

ILLUMINATING THE TRUE LIGHT OF NORTHERN COURAGE: GANDALF AS J.R.R.
TOLKIEN'S REVISED ODIN

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that J.R.R. Tolkien was determined to re-write the character of the Norse god Odin as Tolkien thought he ought to have been. I argue that this desire was rooted in Tolkien's belief of "true light": a thing's essential goodness which is often corrupted or disguised by evil perversion. Tolkien wanted to present Northern courage—the Norse view of fighting to the end despite certain doom—in its true light. Odin was the perfect character through which this virtue could be expressed and revised, principally through the character of Gandalf. This project is present in Tolkien's retelling of the *The Saga of the Volsungs* in his poem "The New Lay of the Volsungs," but is more fully realized in his depiction of Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Any reader familiar with Norse mythology would have recognized the bearded and cloaked wanderer who visits Bilbo Baggins in the opening chapter of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. If they, like Tolkien, had read the sagas and folktales of the old Norse peoples, they would have immediately assumed the role this "Odinic wanderer," Gandalf, would play in the story: Odin is traditionally depicted as a cloaked and bearded wanderer who visits humans, gods, and other creatures to stir up trouble. Though he may impart valuable wisdom and magical gifts, the adventures he initiates always end in trouble. He is arrogant, self-serving, devious, and erratic, commonly testing and then betraying the mortals with whom he interacts. Yet, as the story plays out, Gandalf slowly but surely proves himself to be a different kind of wanderer. Years later, in Tolkien's longer and more serious *The Lord of the Rings*, the true nature and function of Gandalf's character is fleshed out, defying and subverting all expectations set by his associations with Odinic tropes.

In this thesis, I argue that Tolkien borrows from Norse mythology not to imitate it, but rather to revise and present it unblemished in its true light. This concept of "true light" is drawn from a letter by Tolkien to his son Michael in which he laments the corruption of "that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light" (Carpenter, *Letters* 56). Tolkien had an Augustinian conception of evil, believing that good is primary, evil secondary. Therefore, a good thing like Northern courage, in Tolkien's

view, could be corrupted, but beneath that corruption remained the true light of Northern courage, something noble and worthwhile which Tolkien desired to see redeemed. In chapter two, I will illustrate Tolkien's efforts to present Northern courage in its true light by examining his first obvious attempt: his poem "The New Lay of the Volsungs," published posthumously by his son Christopher in 2009 in the volume titled *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*, but composed – most likely – sometime in the early 1930's (*Legend of Sigurd* 5). In this work Tolkien is already hard at work revising the legends and myths of the North which he so dearly cherished. While the poem follows the same cast of characters and sequence of events depicted in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, I argue that Tolkien tampers with the tale in such a foundational way that it ceases to be a truly Norse tale. Dissatisfied with the bleakness of the Nordic-worldview, Tolkien infuses his version of the story with blatant Messianic imagery and an Odin who better resembles the God of the Bible than the Odin depicted in Norse mythology. The end result is an entertaining, yet perhaps somewhat sloppy and disjointed, jumble of Norse and Christian mythology.

Having diagnosed Tolkien's project of rewriting Norse mythology, I will argue in my third chapter that he accomplishes this feat with remarkable nuance and maturity in *The Lord of the Rings*, namely in his depiction of Gandalf as an Odinic wanderer. In addition to bearing many superficial similarities, such as long grey beards, blue hoods, and even iconic, magical horses (Birzer 79), both characters function as prophetic disruptors who intervene in the lives of mortals in order to ennoble them through acts of courage. Odin, best of all the Norse gods and heroes, embodies the Northern theory of courage: the Nordic tendency to romanticize heroic battle in the face of certain doom. Gandalf does the same. Northern courage, in Tolkien's view, was a noble trait which aligned just as much with a Christian worldview as it did a Norse pagan worldview.

The key difference, I argue, is that unlike in Norse mythology where ultimate doom and defeat is a foregone conclusion, Tolkien's tale is characterized by *eucatastrophe*. The term *eucatastrophe* was coined by Tolkien himself in order to express what he viewed as the opposite of a tragedy (*The Monsters* 153).

This conviction is at the heart of Tolkien's work and ultimately distinguishes Gandalf from Odin. In his essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien argues that these happy endings, which come about in the end against all odds, in the face of horrific evil, are the most fitting endings for works of fantasy. (*The Monsters* 153). A well-documented sceptic of industrialism and the age of modernity which was growing up in its wake, Tolkien's approach to fantasy went against the grain of naturalism and pessimism which dominated the literary scene of the early to mid-20th century (Zaleski 4). Yet, Tolkien's embrace of fairy tales and *eucatastrophe* had nothing to do with escapism, but rather, "a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. It is not only a 'consolation' for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, 'Is it true?'" (*The Monsters* 155). In his view, *eucatastrophe* was exactly the kind of thing which characterized the actual, unfolding narrative of human history, or as Tolkien himself explains, "in 'eucatastrophe' we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater - it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world" (*The Monsters* 155). The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, portrays an endless and seemingly hopeless cycle of human events. The progression, stated roughly and briefly, consists of humanity rejecting God's commands, growing in strength and using their strength to injure and dominate both other people and the earth, and God using some combination of nature, divine acts of wrath, or human agents to enact judgement on those people. This cycle self-perpetuates in roughly the same form from Genesis through Malachi, the only hope being the promised Messiah who can finally break the cycle and

offer release from its cruel clutches. When Christians recognize that the Messiah arrives in Matthew, the escape from the cycle is finally introduced. Thus, Jesus's death at the hands of the people caught in the cycle seems like the greatest of all tragedies, but is overturned by His resurrection and promise to save those who follow Him, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat in the penultimate *eucatastrophic* event (*The Monsters* 156). It is hard to imagine something more distinct from the world of Norse mythology than this notion of *eucatastrophe*.

In my fourth chapter, I will argue that Tolkien perceived Odin as a demonic character in the vein of Milton's Satan who is corrupted because of misplaced pride. Gandalf functions as Odin as Tolkien thought he ought to be, while the treacherous wizard Saruman functions more like Odin as Tolkien saw him in Norse mythology. I will illustrate the demonic character of Odin by comparing him to Milton's Satan and Tolkien's Melkor in order to explore the evidence for Tolkien's deep-rooted aversion to the demonic. I suggest that it was this antipathy for the Satanic quest, embodied most famously by Milton's Satan, that motivated him to re-write Odin as Gandalf. Tolkien placed a high value on knowing one's place and doing one's duty with unwavering resolution, and any attempt to reach beyond one's place for personal gain was not only foolish but perverse. This prideful overreaching is best expressed by the old Anglo-Saxon word *ofermod*, a vice for which Tolkien expresses particular disdain. When one with power acted *ofermod*, in Tolkien's view, it was an act of corruption and evil in its purest form, particularly if acting *ofermod* caused the person to neglect their duty to their followers by putting them in unnecessary danger. I will argue that Tolkien's most admirable characters know their roles and fulfill them dutifully while his most evil characters disregard their roles and ultimately bring about their own ruin in doing so.

Coming to a conclusion about the nature of Tolkien's use of Norse imagery and themes in his work is not merely a psychological experiment for those who wish to understand the mind J.R.R. Tolkien. Deciding whether *The Lord of the Rings* is Norse in character, Christian in character, a synthesis of both, or something else entirely impacts how we read Tolkien's work on a fundamental level. When the Ring is destroyed and Sam returns home, ought we to weep at the futility of all the characters' heroic deeds? Tom Shippey writes, "the very last words of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* are, famously, 'Well, I'm back', [Sam] said.' One major author in the same field declared it 'the most heartbreaking line in all of modern fantasy' (Shippey, *Laughing* 89). Shippey here compares the final words of Tolkien's novel with some of the last words of famous Norse heroes as depicted in the lays which celebrate them. These dying words were almost always brief and utterly unemotional, perhaps the most poignant of all belonging to the final words of the great Beowulf himself. Like Sam and the other heroes in *The Lord of the Rings*, Beowulf does his duty faithfully, slaying the monsters time and time again and protecting the innocent from being annihilated. Yet, Beowulf in the end is too weak. He finally meets his death, and as he dies, knowing that an invading army will soon arrive and destroy all that he long fought for, "he says that fate has swept away all his kinfolk: *ic him after sceal*, 'I must after them.' Not a word wasted" (Shippey, *Laughing* 89). He knows that, as Galadriel puts it, "together through ages of the world we have fought the long defeat" (*Fellowship* 348). The question leaps from the page, both in *Beowulf* and in *The Lord of the Rings*: Was it all worth it? This question demands an answer. When Sam holds his child after his adventures are done and utters the famous final lines, has he only postponed the inevitable, or did he actually accomplish something worthwhile?

One's answer to this question completely depends on whether one reads Tolkien's work as an essentially Norse tale or a response to the Norse worldview, as illustrated by his friend C.S. Lewis's reaction to *The Lord of the Rings*. Lewis declared that "here are beauties which pierce like swords or burn like cold iron; here is a book that will break your heart. They will know that this is good news, news beyond all hope" (Zaleski 412-413). Notice that Lewis does not attempt to deny the presence of heartbreaking sadness and despair contained within the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*. Lewis acknowledges that the sense of loss and dread in Tolkien's work, and had his comments ended with that, he would have been in agreement with the scholar who declared the final lines to be the "most heartbreaking line in all of modern fantasy" (Shippey, *Laughing* 89). However, Lewis concludes that Tolkien's work presents "good news" and "hope." The difference is that Lewis encountered in Tolkien's work Northern courage not as it was, but as it ought to have been. To press on against all odds, despite certainty of death with no assurance of success, yet holding out hope for a *eucatastrophic* ending is, for Tolkien, the true light of Northern courage. In the end, that hope of a coming *eucatastrophe* separates Tolkien's rewrite of Norse mythology from its source, and perhaps more than anything else establishes the work as belonging to its own independent mythology.

CHAPTER II

A SAGA RE-WRITTEN: THE CHARACTER OF ODIN AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S ADDITION OF *EUCATASTROPHE* IN "THE NEW LAY OF THE VOLSUNGS"

That J.R.R. Tolkien was profoundly influenced by the myths and legends of the ancient Norse peoples is no secret. In many instances, Tolkien blatantly borrows themes, images, and even names from the ancient Norse imagination. For example, the very name "Middle-earth" is an English translation of *Midgard*, the realm inhabited by humans in Norse mythology. Familiar names in Tolkien's imagined world such as Gandalf, Durin, Bombur, Nori, Kili, and Fili are drawn directly from the opening lines of the old Norse poem "Voluspa" (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 4-5), one of the poems that constitutes the oldest and most authoritative sources on ancient Norse mythology called the *Poetic Edda*. In his introduction to his father's telling of *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*, Christopher Tolkien concludes "That the ancient poetry in the Old Norse language known by the names of the *Elder Edda* or the *Poetic Edda* remained a deep if submerged force in his later life's work is no doubt recognized" (3). Leslie A. Donovan notes that "early in the history of Tolkien scholarship, Charles Moorman even went so far as to assert that 'The greatest single influence upon Tolkien's work is the eddas and the sagas of the North'" (212). Yet, as one looks past all the many superficial elements which Tolkien borrows from Norse mythology, the thematic connections are not so clear-cut. Questions abound about whether the character of Tolkien's work is in accord with the Norse worldview or in opposition to it.

In this chapter, I will argue that Tolkien was not interested in mimicking Norse mythology nor endorsing the Nordic worldview, but rather re-writing Norse mythology in accord with its true light. This project is clearly demonstrated in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*, where Tolkien tampers with the saga at such a foundational level that it is hardly appropriate to still refer to the poem as Norse. *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun* follows the familiar character of Sigurd along his well-documented quest, led on his way by a god named Odin, but Tolkien's poem takes liberties with the story that shake it - thematically - to its core. The Nordic worldview, characterized by its distinct theory of courage, which I shall heretofore refer to as "Northern courage," is summed up most succinctly by Edith Hamilton: "The world of Norse mythology is a strange world. Asgard, the home of the gods, is unlike any other heaven men have dreamed of. No radiancy of joy is in it, no assurance of bliss. It is a grave and solemn place, over which hangs the threat of an inevitable doom Nevertheless, the gods will fight for it to the end" (300). It was a worldview entirely built around the idea that the earth and everyone in it was doomed to ultimate defeat along with their gods, and their response, as modeled by Odin and the rest of the Aesir, was to defiantly fight on to the bitter end.¹ The Nordic worldview then was one that acknowledged that the world was a cold, brutal place full of cruel and violent people, all predestined for suffering and destruction without even the hope that their gods might save them,

¹ See Paul Sturtevant, "Contesting the Semantics of Viking Religion." (*Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*) 261-278. Paul Sturtevant questions whether it is accurate to assume the ancient Norse were united in their religious beliefs. Our knowledge of the Nordic-worldview and religion is largely based on the old Norse myths and sagas, but Sturtevant suggests that Icelandic Norse, Swedish Norse, and Northern Irish Norse cultures likely developed rather different religious beliefs. However, regardless of whether or not anyone ever believed in Odin as an actual being, there is overwhelming historical evidence that the ancient Norse lived and died modelling the ideals their mythology immortalized. So, even if Norse mythology provides us with very little in the way of historical facts or religious beliefs, it does seem to be a reliable embodiment of what the Norse people valued. See also, Tom Shippey, *Laughing Shall I Die* (Reaktion Books), 24-37, 107-131. Shippey points to countless examples where incredible details in Norse sagas have been supported by archeological and historical findings. Additionally, Shippey's book provides copious evidence that actual, historical Norsemen were witnessed time and time again living exactly as their mythology instructed.

a bleak and demoralizing prospect to say the least. Yet, the ancient Norse were known as hardy, relentlessly courageous people, despite their gloomy worldview. Though they acknowledged the bleakness of their position, they were determined to go down to the grave laughing defiantly, with heads held high until the very last. This, in a nutshell, is Northern courage. Yet, in Tolkien's "New Lay of the Volsungs," he inserts a messianic promise of redemption and suggests that death in fact will be overcome, even if it is not entirely clear how. On the surface, this insertion may seem a small detail considering how few lines are actually dedicated to it, but it is a detail which undermines the entire tapestry of Norse mythology, a move which cannot be mistaken as a mere mistake or misunderstanding coming from a student of Norse language and literature such as Tolkien. Tolkien's subversive addition was a calculated move and part of his project to rewrite Norse mythology in order to present Northern courage in its true light.

The ancient Norse were certainly not the first nor the last to glorify such a pessimistically romantic theory of courage, but it would be difficult to find a culture that embodied it so thoroughly. Something like it is expressed in the Greek myth of Sisyphus, highlighted and celebrated anew amidst the rubble of World War II by Albert Camus. The stance taken by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is often associated with the absurdism of its defiant, yet romantic stance in the face of certain doom as a defense against despair (Hall 26). Even though Sisyphus is doomed to roll his stone up the hill in a humiliating, never-ending struggle, he can preserve some form of dignity and meaning by shaking his fist in defiance of the gods and falling to his work with ardor. Christopher Toner notes that Tolkien "writes approvingly of the old Norse conviction that 'Man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die. A theme,' he hastens to add, 'no Christian need despise'" (Toner 78). Toner, a Catholic like Tolkien himself, argues that without the biblical promise of salvation, the courageous defiance of the human condition

found in Norse mythology and the writings of Camus alike are ultimately absurd (78). While Tolkien unapologetically immersed himself in the myths and legends of the old Norse, it is clear he was not satisfied by their absurd and hopeless character, and this dissatisfaction fueled much of his academic and literary work. He believed there was something true and good about Northern courage, warped and obscured as it was beneath the complex layers of Norse mythology. Camus dramatized the plight of Sisyphus in order to illustrate how a human being might create meaning in an otherwise meaningless world. For Tolkien though, meaning and truth existed objectively and could be discovered and embraced. This, perhaps more than anything else, accounts for how two contemporary moderns across the English Channel from each other came to assume such drastically incompatible worldviews. Tolkien believed that good and beautiful things could be perverted and misapplied, making the goodness in them difficult to recover or even recognize. However, that essentially good and true thing that existed before its corruption is not made any less good and useful because it has been obscured, and this is what Tolkien refers to when he speaks of “true light.”

Over twenty years before the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was already demonstrating his interest in highlighting the true light of Northern courage found in Norse myths and legends. Taking what is arguably the most famous and significant of the medieval Norse legends, Tolkien wrote a poem which he called “The New Lay of the Volsungs,” published at last in 2009 in a volume titled *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*, thanks to Christopher Tolkien. This work is notable in that it is not a mere translation of *The Saga of the Volsungs*, nor a stylish retelling. Rather, it is a re-working of the saga which inserts a taste of *eucatastrophe* (Beal 10). Though the legend of Sigurd is recorded in several sources, both in writing and carved into wood and stone (Shippey, *Laughing* 64), the oldest and most

authoritative source, *The Poetic Edda*, is missing several key pages of the story. These missing pages must have both delighted and frustrated Tolkien, for as Tom Shippey points out, Tolkien “set himself to write the missing poem and the legend as it should have been” (*Laughing* 64). Although Shippey is referring to “the legend as it should have been” in the sense that the older sources present a narrative that is, because of the missing pages, literally incomplete, this notion of re-writing Norse mythology as it ought to have been seems to have had far greater significance for Tolkien. The Norse sagas, whether they were missing pages or not, were incomplete for Tolkien because they presented Northern courage, a good and true thing at its core, misapplied outside of its proper context. Tolkien lamented the demonic corruption of “that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light” (Carpenter, *Letters* 56). Northern courage itself, in Tolkien’s view, was certainly no bad thing. Although he traced its origins back to villainous Viking raiders and pointed out its contemporary manifestation in Hitler’s Nazi party, he still believed there was something good and true about it, even though it was twisted into a hopelessly ugly, demonic mess. In that same letter, he claims that “you have to understand the good in things, to detect the real evil” (Carpenter, *Letters* 55). Thus, considering Tolkien’s notion of “true light,” Norse mythology written as it should have been must involve not only filling in the missing pages, but editing the existing pages so that they depict Northern courage in its true light. If one compares the Norse renditions of *The Saga of the Volsungs* and Tolkien’s “New Lay of the Volsungs,” one can clearly see that this is exactly what Tolkien does.

Although Sigurd is the central character and hero of the traditional Norse saga, Odin proves to be the puppet-master who pulls all the strings, guiding the Volsung family from its miraculous beginnings to its glorious, yet tragic end. Odin directly facilitates the conception of

the Volsung family. Rerir, a son of Odin, prays to the gods in his old age for a son to be his heir, and Odin sends a Valkyrie with a magic apple which grants fertility to him and his wife. The son who is born to them is called Volsung (Crawford, *Saga of the Volsungs* 2-3). Quite literally then, it is Odin that guides and equips the Volsungs from the very beginning. This story has as much to do with the one-eyed god and his quest as it does the mortal heroes involved, and thus offers a rich store of insight into Odin's character.

According to Norse tradition, Odin and Loki set in motion the events that ultimately lead to the tragedy that is *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Having killed the son of a farmer named Hreidmar while the son was in the shape of an otter, they are forced to pay ransom to the farmer. Loki obtains the ransom through treachery and they leave Hreidmar and his sons, Regin and Fafnir, with a magical ring which both begets more treasure and is cursed to bring death to whoever owns it (Sturlson 96). After being refused a share of the treasure, Fafnir promptly slays his father in his sleep (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 236) and then denies a share of the treasure to Regin (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 237). Regin recruits the promising young warrior, Sigurd, to help him claim his share of the treasure from Fafnir, who lay on the treasure "in the form of a dragon. He had a helmet of terror that instilled fear in all living things" (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 238). Sigurd, a descendant of Volsung, agrees to aid Regin in this quest but demands a worthy blade. After failing to produce a satisfactory blade for Sigurd, Regin forges Sigurd a new sword out of the shards of Sigurd's father's sword, Gram.

Just as Odin set in motion the events which led to Sigurd embarking on his quest and possessing this legendary weapon, Odin himself was the one who originally presented the sword to Sigmund, Sigurd's father, and thrust the Volsung family into the spotlight. At a wedding feast, "when the merry-making was at its height, the entrance to the hall was suddenly darkened by the

tall form of a one-eyed man, closely enveloped in a mantle of cloudy blue” (Guerber 277). The stranger “thrust a glittering sword up to the hilt” into an oak tree trunk (Guerber 277). He claimed that the blade would belong to whomever could remove it from “its oaken sheath, and that it would assure him victory in every battle” (Guerber 277). In Jackson Crawford’s translation of the saga, Odin specifically calls the sword “a gift from me” (*Saga of the Volsungs* 4). Its status as a gift is confirmed after all the “highest-born men went to the sword first” (*Saga of the Volsungs* 5) and were unable to remove the blade, “But then Sigmund, Volsung’s son, came to try the sword, and it came out in his hands as if it had sat there loose for him” (*Saga of the Volsungs* 5). Sigmund takes no credit for the feat, explaining that “You could have taken this sword from the tree just as easily as I did, if it had been meant for you” (*Saga of the Volsungs* 5). Sigmund values this gift dearly, even though this public gift-giving by Odin leads to years of bloody war and treachery, sending many a Viking warrior to glory and a seat in Valhalla. Sigmund had many great sons who won the Volsung family fame, and Odin’s promise that the owner of Gram would win every battle holds true. However, in Sigmund’s final battle:

They saw Sigmund pile the dead around him, for none could stand against him, until at last a tall, one-eyed warrior suddenly appeared, and the press of battle gave way before the terror of his presence.

Without a moment’s pause the new champion aimed a fierce blow at Sigmund, which the old hero parried with his sword. The shock shattered the matchless blade, and although the strange assailant vanished as he had come, Sigmund was left defenseless and was soon wounded unto death by his foes (Guerber 290).

Odin is the source of the Volsung's glory and also the author of their pain and death. On one hand, Odin appears benevolent in that he chooses the Volsungs among other families to be the greatest of his heroes who will drink with him in Valhalla and fight at his side at Ragnarök (*Legend of Sigurd* 53). However, "by the same token, Odin's role as an inciter of war and a killer of men led to some unease about his role...(such as 'Evil doer,' 'Battle-Merry,' and even simply 'Killer')" (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* xiii). When Odin, through his mysterious relationship with Loki, set in motion the events that caused Sigurd to take up his father's sword and go out on a dangerous adventure, he was renewing his commitment to his chosen family. Like his father, Sigurd is guided to glory and then doom by Odin every step of the way. Clearly the relationship between Odin and his champions is complex. There is something seemingly treacherous in the way Odin abandons his heroes at their time of death, or as Jesse Byock puts it, "Odin is also a fickle god... Bjarki curses Odin for his treachery, but the god is simply acting in character. Odin's propensity to betray even his most beloved heroes, especially those to whom he had previously granted a long string of victories, is well known" (*Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* xxx). Indeed, Odin's treachery is simply a part of his nature, for he is constantly at work "harvesting' accomplished warriors for his army in Valhalla" (*Saga of the Volsungs* xi). Odin grooms Sigurd like a farmer fattening a prized pig. He treats the hero with utmost care until the time comes for butchering, and then all of Odin's warmth turns suddenly into what looks like cold treachery, often using the very gifts he's given against his hero or disarming and slaying them himself, as in the case of Sigmund.

Just before he sets out with Regin, Sigurd visits his uncle Gripir, who can see the future, and asks what Gripir can see regarding his fate. Gripir tells Sigurd that:

You will become
the most famous man
beneath the sun,
most honored of all kings,
you will share your gold
and show your courage,
you will be a handsome man,
and master of words. (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 222)

Encouraged by this prophecy, Sigurd sets off with Regin in a boat and promptly receives his first and most obvious visitation from Odin. In the midst of a storm, they meet an old man who calls himself Battle-Stirrer (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 239). Odin, in this guise, guides Sigurd and Regin through the storm, teaching Sigurd how to read omens (Guerber 299). Sigurd puts these skills to use before long. Having slain Fafnir and taken a taste of the dragon's heart, Sigurd is able to understand the chatter of birds, who advise him to kill Regin, take the treasure, and set out in pursuit of a beautiful maiden (Guerber 302).

Although neither the *Prose Edda* nor *Poetic Edda* say explicitly whether Odin sent the birds himself, it does seem most likely, considering Odin's frequent association with birds - ravens in particular - as well as directive omens (Shippey, *Laughing* 219), (Hamilton 308), (Guerber 16). Odin's ravens were his spies. They flew about the earth observing the deeds of men and bringing back information to their master. It is no coincidence that Odin himself appeared to Sigurd and taught him to read omens, mentioning ravens specifically as a good omen before battle (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 239). In Jackson Crawford's translation of *The Poetic Edda*, he specifies that the birds who speak to Sigurd are wagtails (248), but other accounts,

including *The Prose Edda*, are more ambiguous, saying only that after he tasted Fafnir's blood he was able to understand the speech of birds (Sturlson 97) (Guerber 301). It should be noted that the birds who have gathered around Sigurd have come now that there is a corpse, so it follows that they are scavenger birds, like ravens. Tolkien apparently felt comfortable assuming the status of the birds as Odinic messengers, even going so far as to distinguish one of them as a raven in his own telling of the legend (*Legend of Sigurd* 116). There is also a possibility, regardless of what kind of birds they are, that they are actually Odin himself. After all, there are stories of Odin shapeshifting, and it is suggested that "He could also send off his soul in animal form as a means of gaining knowledge of things far away" (Eson 87). Regardless of whether one reads the birds as emissaries of Odin or Odin himself, these birds intently watch Odin's chosen hero and supply him with Odinic council. Their advice prompts Sigurd to initiate his relationship with Brynhild, a relationship which ultimately proves his greatness and brings about his death, exactly the kind of thing Odin is said to have done time and time again. So yet again, Odin has furnished Sigurd for his quest and prodded him along to his next destination.

The woman to whom Sigurd is guided is a Valkyrie, one of Odin's angelic maidens tasked with selecting the valiant from among the slain and escorting the chosen to Valhalla. This Valkyrie, named Brynhild, is surrounded by fire and remains fast asleep, cursed by Odin for an act of disobedience but granted Odin's promise that "he who comes to her shall be one whose heart knows no fear" (Hamilton 304). The valiant Sigurd awakens the maiden and the two fall in love, but accounts differ considerably about what happens next. Only fragments remain of the old Norse poem, "Brot af Sigutharkvithu," and sadly, the *Poetic Edda's* account of Sigurd is interrupted abruptly, resuming in the future with Sigurd married to another woman, Gudrun. It is elsewhere told that Sigurd departed from Brynhild in order to win a title and a home before he

made her his queen, but had his memory erased by magic (Geurber 309-310). Sigurd later helps his brother-in-law, Gunnar, by winning Brynhild, who again is surrounded by fire and pledged to the same conditions to marry only the one who is without fear. Disguising himself as Gunnar, Sigurd passes through the flames and frees Brynhild, thereby winning her as a wife for Gunnar, whom Brynhild believes to be a worthy husband. This scheme is uncovered years later by Brynhild, who indignantly exacts revenge on Sigurd and brings about the mighty warrior's demise.

A brief survey of this narrative's outline prompts a question which probes deeply into the nature of Odin's character: Why would Odin guide Sigurd along his journey, grooming him and furnishing him like only a god could, if the quest led only to treachery and death? If Sigurd and the Volsungs are his favored family, why must they suffer and die such violent deaths? The narrative surrounding Brynhild is particularly interesting and may hint at an answer to this question. It is undeniable that Sigurd's and Brynhild's meeting is entirely staged by Odin. We have already seen how Odin incited the events that led to Sigurd's quest being undertaken. Having learned to read omens and slain a fearsome dragon with his magical sword, gifted to his family by Odin himself, Sigurd is guided by Odin's messengers to the next part of his quest. The fact that Sigurd wins Brynhild not once, but twice proves that he is not only courageous, but legendarily so. Brynhild exists to both prove Sigurd's greatness and to secure a violent and honorable death for him before he grows old. While the first function seems benevolent on the part of Odin, the second feels twisted and cruel, but it is a cycle that encapsulates how the Norse people saw themselves in relation to their gods, to life, and to death itself.

If an author today were to rewrite Sigurd's story with a positive portrayal of Odin, a few small changes would seem most sensible. First, Sigurd could meet Brynhild, win her, and wed

her himself, thus proving himself to be a man without fear. Though Brynhild's previous vow never to marry was shattered when Odin punished her and put his curse upon her, being wed to the greatest of all men seems a satisfying resolution to her character arc. Similarly, a rewrite might just as well exclude Brynhild altogether. After all, there are plenty of other ways to demonstrate Sigurd's great courage and strength that does not involve vengeful murder and treachery at his jealous lover's hands. A generous, merciful Odin could bestow gifts upon a hero, guide them to glory, and allow them to grow old as they enjoy the spoils of their victories until natural death eventually takes them beside a fire with their closest of kin looking on in admiration. Yet, this sort of Odin would not have appealed to the old Norse sensibilities. In fact, such a rewrite would have been repugnant and downright offensive. Brynhild could not be excluded from the narrative because she was both Sigurd's glory and his death, nor would it do for her to be simply his glory or merely his death. *The Saga of the Volsungs* holds such a central place in the canon of the old Norse sagas because it perfectly embodies the character of Odin and his relationship with men and their lives. Although it appears as if Odin is luring Sigurd to his death, one must grapple with the fact that a Norse hero's journey is not complete without dying a violent death. Yet, a violent death means nothing if the hero's honor is not at stake. Thus, one could say that Odin is merciful to Sigurd, for by allowing him to prove himself by slaying a fearsome dragon, outsmarting the treacherous Regin, understanding omens brought by birds and twice winning a beautiful and fearsome Valkyrie maiden. Indeed, Odin ensures that Sigurd's fate is every bit as glorious as his uncle predicted. His mighty deeds completed, Sigurd is killed and is taken to Valhalla, untainted by old age, defeat, or any weakness that might disqualify him from being called the greatest of all heroes.

In Tolkien's re-telling of the saga, he highlights and embellishes the gracious and even hopeful aspect of Odin's character. Christopher Tolkien, in his preface to *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*, notes that Odin chooses the family of the Volsungs to be his chosen warriors, Sigurd to be their leader, "for Odin hopes that by his hand the Serpent shall in the end be slain, and a new world made possible. None of the Gods can accomplish this, but only one who has lived on Earth first as a mortal and died" (53). Christopher Tolkien goes on to suggest that, both in his father's work and in the original poems, Odin's hope "looks out beyond the seeming disasters of this world. Though Odin's chosen come all to an evil end or untimely death, that will only make them of greater worth for their ultimate purpose in the Last Battle" (54). This hope and the Volsungs' chosen status is not explicit in the old Norse sources Tolkien consulted (*Legend of Sigurd* 54), so the fact that he chose to highlight these elements reveals his predisposition to insert *euclastrophe* into tales which lack it.

In the opening lines of Tolkien's lay, he does something rather drastic. He provides the necessary ingredients for *euclastrophe* to take place, but in doing so, he simultaneously undermines the central conflict of Norse mythology. Having established the war between the gods and the monsters, Tolkien puts these words into the mouth of a seer:

Shall all be ended,

Shall Earth perish?

If in day of Doom

One deathless stands,

Who death hath tasted

And dies no more,

The serpent-slayer,
Seed of Odin,
Then all shall not end,
Nor Earth perish. (*Legend of Sigurd* 63)

That the earth shall perish, in the Norse myths, is a foregone conclusion; yet, Tolkien here is suggesting that perhaps this fate can be avoided. The Seer goes on to say that at this hero's hands, "the Wolf be vanquished / and the world rescued" (64). This hero must be of Odin's seed, so Tolkien's seer explains Odin's activity in the world as something ultimately hopeful and good, since he must proactively sow his seeds in search for this promised savior of the world. Instead of waiting to die by Odin's side at Ragnarök, Tolkien describes Odin's warriors patiently waiting in Valhalla, the "mighty ones of Earth / mailclad sitting / for one they waited, / the World's chosen" (65). In these critical lines, Tolkien has inserted what can only be likened to a messianic figure, and in doing so, has completely altered the Odinic quest, the despair of Ragnarök, and the stubbornly defiant stance of the Norse hero. If all of Odin's fallen heroes simply gather to wait for the coming savior, they have more in common with Old Testament prophets and patriarchs than they do with ancient Norse heroes like Sigurd or Ragnar Lodbrok.

This messianic imagery in Tolkien's lay is only furthered when Sigurd is called by Fafnir "man of mankind" (109). This title recalls the biblical title "Son of Man," frequently attributed to Jesus, the Messiah (Daniel 7:13, Mark 14:62, Luke 9:22). The title Son of Man draws attention to the Messiah's role as a representative of humanity, even though He is simultaneously the Son of God. Likewise, Sigurd is a son of Odin, but also "man of mankind." As the chosen seed of Odin, Tolkien's Sigurd will fulfill the prophecy and bring about the world's salvation. Tolkien does not simply leave this messianic function as a suggestion in his poem. He does not leave the

reader wondering if Odin's hope was misplaced. In the final lines, he depicts Brynhild and Sigurd united in Valhalla, she as his shieldmaiden, preparing him for the last battle. Tolkien confirms that Sigurd was indeed the "world's chosen," and that:

In the day of Doom
he shall deathless stand
who death tasted
and dies no more
the serpent-slayer,
seed of Odin: not all shall end
nor Earth perish. (179-180)

Tolkien portrays Sigurd's death as a necessary evil which leads to something ultimately good, for as one of Odin's ravens declares "Odin smote/ whom Odin loved" (117). With his honor fully intact and his reputation as a great warrior undisputed, Tolkien's Odin calls Sigurd home, like a loving father welcoming home a much-cherished child:

In Valhollu
Volsungs feasted:
'Son's son welcome,
Seed of Odin!'

Thus soon came Sigurd
The sword bearing
To glad Valholl
Greeting Odin.

There Feasts he long
At his father's side,
For War waiting,
The World's chosen. (179)

This is certainly a warm and comforting picture that Tolkien paints, a stark contrast to the scenes of fire, suicide, and murder which precede them. Compare Tolkien's warm rendering of Sigurd and Brynhild's end with these words taken from a Jackson Crawford's translation of the old Norse version of the saga:

Now Sigurd's body was prepared in the ancient way, and a great funeral pyre was built. And when the fire had been kindled, they put Sigurd, the killer of Fafnir, on top of it with his three-year old son, killed on Brynhild's orders...And when the fire was burning high, Brynhild spoke with her serving-women and told them to take the gold that she wanted to give them. And after this, Brynhild died and burned there with Sigurd, and their lives came to a close. (*Saga of the Volsungs* 64)

In the traditional telling of the saga, there is no reunion for Sigurd and Brynhild in a feasting hall in Valhalla, surrounded by family and a loving god. Rather, we find only fire, suicide, and even the murder of Sigurd's three-year old son. In *The Poetic Edda*, there is a poem, "Helreith Brynhildar," in which Brynhild, on her way to Hel after her suicide, declares that "But as for me and Sigurth, / we will never be parted, / never again after death!" (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 292). Though Brynhild believes she and Sigurd will be united once more, there is no talk of feasting and final victory. This poem is accompanied with grisly accounts of murder, treachery, and mourning, and even the great hall of Odin is not safe.

In Tolkien's poem, Odin is a god characterized by love and hope, hardly comparable to the cold and cruel Odin we meet in the sagas. It is difficult not to notice that the Odin found in Tolkien's poem bears a resemblance to the God of the Bible, working out all the troubles in his chosen people's lives in order to bring about a greater good which will occur against all odds in spite of overwhelming sorrow and evil. After all, Tolkien "could not linger in the pagan despair of the defeated hero, as glorious and moving as it might be. Although his imagination was steeped in the sorrows of tragic myth, it was more deeply rooted in the Christian hope of final victory" (Coutras 165). To leave Odin and the Norse myths as they were passed down by the ancient Norse peoples, in Tolkien's view, was to allow the true light of Northern courage to be obscured and, perhaps, forgotten. Odin, in Tolkien's view, was clearly a character in need of a rewrite, and it seems the professor believed he was the one to do it.

Tolkien's attempt to rewrite Odin in his true light in the "The New Lay of the Volsungs" is dissatisfying for several reasons, particularly because he uses Odin as a stand-in for the God of the Bible. It seems that Odin has been replaced rather than revised, but still, Tolkien reveals his dissatisfaction with Odin and Norse mythology and his desire to set it right, even if his initial effort was a bit clumsily handled. It is noteworthy, if Christopher Tolkien's estimation is correct, that his father composed this work in the years leading up to, or perhaps even concurrent with, the writing of *The Hobbit (Legend of Sigurd 5)*. That Tolkien was thinking quite a lot about Odin in the 1930's is clear, so it is no surprise that in the opening pages of his adventure novel, the reader is introduced to the Odinic wanderer, Gandalf, who is described as "an old man with a staff. He had a tall pointed blue hat, a long grey cloak... his long white beard hung down below his waist" (*The Hobbit 5*). Furthermore, Tolkien gives Gandalf a broad brimmed hat which conceals his eyes and says that "Tales and adventures sprouted up all over the place wherever he

went, in the most extraordinary fashion” (*The Hobbit* 5). This description is about as stereotypically Odinic as possible (Brunsdale 49), but instead of challenging a dangerous giant to a battle of wits or calling a mighty hero into battle only to slay him, Gandalf joins a band of stupid, homeless dwarves and a lazy little hobbit. There is no treachery in this Odinic wanderer as Bilbo gets to return home rich and ennobled while the dwarves regain their honor, though, granted, at the cost of several of their company’s lives. By time he was writing *The Hobbit*, Tolkien was obviously thinking deeply about the nature of Odin and already adding nuance to his rewrite of the god.

CHAPTER III

TOLKIEN REVISES ODIN: PROPHECY, KNOWLEDGE, AND GANDALF AS ODINIC

WANDERER

Tolkien's posthumously published *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun* serves as an obvious, though perhaps not especially subtle re-writing of a famous Norse myth. The most audacious aspect of his re-write is his utter transformation of Odin, the chief god and central character in Norse mythology. Though it is probably the earliest, "The New Lay of the Volsungs" is not the only work in which Tolkien can be seen reworking a Norse tragedy into something more in line with his Catholic worldview. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien accomplishes his vision with the subtlety and maturity which his earlier work lacks. Jane Beal has convincingly argued for a reading of Eowyn as a rewrite of Brynhild (12), while Leslie A. Donovan explains how "unlike medieval valkyrie counterparts such as Sigrún and Sváva, Arwen's choice of mortality results not in Aragorn's tragic death but in a life lived with her beloved" (109). These are but a few of the discernable rewrites Tolkien includes in his novel, but it is how Tolkien approaches his rewrite of Odin that bears the most weight, for after all, it is Odin's quest that characterizes and drives the whole of Norse mythology. It should come as no surprise then that one need not dig deep to find a candidate for this critical role in Gandalf, undoubtedly the closest thing Tolkien produced to a rewrite of Odin.

In this chapter, I will explore Gandalf's role as an Odinic wanderer. Gandalf's and Odin's functions appear strikingly similar at first glance, as they both act as prophetic disrupters, using

their knowledge to set in motion events which lead to the ennoblement of their followers through acts of courage. However, it is Tolkien's insertion of *eucatastrophe* that ultimately distinguishes Gandalf from Odin. While all those who follow Odin are eventually betrayed and destroyed with him, those who follow Gandalf find a loyal friend who guides them to improbable victory. Unlike in "The New Lay of the Volsungs," however, Tolkien refrains from inserting blatant messianic imagery or presenting Gandalf as a stand-in for God. Instead, Gandalf is truly Odin as Odin ought to have been, illuminating the nobility of Northern courage in its true light, rather than the distorted, misapplied version Tolkien found in Norse mythology.

"Voluspa" is at the center of contemporary knowledge about Norse mythology. In the poem, Odin interviews a deceased witch, who tells him how the world began and how it will end. Odin's desperate desire for knowledge and his inability to prevent Ragnarök, the prophesied apocalypse which entails not only the death of the gods and all their followers but of the world tree, Yggdrasil, itself, takes central stage in this poem. Quite literally, the plight of Norse mythology is sketched out. The gods, led and best represented by Odin, are not all powerful. They know their doom is coming but are helpless to prevent it. In a famous Norse tale, Odin sacrifices his eye at Mimir's Well, a sacrifice which grants him foresight and wisdom, tools he hopes he can use to change his fate. Yet, in "Voluspa", the witch speaks of this sacrifice in hopeless terms:

Odin, I know
where you hid your eye
in the famous waters
of the well of Mimir.
But Mimir can drink every morning

from those waters

where your own eye drowns.

Have you learned enough yet, Allfather? (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 8)

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf's self-sacrifice in Moria and subsequent return as Gandalf the White bears some resemblance to Odin's sacrifice at the well of Mimir. Gandalf says that he and the Balrog fell for a long time until they "plunged into the deep water and all was dark" (*Two Towers* 490). This descent into the dark waters under the earth is certainly inspired by the well of Mimir, and the darkness that surrounds Gandalf is not unlike the murky black waters that drowns Odin's eye. After he defeated the Balrog, Gandalf says that he "strayed out of thought and time" (*Two Towers* 491) and "was sent back - for a brief time, until my task is done (*Two Towers* 491). Like Odin, Gandalf's descent into the dark waters grants him understanding not inhibited by the limits of time and consciousness, and as a result, a renewed and clarified sense of purpose. Odin sees the coming apocalypse of Ragnarök and responds by trying to stop it, even though the immediate future and path forward remains unclear to him. Gandalf remarks that "I have forgotten much that I thought I knew, and learned again much I had forgotten. I can see many things far off, but many things that are close at hand I cannot see" (*Two Towers* 484). Even though immediate steps may not be clear to Gandalf, he returns from his sacrifice under the earth with a knowledge of what is to come and an understanding of his role to play in bringing those events to pass.

Odin's knowledge about his coming doom is a key characteristic not only for his character, but for the entire Norse worldview. Like many other ancient peoples, the medieval Norse were deeply concerned with "gaining and maintaining honor, and avoiding shame" (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* x). They saw a harsh, violent, cold world all around them and embraced

the fact that death awaited every person, regardless of whether the gods favored them or not. What then could be more shameful than cowering in fear or trying to run from the inevitable? In order to protect his followers from such shame, Odin leads by example as an ultimate representation of Northern courage, and in his generosity, he offers men a chance to die honorably with him at Ragnarök.² Valhalla, Odin's magnificent hall, awaits fallen warriors who die honorable and courageous deaths. There they feast and fight in anticipation of that day when they will finally be called to arms for the last battle. If one were so inclined, it could be considered an act of grace on the part of Odin when he arrives in disguise at the door of a Norse hero, sending him off on a perilous adventure which ultimately leads to his earthly destruction, although this is a deliberately generous reading of Odin's motives. In most old Norse stories involving Odin, the god comes across as anything but warm and caring; yet, if one embraces the Norse worldview and their distinct theory of courage, it is not inconceivable that followers of Odin must have genuinely appreciated and admired his character, especially considering the high value they placed on glorious death in battle.

According to the Norse worldview, to be left alone to grow fat and weak until one's natural death was no mercy. A straw death, as they called dying of old age, was a threat, something so repugnant that they "wounded themselves with their own spears when death drew near, if they had been unfortunate enough to escape death on the battlefield" (Guerber 22). Odin plays a prophetic role for the Norse pagan warrior. I use "prophetic" here in the biblical, Old Testament sense, in that the prophets of the Old Testament were regularly tasked with challenging and disrupting the lives of God's people for their own betterment, and a similar case

² See Jackson Crawford, *The Saga of the Volsungs* (Hackett Publishing), pg. xi. While women were certainly not devoid of honor in old Norse culture, the halls of Valhalla are not known to hold any thrones for even the most courageous of women.

can be made for Odin, whose very name is associated with prophecy. In fact, the Old English translation of Odin's name, *Woden*, derived from the Old English word *wod*, is something like "inspired" or "mad," but as Tom Shippey points out, "They testify to a belief in some superhuman and inexplicable force that allows men and women to see their future – the Latin word *vates*, 'prophet,' is from the same root" (*Laughing* 130-131). The prophetic force displayed by Odin "is the same force that puts immortal poetry into mortal heads and makes warriors and berserkers impervious to fear, pain or wound" (Shippey, *Laughing* 131). In a culture that valued glorious death in battle, this kind of inspired madness could shake a Norse warrior out of their comfort and move them into the thick of battle without fear of pain or death. An easy example of Old Testament prophetic disruption can be found in the book of Jonah. The prophet, Jonah, warns the people of Nineveh about God's imminent wrath, the assumption being that the people of Nineveh would have gone on enjoying their carnal pleasures until God's wrath was unleashed and their city was destroyed. However, thanks to the disruption brought by Jonah's arrival, the people repent and God's wrath is assuaged. Jonah rejects his fate and selfishly hopes for the prophesied disaster of Nineveh, bearing some resemblance to Odin who rejects his fate and selfishly stirs up all kinds of trouble among humans to rally them to his cause - this being the more common and less generous reading of Odin's motives. Regardless of Odin's motives, the Norse worldview did not ignore the fact that death awaited every person, and if left to his own devices, the Norseman might fall victim to weakness and cowardice, allowing glory and honorable death to pass him by, thereby excluding him from Valhalla.

Gandalf's prophetic nature is likewise a critical part of his character. The hobbits love eating, smoking, and indulging in frivolous social activities, safely tucked away in their beautiful Shire far away from the wars and politics of the world. Without Gandalf's intervention, Frodo

and the other hobbit characters never would have played their part in the great War of the Ring. They would have happily enjoyed their days in the Shire until their homes were eventually destroyed and taken from them by the growing power of Sauron and Saruman. Unlike the violent and harsh Scandinavian landscape inhabited by the medieval Norse or even the imperialistic, debauched metropolis of Nineveh, the hobbits' setting is not a place from which they must be saved. In the prologue to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien describes the Shire in idyllic terms, explaining that the land had once been farmland and vineyards belonging to ancient human kings (5). The land itself is rich and beautiful and the hobbits have an appropriately enthusiastic appreciation for the bountiful goodness of their land. I say appropriate, because at the end of the day, the fact that the Shire is itself something good and worth saving, worth dying for even, is a critical motivation for Frodo, Sam, and even Gandalf. Upon his resolution to undertake the proposed journey, Frodo says:

“I should like to save the Shire, if I could - though there have been times when I thought the inhabitants too stupid and dull for words, and have felt that an earthquake or an invasion of dragons might be good for them. But I don't feel that now. 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” (*Fellowship* 61).

Although Tolkien's description of the hobbits and their activities in the Shire is not exactly flattering, it is undeniable that they lead a safe and comfortable existence, an existence which Gandalf would very much like to see them continue. They are simple people who live in content appreciation of that which is naturally good, such as food, pipe weed, and the earth itself. The fact that hobbits live in quaint, comfortable holes in the ground is a perfect image for their

closeness with the earth as well as the sheltering nature of the Shire. Yet, like Odin, it is Gandalf's prophetic duty as a disrupter to combat the seduction of comfort by awakening Frodo to the outlying peril which threatens not only the Shire, but all the good places in Middle-earth.

Gandalf stirs Frodo with ominous musings, telling him that "Ever since Bilbo left I have been deeply concerned about you, and about all these charming, absurd, helpless hobbits. It would be a grievous blow to the world, if the Dark Power overcame the Shire; if all your kind... became enslaved" (*Fellowship* 48). A common theme in the Old Testament books of prophecy is that the prophet comes to Israel at a critical moment, usually before a potential disaster. The prophet implores the people to listen to him so that the disaster may be averted, as can be clearly seen in the first chapter of Joel. Joel begins the book exclaiming "Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land!" (Joel 1:2). Joel warns that "a nation has come up against my land, powerful beyond number" (Joel 1:6); yet, there is still something that can be done. Joel implores his people to humble themselves and "Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God and cry out to the Lord" (Joel 1:14b). Joel makes it clear that if the people of Israel continue in their ways they will be destroyed, and Gandalf does no different in his confrontation with Frodo. The wizard speaks from a place of superior knowledge, telling Frodo "You do not know the real peril yet; but you shall... the time has come to speak" (*Fellowship* 48). The fact that Frodo is not aware of the danger facing him necessitates Gandalf's timely disruption. Yet, it is worth noting that Gandalf does not disrupt Frodo's life because there is anything wrong with it. Magic rings and dark lords aside, Gandalf would have been very happy to watch Frodo live a long life enjoying the Shire without ever going on an adventure, and if Frodo died a calm straw death in the end, we can only assume that Gandalf would have approved. However, since there is a great war taking place and because there is an important

quest to go on, Frodo's lack of participation in that conflict would not only be unfortunate, but shameful.

Without knowledge of danger and a comprehension of one's choices, a person - or hobbit - cannot really demonstrate courage. If an evil ending is not considered a possible outcome, courage is not required (Shippey, *Road to Middle-earth* 154). In *The Lord of the Rings*, the stakes are clearly set, as Tom Shippey notes, "Repeatedly we are told that if its characters fail to resist the Shadow, they will be taken over" (*Road to Middle-earth* 154). Unlike the situation at Ragnarök, where the gods are doomed whether they resist or not, the hobbits are given some hope that their struggle may ultimately save them from the coming doom. However, there is no guarantee that if any of the characters act, Gandalf included, that they will completely avoid disaster. Gandalf's decision to share his knowledge, or at least a small slice of it, with Frodo at once burdens him with moral responsibility and with it the potential for ennoblement. If Gandalf does not make Frodo wise to the threat facing him, then he would have been free to live in oblivious bliss until trouble suddenly overtook and destroyed him. Such a fate is neither heroic nor cowardly. However, since Frodo knows of the threat and experiences dread in response to it, Frodo is able to then demonstrate courage. Establishing that a character experiences sadness, pain, and fear was important in depictions of traditional Norse heroes. Although Norse heroes take bad news and painful experiences passively, making crude jokes and repressing emotional urges, their inner-turmoil is often "betrayed by signs that are automatic, that cannot be controlled: Thor's knuckles whitening, Volund grinding his teeth... when Sigurd is finally rejected by Brynhild, he says nothing (naturally), but his breast swells with rage and grief so much that the links of his mail-shirt burst" (Shippey, *Laughing* 97). To passively respond to

danger or pain is either psychopathic, foolish, or downright pathetic unless there is some sign that the hero is containing their emotional turmoil and making the most of their situation.

One of Tolkien's chief interests was the ennoblement of common people (Carpenter, *Letters* 220), but the hobbits would never have been ennobled, the Ring would not have been taken to Mt. Doom, and there ultimately would have been no Shire to enjoy in the end if Gandalf had not sent the hobbits off on their dangerous and uncomfortable quest. Gandalf and Odin both prophetically disrupt the lives of their followers in order to engage them in a higher conflict through acts of courage (Coutras 139), protecting them from the sin of idly sitting by as all chance for ennoblement passes. Many characters in the *The Lord of the Rings* express a longing for the chance to prove themselves through their actions, perhaps none more memorably than Eowyn. When Aragorn confesses his plan to travel the Paths of the Dead, Eowyn responds that "if you must go, then let me ride in your following. For I am weary of skulking in the hills, and wish to face peril and battle" (*Return* 767). Aragorn reminds Eowyn of the duty given her by King Théoden, to defend and govern the people of Rohan in his absence. Rather than celebrate the fact that she may honorably stay behind and forgo the horrors of war, Eowyn laments this duty, saying "Shall I always be left behind when the Riders depart, to mind the house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return?" (*Return* 767) Eowyn goes on to say that she does "not fear either pain or death" (*Return* 767), but rather fears wasting away in inglorious idleness until "all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire" (*Return* 767).

While a case has been made for Eowyn's function as a challenge to traditional views on the role of women in 1950s English and American society (Hatcher 47), there can be no denying that she is expressing an anxiety that was central to the worldview of the ancient Norse peoples. Eowyn ultimately seizes the opportunity to win herself glory, refusing to sit by and comfortably live out

her life in comparative comfort. A more traditionally Christian sensibility is expressed by Aragorn when he suggests that Eowyn may fulfill even her most mundane duties with honor, but Eowyn ultimately rejects this idea and embraces the more traditionally Norse pagan view.³

We can only assume that Eowyn is grateful for the disruption caused by Gandalf and his consorts who open the door which leads to her adventure, her winning glory through participation in heroic battle, and ultimately finding love with Faramir. Without this disruption, though, let us consider the presumed fate of these characters whose lives are disrupted by Gandalf. Eowyn would have been slaughtered along with the rest of her people, defenseless against the might of Isengard which had already infiltrated the very courts of Rohan. She would not have won renown as the greatest shieldmaiden the Riddermark had ever seen but would have died unheralded, most likely huddled in a corner with women and children. Frodo and the rest of the hobbits would likewise have happily stayed in the Shire until Saruman and his army arrived and desolated the land, killing and enslaving the hobbits. Gandalf's appearance sets off a chain reaction of disruptions and events that not only brings about the demise of Sauron, but also ennoble the people whose lives have been disrupted. A fitting analogy might be that Gandalf grabs the hobbits by the shoulders and shakes them out of a peaceful slumber, making them aware of the venomous serpent at their feet.

Motivating Gandalf's and Odin's prophetic roles is prescient knowledge. Gandalf is one of the Istari, emissaries sent to Middle-earth by the Valar - an order of gods created by the one, supreme god who are neither omnipotent nor omniscient yet still play an active role in implementing the divine plan for Middle-earth - with the task of instructing and inspiring the

³ See Melissa Hatcher, "Finding Woman's Role in 'The Lord of the Rings.'" (*Mythlore*) pp. 52-53. Eowyn's character develops, and in the end, she becomes a healer and restorer rather than a warrior obsessed with death and personal glory.

people of Middle-earth to use their power to defeat Sauron (Carpenter, *Letters* 180).⁴ The term *Istari*, according to Tolkien, means “those who know” (Carpenter, *Letters* 202). Though it is not entirely clear what the extent and nature of Gandalf’s knowledge is, he knows the nature of good and the evil of its corruption, and this knowledge propels his actions and convictions. It is not because of blind fear or hopeless dread that he stirs the people of Middle-earth into action, but a knowledge that offers clarity of motives and action. Odin, likewise, is one who knows. This is why the story of Odin sacrificing his eye at Mimir’s Well in order to gain knowledge (Guerber 32-34) is so central to the entire tapestry of Norse mythology. After his sacrifice, Odin begins to see clear visions of Ragnarök, and this knowledge motivates him on his endless quest to avert the coming disaster. Even though he knows the doom of the gods and the world is inevitable, he stubbornly refuses to accept it without a fight, choosing instead to seek out a way to delay Ragnarök as long as possible (Byock, *Prose Edda* xviii). Thus, knowledge of his doom directs Odin’s attention towards humans as he prepares them (Hamilton 309) and himself to meet the coming disaster with honor (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* xiii), just as Gandalf’s knowledge of the true enemy and true light directs his attention to the hobbits so they can participate in the war which will save all that they hold dear. This is where Odin’s and Gandalf’s, and likewise Norse and Hebrew, prophecy differs, for as Tom Shippey points out regarding the inspired madness Odin instills in his followers, “Like the god Odin, it cannot be trusted. It will always let you down in the end” (*Laughing* 131). When Gandalf stirs up first Bilbo in *The Hobbit* and then Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, he does not send them off on hopeless quests. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Though there are seemingly insurmountable trials to be faced, and even though the hobbits

⁴ See Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Houghton Mifflin), pp. 336. The creator god of Middle-earth is referred to, among other names, as Ilúvatar by Tolkien in *The Silmarillion*. In Tolkien’s Quenya language, the term can be interpreted “father of all things” or “Allfather,” the term used by the old Norse to refer to Odin.

cannot see the end result themselves, Gandalf's knowledge - no matter how latent it may be at first - of a forthcoming and ultimately good ending, drives his actions, while Odin is driven by the certainty of defeat.

Though both Odin and Gandalf have foreknowledge of "the end," that does not mean that they have perfect knowledge of every event that must take place in order to bring that end about. For Odin, this is a dim source of inspiration. Since he cannot see how each of his actions brings him one step closer to Ragnarök, Odin can hope that he may yet cheat the fates and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. The more strength and wisdom Odin amasses in the meanwhile can only better his odds. Thus, it is in Odin's best interest to constantly rally the greatest warriors to his hall without delay, as illustrated in a hauntingly telling sequence involving the great King Eirik of Norway, as told in the poem *Eiriksmal*. Having achieved a heroic death, Eirik's footsteps can be heard approaching Valhalla. Odin commands Sigmund and Sinfjotli, the greatest of his warriors, to greet the newly arrived hero. Sigmund, presumably jealous, asks why Odin is making such a fuss over the newly-arrived warrior, and "Odin tells him Eirik has borne bloody sword in many lands. Bragi asks why Odin has then taken victory from him, and Odin replies with a famously enigmatic remark: 'Because it cannot be known for certain when the grey wolf will attack the seat of the gods'" (Shippey, *Laughing* 121). Odin sees the coming apocalypse and acts in response to it, yet he does not see what lies directly before him, and he does not know for certain how his actions may affect his fate.

For Gandalf, however, his inability to see things close at hand is a source of anxiety. He tells Frodo that "Even the very wise cannot see all ends" (*Fellowship* 58). Later, even after he has returned as Gandalf the White and is preparing to march on the Black Gates, Gandalf still recognizes the potential for two drastically different outcomes. On one hand, Gandalf and his

friends may defeat Sauron and put an end to him for good. Yet, there is the terrifying and equal potential that Sauron will regain the Ring, and that “your valour is vain, and his victory will be swift and complete: so complete that none can foresee the end of it while this world lasts” (*Return* 861). Furthermore, Gandalf expresses that he does know who will survive to see the hoped-for victory, “We must walk open-eyed into that trap, with courage, but small hope for ourselves. For, my lords, it may well prove that we ourselves shall perish utterly in a black battle far from the living lands; so even if Barad-dur be thrown down, we shall not live to see a new age” (*Return* 862). Gandalf does not know if he or any of his friends will survive. He cannot tell at what cost victory will be won, and he also seems convinced that Sauron’s victory is not an impossibility, especially if he and his friends do nothing, “And better so than to perish nonetheless - as we surely shall, if we sit here - and know as we die that no new age shall be” (*Return* 862). Gandalf sees that action is necessary, and indeed their “duty” (*Return* 862), but he does not see a clear road ahead and is not confident enough to rule out any chance of calamity. However, even though Gandalf does not carry with him a special formula that guarantees his success, and though he cannot see what the cost of victory will be in the end, he does know why he was sent into the world, why he was sent back after his descent into the deep waters of the earth, and that reason is to bring about Sauron’s end. Gandalf, like Odin, is not omnipotent, omniscient, nor unbridled by space and time, so even if he believes that victory will ultimately be his, he still must act out of faith, rather than absolute certainty. Romuald Ian Lakowski draws attention to this fact, citing a passage from the unfinished draft of a letter to Robert Murray, where Tolkien explains that for Gandalf “in his condition it was for him a sacrifice to perish on the Bridge [of Khazad-Dûm in Moria] in defense of his companions. [...] for all he could know at that moment he was the only person who could direct the resistance to Sauron successfully and

all his mission was vain. He was handing over to the Authority that ordained the Rules, and giving up personal hope for success” (32-33). Lakowski sums up Gandalf’s chief function as a hero who guides the people of Middle-earth in a task that is too great for them on their own (33), which raises the stakes of Gandalf’s stand on the bridge to catastrophic levels. If he indeed is the only one who can guide the people of Middle-earth to victory, his demise could have, or perhaps *should have* made Sauron’s victory certain. Yet, judging by Tolkien’s comments in his letter, it does not seem that Tolkien viewed Gandalf’s stand at the bridge of Khazad-Dûm as suicidal or hopeless. Rather, Gandalf demonstrated immeasurable courage and hope that something would intervene and make his sacrifice worthwhile.

In the face of uncertainty and overwhelming darkness, Tolkien leaves little doubt that *eucaastrophe* is the only means by which a happy ending can take place in Middle-earth. Although Tolkien claimed *eucaastrophe* as a central theme of his Christian faith and inserted it frequently into his fiction, he did not envision *The Lord of the Rings* as a Christian novel. Gandalf, Tolkien’s take on the Odinic wanderer, is not a missionary nor a priest. He retains an unapologetic resemblance to Odin, in appearance, in his function as a prophetic disrupter, and as an *Istari*, or one who knows. In noting these parallels between Gandalf and Odin, it is tempting to either equate Gandalf with Odin or pit them against each other as opposites. Neither of these approaches are satisfactory though, and they reflect two common mistakes regarding the influence of Norse mythology in Tolkien’s Middle-earth. The first mistake is to assume that Tolkien’s fiction is essentially Norse in nature (Burns 6) (Coutras 10). In other words, Tolkien created a contemporary Norse epic that embodies the themes of the old Norse myths. The second mistake is to minimize the influence of Norse mythology on Middle-earth as being *merely* superficial, and that Tolkien’s mythology is really a Christian story with little bits of Norse

mythology tossed in to add flavor (Birzer 46-47, 55-56, 60, 76-77) (Weidner 81-82). Both claims, that *The Lord of the Rings* is either Norse pagan or Christian, are quite frankly incorrect, and “diminishes the vastness of Tolkien’s conception” (Testi 5). Rather, Middle-earth is a pre-Christian world filled with heroes living in accord with the virtue that is discoverable through natural revelation.⁵ Tolkien’s work does notably glorify the Norse value of Northern courage, but this is not because he found Norse paganism preferable or more true than Christianity. As human beings made in the image of God, Tolkien believed that “inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God... Our myths may be misguided, but they steer however shakily towards the true harbor” (Carpenter, *Biography* 198). Tolkien loved what he saw as the “true light” of Northern courage, and he paired it with the *eucatastrophic* ending that Norse mythology lacked.

Margorie Burns best represents the host of scholars who argue that the *Lord of the Rings* is at its heart a Norse pagan tale. She goes so far as to say that “An important aspect of Tolkien’s borrowing from the North is his attachment to the Nordic worldview, to the Nordic emphasis on imminent or threatening destruction, a destruction which, in Norse mythology, appears to be in motion at the dawn of creation...” (6). The acknowledgement of a certain, impending doom, perhaps more than anything else, best characterizes the singularly bleak nature of the Nordic worldview. Tolkien was undeniably attracted to this theory of courage which the Norse myths

⁵ See Tolkien’s letter no. 142. In a 1953 letter to Father Robert Murray, Tolkien asserts that *The Lord of the Rings* is “of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision” (Letters 172). I do not see this to be in contradiction with his reference to the Third Age of Middle-earth as a pre-Christian world. Earlier in his letter to Father Murray, Tolkien expresses that his “small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded” in the Virgin Mary, so the depictions of beauty which are so extensive and fundamental in *The Lord of the Rings* are inevitably grounded in Christianity, specifically in Roman Catholicism. Yet, Tolkien made a conscious decision not to make his characters practicing Catholics, or even religious, so even if the world they inhabit and the virtues they exhibit are in accord with Tolkien’s Catholic faith, it does not necessarily follow that the characters themselves are Catholics nor that the Third Age is a Christian world.

celebrate (*The Monsters* 25-26), and he expounded on it in his foundational essay “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics.” Odin and the rest of the Norse gods share the doomed fate of their human followers, a fact which separates them from the “more godlike - more lofty, dread, and inscrutable” (*The Monsters* 25) Southern gods of the Greek pantheon. So it is that the dreadful plight of the Norse people is equally the plight of Odin and rest of the Aesir. To be born was to receive a death sentence, and all of life was just a time of waiting for an inescapable execution. Yggdrasil, the world tree, translated literally means “Odin’s horse,” an allusion to execution by hanging (Byock, *Prose Edda* 120). Thus, the world of men in Norse mythology is nothing more than a gallows tree, a gallows from which Odin himself knows he will someday hang.

Clearly, Tolkien’s tale does not embrace the bleakness that is at the heart of the Norse worldview, but this does not mean that *The Lord of the Rings* is a Christian tale either, a popular and understandable reading, but potentially misleading. Lisa Coutras argues that “While Tolkien’s Christianity has not been overlooked in Tolkien Studies, it is often held in an unsteady tension with the pagan despair put forward in his mythic world. On the other hand, Christian analysis often oversimplifies the presence of religious symbolism in Middle-earth at the expense of other elements” (3). In a letter to Houghton Mifflin in 1960, Tolkien described the world depicted in his epic as a “monotheistic world of ‘natural theology.’ The odd fact that there are no churches, temples, or religious rites and ceremonies, is simply part of the historical climate depicted... I am in any case myself a Christian; but the ‘Third Age’ was not a Christian world” (Carpenter, *Letters* 220). Since Tolkien was himself a Christian, it is only right to acknowledge that his love for *eucaastrophe* was reflective of his Catholic worldview (Beal 13). In his essay on fairy stories, Tolkien explicitly states that he sees a deep connection with *eucaastrophic* events and the Gospel (Toner 2). The mistake is not diagnosing the Christian influence upon

Tolkien and his myth, but assuming that Middle-earth and the characters in it are Christians. Yet, Tolkien's world is at the same time not a godless, naturalistic world nor a polytheistic world like that of the Norse myths. Rather, it is a pre-Christian age of Earth, not all that different from the world of pre-Christian virtuous pagans, to borrow Dante's language, such as Cyrus the Great and Aristotle. Readers of *The Lord of the Rings* often mistakenly believe that Middle-earth was conceived as another world, even though Tolkien plainly explains that it is in fact supposed to be a long-lost age of Earth's (*Hobbit* 4) (Carpenter, *Letters* 220). The term "fantasy," in the modern imagination, has generally come to mean "unreal," and "fabricated," but that was not Tolkien's vision for his mythology. Tolkien's pre-Christian world is not purely pagan since it is still governed by a monotheistic God who acts in accord with how Tolkien believed the actual God of his Christian faith behaved in the real world, and at the same time, the characters in his novel are not Catholics and the book is not an allegory.

The pitfall that some Christian readers of Tolkien's work fall into is projecting Christian symbolism onto characters and actions that really should be more closely associated with pre-Christian theists. Gandalf is not a stand-in for Christ - even if he does do Christ-like things at times - any more than Cyrus the Great was a Christian king. Tolkien disliked allegories and expressed deep dissatisfaction with the Arthurian legends since they were full of explicit references to Christianity, a flaw which he felt was "fatal" to the Arthurian legends being an appropriate English mythology, "associated with the soils of Britain but not with English" (Carpenter, *Letters* 144). Scholars such as Verlyn Flieger have argued that Tolkien's mythology lines up more with Arthurian legend than any other mythology, including Norse (49-51), but even Flieger notes Tolkien's deliberate break from the Arthurian legend: "Unlike the Arthurian canon with its miracles, pious hermits, heavy-handed symbolism and allegorical preachiness,

Tolkien's fantasy has no explicit Christianity. It is not preachy, it has no miracles, no holy hermits, no Grail, no didactic allegory, all of which is greatly to its credit" (51). Tolkien's mythology was a mythology for England, stretching far back into its prehistoric past before the arrival of the Christian church. So, while the virtues of his characters and the *eucatastrophic* moments in *The Lord of the Rings* are consistent with the Biblical narrative, the characters exist on a purely natural plane (Testi 11), and are therefore guided only by natural and, arguably, sometimes special revelation, unlike Arthur and his knights who are aware of Christian teachings and have a veritable prophet amongst them in Merlin. Tolkien's characters, lacking any exposure to Christianity, are essentially on an even playing ground with Dante's virtuous pagans.

Tolkien had an appreciation for pre-Christian pagan perspectives, but he did not appreciate them because of their deviance from Christianity, but rather because of their closeness to Christianity. Claudio Testi, explaining Tolkien's essay on Beowulf, says that "we cannot but remark the great harmony with the supernatural plane of Revelation, as shown by the role played by the monsters (pivotal for Tolkien), the enemies of Man who will later also become the enemies of the one God" (16). Testi points out a quote from Tolkien's essay which explains that he recognized the fact that modern and ancient people's alike are "alien in a hostile world, engaged in a struggle which he cannot win while the world lasts, is assured that his foes are the foes also of Dryhten [God]" (Testi 16). Part of the appeal of fairy-stories, as Tolkien explains in his essay "On Fairy Stories", is that they foster an "appetite for wonder" and prompt one to ask the vital question "is it true?" (*The Monsters* 131). Previously in the essay, Tolkien claims that "History often resembles 'Myth' because they are both ultimately of the same stuff" (127). In his conclusion, Tolkien states his belief that the Christian myth is true, and that good fairy-stories hit on that truth in some way. The trouble then, with a fairy-story which includes explicitly Christian

elements is that it does not spark the question “is it true?” especially when told to a Christian audience, since the wonder of the fantasy setting is shattered by the familiar presence of Christianity. A fairy-story has the potential to reveal old truth in a new way. In other words, Tolkien had a profound appreciation for the potential of natural revelation. Christianity that rejected the true light of Norse paganism was incomplete, in Tolkien’s view, yet, clearly, without Christian morals, Norse paganism was prone to become something ghastly and horrible, for indeed “Paganism needs to be sanctified by Christianity, but also that the Christianity of the present is in need of the values which, in Tolkien’s eyes, characterize Norse Paganism, in particular courage, strength, and will” (Schnurbein 312). The characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are clearly not yet Christianized, but Tolkien displays them as shining examples of noble pagans living out the “true light” of Northern courage.

This belief in the existence of a “true light” is at the very heart of all Tolkien’s work, but it is particularly important if we are to understand how Gandalf functions as a sanctified re-write of Odin. As the Norse Allfather and central figure of Norse mythology, Odin was indisputably a figure of deep interest for Tolkien. The central villain of *The Lord of the Rings*, and of the whole Third Age of Middle-earth is Sauron, and Gandalf is his counterpart, so it is fair to say that Gandalf is situated at the center of Tolkien’s epic. In Tolkien’s view, Odin’s penultimate display of Northern courage was not only stirring, but admirable. Even as a Christian, he had no qualms about appreciating goodness in a pagan god, not because of any disregard for his own religion, but because in the pagans of old he saw a bright spark of the true light of real virtue. Yet, Odin and all the pagan heroes failed to fully display the true light of Northern courage since their courage was ultimately misdirected. All their fighting and scheming is in vain, as the “Voluspa”

memorably highlights. After "...Odin goes / to fight the wolf," (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 13) the poem tells how "...all humankind / will die out of the world" (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 14). Then:

The sun turns black,
the earth sinks into the sea,
the bright stars
fall out of the sky.

Flames scorch
the leaves of Yggdrasil,
a great bonfire

Reaches to the highest clouds. (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 14)

Odin and his army's end could not be portrayed in bleaker terms.

After Ragnarök, "Voluspa" does tell of a hall which will survive, Gimlé by name (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 16). However, this splendid, post-apocalyptic safe-haven which "had become the place of refuge for all the virtuous" (Guerber 373) bears a suspicious resemblance to the Christian heaven, a fact expounded upon by scholars like John Lindow, who asserts that "I take it as a given that Norse mythology cannot be interpreted without reference to Christian influence, which may have been massive" (322). One of these "massive" influences likely was the account of Gimlé- tacked on the end and not elaborated on elsewhere - but ultimately, as far as the Odin-myth is concerned at least, it is irrelevant whether this depiction of Gimlé was true to Norse tradition or not. Odin and the world he ruled and helped create perished, Ragnarök was not prevented, fate was not cheated. If there was a life after Ragnarök, it did not matter to Odin, and he did nothing to prepare his people for it. His only concern was to lead his followers to a glorious death with him in defiance of his fate which he detested.

Gandalf, on the other hand, functions as Tolkien's answer to this problem, since Gandalf's knowledge leads him to inspire a brand of Northern courage that is consistent with its true light. Gandalf does not face-down Sauron in an epic display of his might, nor does he conjure up some cunning spell that secures victory while drawing attention to his own splendor. Rather, Gandalf equips the people of Middle-earth and humbly does his duty. His reward is not undying glory, but that good places like the Shire are preserved and the little people of the world are ennobled. It is only right that Gandalf's last words in the novel, just before departing for the Grey Havens, are "Well, here at last, dear friends, on the shores of the Sea comes the end of our fellowship in Middle-earth. Go in peace! I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil" (*Return* 1007). Tolkien does not draw attention away from the heartbreaking loss and pain his heroes went through, but it is a great *eucaustrophic* turn of events that permits Gandalf to confidently tell the hobbits to "Go in peace" as he departs Middle-earth. The victory won is not for Gandalf, and it is not Gandalf's name that will be sung in the years to come, but rather that of Sam the gardener, Strider the roaming, dishonored, dispossessed heir, and Eowyn, the forgotten niece of an impotent king who becomes a noble shieldmaiden and lady of Ithilien.

In Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories," he makes it clear that he loves *eucaustrophe* not merely because he enjoys the catharsis of a happy ending. Indeed, he was utterly convinced that the reason *eucaustrophe* was the best kind of ending for a fantasy tale was because it was exactly the kind of thing that happens in reality (*The Monsters* 155-156). Tolkien took seriously his role as a sub-creator, the idea that the human instinct to create reflects the fact that humans are made in God's image and desire to be like Him (*The Monsters* 145). Thus, Tolkien believed his sub-creations were pleasing to God since "We have come from God, and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light,

the eternal truth that is with god. Indeed, only by myth-making, only by becoming a ‘sub-creator’ and inventing stories, can Man aspire to the state of perfection that he knew before the Fall” (Carpenter, *Biography* 198). However, the assertion that myth-making possesses such redemptive qualities can only be true if one’s sub-creation is faithful to God’s created order. Evil, in Tolkien’s view, was the perversion of what was made good. In Anglo-Saxon the word *orc* has been translated simply as “demon” (Birzer 93) which is significant considering Tolkien reveals that the vile orcs in his stories are elves who have been twisted beyond any resemblance of their former beauty. It was crucial in Tolkien’s mind that Gandalf, his Odinic wanderer, should reveal the true light of Northern courage hidden by Odin’s demonic perversion of it, lest Tolkien himself be guilty of becoming complicit with the perversion.

According to Helen Gruber, “The whole scheme of Northern mythology was therefore a drama, every step leading gradually to the climax or tragic end...” (363). The fact that *The Lord of the Rings* turns out to be a drama which builds to a resounding *eucatastrophic* end makes a reading of Tolkien’s work as something that is in line with the Nordic worldview simply incorrect. Yet, the presence of Norse elements and the depiction of Northern courage make the mark of Norse mythology impossible to ignore. Gandalf and Odin resemble each other both aesthetically and in their functions as prophetic disruptors who ennoble their followers through acts of courage. The romance of Odin’s story is difficult to ignore, for indeed:

at no time to the very end is there any thought in his mind but to carry on the fight relentlessly to the last, to save Asgard and the world from the great doom. It is as if he were determined to defeat Fate herself in her terrible decree. He accepts proudly every challenge; he seeks out the foe and challenges him. It is a magnificent myth, the Odin-myth. (Flom 153)

Tolkien to an extent at least, agreed with Flom in that there is something magnificent about the Odin-myth. It was not Tolkien's desire to undermine and rebut this myth, but rather to recover the truth behind it. The Norse Odin, as inspiring as he may be, is a doomed god who leads his followers to death without hope. Tolkien's ideas of *euclatrophe* and faithful sub-creation, however, motivated Tolkien to re-write Odin through the character of Gandalf, his own Odinic wanderer, who fights as courageously and cunningly as Odin, but with victory waiting for him at the end. Ultimately, Odin proves to be most concerned with ennobling himself despite his ill-fate, but Tolkien's mythological epic is really concerned with ennobling the common people and the true light of Northern courage which the hobbits display, thanks to Gandalf, Tolkien's subversive Odinic wanderer.

CHAPTER IV

THE PROBLEM OF ODIN'S OFERMOD: ODIN AS A SATANIC FIGURE AND GANDALF AS TOLKIEN'S TRUE ODIN

Although J.R.R. Tolkien demonstrated an obvious appreciation for the languages and myths of the ancient Norse peoples, he dedicated a great deal of his artistic and scholarly attention towards reworking Norse mythology and rewriting some of its chief characters. This project grew in sophistication over the years, from the somewhat clumsy depiction of Odin found in Tolkien's "New Lay of the Volsungs," in which Odin turns out to essentially be the Christian God by another name, to the Odinic wanderer, Gandalf, in *The Lord of the Rings*, who proves to be a far more subtle rewrite of Odin as he ought to be. It is clear that Tolkien did not embark on his project to rewrite the Norse Allfather because he hated Odin and the tales about him, but rather because he saw something objectively good and true in those tales which was worth excavating and presenting to the world. Obscuring this goodness, however, was the fundamentally demonic character of Odin's absurd, romantic quest, resembling Milton's depiction of Satan and the demons in *Paradise Lost*. Tolkien is notably silent on Milton, referring to him only in passing in his letters and essays. Tom Shippey suggests that Tolkien "probably did not...personally admire Milton" (*Road to Middle Earth* 221), due primarily to Milton's being "a Protestant, a divorcer and a spokesman for

regicides” (*Road to Middle Earth* 221).⁶ However, Shippey notes the echoes of Milton found in *The Silmarillion*: “C.S. Lewis gave a summary list of doctrines of the Fall of Man common to Milton, to St Augustine and to ‘the Church as a whole’. Most of them reappear with little change in the ‘Ainulindale’ or ‘Valaquenta’” (*The Road to Middle Earth* 235-236). Despite their differences, Tolkien and Milton are united in their portrayal of the Satanic plight. Tolkien recognized that Odin, just like Milton’s Satan, leads his followers in a futile but glorious lost cause. Despite whatever victories Satan and his demonic forces win in any portion of history, Milton leaves no doubt that their romantic quest is a tragedy. The same is true of Odin and the rest of the Aesir. Satan’s and Odin’s endings are no *eucatastrophes*, and therefore, in Tolkien’s mind, aligned with the very real demonic forces which his Catholic church agreed were part of everyday reality. Since Satan and his demons, for Tolkien, were real beings of great evil, they were to be resisted at all costs, and swooning over the romantic nature of their plight was not only foolish, but perverse.

In this chapter, I will argue that Odin functions as a demonic character in the vein of Milton’s Satan, and that Tolkien’s aversion to the demonic motivated him to portray Gandalf as a version of Odin who fulfills his duty instead of rebelling against it. Odin, as a powerful and wise god, had a duty towards his followers which he abused through prideful overreaching, as did Milton’s Satan in his attempt to usurp God’s throne. Rather than simply leading his people in their long, hard battle against the monsters, Odin became obsessed with gaining knowledge and taking

⁶ See Tolkien’s *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun*, (Houghton Mifflin) 63-65. Notice the similarity between the vocabulary Tolkien uses to frame his “New Lay of the Volsungs” and the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*. Milton begins his epic anticipating the years of darkness and struggle “...til one greater man/ Restore us...” (1.4-5). This coming man will, like Moses, both shepherd and descend from God’s “chosen seed” (1.8). Tolkien infuses this messianic imagery into his retelling of *The Saga of the Volsungs*: “for one they waited,/ the World’s chosen” (65). This “World’s chosen” Tolkien references will be the “seed of Odin” (63). Whether or not Tolkien admired Milton and his work as a whole, he certainly seems to have constructed his poem with *Paradise Lost* in mind.

his fate into his own hands. Odin's followers all suffered without hope below him, joined to him in his doomed quest. This sort of perversion, for Tolkien, lay at the heart of his distinctly Augustinian conception of evil, and is summed up well by the Anglo-Saxon word *ofermod*, an idea which Tolkien illustrates and expounds upon in his, as Thomas Honegger puts it, "poem-cum-essay 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth'" ("Riders, Chivalry..." 18). Milton's Satan, I argue, embodies this *ofermod* behavior with great flourish, and is mirrored by Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings*. Saruman's pride causes him to shirk his duty and greedily exceed his natural function. Saruman, then, functions more like Odin as he is in the Norse myths and legends, while Gandalf functions as Tolkien's ideal, true Odin.

The Anglo-Saxon noun *ofermod* and Tolkien's own treatment of the word in "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" illustrates both his deep disdain for abuses of power as well as the high value he placed on fulfilling one's duty towards others (Cutler 63). Having written a lyrical retelling of the battle of Maldon, Tolkien supplied a brief analysis of the tale, expressing his contempt for the Saxon king Beorhtnoth's pride. Beorhtnoth allegedly allowed Viking invaders to gain a foothold on the English shore before engaging them in battle. Tolkien characterized this move as an "act of pride and misplaced chivalry" which "proved fatal" (Cutler 64). Beorhtnoth's actions, according to Tolkien, went "beyond legitimate glory-seeking to reckless endangerment of the soldiers for whom he's responsible" (Cutler 64). This, in a sense, sums up the idea of *ofermod*. It is pride in excess, prompting one to shirk responsibility towards others in pursuit of personal glory. Tolkien claimed that the term was only used twice in verse, "once applied to Beorhtnoth, and once to Lucifer" (Cutler 63). Some scholars such as Tom Shippey have argued against Tolkien's harsh condemnation of Beorhtnoth, suggesting that the "Vikings appealed to Byrhtnoth's sense of *drengskapr*, shared by Anglo-Saxons even if we do

not know their word for it, and he could not resist the appeal” (Shippey, *Laughing* 249).

Drengskapr is a loaded concept, meaning, essentially, to behave like a proper *drengr*, which Shippey describes as a young fighting lad in the service of a lord (Shippey, *Laughing* 230-231).

The implication is that these are good boys who do their duty and obey the rules. *Drengskapr*, seems to have evolved to refer to a sort of unspoken warrior-code, a set of rules for honorable fighting (Shippey, *Laughing* 230-232). According to this view, for Beorhtnoth to utilize the strategic advantage offered him by the terrain would have given him an unfair advantage.

Forgoing this advantage, however, may have been in accord with the rules of *drengskapr* and an opportunity for the king to win personal glory. So what was it about Beorhtnoth’s actions that made him appear so devilish in Tolkien’s eyes? If Beorhtnoth had been alone on an individual quest to win glory, his decision would have affected none but himself, in which case, there would have been nothing necessarily wrong with it (Cutler 73). However, Beorhtnoth was a king, and his decision endangered his followers, his family, and his land, the people whom it was his duty to protect. In Tolkien’s view, it was Beorhtnoth’s pride that caused him to reach beyond his duty, taking his followers down with him, an action Tolkien is comfortable equating with Satan himself.

Yet, it would be a mistake to suggest that Tolkien thought that pride itself was evil. After all, Aragorn, one of the most admirable characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, displays a great deal of pride, perhaps more vocally than any villain in Tolkien’s fiction ever does. Worlds away from the soul-searching, self-doubt ridden Aragorn of the Peter Jackson film adaptations, Tolkien’s Aragorn anticipates his future kingship confidently, as seen when he announces himself before the council of Elrond (*Fellowship* 240). Despite Boromir’s accusation that Aragorn hardly appears like the heir of Isildur, Aragorn confidently declares “A new hour comes. Isildur’s bane

is found. Battle is at hand. The Sword shall be reforged. I will come to Minas Tirith” (*Fellowship* 242). Later, in his initial encounter with Éomer, Aragorn announces himself in true kingly fashion, telling the horse master “I serve no man” (*Two Towers* 423), and then “Aragorn threw back his cloak... and the bright blade of Anduril shone like a sudden flame as he swept it out. ‘Elendil!’ he cried. ‘I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn, and am called Elessar, the Elfstone, Dunadan, the heir of Isildur Elendil’s son of Gondor. Here is the Sword that was Broken and is forged again!’” (*Two Towers* 423). Aragorn is proud, and that by no means damns him. In fact, it is an essential and good part of his character, for he is indeed the heir of Isildur and Gondor needs a proud king to reclaim the throne and set things right. Thus, for Aragorn, being a proud king is good as long as his pride motivates him to fulfill his duty to those placed in his care.

That goodness is a prerequisite for evil to exist is a foundational tenet of Tolkien’s conception of evil. Evil, as Tolkien saw it, was goodness corrupted. Tom Shippey asserts that “One word which for Tolkien expressed this distinctive image of evil was ‘shadow’” (Shippey, *Road to Middle-earth* 146). Shadows, however, do not exist if there is neither light nor something to illuminate, for indeed “Shadows are the absence of light and so don’t exist in themselves, but they are still visible and palpable just as if they did. That is exactly Tolkien’s view of evil” (Shippey *Road to Middle-earth* 146-147). If evil was just as much a part of the world as goodness, there would be no point in trying to extricate evil from the world. One might as well attempt to unravel the very fabric of the universe. However, good and evil are not intermingled in a sort of Yin-Yang interdependence in Middle-earth. The light illuminates good things which are worth protecting and even dying for, but evil comes from the exterior to hide, warp, or destroy that which was created good. Not only did Tolkien believe that things were created good, but he also believed they were created purposefully. Thus, one of the means by

which something good might be twisted into evil is by going beyond or falling short of the created purpose or duty. Pride and the desire for power, in Tolkien's mind, were common motivators for abandoning one's intended purpose, and therefore intimately linked with evil itself.

In the *Silmarillion*, Tolkien's image of good and evil is vividly depicted in the story of Middle-earth's creation. In this opening chapter, titled "Ainulindale," Iluvatar creates a cast of angelic beings called the Ainur. Iluvatar reveals his great vision for his creation to the Ainur, providing a musical theme which they are to use to make beautiful music for their creator and fill the void with the vision shown to them by Iluvatar. Greater than all the rest of the Ainur is one called Melkor, who "among the Ainur had been given the greatest gifts of power and knowledge" (*Silmarillion* 16). Rather than using his gifts for their intended purpose, however, Melkor "sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself" (*Silmarillion* 16). Melkor rebels against Iluvatar and creates things of his own design which are in discord with Iluvatar's vision, disrupting the great theme of the creator and making constant trouble for the Ainur as they strive to do their part in bringing about Iluvatar's vision. That Melkor is modeled after Satan is not difficult to recognize, and it is because of Melkor that evil exists in Middle-earth. It is tempting to say that it is because Melkor was proud that he fell, a claim equally easy to make about Milton's Satan. However, to imply that it was pride itself that is responsible for evil is too simplistic an answer. The question is whether pride itself is a virtue or a vice, and for Tolkien, it seems that the answer was "both."

No one could possibly embody all that is evil as thoroughly as Satan himself, especially for a devout Catholic such as Tolkien. Odin's plight notably resembles that of Milton's Satan, a fact which seems to have bothered Tolkien so much that he took it upon himself to write a

version of Odin who humbly played his part, rather than vainly reaching for the stars. Though Satan's pride cannot be denied, its status as a virtue or a vice can and has been debated by scholars for years. John Leonard claims that the debate surrounding Milton's Satan is "most lively when opposing critics agree about what they see but disagree about its significance" (394). The question is not whether Satan is prideful, but whether that pride damns or ennoblees him. In his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, C.S. Lewis argues that Milton's Satan is completely blinded by his self-absorption to the point of being idiotic and ridiculous, almost comical in his inability to appreciate anything beyond himself (97-100). William Empson, however, agrees with Raleigh, whom he quotes explaining that Satan's "situation as the fearless antagonist of the Omnipotence made him either a fool or a hero, and Milton is far indeed from permitting us to think him a fool" (1). If Satan is not a fool then, by Raleigh's logic, he must be a hero. In this point of view, held by scholars like William Empson, Satan's pride humanizes him and prompts him to challenge God whose legitimacy, at least within the poem, is in question. John Leonard claims that "the contentious point is whether his pride is a vice or a virtue. Satan's vices often resemble virtues" (394). C.S. Lewis believed that Milton would have been surprised to learn that anyone found his Satan character to be heroic (100) since, just like the biblical Satan, he is a great manipulator, capable of working his charms on humans as he preys upon their most natural longings and instincts. Lewis's claim anticipates later scholarship by Joseph Summers, who focuses on the relationship between the reader and Milton's Satan. Summers argues that a reader can be confused to find heroic traits and powerful, sympathetic rhetoric from the one who clearly seems as if he at least *ought* to be the antagonist of the poem (2). Indeed, the word "ought" is of the utmost importance if we are to understand why Satan's pride, in Tolkien's view, is undoubtedly a vice.

Melkor, like Satan, is led to disobedience by a desire to be God. However, “Disobedience resulting in *eucatastrophe* is part of the very fabric of Eru's universe from the beginning. Even as Melkor rebels and plays his own themes, trying to dominate the music of creation, Eru works them into the greater Music” (Croft 146). The existence of a greater Music, an unalterable and incomprehensibly vast and complex theme for all of creation has huge implications for how we must view pride as a vice in Tolkien’s legendarium. In addressing disobedience in *The Lord of the Rings*, Janet Croft highlights a pronouncement by Iluvatar from *The Silmarillion*, “And thou, Melkor, shall see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined” (Croft 146). Such a statement is a devastating blow to the pride of any being that would seek to impose their will on Eru’s creation. Even the most selfish and disobedient deeds, according to the creator, will ultimately contribute to the great theme. Thus, all creatures in Middle-earth are faced with a choice. They can choose to act in accordance with the theme or against it, but Iluvatar’s theme is not dependent upon the outcome of this decision. After all, their choice will not alter the theme nor challenge the power of Iluvatar. In one of Tolkien’s letters to Houghton Mifflin, he admits “I am... most grieved by Gollum’s failure (just) to repent when interrupted by Sam: this seems to me really like the real world in which the instruments of just retribution are seldom themselves just or holy; and the good are often stumbling blocks” (Carpenter, *Letters* 221). Regardless of one’s intentions, whether good or evil, Iluvatar’s theme will triumph in Middle-earth, so beings who elect to persist in their rebellion can only deprive themselves of the chance to be fully themselves. The great evil of *ofermod*, however, is that it not only degrades the one who acts *ofermod* but endangers or violates others as well.

As creatures who are created good for a good purpose, deviating from that purpose demonstrates a lack of self-awareness. Speaking of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien claimed that “In my story I do not deal in Absolute Evil. I do not think there is such a thing, since that is Zero. I do not think that at any rate any ‘rational being’ is wholly evil. Satan fell. In my myth Morgoth fell before Creation of the physical world” (Carpenter, *Letters* 243). Since evil cannot exist without original goodness, “the more evil something is, the more nearly it approaches nothingness” (Davidson 103). Thus, in a sense, evil beings who persist in their rebellion against their creator lack self-knowledge not merely because they fail to embrace their own purpose, but because there is literally less of them to know the nearer they come to nothingness. Likewise, creatures who obediently play their part in the theme know themselves and simultaneously have more of themselves to know as they become more completely immersed in Iluvatar’s vision. Croft helpfully compares this idea of the Iluvatar’s theme to Lewis’s description of the *Tao* in *The Abolition of Man* (135). Simply put, the *Tao*, as Lewis uses it, refers to a sort of objective rightness which exists in harmony with who we ought to be as individuals in conjunction with how the universe as a whole is designed. Thus, as a being who exercises their free-will, a person may either choose to act in accordance with the *Tao*, the theme, or against it. In Tolkien’s fiction, a character’s prideful choice to act *ofermod* in defiance of the *Tao* leads ultimately to the diminishment of the self, as can be clearly seen in the case of the Ringwraiths (Davidson 102). Obedience, on the other hand, enables characters to become ennobled, more robust versions of themselves. Ursula Le Guin observes that evil characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are “not complete figures, but complements; Saruman is Gandalf’s dark-self, Boromir Aragorn’s” (Birzer 92). Though Ursula Le Guin is right to point out that goodness in Tolkien’s world is primary, evil secondary, to say that Saruman is Gandalf’s dark-self draws the attention away from the

actual relationship between the two wizards. Saruman does not exist in the novel to demonstrate what an evil Gandalf would look like. Rather, Gandalf and his entire role in the novel is a response to Saruman, a character who perfectly embodies Tolkien's rejection of the Satanic character of Odin and his aversion to *ofermod*.

Tolkien implies that created beings have intended roles, parts to play in the theme. Thomas Hibbs argues that "Tolkien gives us characters who can only understand themselves and their duties by seeing themselves as parts of larger wholes... and ultimately as part of a natural cosmos" (173), so that "a grim determination to press on in the performance of one's allotted role marks a peak of virtue or heroism" (173). This role one has to play is, at least to an extent, dictated by one's hierarchical position in relation to others. Lisa Coutras argues that Tolkien seemed to believe that "the inner light of a form deepens with an ever-increasing depth as the order of creation climbs the hierarchy of being 'from plant to animal to man'" (65). According to this model, a being with greater potential good, like Melkor or Saruman, likewise possesses a capacity for disobedience that is all the more egregious. As a being capable of creating great beauty in accordance with the theme, Melkor's decision to destroy is a heinous evil indeed. As a powerful being placed in the world to lead the peoples of Middle-earth against Sauron, Saruman's decision to join Sauron could not be more perverse in Tolkien's mind. Yet, their evil runs deeper still. Melkor, like Milton's Satan, is a prince with other beings who look up to him as a leader. The role of a prince is to care for and lead those placed under them, but Satan, Saruman, and Melkor pull lower beings along with them in their defiance of the *Tao*. While even a well-intentioned leader may mislead those beneath them by accident, Satan, Saruman, and Melkor do so willingly, comprehending, at least partially, the implications of their actions. Melkor "desired rather to subdue to his will both Elves and Men, envying the gifts which Iluvatar promised to

endow them; and he wished himself to have subjects and servants, and to be called Lord, and to master over other wills” (*Silmarillion* 18). Rather than caring for Elves and Men, lesser beings but beloved in the sight of Iluvatar, Melkor deviates from his role, craving both their worship and the gifts Iluvatar has given them.

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan likewise envies the gifts God has given mankind. He observes Adam and Eve in all their pristine beauty in the garden, enjoying the fresh-made goodness of creation, and Satan responds with words which are jarring in contrast with the beautiful wonder just described: “O hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold” (4.358). Satan’s pride has rendered him unable to appreciate the untainted goodness which surrounds him, further illustrated by his reaction to Adam and Eve’s expressions of love to each other shortly afterwards:

...aside the devil turned
For envy, yet with jealous leer malign
Eyed them askance, and to himself thus plained.
Sight hateful, sight tormenting! Thus these two
Emparadised in one another’s arms
The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill
Of bliss on bliss, while I to hell am thrust, (4.502-508)

Satan’s words imply that he has been unjustly barred from the bliss which Adam and Eve enjoy, but his words earlier in book IV contradict him. He is aware that God was acting within his rights to punish him, but upon observing creatures living as God intended, Satan can only think about his own fallen state with self-pity. Having embarked from Hell on his quest to spoil God’s creation, Milton makes it plain that Satan understands the nature of his sin:

I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere;
Till pride and worse ambition threw me down
Warring in heaven against heaven's matchless king:
Ah wherefore! he deserved no such return
From me, whom he created what I was (4.39-43).

Bemoaning the hardness of his fall, Satan here admits that it was God who made him great in the beginning, and that God had done him no wrong. Satan continues: "Nor was his service hard./ What could be less than to afford him praise,/ The easiest recompense, and pay him thanks,/ How due!" (4.45-48). This admission reveals that Satan acknowledges, at least in this moment, that he has wronged God by withholding his praise and seeking to usurp him. Yet, we must not mistake Satan's words here as repentance. He swiftly reveals that his pride still governs him:

O then at least relent: is there no place
Left for repentance, none for pardon left?
None left but by submission; and that word
Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame
Among the spirits beneath, whom I seduced
With other promises and other vaunts
Than to submit, boasting I could subdue
The omnipotent... (4.79-86)

This act of rebellion, Satan admits, was not merely a courageous endeavor taken alone. Rather, he confesses that he willingly brought those lesser spirits down with him, seducing them so that they worship him. Satan is motivated to persist in his rebellion, though he knows it is both wrong and futile, because his pride forbids him to surrender the worship those fallen spirits bestow upon

him. This, for Tolkien, is what defines the sin of pride. Not only does it destroy the one who is prideful, but it trickles down and hurts those below. This abuse of authority, in Tolkien's eyes, was nothing short of demonic, an effect of not being rightly aligned with one's created purpose due to the prioritization of personal glory over duty. It must have been troubling indeed for Tolkien to see this very sin in the character of Odin, the Norse Allfather.

Like any devout 20th century Catholic Englishman, J.R.R Tolkien believed quite literally in the existence of a spiritual realm. Populating this realm were not only God's benevolent angels, but also hordes of demons, fallen angels, pledged to their captain, Satan, and joined with him in his doomed quest to defy God and rule His creation themselves. Even though the demons know they are doomed to defeat, they are determined to press on in their war of defiance, for as Milton's Satan so famously declares "Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven" (*Paradise Lost* 1.263). Though an extra-biblical work of fiction, Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* memorably embodies the demonic plight which Tolkien acknowledged as a real thing that manifested itself in the actual world, not merely as a literary invention. It is notable then that Odin, whom Tolkien felt compelled to rewrite, bears all the marks of the demonic plight. However, unlike in the case of Melkor or Satan, Odin's myth is told not from the perspective of a disapproving Christian author, but from the of the god's own followers.

Much of what we have of the old Norse tales were written down after the Christianization of Scandinavia and Iceland. However, unlike their European Scandinavian counterparts, the people of Iceland preserved the old skaldic poetry much as it came to them in the Viking Age. Jesse Byock explains that after the Icelanders peacefully adopted Christianity, "The old forms of worship faded within a few decades of the conversion, but the Icelanders continued long afterwards to value stories from the pagan times as a cultural heritage rather than a creed" (*Prose*

Edda, xi). Thus, the Odin we encounter today in the Icelandic eddas and sagas are grounded not in Christian reimagining's of the gods and their tales, but rather in the ancient pagan roots they were seeking to memorialize. In both *The Silmarillion* and *Paradise Lost*, an unapologetically Christian author portrays a good God and a fallen angel. Melkor and Satan are doomed because they stepped outside of the natural order and rebelled against the almighty God. After all, Milton's famously stated purpose in writing his epic is "to justify the ways of God to men" (1.26). Yet, in Norse mythology, there is no Iluvatar or Creator God for Odin to rebel against. Odin is the Allfather, and the world's creation as well as the presence of the fates are not justified or rationalized in any way. Rather, Odin is portrayed as a courageous hero, spitting in the face of a senseless universe. His heroic stand carves out meaning and purpose for himself and his followers in an otherwise cruel and hopeless world.

Odin is portrayed precisely how someone might have portrayed Satan or one of his chief demons if they wanted to do so in a noble, romantic light without having to bother about a higher being. In Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, it is told that before the creation of Midgard and its human denizens, there was a man-like being called Ymir. Ymir is the first lifeform, but others soon follow (14-15). Three brothers, the eldest and greatest of whom is Odin, kill Ymir and use his body to form the world as we know it (15-17). Odin then set himself up on a great throne at Asgard where he could look out upon all the world, and Snorri Sturluson writes "he can be referred to as All-Father, since he is the father of all the gods and men and of everything that has been accomplished by his power" (18). Odin is a usurper who, as the oldest and greatest of his brothers, destroyed the first lifeform, Ymir, and, just as Melkor desired, enacted his own creation and set himself up as Lord. At the very beginning of Norse mythology, Odin has done what Satan and Melkor failed to do and has set himself up exactly as they wished to become, and all

this “has been accomplished by his power” (18). The old Norse eddas do not attempt to justify Odin’s actions or determine whether his authority is legitimate or not. Perhaps Ymir had a very different plan for the how the world would take shape, perhaps he had no plan at all, or maybe it was always his intention to be slain by Odin so that his blood and bones could give shape to the world. Within the world of Norse mythology, however, these questions are meaningless. All that can be known is that Odin is the All-Father, and that he and the world which he rules are doomed. For a god consumed with pride, this bleak but romantic outlook may be satisfying indeed, but to Tolkien it was both incomplete and tragically misleading.

Tolkien agreed with Milton’s theory of history, which Luke Taylor maps out as a cohesive, biblical story spiraling upwards towards a glorious, redemptive conclusion. However, the trouble is that people cannot view history as a whole since they only experience a narrow slice of it, and as a result, they may come to view all victories as futile and defeat and death as ultimate (307). Whatever victories Satan and his demonic forces win in any portion of history, Milton leaves no doubt that their romantic quest is a tragedy. Taken as a whole, *Paradise Lost* does turn out to be a comedy, despite its sad and weighty subject. Satan refuses to humble himself, and his *ofermod* stance leads inevitably to his tragic ruin. This is true as well for the demons who follow him, but not so for Adam and Eve who disobey Satan and resolve to realign themselves with the *Tao*. Adam reminds Eve that “Part of our sentence, that thy seed shall bruise/ The serpent’s head” (10.1032), and that:

To evils which our own misdeeds have wrought,
He will instruct us praying, and of grace
Beseeching him, so as we need not fear
To pass commodiously this life, sustained

By him with many comforts, till we end

In dust, our final rest and native home. (10.1080-1085)

Satan would have those under him believe that their fate is the same as his, making tragedy inevitable. The same appears to be true of Odin and the other Aesir, a glaring flaw in Tolkien's opinion. Tolkien's belief in *euclastrophe* stemmed from his Catholic faith, and this faith informed his vision of all things, even the blatantly evil actions of Melkor and his minions, ultimately contributing to the Illuvatar's great theme. The picture painted in Norse mythology, then, was not entirely untrue, but simply – and conveniently – incomplete. For a Satanic character such as Odin, the belief in a coming *euclastrophe* that brings about a happy ending in tune with a Great Theme beyond his control undermines his lordship and the romance of his heroic quest. Yet, if his followers truly believed that Odin's date with destiny at Ragnarök was truly unavoidable, why not call him lord and admire his courage, strength, and wisdom until he met his tragic end?

Milton's Satan acts in a way that is clearly *ofermod*, in violating his duty to God whom he ought to be serving, and to his fellow angels, whom he ought to be leading. Instead, Satan tries to usurp God's throne and leads some of his fellow angels astray, doomed to forever to join him in his hopeless quest. Tolkien, as a Catholic, did believe in an actual, literal Satan along with his demonic underlings. Even though Milton's Satan is, of course, a literary invention, his plight echoes that of the biblical Satan and his demons. In short, Satan's doom is sealed and certain, and Satan is fully aware of this fact. Yet, he strives on in his quest to bring glory to himself and violate God's creation for as long as possible, rallying people and demons to his side in hordes. A student of both the Bible and Norse mythology, Tolkien recognized the demonic influence in those myths that he loved. In a letter to his son Michael in 1941, Tolkien expresses his anger at

the likes of Hitler for contributing to the demonic “Ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light” (Carpenter, *Letters* 55-56). The courage to stand in the face of great danger and apparent doom is a good thing, the true light of the Nordic worldview. That true light was not to be found in the imperialistic march of Nazi Germany, nor, sadly, in the myths and tales of Odin and the Aesir. Tolkien was well-aware of the demonic nature of their mythology, but he was unwilling to surrender the essentially good, true light of Northern courage which he cherished his entire life. As a storyteller and a scholar, his duty was to recover this distorted good thing, and for him to have presented it at the height of its demonic romance would have been for him to act *ofermod*.

Tolkien saw the character of Odin as essentially Satanic, and whether worshipped as a god or merely admired as a heroic embodiment of Northern courage, Odin’s character was clearly acting *ofermod*. Yet, part of the Satanic appeal, in Tolkien’s mind, was that “He is as good every bit at catching you through generous romantic or tender motives, as through baser or more animal ones” (Carpenter, *Letters* 48). Thus, Odin’s Satanic perversion of Northern courage was completely in line with what Tolkien would expect a devil to do, just as Milton’s Satan appeals to the common human-desire to throw off the shackles of a higher-being and the human-tendency towards envy and self-pity. As C.S. Lewis put it in his *Preface to Paradise Lost*:

It remains, of course, true that Satan is the best drawn of Milton's characters. The reason is not hard to find. Of the major characters whom Milton attempted he is incomparably the easiest to draw. Set a hundred poets to tell the same story and in ninety of the resulting poems Satan will be the best character. In all but a few writers the 'good' characters are the least successful, and every one who has ever

tried to make even the humblest story ought to know why. To make a character worse than oneself it is only necessary to release imaginatively from control some of the bad passions which, in real life, are always straining at the leash... (100)

This difficult task of writing a well-drawn “good” character is exactly the one which Tolkien takes on in *The Lord of the Rings*. Sauron is a distant and mysterious villain whom Tolkien makes no attempt to romanticize or study. Rather, Tolkien focuses his attention on crafting “good” characters who do not act *ofermod*, instead acting humbly in accord with the *Tao* as they fulfil their duty.

Tolkien provides examples of characters who act rightly towards those both under and below them in *The Lord of the Rings*. Aragorn, the rightful king of Gondor and a skilled warrior, not only valiantly protects and guides the hobbits on their journey, but also dedicated years of thankless labor on behalf of weak and helpless people: “Strider I am to one fat man who lives within a day’s march of foes that would freeze his heart, or lay his little town in ruin, if he were not guarded ceaselessly. Yet we would not have it otherwise. If simple folk are free from care and fear, simple they will be and we must be secret to keep them so” (*Fellowship* 242). Here, Aragorn demonstrates the clear opposite of *ofermod*. Part of proudly assuming his role as king is humbly accepting his duty to protect people beneath him from danger, even if he is not thanked or honored for it. This is part of a common theme in *The Lord of the Rings* which establishes that though there is a right natural order aligned with the *Tao*, it is not always represented by the hierarchy that is actually manifested in the world. Janet Croft observes that “There is a certain amount of questioning and upsetting of hierarchy in Tolkien's world... The last shall be first, a small people shall trouble the counsels of the great, woman will kill the Witch-king. Aragorn associates with Hobbits and patronizes country inn’s like Prince Harry” (139). Even if the rules

of *drengskapr* demand that a king put his kin at risk so that he might win glory on the battlefield, it does not mean that these rules ought not to be broken. When rules are not aligned with the *Tao*, disobedience is not a vice, but a virtue. Whether pride and disobedience, in Tolkien's view, are vices or virtues depends entirely on one's duty and position. They are only evil if they are misapplied. *Ofermod*, then, encapsulates the essence of evil for Tolkien. It is pride coupled with greed, selfish overreaching of one's duty for personal gain at the expense of others.

While Aragorn is an excellent example of a character fulfilling his duty appropriately towards those placed beneath him, Sam Gamgee is a perfect example of a person fulfilling a subservient role. Tolkien clearly felt a great deal of affection for Sam, claiming that the "the book will prob. end up with Sam" (Carpenter, *Letters* 105), rather than Frodo, and even going so far as to compare Sam's humility with that of the Virgin Mary (Boyd 618-619). As Frodo's servant, Sam has an appropriate relationship with Frodo, loyally serving his master and supporting him on his way to Mordor. Sam's sense of duty is memorably depicted when he and Frodo arrive at the Black Gate, only to find it obviously impenetrable. Frodo, however, is determined to go, and Sam resigns himself to this suicidal attempt, "Now they were come to the bitter end. But he had stuck to his master all the way; that was what he had chiefly come for, and he would still stick to him. His master would not go to Mordor alone" (*Two Towers* 624). It is critical here to note that it did not matter to Sam whether there was any real hope of success. Rather, it was an unflinching resolve to fulfill his duty that drove Sam onward, even into the face of certain death. Had Sam had acted *ofermod*, he might have served Frodo in such an excess that he brought glory to himself. For instance, if Sam had decided to challenge the Ringwraiths to a duel or seized the ring and stormed the Black Gates by himself, he would have been doing something courageous, but unnecessary, and something which endangered Frodo's mission.

Gandalf stands out as a character who balances his duty to both higher and lower beings in a way which neither “good” characters, like Aragorn and Sam, nor Satanic characters, such as Melkor, Satan, and Odin accomplish. In his attempt to re-tell *The Saga of the Volsungs*, Tolkien borrows the name of Odin but alters his character and plight so drastically that the tale feels less like an answer or a subversion of the Satanic Odin and more like a completely different character altogether. In a sense, Odin has not been rewritten, but rather replaced. In *The Lord of the Rings*, however, Tolkien wrote a more mature, complex, and satisfactory answer to the Satanic problem of the Nordic-worldview, presenting Gandalf as Odin as he should have been, and Saruman as Odin more as he actually was. Saruman, like Satan, fails in his duty both to those above him - the Valar who sent him to Middle-earth - and the people below him, including Gandalf as a lesser wizard, Théoden as an ally and confidant, Nature, embodied by the forest of Fangorn, and eventually the vulnerable and naive hobbits. The motivation behind Saruman’s distorted relationships is his desire for personal power. He disregards his mission, ordained by the Valar, because he wishes to impose his own will on Middle-earth and join with Sauron. Gandalf, when summoned by Saruman, goes willingly and trustingly since “Saruman the White is the greatest of my order” (*Fellowship* 250). Yet, Gandalf is failed by Saruman when the greater wizard tries to coerce Gandalf into joining him in his perversion, telling him that “The time of the Elves is over, but our time is at hand: the world of Men, which We must rule. But we must have power, power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see” (*Fellowship* 252). Though he was sent to lead the wizards in their efforts in drawing out the native powers of Middle-earth, Saruman tears down the forests and fills Isengard with orcs, unnatural, perverted creatures (*Fellowship* 254). Rather than leading the fight against Sauron, Saruman’s craving for power has prompted him to join Sauron and to seduce Gandalf into going down with him in his

treachery. Gandalf, willing enough to follow Saruman as his leader as long as Saruman's orders align with the *Tao*, does not hesitate to separate himself from his leader and disobey once Saruman reveals his *ofermod* ambitions.

Superficially, Gandalf probably bears the closest resemblance to Odin in *The Lord of the Rings*. Their titles are reminiscent of each other; for instance, Gandalf is called Mithrandir, or the Grey Wanderer, while Odin is referred to both as "Grey Beard" and simply "Wanderer." Tolkien associates Gandalf with Odin down to little details such as their blue hoods, long brimmed hats, knowledge of runes, and even magical steeds (Birzer 78-79). However, as the story unfolds, Gandalf continuously subverts the expectations set for him due to his associations with Odin. On the other hand, Saruman continuously behaves exactly as Odin would. Saruman functions as Odin as he can be found in Norse mythology, while Gandalf functions as Odin as Tolkien thought he ought to be. In a letter to his publisher, Tolkien explained the function of the wizards in Middle-earth, "They were thought to be Emissaries... and their proper function, maintained by Gandalf, and perverted by Saruman, was to encourage and bring out the native powers of the Enemies of Sauron" (Carpenter, *Letters* 180). Who were Sauron's enemies? It would be tempting to reply that Sauron's greatest enemies were the likes of Aragorn or Elrond, great kings and warriors standing in opposition to his dominion of Middle-earth. While this is true, the answer deserves a more nuanced reply as well. Since Sauron is the predecessor and imitator of Melkor himself, Sauron's enemy is light. He hates all good things and wants to swallow them up in shadow. Thus, the hobbits and their pristine Shire are as much the enemies of Sauron as Aragorn and the battlements of Minas Tirith. Gandalf and Saruman are not sent to Middle-earth to confront Sauron with their own strength, but to bring out the strength already contained in Sauron's enemies, which includes both the long-lost heir to the throne of Gondor as well as the

plump and oblivious hobbits. Yet, Gandalf alone concerns himself with the little people in Middle-earth. He tells Frodo that Saruman is “great among the Wise... His knowledge is deep, but his pride has grown with it” (*Fellowship* 47). Saruman’s pride has led him to obsess over “the lore of the Elven-rings” (*Fellowship* 47). Gandalf, on the other hand, reveals that “among the Wise I am the only one that goes in for hobbit-lore” (*Fellowship* 47). Gandalf appreciates the potential strength in hobbits, who are “soft as butter... and yet sometimes as tough as old tree-roots. I think it likely that some would resist the Rings far longer than most of the Wise would believe” (*Fellowship* 47). This suspicion of Gandalf’s, that hobbits are tough and exceptionally resilient to the Ring’s power, proves true in the end. If Gandalf had not troubled himself with the affairs of hobbits enough to see their potential worth, he never would have discovered the location of the Ring and the quest to destroy the ring would not have been undertaken by the only creatures in Middle-earth really cut out for the job. Saruman’s obsession with powerful things leads to his perversion and ruin.

Likewise, Saruman uses his power to manipulate Théoden, the king of Rohan, who looked to Saruman for counsel and aid. Théoden is ensnared by Saruman’s agent, Wormtongue, in a web of lies. Éomer tells Aragorn that, even as the rightful king of Rohan sits on the throne, Saruman “has claimed lordship over this land” (*Two Towers* 426). Éomer describes the wizard in terms eerily like Odin: “he is a wizard both cunning and dwimmer-crafty, having many guises. He walks here and there, they say, as an old man hooded and cloaked... His spies slip through every net, and his birds of ill omen are abroad in the sky” (*Two Towers* 426). Instead of encouraging the people of Rohan to prepare for war with Sauron, Saruman turned their king impotent and left the land barren and defenseless. Under Saruman’s influence, Théoden is drawing dangerously close to a dishonorable “straw-death,” the shameful, perverse natural death

which the ancient Norse so bitterly feared. Gandalf, however, refuses to permit Théoden to degrade himself in this manner, making plain the looming danger and his proper response to it: “Behold! You are come into a peril greater even than the wit of Wormtongue could weave into your dreams... 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” (*Return* 505). Just as he did with Frodo in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gandalf has provided the knowledge necessary for Théoden to demonstrate courage in response to danger. Yet, Tolkien emphasizes the apparent weariness which threatens to lull Théoden back into a place of complacency:

Slowly Theoden sat down again, as if weariness still struggled to master him against the will of Gandalf. He turned and looked at this great house. ‘Alas!’ he said, ‘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.’ He clutched his knees with his wrinkled hands.”
(*Two Towers* 505)

Gandalf, when he returns as Gandalf the White, does what Saruman ought to have done. He frees Théoden from Saruman’s spell and puts a sword in his hand (*Two Towers* 506). Théoden remembers his old strength and attends to his duties as king, leading his people in their defiant defense of Helm’s Deep and in their heroic exploits at Battle of the Pelennor Fields. In each case, Théoden must stave off despair and weariness which constantly threaten to corrupt his sense of duty and honor.

At Helm’s Deep, Théoden expresses his doubt openly, “It is said that the Hornburg has never fallen to assault... but now my heart is doubtful... 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 now so good as it did under the morning sun” (*Two Towers* 526-527). Even after he witnesses the great *eucatastrophe* at Helm’s Deep, Théoden displays an involuntary sign of despair before upon seeing the forces of Mordor besieging Minas Tirith, “the king sat upon Snowmane, motionless... as if stricken suddenly by anguish, or dread. He seemed to shrink down, cowed by age” (*Return* 819). However, Théoden musters his courage and leads his riders boldly into the fray, knowing full-well that he and his comrades may not achieve victory. If Théoden felt no fear or weariness, his actions would not be so heroic. Having established his emotional and physical turmoil, however, Tolkien then provides one of the most rousing passages in novel:

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!* (*Return* 819-820)

Although Théoden dies in the battle, a battle which does not eliminate the threat of Sauron, the king is ennobled through his actions which capture Sauron’s attention sufficiently to allow Frodo and Sam to deliver the Ring to Mount Doom. By acting *ofermod*, Saruman lost his power and brought about his own destruction, while Gandalf’s humble resolve to fulfil his role both upwards and downwards sets the stage for the *eucatastrophe* takes place in the end.

In Norse mythology, Odin displays this same lack of self-awareness, as his actions mechanically set in motion the events which lead to Ragnarök, the very thing he is hell-bound to prevent. This is most memorably displayed in the story of Odin’s retribution against Loki after the death of Balder. Loki, in typical trickster-form, fools the blind god Hod into slaying his

brother, Balder. Odin and the rest of the Aesir are so indignant at Loki, a god of treachery whom Odin had constantly kept by his side and put to great use, that they exact a startlingly cruel punishment. The gods captured Loki and “with no thought of mercy he was taken to a cave...Then they caught Loki’s sons, Vali and Nari... The Aesir changed Vali into a wolf and he ripped apart his brother Narfi. Next the Aesir took his guts, and with them they bound Loki” (Sturluson 70). The gods’ retribution against Loki is extreme, but it does not end there, for “Skadi took a poisonous snake and fastened it above Loki so that its poison drips on to his face... He will lie bound there until Ragnarok” (Sturluson 70). In the end, it is Loki and his children, including the great wolf, that bring about the end of the gods and all the worlds.⁷ Their vehement hatred stemmed from the Odin’s own decrees, and even as Odin scoured the earth for great warriors to accompany him at Ragnarök or, better yet, to find a way to prevent the apocalypse, he had lit the fire which would fester and grow into the great flame which would ultimately consume him.

Just like Odin, Saruman’s actions end up leading him straight into the destruction which he sought to evade. Saruman is sure that Sauron will win the coming war, assuring Gandalf that “A new Power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all... We may join with that Power... there is hope that way. Its victory is at hand” (*Two Towers* 253). Gandalf does not disagree with Saruman because he thinks he has overestimated the strength of Sauron. Indeed, Gandalf readily admits that the chances of defeating Sauron are slim. At the Council of

⁷ See Helen Guerber, *Tales of Norse Mythology*. (Barnes and Noble) 171-173, 230, 368-369. The Prose Edda’s description of Vali as Loki’s son contradicts other sources in which he is a son of Odin whom Odin sires immediately after the death of Balder. Vali grows to maturity quickly and exacts vengeance on Hod – also known as Hoth or Hodur. Fenrir is the name commonly given for the great wolf-son of Loki, who, it should be noted, is the one who swallows up and kills Odin at Ragnarök. Of course, multiple versions of these myths were bound to take shape, and it seems safe to assume that we can equate Vali in Sturluson’s account with Fenrir, Odin’s bane.

Elrond, Erebor calls the proposed attempt to destroy the Ring desperate and full of folly. Gandalf responds, “It is not despair, for despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt. We do not” (*Fellowship* 262). Though Gandalf is not willing to disagree with Erebor that success appears doubtful, he demonstrates the quality which Odin and Saruman lack. He sees the power rising against him and can see no clear path to victory, yet he bases his action not on what seems most reasonable or glorious, but on personal duty. Just because the path to victory is not clear, the chance of *eucatastrophe* taking place against all odds is still possible. Gandalf goes on to argue that “It is wisdom to recognize necessity, when all other courses have been weighed, though as folly it may appear to those who cling to false hope” (*Fellowship* 262). Saruman’s hope proves false, as clearly seen in the end when he is reduced to lording over the vulnerable hobbits he had ignored for so long, and even that proves impossible for him to hold on to. Likewise, Odin’s constant search for mighty warriors and secret knowledge do not prevent him from creating the very monsters that will consume him and initiating the events that lead to Ragnarök.

Tolkien wrote that “There are of course certain things and themes that move me specially. The inter-relationships between the ‘noble’ and the ‘simple’ (or common, vulgar) for instance. The ennoblement of the ignoble I find specially moving” (Carpenter, *Letters* 220). This was not a sentiment shared by the character of Odin in the Norse myths that Tolkien read. “I have traveled so much, / I have tried much, and I have often tested the mighty” (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 48), Odin declares, and the sagas of Norse heroes confirm this. In a humorous battle of brags and insults between Odin-in-disguise and Thor, found in the old Norse poem “Harbarthsljóth,” Odin tells Thor that:

I was in the south
Making battles
I turned princes against one another,
I never made peace.
Odin receives the powerful men
Who fall in battle,
And Thor receives their servants. (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 85-86)

The height of the insult, of course, rests on the assumption that only the “powerful men” are worth having, while the servants are but refuse. This sentiment was certainly not unique to the old Norse peoples, but it something which Tolkien defies time and time again in *The Lord of the Rings*. Saruman’s folly turns out to be his ignorance of the “simple” folk whom Gandalf consorts with, preferring instead to align himself with might of Sauron and the Ring. Saruman turns his back on that which is natural, abandoning his duty and relying instead on machines and genetically engineered monsters. Fittingly, it is the Ents and the trees, wonderful symbols of ancient, natural good, as well as the humble horsemen of Rohan, the more rural and backwards of the kingdoms of men, that bring Saruman to his knees.

Saruman and Odin both grasp at knowledge as a defense against the grim uncertainties of the future. The Palantir which Saruman possesses was one of seven powerful, ancient stones which enable their owners “To see far off and to converse in thought with one another” (*Two Towers* 583). However, since Saruman only possessed one, “alone it could do nothing but see small images of things far off and days remote. Very useful, no doubt, that was to Saruman; yet it seems that he was not content” (*Two Towers* 584). Gandalf tells Pippin that the Palantir was a tool created originally for good, “But there is nothing that Sauron cannot turn to evil uses. Alas

for Saruman! It was his downfall, as I know perceive. Perilous to us all are the devices of an art deeper than we possess ourselves. Yet he must bear the blame. Fool!” (*Two Towers* 583).

Saruman’s greed prompts him to overreach in his attempt to possess knowledge and power too great for him to handle. Odin is depicted on several occasions seeking out giants or witches who are deemed wise in order to test his knowledge against them, the old Norse poem “Vafthruthnismal” being a memorable example. Frigg, Odin’s wife, tells him “I don’t think there’s any giant/ who is as wise/ as Riddle-Weaver” (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 48). This of course all but necessitates that Odin challenge Riddle-Weaver to a contest, “Odin then went/ to test the wisdom/ of that wise giant” (Crawford, *Poetic Edda* 49). Odin makes it clear that he has knowledge beyond that of even the wisest of giants, a trait which he came by only through great sacrifice. Yet, Odin’s sacrifice at the well of Mimir in exchange for knowledge brings him no closer to preventing Ragnarök, just as the Palantir and all its secrets are of no avail to Saruman, who could not see the threats he created just outside his own gates when he cut down the forest of Fangorn. Gandalf, on the other hand, does not attempt to master a knowledge of the future or the dark secrets of the enemy. Rather, Gandalf takes only what knowledge is revealed to him and acts upon it with courage, as exemplified in his speech at the Last Debate, before the joint forces of Rohan and Gondor go to meet Sauron’s army at the Black Gate:

If it [the Ring] is destroyed, then he will fall; and his fall will be so low that none can foresee his arising ever again...And so a great evil of this world will be removed.

Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the

fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule. (*Return of the King* 862)

Gandalf clearly expresses that he does not know what will take place, but he knows his duty and is willing to do it, even if it means that he and all he loves perishes in the process. The battle against evil is not to be undertaken out of a pursuit of personal glory, and there can be no certainty that a new and even more ghastly evil will not rise up and replace its predecessor. All the same, Gandalf knows that it is his and his friends' duty to "uproot" manifestations of evil, even while knowing they cannot exterminate evil themselves. Gandalf's speech here echoes what he tells Frodo back in the safety of Bag-End. Having learned of the dangerous task ahead of him, Frodo says, "I wish it need not have happened in my time" (*Fellowship* 50). Gandalf responds, "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. And already, Frodo, our time is beginning to look black" (*Fellowship* 50). This is the true light of Northern courage which Odin possessed incompletely. Gandalf does not act *ofermod* by seeking to use the Ring or the Palantir, nor does he put his trust in aligning himself with the wise and mighty. From beginning to end, Gandalf does exactly what he was sent to Middle-earth to do: empower the enemies of Sauron and aid them in their fight.

If Tolkien had concluded his epic there at the Black Gates, with Gandalf and his friends dying in a valiant last battle, he would have indeed written a Norse tale. However, a *eucaastrophe* takes place which brings about the rewriting of Norse mythology which Tolkien had been working towards for roughly two decades – if not longer. Despite Frodo's ultimate failure and Sam's inability to intervene, the Ring is destroyed, and Sauron is defeated. It is not due to any great cunning or strength that this *eucaastrophe* takes place, but it is what ennobles

Gandalf and damns Odin. Frodo is corrupted by the Ring while Sam lies helpless on the ground (*Return* 924). Gandalf, Aragorn, and the rest clash with Sauron in a doomed struggle before the Black Gates. All their plans have gone awry and their strength has failed them. Yet, though none foresaw it, Gollum greedily takes the Ring from Frodo and “dancing like a mad thing” (*Return* 925), accidentally delivers the Ring to the fires of Mt. Doom, thus bringing about the hoped for *eucaatstrophe*. It is important to note that at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, evil itself is not defeated. In fact, Tolkien planned on writing a sequel set 120 years in the future, in which Aragorn’s grandson faces a return of the shadow. However, for Tolkien, this was not to imply that everything Gandalf and his friends accomplished was in vain. The *eucaatstrophe* which concluded the Third Age of Middle-earth was but a foreshadowing of later, even greater *eucaatstrophes* to come, just as Moses’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt was but a lesser-preview of the deliverance brought by the Messiah. It was not good enough for Tolkien to concede that Odin’s tragedy was final and ultimate. He was but a Satanic character who could think of nothing besides his own prideful ambitions. In the character of Gandalf, Tolkien at long last was able to present Odin as he believed he ought to have been.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The literary landscape of the early-to mid 20th century appears to hold no obvious place for Tolkien and his work. As a result, it is tempting to regard Tolkien as a sort of revolutionary literary figure. *The Lord of the Rings* is a work which seems to stand outside of its time, neither aligning itself with the nihilistic Naturalism which dominated the decades preceding its release nor the psychedelic, progressive, and highly experimental art of the decades which followed. In a time of world wars, cold wars, atomic bombs, skepticism, antiheroes, and death counts unapparelled by any previous century, Tolkien produced a novel which celebrated beauty, heroism, truth, grace, and ultimately, optimism. Tolkien, along with his friend C.S. Lewis, “were swimming against the tide of their times. During the postwar years, many veterans composed fiercely anti-war novels and poetry. Many more became moral cynics. Yet Tolkien and Lewis – deeply aware of ‘the beauty and mortality of the world’ – insisted that war could inspire noble sacrifice for humane purposes” (Loconte xiv). One possible explanation for the apparent disconnect between Tolkien and his times is that he was a naïve escapist who cowardly stuck his head in the sand, refusing to see the world for what it is was. However, in this thesis, I have argued that Tolkien was not ignorant about the bleakness of his time. In fact, Tolkien sympathized with the old Norse attitude that the world and everything in it was utterly doomed to fire and death. Tolkien expressed a deliberate desire to portray the horrors of evil in his work in a manner which corresponded to the horrors of reality (Carpenter, *Letters* 120). Evil in *The Lord of*

the Rings is dark, powerful, and persistent, and victory against it is frail and won only at a terrible cost: hardly the work of an escapist.

Perhaps then, one may argue, Tolkien was boldly progressive, looking out beyond his time at utopian ideals of beauty and peace lying just beyond his generation's grasp. Humphrey Carpenter notes how *The Lord of the Rings* inspired a sort of "campus cult" (*Biography* 306) among American college students in 1960s. These students latched onto Tolkien's "emphasis on the protection of natural scenery against the ravages of an industrial society" (*Biography* 306). The novel appealed, at least in part, to those who identified with the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, "and a 'psychedelic magazine' entitled *Gandalf's Garden* was issued with the avowed objective 'to bring beautiful people together'. Its first issue explained that Gandalf 'is fast becoming absorbed in the youthful world spirit as the mythological hero of the age'" (*Biography* 307). Tolkien, however, expressed that this sort of appreciation was not rooted in a robust understanding of his work (Carpenter, *Biography* 307). Tolkien was, frankly, an old-fashioned, staunchly traditional, neo-medieval man who regarded the products of his modern age with suspicion and, at times, forthright disdain. He did not believe in the idea of post-war utopias. Peace, in Tolkien's view, was something which could only be won through terrible struggle against the constantly rising evils of the world.

What explanation can then be given for the fact that Tolkien, though not an escapist nor a revolutionary progressive, produced an imaginative work that stands so distinctly outside of its time? More than anything else, the project behind Tolkien's creation of *The Lord of the Rings* is his desire to recover something lost. His was not a revolutionary project in the sense that he set out to create something entirely of his own original creation. Rather, Tolkien set out to revise the old Norse tradition in order to recover the virtue behind their theory of courage. If Tolkien's

work feels out of place in the modern world, it is not because he is post-modern, but rather because he reached far back into the past. If *The Lord of the Rings* goes against the flow of its literary age, that is because Tolkien himself was a kind of alien in his own time. One must remember that Tolkien was deeply immersed in the languages and myths of long-lost ages. He could read the works of medieval Anglo-Saxon and Norse poets fluently. In a sense, part of him belonged to those distant places and peoples, just as much as another part of him was a product of the modern age.

While the early medieval world of Beowulf and the Vikings may have captured Tolkien's imagination, he was still inescapably an active participant in the events of his age. His infatuation with the past and obsession over his own imaginative work did not cause him to dismiss or ignore the modern world. In fact, his letters provide evidence that Tolkien paid close attention to contemporary events and was frequently moved to pen impassioned critiques of world politics.⁸ He vehemently hated the evils he perceived as running rampant all about him. Recovering and illuminating the true light of Northern courage was not a trivial matter of personal interest in Tolkien's view. True, unperverted Northern courage, was something he believed was necessary for survival in the face of the great darkness looming over the modern world. England, in his view, needed a hero who embodied true Northern courage just as Odin embodied corrupted Northern courage for the medieval Norse. In *The Lord of the Rings*, decades after his imperfect attempt to rewrite Odin in "The New Lay of the Volsungs," Tolkien finally managed to produce his hero who embodied the true virtue of Northern courage: Gandalf. The editors of the previously mentioned psychedelic magazine *Gandalf's Garden* correctly diagnosed Tolkien's desire to enshrine ideals of heroism in the mythological heroes in *The Lord of the*

⁸ See Tolkien's letter no. 53 (Carpenter, *Letters* 65-66).

Rings. Tolkien's mythology was not intended as a form of worship for the heroes of the past, since he recognized that even some of the most noteworthy and admirable, like Odin, embodied corrupted manifestations of the virtues they possessed. Instead of attempting to create completely novel, brand new heroes who espoused fresh, modern virtues, Tolkien set out to recover that which was lost. Somewhere, hidden so deep as to be all but forgotten, Tolkien believed there was truth behind pagan virtues such as Northern courage, and in *The Lord of the Rings* one can find Tolkien's representations of the true light of those virtues.

In his efforts to rewrite the Norse tradition, Tolkien stumbled into quite another tradition: a Miltonic tradition. Tolkien's project of recovery was predicated upon the belief in primary goodness. In other words, Tolkien believed in a lost Paradise which he hoped could be at least partially restored. In a 1945 letter to his son, Christopher, Tolkien explained that:

... certainly there was an Eden on this very unhappy earth. We all long for it, and we are constantly glimpsing it: our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most humane, is still soaked with the sense of 'exhile' ... As far as we can go back the nobler part of the human mind is filled with the thoughts of *sibb*, peace and goodwill, and with the thought of its *loss*. We shall never recover it, for that is not that way of repentance, which works spirally and not in a closed circle; we may recover something like it, but on a higher plane. (Carpenter, *Letters* 110)

Notice that Tolkien does not deny the permanence of loss nor believe that humanity can return to Eden just as it was. Something like it may be recovered, "but on a higher plane" (Carpenter, *Letters* 110). *Paradise Lost*, though primarily an account of how Adam and Eve became exiles from Eden, ultimately concludes with the hope of restoration. As the father and mother of the human race are escorted finally out of Eden, Eve utters the words on which the whole epic

hinges: “This further consolation yet secure / I carry hence; though all by me is lost, / Such favour I unworthy am vouchsafed, / By me the promised seed shall all restore” (12.620-623). If not for this promise of restoration, Milton’s poem is a tragedy. The consolation that “the world was all before them, where to choose / Their place of rest, and providence their guide” (12.646-647) rings hollow if Paradise is merely lost and never to be recovered. For Adam, Eve, and all their descendants, it is obvious to the reader that the journey will be long and full of hardship. How exactly God will bring about the promised restoration and when are mysteries to Adam and Eve. Though the fate of Creation is already sealed, the restorative work is not yet complete. Adam and Eve must step forth into the world with courage, going to their eventual deaths divorced from Eden but believing that, somehow, against all odds, they will be restored to it in the end in a penultimate *eucatastrophe*.

Just as Tolkien was frustrated by the explicit Christianity in the Arthurian legends, it is likely that he was similarly dissatisfied with Milton’s epic. Yet, it is with a distinctly Miltonic vision of restoration which Tolkien concludes *The Lord of the Rings*. In the third chapter of my thesis, I argued that Tolkien clearly established the Shire as something good and worth fighting for. It is, as much as anything else, the true enemy of Sauron and of evil itself. The Shire exists as a tangible example of natural goodness, a taste of Eden. Sam’s final words in the novel are words of restoration. Sam is a gardener, working with his hands to tend the good earth of the Shire. He is as much a part of the Shire as its trees, rivers, and fruits which he loves so dearly. Sam and Frodo embark on their quest to destroy the Ring to make the preservation of the Shire possible, and when they return, they are forced to quite literally restore their homeland, which has been overrun by Saruman and his cronies. Frodo’s labor drains him and leaves him unable to reintegrate himself into life in the Shire. He is broken. However, when Frodo sails away from the

Grey Havens out into the sea, “it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country” (*Return* 1007). Frodo, in the end, has been restored, but not exactly as he was. The restoration takes place on a “higher plane.” Gandalf, with Frodo, is restored to the Ainur who commissioned him, his task in Middle-earth completed. The throne of Gondor is restored to the rightful heir of Isildur. Théoden, even in his death, is restored as a noble king of Rohan.

Finally with Frodo beyond his service, Sam is released and restored also, “And he went on, and there was yellow light, and fire within; and the evening meal was ready, and he was expected. And Rose drew him in, and set him in his chair, and put little Elanor upon his lap. He Drew a deep breath. ‘Well, I’m back,’ he said” (*Return* 1007). Like Adam and Eve walking “Hand in hand with wandering steps and slow” (12.648), Sam’s restoration is not final like Gandalf’s and Frodo’s. Sam’s restoration to his place in the Shire is overshadowed by the possibility of future threats and the decay of beauty in Middle-earth, best illustrated by the passing of the Elves at the end of the Third Age. Watching Frodo’s ship sail into the horizon, Sam does not see the white sands nor the swift sunrise:

But to Sam the evening deepened to darkness as he stood at the Haven; and as he looked at the grey sea he saw only a shadow on the waters that was soon lost in the West. There still he stood far into the night, hearing only the sigh and murmur of the waves on the shores of Middle-earth, and the sound of them sank deep into his heart. (*Return* 1007)

While Frodo hears “the sound of singing that came over the water” (*Return* 1007), Sam hears the “sigh and murmur of the waves” (*Return* 1007). Gandalf and Frodo have passed beyond the need

for courage, for they have passed beyond the possibility of danger. Sam and all those who remain in Middle-earth must store up their courage for the next great conflict.

In the grand scheme of the history of Middle-earth, the narrative depicted in *The Lord of the Rings* is but a slice of a much larger narrative. Tolkien was a student and propagator of myth, thus *The Lord of the Rings* can be read as a mythic foreshadowing which anticipates a more complete, unfolding narrative, much like the Old Testament Exodus narrative anticipates and prefigures the New Testament story of Christ. The cycle of loss and restoration depicted in *The Lord of the Rings* can be expected to continue with many small *eucatastrophes* taking place, all pointing towards some penultimate *eucatastrophe* and subsequent restoration on a higher plane. For Tolkien, the despair of the modern world belied a narrow view of history and shameful lack of courage. On the other hand, the medieval Norse stance in the face of darkness was courageous, but their courage was misplaced. The common error Tolkien diagnosed in both of these responses was the conviction that Paradise was utterly lost and would never be restored. Thus, *The Lord of the Rings* is equally out of place among the Norse myths which Tolkien set out to rewrite as it is among the moderns, falling instead in line with a Miltonic tradition, even if unconsciously.

The true light of Northern courage, courage in the face of apparently certain doom inspired by the hope of *eucatastrophe* and eventual restoration, is Tolkien's antidote for the pessimism of the moderns and the Odinic death-cult alike. Just as Odin for the Norse or the myth of Sisyphus for Camus and his fellow nihilists provided archetypal heroes for their worldviews, Gandalf functions as Tolkien's mythic hero. He is the Odinic wanderer who stirs his followers into action not selfishly or without hope of victory. While those who follow Odin are ennobled through their acts of courage, all their courage proves ultimately useless as it does nothing to

prevent Ragnarök. Gandalf and his friends, however, succeed in averting disaster, but not because they exceeded Odin and the Aesir in terms of valor and wisdom. Tolkien's heroes are all insufficient, heroic in their unwavering commitment to their duty and victorious in the end only because of a *eucaastrophe* completely outside of their control. This revised theory of courage which Tolkien espouses does, undeniably, demand a good deal of faith. He admitted himself, explaining his idea of *eucastrastrophe* to his son:

I was riding along on a bicycle one day... when I had one of those sudden clarities which sometimes come in dreams (even anaesthetic-produced ones). I remember saying aloud with absolute convictions: 'But of course! Of course that how things really do work'. But I could not reproduce any argument that had led to this, though the sensation was the same as having been convinced by reason (if without reasoning). (Carpenter, *Letters* 101)

Since Tolkien could not adequately express his conviction by means of reasoning, he turned to the province of myth. It was not certainty and calculated reason which guided Gandalf, but rather a "fool's hope" (*Return* 797). Odin hoped that wisdom and strength would help him cheat his fate, and in his arrogance he met his end. There is no recovery of paradise lost for Odin and the Aesir whose courage, strength, and wisdom ultimately gain them nothing. By illuminating the true light of Northern courage, specifically through the character of Gandalf, Tolkien manages to make his argument for "how things really do work" (Carpenter, *Letters* 101), thereby rescuing Odin and repurposing him for what he believed was a far nobler purpose.

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