If I had to supply reader notes to *Fellowship of the Ring*, it would be as follows. To begin, I would draw the reader to think a little more on the character of Lobelia, the would-be Shire matriarch, who is astounded that Bilbo has managed to keep his property from her all these years. She’s played for fun in this part of the book, but the reader should note she’s nonetheless a bit too present in this beginning portion of the text — when surely other “options” were available — to convince that she’s just there to provide an extra element of levity before the plunge into darkness begins. Her presence is not inconsequential but an indicator of what was on the teller’s mind other than a world about to discombobulate. There’s talk about keeping doors bars to her, about her returning — like a fire-breathing dragon that’s once again re-generated heat — to launch a subsequent belch of haranguing, and about putting on the invisible ring to escape her. To anyone who considers that it is our earliest scares and fears, brought to us not just through mothers, nurses and other early attendants, in their whisperings of dark “old wives tales” (that we note that even Celeborn says we should never just pass over because they always draw on something substantial), but via the terrifying presence of this lot themselves, this concern to depict the matriarch Lobelia as an “invading monster” should not be allowed to pass as inconsequential, for to the teller’s mind, it might not be. Note that at the end of the *Return of the Ring*, Lobelia is recovered as actually someone on the hobbits’ side, as a constituent the Shire should be proud of, but only after a barbarian gang has visited the town and done what barbarian gangs do to women who come out of their houses to oppose them — revenge themselves on them horribly. Tolkien has said that he had the end of the book in mind when he started the adventure. Perhaps unconsciously he may have only have had in mind his concern to demonstrate that the greatest calamity is when “Mordor” infiltrates one’s town of origins, but to displace a desire for revenge onto others and see them visit it upon the book’s first menace, the aggressive matriarch whom even the invisibility ring-bearer would hope of greater spells to forestall. Gollum is quoted as thinking, “People would see if he could stand being kicked, and driven into a hole and then robbed. Gollum had good friends now, good friends and very strong. They would help him. Baggins would pay for it. That was his chief thought. He hated Bilbo and cursed his name.” Driven out the door by the demands of a pressing Lobelia — not just, that is, by Black Riders — were these half-Orc barbarians in a
way Frodo’s own newly acquired “friends,” his own henchmen, serving out a revenge that he himself needs distance from?

We should flag it, flag the possibility of Lobelia not just being someone to discount, and there is a reminder to do this very thing in the text. For we soon learn from Gandalf of how Smeagol, the hobbit-like creature, became Gollum, the gangly, deadly, spider-like creature that Gandalf initially surmises that it may well have been just to have killed outright when chance allowed, and it wasn’t just the Ring that did it. The Ring made him extraordinarily bothersome, a sort of town nuisance writ large, but it did not change him into something that disparate from his normal, after all, “most inquisitive and curious-minded” (69) self. Rather, it was his expulsion from his home by the leading matriarch — by his grandmother — which did it. That’s what drove him away from all light and into the caves; that’s what made him so forlorn. Exasperating her beyond all tolerance, he had finally overwhelmed her patience, and paid one hell of a price for it. When Frodo provides Lobelia with the home she covets, it is done ostensibly only for expediency — the house needed to be sold quickly, and she was the most interested buyer. But given the foreboding tale of what happened to Gollum when he had exhausted an ostensibly benign matriarch’s patience, in addition, of course, to our own never lost knowledge that nothing scared us more than what may have happened to us in the way we were managed while “in the nursery,” in retrospect it can feel like it was sold to her almost out of relief. The adventure-garnered prowess of Bilbo had kept the home safe to himself for over ninety years; his adventure and might-backed “queerness” intimidated neighbours, not just irked or intrigued them; he was a man of accrued mana. But with him gone and it left only to young, inexperienced Frodo to forestall the accumulating anger of Lobelia’s having being denied, decade after decade, her inheritance, he took the last avenue he had to stop her from annihilating him with her fury. He threw her, this “dragon,” accumulating fury and strength as the ages passed, a house-sized “steak” — everything, that is, that she wanted — and snuck quickly out through the door. Possible?

Bilbo is about to be pretty much left out as a character in the adventure, but while’s he’s still here at the commencement we can be drawn to think on how Frodo’s journey to being his own “master,” his own journey to ostensible maturity, differs from Bilbo’s own. Bilbo is estimated as only “quite a little fellow” (The Hobbit, 351) by Gandalf, but it’s a poor reading of him, actually, considering that it was Bilbo’s perhaps singular ability to charm and deceive Smaug, the terrible fire-breathing dragon — that would, if he had lived, proved the greatest threat in Sauron’s arsenal — that brought about Smaug’s end. Specifically, after catching site of a possible flaw in Smaug’s ostensibly secure impregnability, Bilbo lured him
into exposing the full girth of his chest, bating him into doing so by making it seem just an extension of the sort of ostensibly charitable play they’ve been up to in the pretension of their situation as simply one of respectful guest visiting a bequeathing host. Smaug’s chest is absent one piece of armouring, and without it having been exposed here Bard the archer would never have known it existed, and therefore himself proved no powerful opposition to him but rather only a tiny itty-bitty portion of his colossal carnage. Bilbo caught off guard the greatest evil power in his time, found out his only weak spot, so that against impossible odds, the villain could nevertheless be taken down.

Frodo, on the other hand, does nothing of the sort. And while we see on his journey that he has considerable “grit,” the traditional hobbit ability to thrive surprisingly well — to be “hard to daunt or kill” (7) — when they had became accustomed to being absent their normal comforts, and that he does possess an unusual delicacy with language — a characteristic which favours him with similarly fair Faramir — it is certainly never himself who figures out how, for example, Sauron might be brought down. The person who figures out how the seemingly invulnerable threat on this adventure can be made to actually prove vulnerable, in this narrative, is Gandalf, only. The flaw Gandalf points out is that though he is beyond brilliant, Sauron can’t imagine anyone possessing the Ring not wanting to use its power. To Sauron, it’s beyond consideration that the Ring-bearer would seek to destroy an artifact that grants such great power, and this means he maintains no heavily fortified defence against use of this tactic. And so Gandalf loads it onto a member of the one race that seems capable of resisting its draw more than any other, and, as well, just as remarkably capable of bearing the load of its despair, and ships him off — and that’s what Frodo’s own usefulness basically amounts to. Question, then: Which of the two is actually great, and which does well only for being a reasonably good representative of his kind? Further question: Which one goes on adventures where he would seem to have earned the kind of bearing that would have him confidently counter Gandalf if ever he disagrees with him, as for example, Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas readily do, and which one seems as if he’s being granted it only for being a plaguing source of guilt? Like a soldier sent off just at the arrival of his adulthood to immediately die on a foreign battlefield, his voice, if it gets heeded at all, only gets it because unconsciously he remains understood as someone sacrificed for the fact that his immediate circumstances — i.e., great life promise ahead — argued his deserving much, much better.

There’s a bit in Return of the King where Merry thinks on the effect that all the places he has seen in his adventures have had on him, and decides they didn’t provide him with what he thought they would. He surmised that it was perhaps mostly just onslaught, something
he didn’t so much explore and to some extent “master” but something that just fully overstimulated and indeed overwhelmed him. He is described as someone who, “though he loved mountains [...] was borne down by the insupportable weight of Middle-earth. He longed to shut out the immensity” (Return 56). Merry, in effect, becomes the kind of person who actually is easy to daunt, something not ostensibly a hobbit’ characteristic — or so told us by a narrator perhaps more in mood to be charitable at the time. One sees him as someone who in effect was taught a lesson about his actual ability to handle things in the outside world, one he could be counted on to have others learn, other young hobbits who yearned for great adventure, so that they would know that they’re actually not up for anything other than what they’d been accustomed to as farmers and gardeners tending the Shire’s grounds either. This is a lesson “Middle-earth” inflicts, not just upon Merry but on all of the hobbits, pretty much as soon as they escape their door. And it leads, it would seem, to a kind of mindset that the text demonstrates severe “beatings” serve upon the beaten: thereafter, if it’s followed by kindness, you get absolute readiness to comply, absolute servitude. “Bad cop” followed by “good cop,” a bit of soothing after severe mistreatment, leads Gollum from being a troublesome miscreant to one “piteously easy to please” (604). And when it happens to hobbits, it makes them begotten to anything that represents the old ways of Middle-earth, forever pit against unsanctioned significant change.

Just out the door, and beginning to make significant, fate-determining decisions on their own, like what path to take, of the various available to them, ostensibly still at a state of self-command where Gandalf’s recommendations as to what they should do serve as only that — recommendations — and where at the very least Frodo sees escape from the Shire as an escape from all things limiting and stupid, they encounter paralyzing horrors which daunt them with the lesson — actually, you’re not on your own anywhere near up to this. Every predator will stir at the announcement of prey onto their turf they will each judge as well within their mastery! Frodo demonstrates fortitude within the barrow mound, as he force-awakens himself before being eaten and smites an undead hand that was crawling towards him. But collectively, out of their nevertheless still mostly being completely subdued by Black riders, an angry forest guardian, and a Barrow-wight, what are they really but those who’ll forever receive rescuers with an eager resolve to prostrate themselves before them? What are they but those so desperately pleased to be rescued they would only rejoice and celebrate old-world, old-way representatives like their rescuers, the high-Elves and Tom Bombadil? What are they other than those who after being whipped, turned piteously compliant, when healers arrive with salve?
At one point of the text Frodo delays a vote on which route the Fellowship should take, which course through the mountains, under, over, or around, by saying it should be delayed until daytime so that Gandalf’s vote would be given fairer consideration (390): “how the [night] wind howls [doubt],” he says. There is wisdom here, but it’s not deeply felt, and actually is more a demonstration of his being mastered than it is a wise consideration of how best judgment can get waylaid by the competing dictates of the environment from which it is called upon to emerge. For one notes that after being so easily preyed upon by these three horrendous bugaboos, they’re ready to be owned by the saviours who rescue them. They follow the high-Elves’ ownership of them — one of the “chief events of [Sam’s] life” (190) was meeting them, but not just owing to their charm but also surely to having met them right after their arrival daunted Black Riders set to kill and/or capture them — with Tom Bombadil’s — Frodo gives him the Ring when he requests it because he has become just that kind of compliant after Bombadil rescued them all from Old Man Willow — and finally, the rest of the way, with Gandalf’s. And Gandalf becomes someone, not whom one might want to heed advice from (87), but someone whom the others are compelled to, without question, regardless of course or counsel advanced. If the real risk to Gandalf’s plans was ever the hobbits’ independent judgment — would Frodo perhaps actually give someone who represented dissent a listen, a fairer listen, where if the two could find time alone the “two together [might actually find] […] wisdom” (522)? — this would have been the very course he would have plotted for them to undertake in order to scare away any sense of themselves as feeling safe doing anything other than clinging back when caught outside familiar support.

A few things to note about the stay at Rivendale: One, why would Bilbo have wanted to come here, other than for purposes of hidden narcissism, to cherish ostensibly being great himself for being accepted into their indisputable greatness? He is living amongst entities who are better than him, at everything. The most they can grant him when he produces his highest art is that it could maybe pass as what they themselves might produce when at their worst. It is not to say that one couldn’t take pleasure, nevertheless, in reaching a personal pinnacle. But since you’ve surrounded yourself by others who perpetually tempt you more to take adverse pleasure in your accomplishment through understanding it as allowing you to participate in their glory, the environment remains one that works towards self-abasement, self non-recognition, rather than true nourishment of self. It is a very beautiful vision, this Rivendale of abundance and scintillating everything, but nevertheless one that a cunning Hell would contrive to keep visitors in sick and slackened form.
Second, Elrond’s heart (363) tells him that he should refuse Merry and Pippen’s demand that they be taken along on the adventure. His heart does. This should not be allowed to pass notice (and Merry and Pippin surely don’t forget Elrond’s heartfelt opposition to their inclusion, and end up being plagued by it), because it should make available to them evidence that subsequently should their hearts speak loudly, it needn’t mean immediately heeding them. They don’t always tell the loudest and most profound truth, for as great as Elrond is in the text his judgment is still second to Gandalf’s, who speaks as an even greater Stewart of Middle-earth, one more conscious of and loyal to all its parts. And it is Gandalf who essentially informs Elrond that his heart, in this, albeit, rare instance, knows not; “Trust instead to already established friendships, Elrond, or we’ll all die,” is what he essentially says. In this unique instance of Elrond versus Gandalf, it’s either a battle of the profoundest hearts to match the battle of wisest minds we see recurring elsewhere in the text, or it’s an example of mind pit against heart, but in either case what is shown is that even the heart belonging to one of the greats could lead a whole world profoundly wrong, if allowed to go uncontested.

Yet Frodo does not remember this lesson as he deals with Boromir, waging between them the fate of the Ring. His heart tells him to ignore Boromir’s argument, to ignore everything compelling about it, and he lets it lead him as if no one important had ever demonstrated a strong reason against being quick to do so when the stakes are high. My guess is that many readers didn’t think anything possibly awry about his doing so as well. Frodo has become so that he heeds, not the wisdom in Gandalf’s actions, in the particulars of his leadership — for if like that he might have recalled here Gandalf’s reproof against too readily assuming your heart knows best, and thought again on the possible wisdom in Boromir’s preference for the fate of Ring — but his intentions, absent scrutiny, which is for him to destroy the Ring. And so I think have we become. Gandalf hasn’t inspired but mastered us as the text has prompted such Gandalf-clingers of us all that even an instance where Elrond himself looks like he might have been caught out in an error of judgment when the fate of the whole world was at stake, can’t command respectful recall when one would suppose circumstances had arisen for its urgently being beckoned back to memory. Pity the fate of any Boromir, then, who’d hoped to change our mind. As well as the fate of any goodness that might have arisen if their course was one that would have actually proved solid.

And finally, when the wizard Saruman tries to manipulate a good hearing for himself when precariously situated before Gandalf, the Rohirrim and the remaining members of the Fellowship, he succeeds in daunting all but Gandalf by making them feel like those “shut
out, listening at a door to words not meant for them: ill-mannered children or stupid servants overhearing the elusive discourse of their elders, and wondering how it would affect their lot. Of loftier mould these two were made; reverend and wise. It was inevitable that they should make alliance. Gandalf would ascend into the tower, to discuss deep things beyond their comprehension in the high chambers of Orthanc. The door would be closed, and they would be left outside, dismissed to await allotted work or punishment” (The Two Towers 557). Early memories of being dismissed to the children’s table, the subaltern arena, while adults on their own discuss “serious matters,” as a deliberate tactic intended to depreciate one’s self-worth, one self-confidence, apparently remain in everyone, and thus leave you susceptible to manipulation, is what the text informs us here. Yet the Council of Elrond, the council of the good, is certainly high matters itself, yet hasn’t integrated that lesson well enough that it doesn’t seem to all humorous cheek when Sam bursts amongst them and demands his own say as to who should go on the journey. And earlier, when actual-invited-guest Bilbo spoke up, though he got tribute he remained seen — rightly, we are meant to have understood — as someone who can’t appreciate that he’s gotten far too old to go on adventures and do the like of swinging swords at foes without being laughable (only ostensibly truly great ones, like the equally aged Denethor and Theoden, get to remain still like that). He speaks up, only so that he can now with finality, find himself shut out, however kindly. For the door-closers: One lingering bit of old business, now satisfyingly out of the way.

And when Frodo asserts himself and speaks up, it seems not really at his own prompting. That is, his response reads more as slavish high receptivity to others’ needs, other’s needs conveyed here from atmospherically evident deliberate avoidance of the obvious. Elrond replies to his declaration that he will bear the Ring by stating that “this task is [actually] appointed for you” (355). Why, we should ask, did he wait for him to volunteer when the answer to himself and Gandalf, at least, was as obvious as something already confirmed? Is it because they still nevertheless had to keep their hands clean, because Frodo’s going on what Boromir rightly estimates as a clear suicide mission, a clear mission into oblivion, so that established powers can save themselves instant demise and can at their own leisure deliberate their own quiet means of leaving Middle-earth? There’s something in their decision which rings of sacrificing the potential of youth and the unexpected largesse of a great acquired power — the Ring, of course — that points a finger at an urgent need more to placate dangerous elder gods who think the world is spinning out of control, than the proclaimed intent to deal best with the realities of the world, such as they are. The young are being misled, lied to: It’s guilt-inspiring if they admitted this fact to
themselves, that they were doing that to them, that they were so eager to dispense with their good fortune and wealth and of representatives of the young, so blood-thirsty and ultimately not leaderly but rather slavishly intent on beeding old gods looking down upon them with doubt and scorn, that this was going to be their solution to any big world problem that presented itself. And so they hold out gratitude as a reward towards those who’ve shaped themselves so they pick up out of the air the unacknowledged sordid wishes of others’ and show themselves intent to act on them, eliding where the command really came from and resting it solely within themselves, and so thereby ostensibly making up their own minds, independent of influence. “It wasn’t us! they made their own choice!” is not in this instance a demonstration of respect for individual choice, about what separates what is good in this world from what is evil. But only of a show of full respect for actually very much true evils; but ones the conscious mind knows it can discount.

Be willing to make yourself vulnerable to falling into a volcanic pit, and you’re sure Elf-friend forever — that’s the part we didn’t tell you about was coming when we first drew you to find such pleasure in being acclaimed our friend, after your amusing attempts at fluent Elf-speech when we encountered you just outside your door. All peddlers of the dastardly draw their young prey in at first with sweets: Didn’t any of the wise ever teach you so? Don’t trust those who arrive to apply salve just after disaster strikes, for mightn’t they themselves have originated the disaster — perhaps just to find easier to garner influence they’d otherwise find harder to acquire? The latter is an accusation launched at Gandalf many times in the text. Why is it you always show up when disaster is upon us? Are you sure that you and the disaster aren’t part of the same in some way, of the same agency, or of the same level of malicious intention, one overt, the other covert, perhaps? Is this because there’s truth behind it sufficient enough to arouse guilt that this accusation keeps on being aired? An aroused guilt that can be, if not quiet, at least momentarily quelled, in seeing the accusation voiced (“ill news is an ill guest” [The Two Towers 503]; “you come with tidings of grief and danger, as is your wont, they say” [Return of the King 733]) to someone who can later righteously be dispensed with, someone like The Two Tower’s Wormtongue and Return of the King’s Lord Denethor?

Just at the entrance to the Mines of Moria, the text tells us that Gandalf understood that the enormous monster in the water was grooping for Frodo specifically, but he decided to keep this secret to himself. We might assume this is Gandalf being respectful so as not to not unduly terrorize the poor hobbit. But, really, is it any news to Frodo at this point that everything evil in Middle-earth is making a beeline towards him? Thinking on the nobility of Gandalf’s discretion is a way to not think of what else might otherwise be arising in the reader’s mind concerning Gandalf at this point Specifically, on perhaps how already at this point on the exact journey Gandalf urged the Fellowship on, the Company had already
incurred as a great a danger as any any more overt path would have provided them with. A behemoth, that would have forwarded the Ring to Sauron, makes a pretty good attempt at capturing Frodo, and keeping this secret from him may perhaps have kept Frodo a little less distressed, but it also kept Gandalf from being shown up, and so early along a chosen course that several members of the Company had loudly contested. Secret-keeping, overall, seems in Lord of the Rings about giving one leverage over other people, about maintaining the falsity that some people can handle truth while others ostensibly can’t — and that these sort will always remain unimportant.

Aragorn keeps an important secret to himself, later in the narrative. Namely, that Boromir decided to snatch the Ring out of Frodo’s hands. How noble of him to be so discreet and keep Boromir from shame, is what were supposed to at that time be thinking. Yet what shame does Boromir really bear other than his being the only one of the Fellowship who didn’t agree with the Council’s decision — as it was not the course he would have taken — and so his being the only one amongst them that the Ring had something to actually play on? Everyone else had their will bent against the Ring, his was intending toward it. So not that he was evil but that he dissented, that he was not someone who felt obliged to follow Aragorn “wherever he went” (512), was his only “sin,” his only real “problem.” And what good is done in not offering an honest account, in not challenging but playing to childish requirements that heroes be kept flawless, for instance? Contra Gandalf’s admonitions, sometimes the good do “break [...] thing[s] to find out what it is” (339); sometimes you do need to break things apart to find out what makes them tick, if you really want to make improvements, and not rather keep a perhaps flawed product intact because as is it’s built the right way for your own use. For surely we appreciate that a Middle-earth that must be kept from knowing things, a Middle-earth kept fragile, is already deeply set within the dark.

Boromir’s attempt to steal the Ring is the last scare Frodo suffers from in Fellowship of the Ring. But the one just previous to it shouldn’t pass our notice. What scared him, then? Caught sight of the visage of great kings, of “silent wardens of a long-vanished kingdom,” which drew him to feel “awe and fear” and made him “cower down [and to] shut his eyes and dar[e] not to look” (516). Shame, awe and fear seem to get a lot of respect in this book if it’s inspired by lingering great ghosts from long ago, or those who count themselves their servants. And the text seems to make nothing of the fact that Boromir has to try and manage brokering a deal with Frodo, to inspire a novel turn on Frodo’s part, only after Frodo’s been sullied into submission to these great looming giants of the past. A crime of the sort mentioned in Return of the King is being committed here, where the old are venerated
to keep the young from due. It feels almost as if Boromir snatches the Ring, not out evil manifesting in him but rather out of manifesting understandable exasperation at the ongoing madness everyone else is determined to keep themselves caged within, their being caught by elder-deference, to a compulsion to instinctively bow your own head low and not therefore able see the possibilities as they might exist no matter if colossuses of the ancients weren’t actually inclined to instantly appear the moment a situation might arise, fortuitous for a game-changing breakthrough.

The possibility that higher-ranking members of the Fellowship are insane comes up many times through the rest of the text, ostensibly to reveal them as actually masters of a higher order of knowledge — but, also, I think, for reasons the narrator would not be able to acknowledge, for their being in truth quite secret to him. One of these is quite clearly to demonstrate certain select members of the Fellowship as those who can and do cause upset and disquiet in others — in other good people, that is — by making them feel abandoned just when they’d been lead to believe rescue had come — the dismay caused by Aragorn’s unexplained sprinting off from the war-march to Pelennor Fields, anyone? It’s a malicious secret intention, to hopefully grow past. The second, however, is one to expand. For it’s inner sanity reproofing the author with the fact that it is insane to be writing a narrative about having claimed an opponent’s most valuable treasure, his most powerful tool and weapon, and being so unquestionably inclined to only inscribe it as terrible, no good, profound trouble that’s nastily situated itself in one’s midst. In real life that could be a boat load of German Jews coming to American shores in WW2, that would give the Allies the absurd advantage in intellect and creativity, for heaven’s sakes. And we don’t really want to tell a tale that would have had the Americans in that situation deny themselves what amounts to a significant answer to their troubles, just so the local boys wouldn’t have had to learn to accommodate themselves to the strain and stress of accommodating the genuinely new, would we?