states, “a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through” (70).

In the corpus of his work, Tolkien does not directly answer the question “why does a good God allow evil things to happen?” but he does provide the models by which a person can respond faithfully and patiently to the persistence of evil in a fallen world. Tolkien never justifies nor excuses evil but directly names it as such. His work offers the reader a “fleeting glimpse of Joy, poignant as grief,” because, despite the activity of malevolent forces directed against the person, a greater authority exists to encompass them.

Further, Tolkien exalts the person’s place within a providential world while also tempering the person’s exaltation over all things. By showing that the person possesses free will within a providential order, Tolkien suggests the person contributes significantly to both good and evil consequences. While evil circumstances may entrap a person, he or she remains able to exercise the will in resisting evil’s temptation to abandon the good and is morally responsible for the choice. As both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* indicate, while the person can resist evil to a degree, exclusively left to his own

devices, the person will succumb before evil's seductive power. As Tolkien wrote, "one must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is *not* finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however 'good'; and the Writer of the Story is not one of us" (*Letters* 252). However, Tolkien does not leave the person alone to face evil in the world. Rather, deeper and stronger providential powers, the "Writer of the Story," as Tolkien refers to the unseen hand at work in *The Lord of the Rings*, encluse those of fatalism. Working with the person's free will, providence transforms evil actions and consequences into a greater design for the good.

Continuing Appeal of Tolkien's World

Tolkien was part of a much broader generation of people forced by historical circumstances to question and, for many, reject the long-held Christian understanding and explanation of world order. The twentieth century experienced the bloodiest and most destructive wars of human history, giving rise in the West to commonly shared doubts over the person's place within the world and his or her ability to affect anything for good. Margaret Visser argues that a new type of fatalism has arisen in modern and postmodern western cultures: "for more than two thousand years we have fought for freedom from fate, and in many ways we have attained it. However, we seem, in important respects, now to be letting that freedom slip from our grasp. Fatalism and submission to chance, within modernity itself, is at present gaining ground. We are falling back into fate" (1). Tolkien also seems to agree with Visser's analysis of the West's growing tendency towards fatalism. Tolkien thus managed to embody *wyrd's* dual nature, which he had come to understand from his Anglo-Saxon studies, solving its duality in favor of *wyrd* as providence, rather than mere fate or "what happens," by depicting the role of human

freedom and divine participation. Middle-earth's world order expresses Tolkien's own faith in the providential order of the primary world. Despite the suffering and loss he experienced, occurrences that turned many of his contemporaries into convinced atheists, Tolkien saw a pattern and purpose behind apparent chaos. His lifelong work on "The Silmarillion" may be his attempt to create a parallel world conveying the same depth of meaning and intricacy of design as he saw existent within the primary world.

No one disputes the fact that Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* became an instant and overwhelming success; yet not only was it well received upon its initial publication, but it has continued in popularity for the past fifty years. While the following statistics are already dated by more than five years, Tom Shippey offers the sales figures of Tolkien's work as of 2000: "*The Hobbit* has stayed in print for more than sixty years, selling over forty million copies, *The Lord of the Rings* for nearly fifty years, selling over fifty million (which, since it is published usually in three-volume format, comes to close on a hundred and fifty million separate sales." In light of these huge sales figures, Shippey states, "popularity does not guarantee literary quality, as everybody knows, but it never comes about for no reason," and he urges those who do not share a love for Tolkien to at least consider why so many people do (*Author* xxiv).

From its first introduction in the 1950s, *The Lord of the Rings* "spoke" to its reader. In America, it became a cult status and a type of rallying-cry for a society in upheaval.¹ Yet, while anti-establishment "hippies" held up *The Lord of the Rings* as a type of gospel text, at the same time, their more traditional, pro-government and establishment peers also embraced the book. Their apparent motivations for holding it up as bearing a gospel message may be different, but at the heart of the embrace of *The Lord*

of the Rings is a similar concern of both parties—the need for a sense of place and order amidst a chaotic, oppressive, and overwhelming world.

Even beyond the post-World War II, Korean and Vietnam War years of America, *The Lord of the Rings* continued to sell well and to be as loved by new readers encountering the text as old readers returning to it. Now, into the twenty-first century, the work *continues* to be a best seller and, in the midst of the Peter Jackson films, it again became a top seller. As Joseph Pearce indicates in *Tolkien: Man and Myth*, the *Daily Telegraph* of London conducted a poll in 1997 to counter the results of a previous poll ranking *The Lord of the Rings* as the number one book of the twentieth century. However, instead of debunking the first poll's results, the second poll simply confirmed and strengthened them. The *Daily Telegraph's* survey “revealed *The Lord of the Rings* as the greatest book of the century in the view of *Telegraph* readers and Tolkien as the greatest author [. . .]. Two months later, a poll published by the Folio Society ranked Tolkien's epic as Britain's favourite book of any century” (3). In another poll that Shippey cites, *The Lord of the Rings* falls directly below the Bible in popularity and in books that readers take seriously (*Author* xxi). In light of these statistics regarding the immense popularity of Tolkien's world and works, several critics have asked the obvious question, why does this shy, reserved, Oxford don's work have such cross-cultural and inter-generational, long-lasting appeal?

Tom Shippey wrote *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* for the purpose of answering such a question, saying “this book attempts accordingly to explain Tolkien's success and to make out the case for its importance.” My approach to Tolkien's work is similar to Shippey's statement, “[Tolkien] needs also to be looked at and interpreted

within his own time, as *an* ‘author of the century’, the twentieth century, responding to the issues and the anxieties of that century” (*Author* xxvii). However, I believe that Tolkien interpreted the events of his century within the universal context of humanity struggling in a fallen world; thus, his work is not limited to his century. While the evil occurring in the twentieth century was immense, Tolkien’s perspective on it and on human suffering was not a self-centered nor hyperbolic one relating only to his own specific time. He wrote to his son Christopher in 1944:

a small knowledge of history depresses one with the sense of the everlasting mass and weight of human iniquity: old, old, dreary, endless repetition of unchanging incurable wickedness. [. . .] And at the same time one knows that there is always good: much more hidden, much less clearly discerned, seldom breaking out into recognizable, visible, beauties of word or deed or face – not even when in fact sanctity, far greater than the visible advertised wickedness, is really there. (*Letters* 80)

He again repeated similar sentiments in 1956 after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, saying, “I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect ‘history’ to be anything but a ‘long defeat’—though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory” (*Letters* 255). Tolkien seems to have held such a provident perspective on human history throughout his lifetime; even in 1967, six years before his death, he wrote to his son Michael, encouraging him to remain faithful despite the changes occurring in the Church with the Second Vatican Council and passing along advice a Catholic mentor had given to him: “Now we find ourselves nakedly confronting the will of God, as concerns ourselves and our position in Time [. . .]. ‘Back to normal’ as a Catholic professor once said to me, when I bemoaned the collapse of all my world that began just after I achieved 21” (*Letters* 393). While “back to normal” is not necessarily a comforting bit of advice,

it offers comfort through placing proper perspective upon the events of one's present time.

Shippey argues that the "continuing appeal" of Tolkien rests

on a deeply serious response to what will be seen in the end as the major issues of his century: the origin and nature of evil (an eternal issue, but one in Tolkien's lifetime terribly re-focused); human existence in Middle-earth, without the support of divine Revelation; cultural relativity, and the corruptions and continuities of language. (*Author ix*)

However, a further reason seems needed to explain the almost religious devotion many Tolkien fans have towards Middle-earth, and the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, in particular. I posit the answer that Tolkien's work fills a desire or need on the reader's part to feel that he or she has value to the world, has some control and responsibility over life, and, finally, is not alone in an empty universe. Tolkien's world directly counters the secular worldview, arising from the Enlightenment and developing through the nineteenth-century, in which each person is an isolated individual in a vast, vacant universe with a silent, if barely existent, god. The twentieth century saw a conviction of fate replacing most people's faith in either the evolution of humanity towards a perfected social state or the active presence of a loving Deity in the world. Margaret Visser points out that modernity's tendency towards fatalism is continuing into the twenty-first century as "nature," in the form of genetics, has become the contemporary version of the Greek and Norse mythological "Fates." If, according to modern belief systems, humans are "genetically determined," Visser concludes that "a simplistic interpretation has turned biology into a version of fate" (118).

Tolkien's work acknowledges that fatalistic elements exist within the primary world, but fate is not the fundamental determiner of the world—providence governs fate

and intends humans to have significance through their potential to affect the world, and even affect eternity. Yet, while admitting the person's importance in a providential design, Tolkien's story also demands the person's moral responsibility for actions precisely because he or she retains freedom of the will.

By recognizing the order found in Middle-earth, a reader may come to see a similar pattern in his or her own life; and, more personally, the reader may come to see his or her unique importance to the world's wider design. Tolkien's work suggests such purpose is possible and present for the reader to know. While many readers do not accept the Christian faith as true and do not hold to its concept of providence, they still want a sense of importance, meaning, and order to their own swiftly passing life and efforts. Tolkien's work in no way demands a reader's religious acceptance of, or even familiarity with, his own Roman Catholic faith; but Tolkien's faith was essential for him to have been able to form a world order, such as Middle-earth, which essentially follows a Catholic understanding of providential design.

By presenting a providential structure to his secondary world, Tolkien, though not necessarily intending it, fills the audience's need for a sense of meaning in life and opens the way for a new type of poetic expression of religious purpose to the world and the person. Tolkien creates a mode of religious expression for a post-modern, post-Christian world in which faith and religious doctrine are inextricably woven without ever being explicitly expressed. Without any sense of evangelical purpose or intent, Tolkien deeply interweaves theology into his work simply through crafting a story rooted in the premises of reality that Tolkien held as true.

Tolkien creates a world in which the reader is able to be both a part of the story, moving through the plot alongside the characters, and apart from the story, overlooking the whole of it. In Middle-earth, a reader can recognize in the events a pattern and design that is hidden from him in the primary world. Through the medium of the secondary world, Tolkien offers his reader the chance to see a world from the perspective “outside of time,” so that the reader, seeing more as God sees, can understand the pattern of the design. At the same time, the reader also can identify with the limitations of the characters “within time,” who are unable to see the pattern that the reader perceives to their own story.

Thus, Tolkien gives the reader a chance to have at one and the same time the confidence in an overall design that a timeless perspective reveals, and the sympathy for the time-bound person whose knowledge is more clouded than the reader’s. Through experiencing such dual-vision, the reader may better connect his or her own life to the pattern that Tolkien establishes as real for Middle-earth, and then also connect the truths he or she sees within Middle-earth back to the primary world. Thus, Sam and Frodo’s dialogue regarding the relationship of great tales to their own personal story is one which the reader can come to say of his or her own story in the primary world. Sam says:

Folk seem to have been just landed in the [tales that really mattered]—their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on—and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. [. . .] I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?

Frodo responds, “I don’t know. And that’s the way of a real tale. [. . .] You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don’t

know. And you don't want them to" (2: 321). While one is within one's story, one doesn't know how it will end, and as Frodo says, there are difficult times when a person wants to shut the book of life, saying, "we don't want to read anymore" (2: 322).

Tolkien's work assures the reader that while not every life's story will turn out "well," while suffering will come to every person, and death and destruction will remain within the world, every life is important, goodness does exist, and all things, including evil, work together for good under the guidance of providence.

Notes

1. See Carpenter 260-263 for a discussion of the American reception of *The Lord of the Rings*.

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