TO EVERYONE WHO EVER THOUGHT THAT
MAYBE THE RING SHOULD HAVE BEEN
BROUGHT TO GONDOR

For after all, it was even Gandalf’s intention to do so, if only Denethor
could have been better trusted.
Re-reading *Lord of the Rings*, I know it is a great deal unfair to it to declare it such, but still my ultimate summing-up of it is as sort of an *anti*-adventure. Frodo begins the adventure pretty much sick of hobbits and the Shire. He thought “the inhabitants too stupid and dull for words” (*Fellowship* 82), and hoped, maybe not entirely in jest, they’d be beset upon by legions of dragons or an earthquake. This attitude, in case you’re wondering, is very much akin to Saruman’s, who saw the like of another type of rural people, the Rohirrim, as brigands whose children go about the floor with their dogs, and who couldn’t care less if the ancient forests were destroyed for the advancement of the lacunae of industry. This dismissal, in my judgment, is similar to the type of dismissal made by adolescents, who in trying to shed the maternal world they’ve long been content with, might start expressing serious malcontent. It’s a step, maybe not absolutely required, but perhaps most often required, in order for the adolescent to cast away the nursery and feast on their
own self-mission.

If a malevolent, jealous, angry party — the party being dismissed — wanted to nip this type of self-actualization in the bud, it would beset upon the young adolescent a kind of desperate need to cling back to what they had known for a sense of safety. I think that’s what a lot of *the Lord of the Rings* is, under cover of being an adventure into the outside world where people surely must grow and discover new aspects of themselves they had hardly known were there. Frodo and the other hobbits are barely out the door when they are beset upon by Middle Earth’s most dangerous and terrifying predators — members of the nine Nazgul. Frodo, in betraying an insufficient lack of will to not comply with that of their own, is just about to humiliate himself when suddenly a whole host of Elves appear — a race that is the oldest of the old in Middle Earth — and the Nazgul flee their might.

The Elves accept them, and surround them with joyous cheer — but they serve pretty much as if when just out the door, “mommy” had called the neighbourhood watch to keep an eye out for them, at the cost of the “children” thinking this outside world *cannot* be thought through on their own. They are encouraged to learn *this* lesson: If you further rebel against things you have been instructed to requit to, they might not receive you so kindly when next time you are required to retreat for their support — *and then where will you be?* Whatever the Elves might want of you in future, you will heed it. If you sense something awry about them in any way,
you’ll disown knowledge of it, for fear your suspicion might be sensed. Way back into your unconscious it will go, and kept firmly guarded.

Subsequently, the hobbits, in deciding on their own way best to traverse the country, find themselves in woods they prove powerless to negotiate their way through. The woods, with confidence, steers them into a trap, to the ancient and angry tree, Old Man Willow, who must revenge himself upon everything foreign that ventures near its grasp for so long seeing the world he is comfortable with being disrespected by the like of Saruman and Sauron. They’re entangled, and in the process of being smothered, when suddenly Tom Bombadil, a great Middle-earth deity, appears, and instantly intimidates the old angry tree away from further tormenting the hobbits. Tom Bombadil is another of the old order, akin to the Elves, and the hobbits in their desperate gratitude are neither ready to challenge him nor resist him in any way. Like the Elves, he doesn’t overtly do anything harmful to them at all—but he does de facto show them that who they mostly are are creatures so powerless and unequal to him, so unfit to the task of making their own choices in the world, that in return for a rescue they’d surrender to the rescuer anything he chose. Indeed, Tom Bombadil asks for nothing less from them than the Ring itself, and Frodo just hands it to him, without question. This is no minor sort of manhandling, as the hobbits show they understand by Merry’s remarking, “he came when he was told” (The Two Towers 576), after Gandalf draws a compliant return from Saruman when he had been withdrawing into his tower. They know a demonstration of
The Elves were ultimately responsible for this rescue as well, for they had let Bombadil know the hobbits were about, and to look out for them. Their being submissive to the Elves paid off, and their perfect submission to Bombadil pays off as well. Immediately after leaving them they find themselves effortlessly captured by Barrow-wights, an ancient sort of fright, and, after experiencing a terrifyingly long moment of feeling entombed and set to be eaten by the dead, they sing the song Bombadil provided them to instantly draw his summons.

Of course, it isn’t an entirely humiliating situation for Frodo himself. The narrative tells us it was in a sense flattering, in that he possessed enough spirit to wake himself out of the wight-induced slumber and make a call to a rescuer. But this sort of acclaim, these pro-offered bits — “grit,” “fortitude,” “resolve,” “stamina,” “spirit” — always strikes one as something ascribed to the hobbits for them to take solace on, just after being denied the ability to grasp at some greater acclaim, something more profoundly flattering that others are granted and enjoy, and what they themselves are intended to be forever denied. There are great people in this world, people of great wisdom and great might, and the hobbits will never come close to that.

When Frodo arrives at Rivendale and is amongst the Council, he’s pretty much at the point where he’ll do whatever authorities most familiar to him would bid he do. They want him to destroy the Ring — so that’ll be his course. He had
suffered a kind of deep humbling here in being grafted so firmly to Gandalf, the chief guardian of the old world, that no new voice has a chance to disentangle him from it. Boromir’s that voice at the council, instructing everyone that another course does exist, that the Ring could be and should be used. This is not even an enticing idea for Frodo, brought forward again in a new context where others other than Gandalf have authority, to spur on at least some reconsideration of it. And shouldn’t it be at the very least, enticing, to the young hobbits? For the idea not only represents a more unabashed way of taking care of Sauron, but of an individual making an impact on the world that no one had accounted possible — what every young person would at least leave themselves open to, we would hope.

Frodo’s at the point where he balks back away from any idea that might beacon self-discovery; and for this horrible sacrifice, is kept within the envelope of Gandalf’s warm gratitude.

This sort of balm is frequently offered the hobbits subsequently. Every time they provide some indication they feel as if the adventure had been one long lesson on why you should not actually ever venture out beyond your door — if “venturing out your door” means exploring new ideas and new possibilities — and rather just capitulate to the known, for otherwise a mean old angry ancient forest or its like will immediately show up before your path, Gandalf, especially, seems to provide them with a soother after just having stopped their efforts cold. Indicate, like Merry and Pippen do, that they probably have just amounted to riffraff tagging along
passively, start acting out wildly, like Pippen seems to be doing when he grabs the palantir out of the water and later when he steals it from out of Gandalf’s tight possession in unconsciously motivated retaliation for being kept so tightly bound, he — or maybe just the narrative — but really seemingly be, makes sure that in the next place you visit everyone will mistake them as the like of grandiose hobbit princes. And doesn’t that feel nice, young hobbits? If you discount that it is mistaken praise, doesn’t it still feel quite nice to be thought of as belonging to the Middle-earth-wide fellowship of princes and lords, even if representing its least grand people? Be passive acquaintances of the Ents, doing nothing but be carried around as baggage they can banter with as they make all their own decisions, uninfluenced, and you get later accounted as the tumbling pebbles that nevertheless in their wake brought about a whole landslide! Bear a humiliating examination by an Elf-queen, where she, Galadriel, explores every crevice of your mind, in no less an invasive fashion than how Sauron explores his own subjects’, and with no warning, with no permission asked or granted, you get to bite back a bit if you have the power to do so, as Galadriel suggests Frodo, the Ring-bearer, does — “Gently are you revenged for my testing of your heart” (Fellowship 480). But mostly you have to learn to redirect the shame so that it can be expressed not in anger but in displaced form — in the last instance, for example, with furious expressions of gratitude, as she follows it with resplendent gift-giving. You transfer irksome agitation into an acceptable form very quickly, else risk expressing forthright, and thereby bear an angry turn against you won’t be able to
handle.

What is especially grating is that one sometimes get this sense that others are allowed to disclose a certain humiliating truth about being servile so to further guarantee that the hobbits who overhear it ensure that much harder they don’t ever find themselves in any of the speakers’ doghouses — because then, they know, there will be no further agreed upon cloaking of a full accounting of their relationship with one-another. There is a lot of abuse handed out to those who are mere dogs at the feet of masters — Wormtongue, especially, suffers a lot of this. And if you are a hobbit listening to Gandalf scold the pathetically weak-willed, those who have been cowed into always complying, you know what kind of damage he could inflict upon “you,” what kind of truth he land upon “you,” if you should ever really disobey him in a way that didn’t just indicate your momentarily acting out but rather your permanently stepping away from full subservience to his wishes. He’s like all the human warriors in the book who come to so ostensibly appreciate hobbits, but who also make sure the hobbits keep in the back of their minds that this approval could be instantly removed — for haven’t the hobbits enjoyed the entirely of their ample, carefree, insouciant way of living, owing to their ongoing being secretly protected by the efforts, marginal living, and sacrifices of men? Isn’t there something absolutely false, something of an ignominy — a crime — about their entire ongoing existence?

It’s also grating that much of the growth they are allowed to participate in is thin, and sometimes, wholly false. Frodo is
ostensibly the wisest hobbit — and he is wise, in that he, for example, knows to apply caution to what he says so that it can be shaped for best reception, as Captain Faramir says of him when deciding what ultimately to make of the discovery of his and Sam’s presence. But the wisest thing he says and does is actually something inverse to this, for it’s in knowing to trust Aragorn when he meets him because what firmly trusts that it is good can lapse sometimes in its effort to always appear good. But this turns out to be a shallowly learned lesson, for the ugliest thing is shameful action, and it is so to avoid that — shame; how others would see him — that has him decide not to retreat back to Rivendale when further progress seemed blocked ([*Fellowship* 387]). And it is to avoid that that he does not give Boromir a fair listen to when alone with him at the end of [*Fellowship*]. To be beholden to others’ opinion of you is the ugliest thing imaginable, for it means you are not self-ruled, that you are a slave, but he is everywhere so obsequious to its stirrings. For him it is forever, *what would Gandalf think of me if I decided thus?*, followed by capitulation to Gandalf’s anticipated preferences. When Boromir encourages Frodo to choose to go his way, to take the Ring to Gondor and make use of it, he quickly shifts from being friendly to being insulting and aggressive. Even if there is some at first, there is no long-sustained suavity in how he goes about making his case. He bluntly asserts that all of Frodo’s heroes are timid, are frauds, which is the best way to automatically make yourself ugly to whomever you’re speaking to, and therefore the first thing people avoid doing when of the mind — for lacking confidence in their plea as
really so self-evidently for the other’s benefit — that acquiring an ear will depend on art. He admits how fabulous he thinks wearing and using the Ring would be, refusing to conceal how it would be terrific fun to use it to act upon the world with such influence. And Frodo does not say, I would normally be averse to trusting you Boromir, but you so little mask what you know I have been taught to see as ugly while presenting your case, I will actually give further thought to it… Perhaps you’re right. Maybe those I’ve been listening to are merely timid, and I actually kind of knew it but had been encouraged away from admitting this openly to myself to avoid their reprisal, a requirement they in fact installed in me by being so ready to let me think of them as the only rescue I’ve got from a world I’d otherwise a hundred times fall victim to. I’ve been set up, and it’s about time I admitted this to myself. Boromir, yes, you and I will take the Ring to Gondor. He does not say this, but rather dutifully goes about his appointed task and takes what is actually the easy way out, out of everyone who matters to him being on the lookout for him taking the harder one — namely, being open to all courses of action, even those that’d have your friends decide you’d turned against them. He’s ostensibly alone in Mordor, its great bleak landscape, accompanied only by Sam — but this is only in one sense being alone, and it’s far away in unbearableness from the most horrid type, being forlorn of everyone’s good opinion of you. And Frodo’s sad choice, born out of deference, means he doesn’t neglect himself that pleasure one bit.

But how now this mature man wishes for the young adolescent me, the stirring young adult in me, reading Lord of the Rings when he was newly factoring how much venturing he should do away from
home, that he had. I would have loved to have some voice sink into my head early, sink into me, then, telling me, with an alien and exciting power, a power outside one I’d known, that the true way to growth might mean having to bear the shame of appearing ugly to those you’ve thus far depended on. Not just “the Shire” but an “old world” representative as grand as Gandalf, may well think you’re the lowest sort for what you’ve done. And you’ll be documented thereafter as akin in disappointment to Gollum or to Wormtongue. But nevertheless you’ll be happier in being able to bear it, for there are other, more worthy friends, to match your arising self, and from which to form a more genuine and supplying fellowship.
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 not 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
himselp 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 become 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 *himselp* 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 over-stimulated 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 not 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 heed 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 quit, 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 groping 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 reprooefing 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?
The title “The Two Towers” makes it sound like this part of the adventure is especially ominous. The adventurers have to contend with two circumferences of evil influence, both linked. But the reader soon discovers that the towers are hardly in union. Saruman seeks claim of the Ring himself, and is not the least bit actually serving deferentially to Sauron. And Sauron knows this about him but finds him a useful enough agent nevertheless. Saruman, though of course as old as the hills as Sauron is, is however reasonably new to the “being evil” game (though Treebeard suspects a longer tenure, passed notice by everyone for being contrived in hiding), while Sauron is old hat. *The Two Towers* ends up being as much about this, the rivalry between newly rising and long-established order, as it is about the two different threats imposed in the pathway of the Fellowship, a theme, a concern, which applies far beyond Saruman’s relationship vis-à-vis Sauron to include assembling allies of the good and members within the now disparate venturing parts of the Fellowship. It — that is, a concern that the old order not by breached; that people not start thinking things with perhaps destabilizing
implications for the social order — seems concerned in this sense to protect both evil and good in this book. It’s an overriding, an overarching concern, making any act of bravery, initiative, or spirited intuition, just as often something to be dealt with and handled — i.e. subtly or starkly diminished — immediately, than something worth praise and support. An outpouring of an eager willingness to praise or to lend strong support, in fact, is more often to come out of expressions of doubt and admittance or clear evidence of failure, than from successfully accomplished feat — which is actually looked at warily if it can’t be immediately packaged as something as actually as demonstrative of one’s limitations as it is one’s potential.

The book begins with Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas full of doubt, each veering toward despondency. “Now the company is all in ruin,” Aragorn says. “It is I that has failed. Vain was Gandalf’s trust in me. […] What shall I do now?” (404). He gets his answer to some extent by the particular direction his heart points him towards. But also seemingly in deciding for modesty, for the more modest of the two paths he needs to choose between. Grant the main course to Frodo and Sam, and take the path that is a “small deed in the great deeds of this time” (416) — somehow goodness lies therein. This I think is the last time one ever hears of Aragorn admonishing himself as a limited figure, and of his seeking to venture away from glory. In retrospect, it seems almost a ceremonial gesture, in that the one who is about to serve as king over all of Middle-earth first begs himself as someone who never forgets that his greatest deeds have been bested by ostensibly even greater kings before him, and that he has known doubt, failure, and even moments of total lack of surety, as much as any man. Hereafter he never intentionally reduces himself, even if others mistakenly believe they’ve caught him out in reduced form —
his wearing a mere grey cloak into the halls of Meduseld, for example. And the key dramatic action concerning him is infinitely more his rising, and into some form of greatness that daunts everyone in terms of stature — “power and majesty of kings of stone” (423) — and presumed accessibility — “none now of the land of the living can tell his purpose” (780). Henceforth, outside of being momentarily spell-caught by Saruman, any change on his part involves making him that much more evident as a “kingly man of high destiny” (780).

Aragorn is venturing on a path that will not actually have him rescue Merry and Pippen — Treebeard and the Horse-lords do that — but rather establishing himself amongst other denizens of Middle-earth as the great king returned. Ultimately it’s not by any means a path that simply lends distinction to Frodo and Sam’s own journey, but his modestly undertaken journey does work to highlight the outwardly bold presumption of those discussed next in the text, Saruman and his servants, of whom one is deemed particularly vile. Note that bold thought and action is by no means always due for criticism in the text. Much of Two Towers is replete with it, bold action that goes un-criticized, in fact — or at least by anyone given textual authority; by anyone who matters. Aragorn, after deciding finally on which course to take, switches out of being momentarily fretful to simply announcing himself from out of hiding upon a whole horde of Horse-lords, and in such a stark and unexpected manner — “What news from the North, Riders of Rohan?” — that it’s no surprise the Rohanians consider them possibly sorcerers, after having first thought them possibly even Orcs. The path Frodo and Sam chose for themselves is not to be assessed as only a “strange deed,” as Gimli initially judges it, but only as a “brave deed” (409). So states
Aragorn. Pippen dares drop his Elf-given (and so doubly daring) broach so his trail could be followed and so that he and Merry can be known to their friends as not only alive but cognizant and alert as well. Gandalf is identified as having stolen a horse from under Theoden’s — the Rohan’ king’s — nose, cheating him of his hold’s greatest prize when he meant only to offer up a typical sampling. Sam, at the finish of Two Towers, succeeds in stabbing the great monster spider Shelob, something no one, not even great Gondor warriors — of whom, they’re may not even have been but a few — had previously succeeded in doing. All of these bold undertakings are conveyed as actions to be respected and celebrated, unreservedly. In not a single case is anyone who undertakes such bold action meant to be seen as deserving the punishment that might have nevertheless been dealt them for undertaking them; none of them qualifies as the sort of unwarranted claim of self-possession, the sort of sordid action, that should be judged so crossly it ends up amounting to a moral lesson for others to heed.

The harsh moral lesson, “the burned hand teaches best (584),” is however applied to any bold advance made even by someone in very good standing, if it might lend one to reconsider the righteousness of the social order that the returned king is set to restore. While held captive by the Orcs, Pippin decides that he shouldn’t have let himself be daunted by the fact that the company he’d be in would be composed of such high company and rather himself undertaken to learn some of the knowledge concerning geography that was available to them in Rivendale, so he wouldn’t have found himself so shortchanged of options when caught out alone. If this was simply his being involved in self-reprimand, his being involved in a turning against himself — what a damnable fool you are, Pippin! — the text
would have found no trespass here. But it isn’t. He is arguing to himself that no company, no matter how high, should ever daunt; that you should make an assessment of your likely needs, and keep faith with it, even if others around you are of such stature that, without explicitly stating it, their presence seems to insist on your suddenly forsaking your volition. Pippen, informed by this act of self-correction, not self-reprimand, seems to be the one we meet subsequently while at the foot Saruman’s tower when he decides to make claim to a fallen object — namely, the palantir — even after just being successfully chastened by a spell-chanting Saruman as but a kid that didn’t deserve to be present at all, and which persists even after haughty *white* Gandalf reprimands him for independently making a grab at an object he hadn’t yet been instructed to retrieve. “Half” of this was supposed to be the will of the evil Ring. But really, the text accords that the half that was Pippin’s *was just as suspect.* For it’s a recognition of self-rule, everyone’s intrinsic right not to be intimidated away from an independent judgment they’d forced on their own that they judged sound, an expression of spirit antithetical to any social order headed by a supreme ruler, by a king, queen, or some such being ostensibly better aware of what a body public needs than any one or any grouping of its constituents. “Fortunately” the palantir takes Pippen for a horrid ride. And “fortunately” the palantir later is used successfully by one of the Fellowship — Aragorn, of course — who can demonstrate that this is a world, not of those who erroneously leach themselves of personal responsibility and the responsible who don’t, but rather one of legitimate claims and of illegitimate ones. And you don’t act so much to absolve oneself of passivity but so as to learn into which of these two groupings you belong — the one that should take act independently and that should
lead, or the one that really ought just sit on its hands when betters are around, acting only if and when instructed. If it “burns” you, and if someone of as unquestionable textual authority as Gandalf and Aragorn deems that you had it coming, then it’s evidence that next time you think yourself guilty for too much passivity and for too little initiative, you’re probably doing only what people of your limited capability are due for, so be rather, content; okay rather than upset with yourself. Don’t strive to do better, just deal with your accorded lot, for ostensibly, it was justly dealt.

Sam, while upheld in the text as — at least in a certain circumstance — superior to every other entity that ever challenged the might of a certain arachnid demigod, is not lent textual approval while he begins to have doubts concerning Frodo. The text takes humor in Sam’s inversion of social hierarchy when he addresses lord Faramir as if he was admonishing a young hobbit for his “sauce” (650), for it is a contained threat that works more to highlight his master’s superior manners as well as reinforce the conception of common-stock people as brave but without foresight, as lacking in self control, as requiring, as needing, to not ultimately go about absent others’ rule. The text is not however so casual with Sam beginning to think Frodo a bit soft on Gollum, for here there is a trespass which might be mistook by many as a righteous reason for taking command away from those given it; something which would of course have deep reverberations for the social order. There’s a sense in the text, not just that Sam but that many readers have been lured far along enough in a suspicion so that when quit, shown up for good, an arising doubt built on something implicitly weak-seeming about the right of a current hierarchy to its place, has been dealt with triumphantly after having been ventured extented rope, and therefore
subsequently guaranteed a long interim, free of challenge. This something, alluded to at the beginning of the text by one of Sauron’s agents as the one trait not even their worst is “cursed with,” is “kindness” (445). Frodo is Sam’s “rightful master, not just because he is more wise and genteel, which are traits possessed by the like of Sauron, for instance, but because he is more intrinsically kind. Aragorn is Eomer’s rightful master, not just because he is wiser and more mighty than he, not just because he has better manners — “I spoke only as do all in men in my land, and I would gladly learn better” (427) — than he, but because he is kinder, substantially less harsh, than he. Kindness is not, however, something a simple person might mistake it for. It’s not intrinsically connected with weakness, with blindness to villainy, however much the two can be connected (read what happens to Theodon’s Rhodan when Theoden is too open and permissive — i.e., it makes itself fully open to the machinations of Wormtongue). It’s actually twinned with a larger degree of foresight than the simple are capable of conceiving — as for example, Gandalf’s instructing Frodo on what pity can lend in you in surprise — given their being accustomed to associate too much receptivity to others’ pains only with a peculiar willingness to self-designate yourself open for plunder. And it requires a reminder, now and then, of how it is actually not at all that, that it’s actually informed out of full knowledge of the guiles of the weak, and is by no means a capitulation to any of them, so that those properly due respect not find themselves inadvertently held in poor regard by their much-shallower-in-perception servants.

Even an entity as great and important as Treebeard gets a hemming-in, a correction, when he advances on a dangerous conclusion built out of what the text needed to supply, but for
another purpose. The great wizard Saruman must be soundly deflated in the text so that he doesn’t serve as an argument that the uppity do sometimes have good ground for thinking themselves superior to all who’ve gone before them, that sometimes they really are better. So we are instructed that though Saruman was a potent captain, he was, despite his pretensions, only ever but Sauron’s servant. So we are instructed that he was only creating only a copy of Sauron’s constructions, even as he saw himself as a bold originator, and that his awesome tower, Orthanc, indestructible even to Ents, was outside the building acumen of either of them. And Treebeard is accorded as correct by Aragorn in further assessing Saruman as fundamentally lacking in grit and raw courage as well (553). But after that, Treebeard’s denunciation of Saruman is stopped short by Aragorn because — it really does begin to seem — what is flawed concerning Saruman cannot be allowed to implicate all others possessed of previously agreed upon iron-clad claims on greatness, and that’s the territory Treebeard is stepping into. He ventures, “I wonder if his fame was not all along mainly due to his cleverness in settling at Isengard,” which implies that what he was actually foremost skilled at was pulling the wool over people’s eyes. He’s going in the same direction here that Boromir was when he wondered of Galadriel’s ultimate purposes, gauging her perhaps only ever a creature of deception and guile. And so Aragorn quickly jumps on Treebeard’s own venturing into “evil” considerations, expounding, “No[,] [...] once he was as great as his fame made him. His thoughts were deep, his knowledge was subtle, and his hands marvelously skilled” (553). Yes, of course he was, for otherwise Gandalf, Elrond, Galadriel and Aragorn himself, are either thorough fools or agents of deliberate mischief for for so long assuming him otherwise! And of
course he was, for otherwise these other three “great” individuals might perhaps be themselves revealed as being rendered of the same dubious make-up. Seditious thinking of the highest order! So even the great saviour Treebeard is made to suffer a burn of a kind here, by someone the text holds one of the very few worthy of administering it.

If Sam hadn’t realized that Frodo was so far beyond him in comprehension that it was really always wise to trust him implicitly in all matters, if Pippin hadn’t said that subsequently after his own receiving of a “burning” lesson that a whole platter of tempting palantirs could be put before him and he couldn’t be made to touch any of them, if Treebeard hadn’t immediately stopped his denunciation of Saruman and left it where Aragorn would comfortably have had it, then their fates would not subsequently have gone as described, is what one comes to gather from the will at work in the text. If Sam had decided that Frodo was guilty of not sufficiently countenancing the extent of Gollum’s threat and therefore had become himself a threat to the success of their mission — a conclusion which lead to his judging that less-foolish-he should properly be the one carrying the Ring — he wouldn’t have been the recipient of so joyous an accounting of him in his defeat of Sherob that for a moment he was a triumph over every warrior in Middle-earth. But rather, instead, he’d be someone undermined in the text as being just lucky, and probably actually in fact, a battle-incompetent, not worth a tale at all in anyone’s book, even the smallest and most pathetically written. Or, rather, he might just been victim to a sudden plot change, and found himself stabbed by Sherob and mercilessly eaten. And so Frodo proved capable of deposing of the Ring, the text would subsequently be amended to read, even without his Sam. Lesson learned
— by all means, do take along for insurance purposes, but be prepared to do without the services of those you’ve known long but who aren’t immediately obvious to a role, especially if they begin, fat rather than fit, and not just potato-ish in shape but potato-dumb as well, and of the dubious servile class. If Merry hadn’t accepted that there was any legitimate difference between his bold dropping of his broach to inform his three friendly pursuers of his ongoing health and his quickly judged and quickly acted upon retrieval of the dropped artifact that was on its way to being lost to all, if he hadn’t perhaps understood that his “rightful” claim to it was as half-baked a formulation as was Gollum’s claim to the Ring as his own due “present” was, he wouldn’t have found himself so kindly received by Gandalf and merely dropped a notch in a familiar way in being likened to a pawn in the company of greater pieces. But, instead, rather told that that’s what he gets for proclaiming himself equal to all while actually so undeserving. And rather than being spared being forced to sing at Lord Denethor’s court, he’d of found himself serving as its strained, never-ceasing songbird, with no end to his servitude portending. If Treebeard hadn’t accepted Aragorn’s assessment of Saruman and instead pursued his logic towards concluding him a total fraud, he wouldn’t have been as warmly excused by Gandalf for his eventually letting Saruman go but informed more of the consequences of his clumsy mismanagement, including Saruman’s subsequent ravaging of the tree-loving hobbit population — as well all the Shire’s trees! — in his pursuit of making the Shire a haven for polluting factories. Thereby he’d have made Treebeard insane out of grief and guilt, longing for the Elves to return to numb him back into stupidity before they left Middle-earth. An act of pity they would of course would deny him, for having recklessly pursued a line of thought that could have had all the
commons doubting how well earned every one of their reputations was, and so potentially, rendered their whole benighted race, hoisted indecorously out of glory and onto their own petards!

All of them, in short, would have been made subject to the dark fate viciously inflicted upon Wormtongue. If you’re looking for the greatest losers in the text, the ones, not who die but who suffer humiliations no one could bear living with for long, you can skip both Saruman and Sauron; for Saruman’s preference that he always remain a master, even as it abandons him of Gandalf’s help and leaves him having to counter the might of nine Nazgul himself, is, what, but the typical stubbornness and pride of dignified wizards, and Sauron is one who is caught off guard but also one whose weaknesses are heavily qualified so that they are those that always accompany a certain particular kind of genuine genius. The ones to look to are Gollum, the Orc Grishnakh — who plays a Wormtongue to Ugluk’s Gandalf — the Messenger of Mordor, Merry and Pippin (especially Pippin), and most of all, Wormtongue. As a general rule, if the text starts likening one to a cornered animal or an insolent child, you can forget all its ostensibly fidelity to the worthiness of “pity” and be assured it wants you alive only so humiliations have more time to settle in. So if it described you like this — “His face was twisted with amazement and anger to the likeness of some wild beast that, as it crouches on its prey, is smitten not the muzzle with a stinging rod” (Return of the King 872) — as it does the Messenger of Mordor, then if Gandalf has to stop someone from smiting you in the name of second-chances and pity, it’s going to amount to a forced effort, to say the least. If it begins to describe you as a “greedy child stooping over a bowl of food” (The Two Towers 578), as it is applied to Pippin, you’d better in some way desist in what you’re
doing, learn a moral lesson from doing it, real fast, or you’ll get the same. And if it describes you as, “In his eyes was the hunted look of a beast seeking some gap in the ring of his enemies” (The Two Towers, 508), and as “coming out of a hut [...] almost like a dog” (Return of the King 995), then you’re screwed no matter what you do. Because then you’re Wormtongue, and then you’re a snake, a kicked dog, and perhaps even a victim of an assault that verged on rape — what all does Saruman do to him behind closed doors, after his stupidity costs his boss the palantir, to make him so completely snap at the end? — and the world has to literally stop so that all your poisonous fluids can be cleared from all paths you might have trodden upon, and so that the possibility that you could have mated with a treasured princess has its chance to be fumigated out of everyone’s brains.

What happens to Wormtongue is what you get in the text if you breech on someone else’s power when the text hasn’t already approved you as one qualified to do so: In anti-Semitic lexicon, if you’re the Jew making advancements within the European court. To avoid his fate, you go the route of Hana when Gandalf runs off yet again, doing his thing of “ever [...] going and coming unlooked-for” (516), and take advantage of someone else’s doubting of Gandalf to highlight how henceforth you’re at least completely resolved never again to do so. Thus when presented with the proclamation, “Wormtongue, were he here, would not find it hard to explain,” you eagerly reply, “I will wait until I see Gandalf again” (516). Or of Eomer, after having formerly accosted Aragorn, admitting his comparative smallness to him and pledging to “gladly learn better” (427). In short, you have to in effect act pretty much like Gollum’s “whipped cur whose master has patted it” (604). It’s quite the grim way to own people, But such is The Two Tower’s Middle-earth.
There’s always a pair of eyes on you. You can expect to be spotted, so you have to be careful. To eyes of the powerful but worried, a whole social order appears to be at stake.
So the hobbits eventually came back to the Shire, having been forewarned at Bree that it had changed, and not for the better. And what they discovered is that it certainly bad in fact changed, only it would seem transmogrified, assaulted, worsened, only by those who were so fearful that all change is bad they would willfully ignore that as different as it had become, and as irreverent as this change stood to long-held custom, what they saw was undeniably overall better.

Yes, many of the trees were uprooted, and not that there wasn’t some misery in this — as all of them so loved trees — but what were these still easily sprung things to what actually had been planted all throughout the Shire, some in their place, in such ingenious design! Sam had marveled at great big Oliphants, monstrosities of the animal world, and he had to admit that the new brick buildings and factories and administrative buildings that had sprung up were in their own sense monstrosities of types of buildings he knew of, and just as dazzling, not only daunting, for it. And the people hadn’t become the slaves to industry he had been warned about, but all of a sudden had awakened out of long-held patterns and become unpredictable. You never knew whether the next villager you met, who had been a baker
or a farmer, and from whom you could predict the same for the successive generations that would follow them, would still be involved in this role or have branched off into some other career, as previously rare inner-change was actually occurring all the time, in response to newly arisen possibilities.

As the adventuring hobbits told their adventure stories to everyone they met, all were delighted to hear the marvelous tales. But they noticed a distinct lack of envy and awe, for their own lives had become adventures of their own sorts, which involved constant self-activation. Indeed, in seeing Frodo’s weariness and permanent maiming, and the other hobbits’ still-evident — in being evidently disappointed in not being looked upon in their return as hobbit princes — ongoing immaturity, those whom they told their tales to actually wondered if traveling all across the world was in fact as conducive to change as what proved true for themselves, by just staying in place.

The hobbits came to meet the one heralded as mostly responsible for all this change, and they discovered it was — Saruman! The hobbits were incredulous! How could the villain of villains, have created all this goodness? Saruman replied that, “it sure wasn’t easy, with hobbits being so fearful of any kind of change happening in the Shire and all. But all that was really required was for someone to come amongst them who didn’t just want to take amusement in them, but rather actually really wanted something for their true benefit, to challenge them, and make them better. This I did, persistently and over a longish period of time, ad eventually more of them were realizing that they to some extent had been forcing themselves to pretend that they had been living the ideal life only
because defying this pretence would have them fearing some great punishment for breaching, dun dun dun, Natural Order.”

“I'll tell you, it all would have been a lot easier if I had not just my talent to inspire trust even in dubious tasks — the possession of my ‘sugar tongue,’ as some have called it, in an effort to misshapen what is indisputably but a legitimate skill and power — but the power of the Ring, which would have expanded my ability to gain trust exponentially.”

“Yes, the Ring, the very power you were all told could only be corrupting, the Ring the very powerful might first put to considerable good use but which eventually would drown them through egoistic pursuits and pool them into Sauron — that was always untrue. It wasn’t that it often didn’t destroy its users this way, but that it needn’t always have done so. And the reason no one ever discovered this truth is because too many seized on its first few examples of misuse to proclaim a universal, for it fit their own fears that anyone’s own massive expansion in abilities, done without respect for whether or not they had been granted by ‘legitimate’ authority, must inherently be a form of heinous overreach.”

“Recall back. Someone in your own troop was uncovering some of this dissonant truth for himself. Recall, specifically, Sam, who made use of the Ring for a rather longish periods of time, right before where the warping influence of the Ring was strongest, right before the great Mt. Doom, and at a time when Sauron had finally achieved his full might and was in the process of ‘conveying’ it to the world. He knew he should have had just done something to ever-reprimand himself of, if ever he was fortunate enough to recover from falling so deeply under its spell, and that in point of fact it
didn’t happen — all that he was told would surely happen immediately after making this kind of momentous goof, wasn’t much happening at all! He pulled off the Ring just as much to momentarily try and keep faith at what proved a false truth, and all those whom he respected who had upheld it, than from keeping the Ring from possessing him. For at some level he knew he had just caught out a massive lie.”

“What Sam couldn’t fully admit to himself is that the reason the Ring didn’t take over him is that it actually responds positively to people who aren’t narcissistically intent on being big honchos, reified by the like of all the small peoples of Middle-earth — those it destroys, always. But those simply self-activating, which is exactly what Sam was up to while alone in Mordor, with Frodo, with his ostensible intrinsic ‘master,’ at the time currently senseless, it assists without blowback. One after another, Sam was making decisions, and the Ring read that as much as he was trying to persuade himself he was only doing it for Frodo, that some part of him was admitting he was doing it just as much for himself; that it felt good.”

“Yes, it felt good, self-activating, making his own impact on Middle-earth, as worthy as any other, and the Ring knew it has finally got the right kind of bearer. Not Isildur, who was a narcissist who aspired to and who became obligatory firmament of everyone’s necessary understanding of their world’s origins. Not Gollum, who had a multiple personality disorder, providing the Ring no clue as to whom exactly to work its influence on. Not Bilbo, who had the ill-luck of obtaining the Ring when the powers of the narrative universe were all bent on making it only an invisibility ring, as notable but also as innocuous as any other magically enhanced item. Not Boromir,
who saw himself only as a part of the might of Gondor, and thus not actually truly invested in his own self. And not Frodo, who was such downcast gloom there was no material there to try to play to and lift up. But rather Sam, who couldn’t but help notice, as he went along on his adventures, that he was as capable and as appreciative of self-leadership as any, and who — unlike any other other than the legend, Tom Bombadil — could find himself humming tales and cheerful songs even in the darkest of places. He was someone the environment would have to work hardest to draw against himself. Some part of him would never quail, and turn against what made him most happy. It thus only supported him, informing him of its ample abilities, despite its reputation as only a nasty bugger that would drag you Sauron’s no-good way if ever you put it on so close to its maker.”

“Now, about its maker. Yes, Sauron intended that all wills who long bore the Ring would turn to him. But sometimes what’s intended one way, ends up veering another. And if this logic sounds foreign to you, it shouldn’t, for it’s something akin to the wisdom that that otherwise inane Gandalf is always saying — remember how he remarked on how Sauron’s blanket of darkness was actually working against him, by serving as cover for the force opposed to him? Good; there’s that, but the examples are in fact many. Sam at some level recalled this, as well as his Gaffer saying similar things, and so stayed in fidelity to newly awakened truth about the Ring that contrasted inversely with that previously known. It is owing to such that your quest was actually accomplished. That is, not as Bilbo is trying to ascribe it as having happened in his writings, as owing to Sam’s humility and self-sacrifice. No, some part of him — even if not yet ample — had become ready to defy even Gandalf for truth. And for such Sauron met his better. And for long enough that he lost all.”
The hobbits were aghast at Sarumon’s claims against Gandalf. Wasn’t he, they asked, not exactly as Aragorn proclaimed him, the one principally responsible for stopping Sauron and saving Middle-earth?

Saruman acknowledged Gandalf was deserving of respect, but argued, “my point isn’t that he is somehow useless, but that he did considerable harm in having the lot of you ready to proclaim him great regardless of how your journey finished up. You were willing to cloak and hide anything disagreeable about his actions, choices, behaviour, any mistake of his at all, and Gandalf didn’t discourage you from this habit, a crime in a sense akin to the sort of unreality my servant Wormtongue was judged harshly for weaving.”

“He took two of you along on the journey for reasons you know might have been amiss, might have been intrinsically wrong, but knew enough that he wanted his decision judged only as partaking in some kind of elusive wisdom that only the like of great wizards have access to, that you willed yourself into misbelief so to reflect back what you knew he wanted to encounter from you.”

“Unruly needs? Yes. What is it when you include in your company the young, vulnerable and small that would never really be confident that they were on a journey they really should have been included on? Aren’t they perfect, weren’t you, Merry and Pippen, perfect as ‘carriers’ of everyone else’s fears, their sense of inadequacy, their humiliating inclination to soil themselves considering they might be pit against whole companies of Orcs, as well as trolls, dragons, and sea monsters, so they could go about absent any sense of themselves as other than fearless and mighty — as the strongest pieces at play on the board?”
“You were well along on your journey when I, though certainly gruffly — and I do apologize for that — nevertheless pointed out the true fact that you were but Gandalf’s riffraff, those tagging along side him, evidently lacking anything but sordid purpose for the company, if possessed of any true purpose at all. And you recognized this truth, for a moment, didn’t you? You repeated the words I used to assess you, later to Gandalf, perhaps to check to see if maybe in reality he secretly agreed. And how did he then counter your self-doubt? Did he point out to you the actions you performed that no one else could have managed, as he would have, legitimately, with the rest of your companions, indeed, never stopping, if his aim was to do justice to them, until his breath failed him and he collapsed in exhaustion? No, he said that if you had doubt as to your worth you should find respite knowing that Saruman’s mind, that my mind, was currently foremost on you — which, I’ll tell you, though I think you already knew it at the time, is fundamentally more a way of complimenting me rather than any of you. You are noteworthy, he is actually saying, because you caught the attention of someone indisputably so, and so are great in the way that heroic figures as well as nagging flea would have to be similarly ‘great,’ in that both can make claim to a great man’s attention. It amounts to nothing, in order words. How truly stupid had he so casually assumed you actually were?”

“A man who doesn’t truly believe what he tells another he thinks of him will reveal his true feelings in time. And in fact it didn’t take long, not much after his arrival into Gondor, when he identified you both as ‘pawns’ in a battle where the rest of the board — the knights, the bishops, the kings and queens — were at play. That was something else you ruminated on, disquietly fuzzed over, his labeling
you disagreeably as *pawns*. And even as you, Merry, were subsequently called ‘great’ by him for stabbing the Nazgul King, weren’t you actually doing nothing more than what every other pawn that actually belonged on the board would do in your place? You displayed no more than the ability to follow through on an intention, something the warrior citizens of Gondor deemed as differentiating, not the great from the ordinary, but only the adult from the child. What was notable about you, then, as someone who still belonged on the board, if barely, was that you were easier than any other piece present to pass over in mistake; another compliment which works against itself in that it points out that in every other situation in combat those who forsook you for another opponent deemed more dangerous, would have been absolutely right in doing so. You are valiant and exceptional for a hobbit, but of no more combat prowess than any Gondor warrior’s ten-year-old son, like Beregond’s son, Birgil, whom you were bid to hang around with so as not find yourself awkwardly in the way — another of Gandalf’s revealing lavishing of ‘kindnesses.’”

“Merry, you helped take down the greatest danger on the battlefield, and Pippen, you later killed a troll-chieftain. But wouldn’t you say that these great kills were fairly little more worthy of brag than a peasant’s shooting an arrow awry into the wind, but scoring a fatal hit on a king at battle nevertheless? The greatest drifted into your kill-zone, no more than that — a credit to fate and luck, rather than yourself. It is what everyone who was there would know as the truth, if you ever tried to hoist your accomplishment to their diminishment, and also what you’d at some level know about yourself, if you bragged about your feat to those who weren’t.”
“You both went along on this journey constantly thinking on whether you would do anything worthy of its own chapter in a written account of the adventure. When you did something on your own which was enterprising enough that it might have distinguished you from all others of your kin if they’d been in your place, but which was still nevertheless, ineffective — namely, your trying to deceive your Orc captors by impersonating Gollum so to somehow get them to untie your bonds — you hoped that would suffice. It felt meager, and you knew it when you were ruminating over it at the time; more like something that for inclusion would still require much pleading and begging. And yet you knew, rightly, that it was your best representation of yourselves where you both couldn’t necessarily have been replaced by any other hobbit with the same pluck you possessed to go on an adventure. And at the finish, you went back to the Shire — don’t not admit it! — hoping that being amongst people who ostensibly had done nothing would make what little you secretly felt you had done, acquire better backgrounding.”

“You also hoped it would make up for the fact that you were evidently carried along, seized as necessary for the quest, over even additional Elf-lords, when these rare breeds were fortuitously actually at hand, because every venturing company into unknown terrain requires more than “armour,” “weapons,” and “horses,” more than equipage and accents, but also a host for the company’s excreta — a “toilet.” They pissed, shit and barfed all their own vulnerability, their own terrors and fears of inadequacy, into you, to mask from themselves that they actually felt all of that too. And they could deny the displacement — because weren’t you always self-evidently weak and vulnerable? Absolutely so! No projection therefore had ever taken place!, they to themselves decided. And when you reflected back to them,
with your long remaining feeling inadequate, even as the journey was very far along on route, that you sensed you were being used, their “eye” focused on you long enough only to bottle you back up. Without you, all that can be said, is the great may have had to themselves suffer a sense of insufficiency that would have hampered them. Your role was only ever to be an excellent Company’s contrast, everything it wanted to pretend it was immune to and that to the core of their constitution, it was not. That was the foresight Gandalf had as to your unique and special use for the Company. Not, that is, your being a bridge to already established friendship, which actually mattered little — for how long exactly before racial foes, Gimli and Legolas, were best of friends? A week? A day? Maybe not even?”

“Come, my young hobbits. Don’t be afraid to revisit your past and even admit that what you’re seeing happening here in this renewed Shire I’ve helped create is going to require your substantial catching up; that you’ve arrived from your adventures behind, not ahead, in life experience. You know that I won’t flatter you to keep you in a role that isn’t for your own benefit. I’ll challenge you to the end, provoking you to think about yourselves, about things that are still very lacking about you, so that you’ll do the work of actually pointing these facts out to yourselves. With your own brave initiative you’ll grow and eventually become very happy — though do watch out for the abandonment depression, which’ll incur as you pass limits that will leave you absent some of your own former self-approval; it’s a bit rocky. It’s time, my friends, to finally get on with your lives rather than wasting it away on further idle ‘adventuring.’”
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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