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Fealty and Free Will: Catholicism and the Master/ Servant Relationship in The Lord of the Rings

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Fealty and Free Will: Catholicism and the
Master/Servant Relationship in
The Lord of the Rings

Emily Bytheway

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis asserts that one aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* which has been previously overlooked is the hierarchical nature of the master/servant relationship, which mirrors in many ways the hierarchical nature of the Catholic church. Through the various master/servant relationships that Tolkien portrays, he reflects not only the ideal of master and servant working together for good, but also the ways in which this intimate relationship can go horribly wrong. Aragorn represents an ideal master, one who is wise and good, and his servants are either rewarded or punished according to their loyalty to him. In the stories of Wormtongue and Saruman, we see how betrayal and seeking to usurp the power of the master leads to the downfall of the servant. Denethor's fall illustrates how a bad servant becomes, in turn, a bad master. The choices of Faramir, Pippin, Beregon, and the servants of Denethor reflect the difficulties a servant has when trying to decide whether or not to continue following a poor master. Merry and Éowyn show us that sometimes grace may intervene in what seems to be a fairly straightforward situation of disobedience. And the story of Frodo, Sam, and Gollum, from betrayal to ultimate loyalty, at times reflects the complicated hierarchical relationship between mortals and deity.

Keywords: Tolkien, Catholic, Catholicism, Christian, Christianity, master, servant, hierarchy, obedience, free will, The Lord of the Rings

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Fealty and Free Will:

Catholicism and the Master/Servant Relationship in *The Lord of the Rings*

The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.

—J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 172

Introduction and Background

Since Tolkien declared his novel in 1953 to be “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work,” fans and scholars alike have been trying to decide what exactly he meant by “religious.” It’s easy to assume that Tolkien meant the novel to be some sort of allegory, a less-didactic *Pilgrim’s Progress* perhaps. But the most cursory reading of Tolkien’s commentary on his novel reveals that he constantly warned against reading *The Lord of the Rings* as an allegory. “I dislike allegory,” he says in one letter, and “my mind does not work allegorically” in another, and, reflecting as open-mindedly as he can manage on the different critical readings of his work: “What appreciative readers have got out of the work or seen in it has seemed fair enough, even when I do not agree with it. Always excepting, of course, any ‘interpretations’ in the mode of simple allegory: that is, the particular and topical” (*Letters* 145, 174, 212). So, if *Lord of the Rings* is not a Christian allegory, where do we find the Catholicism in the novel? There is little to no actual religion portrayed within its pages. The name of God is never invoked. Mention of any kind of worship services or religious ceremonies is completely absent, and the characters never so much as turn to prayer when in extreme difficulties. Luckily for those who seek to understand Tolkien’s meaning, Tolkien himself, in the same letter in which he declared the novel to be a Catholic work, gave some guidance: “I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion’, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is

absorbed into the story and the symbolism” (*Letters* 172).

Using this statement of the deep-down quality of his fictional religion as a jumping-off point, many critics, especially in the last few years, have attempted to find the religious aspect in *The Lord of the Rings*. Bradley J. Birzer in his book *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth*, tries to match specific characters and other items as being explicitly Catholic parallels: *lembas* being analogous to the Eucharist, for example, and Galadriel as an echo of the Virgin Mary. Other critics, such as Mark Eddy Smith in *Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues: Exploring the Spiritual Themes of the Lord of the Rings*, tend to take a more universal Christian approach, remarking how Tolkien portrays such concepts as friendship, faith, sacrifice, and courage. In *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, Ralph C. Wood argues that Christian themes, especially attitudes in the novel toward life and death, reflect a Christian culture within Middle-earth. Matthew Dickerson, in *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in The Lord of the Rings*, argues that although the story may be focused on war, it is the battle of moral choices that is the true thematic story in the novel. And that's just a representative sample of what has been written on the topic of Tolkien's religion.

It is my contention that, while these kinds of religious identifications may be more or less accurate, there is a deeper aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* reflecting Tolkien's Catholicism that has been largely overlooked by critics: the way in which he portrays the various relationships between masters and servants. That dearth of comment on the Christian relationships is the main reason why I have incorporated few secondary sources into my argument—there are few to incorporate. The critics who have examined Tolkien's religion have, by and large, tried to find *Christianity* in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien said that what we should find there is *Catholicism*. Apart from the specifics found by Birzer, which Tolkien himself acknowledged as generally valid, although probably unconsciously done (*Letters* 288), the themes and virtues explored by the critics are not uniquely Catholic. It seems obvious to me that the main practical difference between Protestant Christianity and Catholicism is the role of

the church itself. To most Protestants, the personal one-on-one relationship between a person and God is the primary focus, with the Bible being of paramount importance in knowing the will of God. For a Catholic, the Church itself is more essential. That the structure of the Catholic church is hierarchical, and that hierarchical relationships abound in *The Lord of the Rings* is no coincidence. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Tolkien's feelings and experiences about obedience and free will within a hierarchical structure found their way into the pages of the novel. The various relationships depicted, ranging from the more minor characters to what I think of as the "small big three" of Frodo, Sam, and Gollum, reflect both the ideals and the problems associated with obedience in a fallen world, and even, at times, point to the relationship that man has with God.

Obedience in the Catholic Church

The concept of obedience in Catholic thought is pervasive—so pervasive, in fact, that to attempt to catalog it all would comprise hundreds of pages. A few instances, therefore, will have to suffice. Implicit in the idea of a God who gives commandments is the requirement to obey those commandments. The scriptures are replete with references to the need for obedience to the commandments of God, from the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament to the epistles of Paul in the New Testament. Further, one of the titles most commonly given to Christ during his lifetime is that of *master*, which Jesus acknowledges to be a true description of his relationship to his disciples (John 13:13), and Christ often refers to the Apostles as *servants* (see John 15:20). But in addition to the injunctions to obey and the imagery of master and servant found in the Bible, Catholic literature also repeatedly stresses the need to be obedient, and repeats the depiction of the followers of Christ as servants. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, which was the standard catechism of the Catholic church from 1556 until 1992, states that "We, above all others, are under the obligation of devoting and consecrating ourselves forever, like faithful servants, to our Redeemer and our Lord" (39)—only "by a willing obedience to His commands [church members] may obtain eternal salvation"(196). Note that

obedience is always qualified as being *willing* obedience; the action is never coerced or forced. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* acknowledges the conflict between obedience and free will: “So it happens that obedience, which makes a man yield up the most dearly prized stronghold of the individual soul [free will] in order to do the good pleasure of his Creator, is accounted the greatest of the moral virtues” (Delany).

This need for obedience to those in authority extends from the lowest level of the ordinary Catholic lay person to the highest level, the Pope himself, who is both the head of the church and therefore its ultimate master, and a servant of God, albeit the highest servant (*Catechism* 414). The common parishioner relies on his priest for the sacraments essential for salvation, and must obey his commands in regards to them, especially in the sacrament of Penance, where the sins of the parishioner are forgiven if they perform the actions given them by the priest (Hanna). The priest, in turn, must obey his direct superior, who must obey his superior, and so on. (Vermeersch). The church does acknowledge, however, that while disobedience is a sin, the seriousness of the sin can be relative, and that the obligation to obey our mortal masters does have limitations put on it (Delany). Some of these limitations are explored within the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Historical Feudalism

The society of Middle-earth is so thoroughly a feudal one that it is necessary to an understanding of *The Lord of the Rings* to have a general understanding of how feudalism worked historically. Feudalism itself is a vast, complicated system, which varied widely from place to place and from time to time. However, there were some aspects which were universal, and it is these aspects that most concern Tolkien and, by extension, his readers. The basic relationship of feudalism was that of fealty between a lord and his vassal. A man would come to a lord and, of his own free will, pledge his service (which was almost always military in nature) to the lord. In return, the lord would provide for the vassal, either by maintaining him in his own household or, more commonly, by granting him a *fief*

or a manor, the proceeds of which would support him and his family (“Feudalism”). This relationship was forged by a formal ceremony, described by Carl Stephenson in his book *Mediaeval Feudalism* as follows:

To become a vassal, a man (B) had to appear before his future lord (A) and render to him the service technically called homage (Latin *homagium*, from *homo*) and fealty (Latin *fidelitas*). B knelt, placed his hands between those of A, and acknowledged himself A’s man, pledging entire faith as a vassal to his lord against all men who might live or die. In equally formal words A accepted B’s homage, raised him to his feet, and, as a rule, kissed him. Finally, on the Gospels or on sacred relics, B took a solemn oath to confirm his earlier promise. (18)

The sacred military, economic, social, and political bond thus forged would last until the death of either the lord or the vassal. In practice, though, the obligations and relationships tended to be passed down from father to son, being reconfirmed with each new generation (Stephenson 24). In many cases a vassal would thereafter take vassals of his own, giving a part of his fief to his vassals as fiefs of their own (Stephenson 28). Thus the feudal system was as hierarchical as the parallel system that existed in the Catholic church, with a series of lords and vassals reaching all the way to the king.

By its very nature fealty was reciprocal. F. L. Ganshof, in his book *Feudalism*, describes feudalism as “a body of institutions creating and regulating the obligations of obedience and service—mainly military service—on the part of a free man (the vassal) towards another free man (the lord), and the obligations of protection and maintenance on the part of the lord with regard to his vassal” (xx). Both the failure of the lord to provide for his vassal and the failure of the vassal to render appropriate service to the lord were considered crimes, and those faithless lords and vassals who committed those crimes were subject to punishment according to the law (Stephenson 23). Unlike many aspects of feudalism, which evolved and changed as events unfolded, this bond between lord and vassal never did

(Bloch 228). The specific circumstances in which the bond could be broken were extremely circumscribed, and even if the obligation to serve the lord came into conflict with a vassal's other obligations, the obligation of fealty was always preeminent. Even if the lord is acting wrongly in his commands to his vassals, the vassals are bound to follow (Bloch 233–34). Fealty, then, in the eyes of the law, trumps everything, from the vassal's family to his own free will.

As we survey the various master/servant relationships contained within *The Lord of the Rings*, we can see reflected the ways in which men interact with their fellowmen—with those in authority over them, with those whom they have authority over, and with those who rank alongside them as fellow-servants. We see also, at a deeper relational level, the way that men interact with God.

Obedience and Leadership

By far the most straightforward of the master/servant relationships are those which relate to Aragorn. As the heir of Isildur, he is the rightful king of all Middle-earth. He is in fact master of all he meets, although he does not insist or, indeed, even seek, for an acknowledgment of his royal status. As the Fellowship sets out from Rivendell, for instance, Aragorn allows Gandalf to take the leading role. He offers advice, but always defers to Gandalf's wisdom. Our first experience with Aragorn as a leader therefore comes when Gandalf falls in Moria, leaving the choice of how to proceed on the quest to Aragorn. This burden rests heavily on him; he feels Gandalf's absence, and is uncertain what path he and the Fellowship should take once they leave Lothlorien (*Rings* 366). He is anything but peremptory, far from overconfident. He delays his decision as to which way to turn until the very last moment, when they reach Amon Hen. Even then, he defers to Frodo (396). Once the decision is taken out of his hands, he again vacillates between two choices: to follow Frodo and Sam, or to attempt to rescue Merry and Pippin. Even after deciding to pursue the orcs, however, he doubts his decisions constantly (413, 414, 419, 426). His indecision comes not because he is a bad leader, but because he is a good man. His first thought in making decisions is not pragmatic success so much as the welfare of those under his

care.

The intriguing thing in the world of Middle-earth is how well those vacillating decisions work out: every decision Aragorn makes turns out right in the end. Gandalf, speaking of Aragorn's indecision and doubt, says to him, "do not regret your choice in the valley of the Emyrn Muil, nor call it a vain pursuit. You chose amid doubts the path that seemed right: the choice was just, and it has been rewarded. For so have we met in time, who otherwise might have met too late" (500). Throughout the rest of the novel, we see Aragorn making decisions which are good in both the moral and the pragmatic senses of the word: the welfare of others is his first thought, and the decisions turn out well. He chooses to look into the *palantír*, and bends it to his will, in the hopes that revealing himself to Sauron might draw his attention away from Frodo (780). He follows the Path of the Dead, knowing that he is the only one who can call the dead to fulfill their oath and thereby save the South and Minas Tirith from destruction at the hands of the Haradrim (788). Legolas, in some wonder, notes that "even the shades of Men are obedient to his will," and that, indeed, his will was so great that, had he chosen to claim the ring for his own, he would have become a "great and terrible" lord (875, 876). He enters Minas Tirith in secret (not wishing to enter it in the guise of the Heir of Elendil unbidden) to heal Merry, Éowyn, and Faramir (860). When he recognizes the fear of many of the men who follow him to the Black Gate of Mordor, he, in mercy, sends those who are afraid to do a task within the scope of their courage (886). Aragorn is the quintessential good master: benevolent, merciful, and wise, always recognizing the claims of those who serve him.

The results of that masterful leadership are exactly what we expect in this moral hierarchy. Those who obey and accept good king-to-be Aragorn are invariably rewarded for their faithfulness. The Dead under the mountain, notable in this context for their failure to fulfill their oath to fight Sauron in the last great war, fulfill that oath in response to Aragorn's summons and are able, at long last, to depart in peace (788–89, 876–77). Because Prince Imrahil holds Aragorn to be his liege-lord, whether he

claims the title or no, Imrahil lives to see Aragorn crowned King, and hold an honored place in the new kingdom (880). Éomer, when first confronted with Aragorn, immediately believes the claim of a person Éomer has considered a legend, and is rewarded with the coming of the kingdom and the friendship of the king (439). When Faramir, who initially states that Aragorn's claim to kingship will have to be proved, beholds Aragorn's face, he knows him immediately and pledges his service to him (664, 866); Faramir's faithfulness is rewarded when Aragorn makes him the Prince of Ithilien and confirms him in the office of Steward of Gondor (967, 969).

With equal consistency, those who disobey or refuse to accept Aragorn come to sticky ends. Boromir, when first informed of Aragorn's lineage, not only doubts that Aragorn is actually from the line of Isildur, but also doubts whether any power remains in either the sword or the line (247). Later at the Council of Elrond he again looks on Aragorn with doubt, much as he welcomes the idea of the Sword that Was Broken returning to Minas Tirith (389). Though he never openly states thereafter that he does not accept Aragorn's claim, neither does he show him the sort of deference one would expect from the son of the steward to his king. His own brother Faramir states that while Boromir would reverence Aragorn, he might ultimately have rejected him (670). For that matter, Boromir felt that his father should be a steward no longer; the king had been absent long enough for the line of stewards to become kings (671).

That may be why Boromir presumes to question Aragorn's decisions after Gandalf falls. Boromir argues with Aragorn about his choice to travel to Amon Hen before making the final decision on which course to take; he yields only when it becomes obvious that Frodo will follow Aragorn. When Boromir approaches Frodo about the ring, he first asks why Aragorn should not wield the ring, but that hierarchically respectful option is obviously not much on his mind—he goes on for several sentences about how he could also wield it, and imagines himself a mighty king. Boromir knows that if any man has claim to the ring, it would be Aragorn, yet he declares “it might have been mine. It should be mine”

(399). Even when he is dying, Boromir does not call Aragorn his king—instead he begs Aragorn to take the Sword to Minas Tirith, to save “my people,” not *our people* or *your people* (414). Because he neither fully rejects nor fully accepts Aragorn, the lure of the ring is able to work on Boromir, ultimately causing his fall. There is here a dramatic contrast to Faramir, who pledges his faith to Aragorn on sight, or to Prince Imrahil, who is ready to follow Aragorn to Mordor, and hails him as king, whether Aragorn himself claims his lordship or not.

Aragorn’s kingship provides a model for how the master/servant relationship should work in an ideal world. The master must be a good one, both morally and effectively, honorable and just, who does not take his servants for granted, but actively works for their welfare. Those of his servants who are faithful to his commands prosper; those who disobey or refuse to acknowledge his authority over them do not. But Tolkien is more of a realist than an idealist. While the type of relationship represented by Aragorn and his servants is what Tolkien may wish for, he acknowledges that things don’t always go according to plan. Men, be they kings or priests, are still men, and therefore fallible. The seemingly straightforward master/servant relationship is not always as we would wish it, and many things can go wrong, as can be seen in the many other master/servant relationships Tolkien wrote about.

Betrayal and Loyalty

Perhaps the most obvious example of things going wrong in a master/servant relationship is the betrayal of the master by a servant, a relational breakdown that appears several times within *The Lord of the Rings*. The first instance that comes to mind is that of Gríma Wormtongue in his dealings with both Théoden, his first master, and Saruman, his second. We meet Gríma as a trusted adviser to King Théoden of Rohan. How he first came into that position we do not know, for he seems to be the antithesis of the kind of man the king would favor: he is cowardly, unable or unwilling to carry a sword, while warfare and warriors are highly prized in Rohan. Yet he is judged by the men of Rohan to be wise, and perhaps that is how he gained his place. When exactly, and how, he was seduced by

Saruman to work the wizard's will on Théoden is also unknown. Gandalf surmises that Saruman promised Gríma the treasures of the kingdom, and perhaps Éowyn, Théoden's niece, to wed (520). However this master/servant relationship began, it is certain that Wormtongue was convinced by Saruman to serve him while still pretending to serve Théoden. Perhaps Saruman even gave him a measure of his own talent—the bewitching tongue where, no doubt, his nickname among the Rohirrim arose (516). No servant can serve two masters, so the Bible says in Luke 16:13, and the tension of that duplicity is certainly present in Wormtongue. Slowly, insidiously, Gríma brought Théoden under his power, until the king became a mere figurehead for Wormtongue's own directions. It is Wormtongue who orders that strangers not be allowed into Edoras, it is Wormtongue who (through the King) orders Háma to relieve Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli of their weapons before entering Meduseld, and it is Wormtongue who counsels Théoden to imprison Éomer after his return from destroying the orcs (509, 514, 516). Gríma has broken the order of authority, usurping his master's position. He rules Rohan while standing behind or, more accurately, beside, the king's throne.

A Fellow Servant

Éomer is placed by this perversion of the hierarchical order in a precarious position. He loves Théoden and is loyal to him, yet he hates Wormtongue more and would not readily obey any order coming from him, even through the king. Technically, Wormtongue, as counselor to the king, does not have the power to order Éomer to do anything; he is in fact a fellow-servant, not Éomer's master. So Wormtongue must work through the king to get Éomer to do what he wants. When Éomer rides out to meet the orcs who have taken Merry and Pippin, he does so without the king's permission (437), and when he allows Aragorn to fulfill his quest, even going so far as to lend him horses on condition that he come to Edoras as soon as possible, he fears that Théoden (or, more accurately, Wormtongue *through* Théoden) might disapprove. He states explicitly to Aragorn that “in this I place myself, and maybe my very life, in the keeping of your good faith” (439).

Is Éomer, therefore, a betrayer, like Gríma? Their situations are disturbingly parallel. Even though orders come from Wormtongue through Théoden, still they are spoken with the mouth of Théoden. In historical feudalism, such actions as Éomer takes would be seen as betrayal, since his disobedience came not from Théoden failing to do his duty by Éomer but from Éomer not wishing to obey Wormtongue. Yet in Tolkien's worldview, Éomer does not feel that, in disobeying the orders of the king, he is being disloyal. In fact, when he is released from prison, Éomer's first act is to offer the king his sword, stating that "it was ever at [Théoden's] service" (517). Gandalf recognizes that Éomer, though disobedient, is Théoden's true servant, while Wormtongue, though outwardly loyal, is a betrayer: "a man may love you and yet not love Wormtongue," he says to Théoden, advising the king to place his trust in his nephew. Théoden, recognizing Éomer's loyalty, states that "Faithful heart may have froward tongue" (516, 518, 521). Éomer acted wisely in continuing to revere and love his master while, at the same time, mistrusting his fellow servant. Háma similarly acted out of loyalty to, and in the best interests of, Théoden when he allowed Gandalf to keep his staff, against the wishes of Wormtongue (511). His words to Gandalf illustrate well the principle by which he and Éomer act: "Yet in doubt a man of worth will trust to his own wisdom" (510). Indeed, it is this anti-authoritarian decision which ultimately saves Théoden, because Gandalf without his staff could not have broken Wormtongue's spell.

Consequences of Betrayal

The effect of Wormtongue's usurpation of hierarchical authority on Rohan is exactly what Saruman wanted it to be: Théoden's natural strength is diminished, as is his will. Those who are truly loyal to the king, such as Éomer, are imprisoned or otherwise made ineffectual, leaving Wormtongue to do as Saruman commands. Rohan, while not bowing to Sauron, is not making any great push to fight him. Saruman is determined to keep Rohan in a state of inaction until it is too late, until his own servants, both Uruk-hai and men, are able to destroy Rohan, rendering them unable to aid Gondor in

the fight against Sauron. But for the disobedience of Éomer in attacking the party of orcs and Uruk-hai on their way to Isengard, Rohan would have remained passive while Merry and Pippin were taken to Orthanc (521), and eventually Rohan would have been overrun. Already Rohan has suffered deeply from the treachery of Isengard, with Théodred, son of Théoden, and many of his men slain by orcs at the fords of the Isen river.

Luckily for Théoden and all of Rohan, Gandalf arrives in time to prevent Rohan from being destroyed. Once Gandalf removes Théoden from the spell under which Gríma held him bound, Théoden is gradually able to realize just how much he had been controlled by Gríma. While Éomer was always distrustful of Wormtongue, even he did not fully realize the depth of Wormtongue's betrayal until Gandalf's revelation. Even then, Théoden gives his erstwhile servant Gríma one last chance of redemption: to ride with the king to war, proving himself to be faithful despite his former actions; or to run away, presumably to Saruman, proving himself a traitor (520). Wormtongue chooses betrayal even in the face of the uncertain welcome he might find from his new master (521).

In the meantime, although disaster has been averted, the damage done by Gríma's betrayal of his oath of fealty is real. While Théoden lay under the spell of Wormtongue, Saruman was able to amass a vast army. It is true that with the help of Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli, and especially Gandalf, the Rohirrim are able to hold back Saruman's army at Helm's Deep, but that is at the cost of many lives, including Háma, the loyal guard of Meduseld (545). Despite that loyal heroism, without the intervention of the Ents and the Huorns, Rohan might well have been destroyed. As it is, Rohan's strength is greatly diminished when the horsemen ride to the aid of Minas Tirith, all because of one traitorous servant.

The Betrayer is Betrayed

Behind Wormtongue's betrayal stands Saruman. At first glance Saruman may not seem to be a servant at all. However, a closer reading reveals that he stands in the relationship of a servant as well as

the master of Isengard. As Gandalf and Saruman are of the same order, and came to Middle-earth for the same purpose, it is safe to assume that what is true for Gandalf is also true for Saruman. Indeed, when Gandalf returns, he is dressed in white, as Saruman was, and is able to exercise authority over Saruman, which confirms the notion that they are both servants of the same master (583). While this master is never directly named, his presence can be seen throughout the novel. The first intimation we have of an authority higher than Gandalf, higher even than Sauron, is when Gandalf is telling Frodo that the ring he possesses is, in fact, the One Ring. In discussing how the ring came into Bilbo's possession, Gandalf explains:

There was more than one power at work, Frodo. The Ring was trying to get back to its master. . . . So now, when its master was awake once more and sending out his dark thought from Mirkwood, it abandoned Gollum. Only to be picked up by the most unlikely person imaginable: Bilbo from the Shire! Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you were also *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought. (56)

This “other power” that Gandalf mentions here is again alluded to by him, and in the same passive construction used here. When talking about his return to Middle Earth, reborn as Gandalf the White, he says “Naked I was sent back—for a brief time, until my task is done.” He was sent back, sent with a particular task—but by whom, he does not say. Later, when he speaks to Denethor of his responsibilities as a steward, he says, “For my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I also am a steward. Did not you know?” (758). A *steward* is “one who manages another's property, finances, or other affairs” (“Steward”). What property does Gandalf then manage? His words to Denethor suggest that it is all of Middle-Earth that he has charge of, to ensure that it

survives the machinations of Sauron. These small hints are all we know of the power that Gandalf serves within the novel, although we do discover a bit more of his master in the appendix:

When maybe a thousand years had passed, and the first shadow had fallen on Greenwood the Great, the *Istari* or Wizards appeared in Middle-earth. It was afterwards said that they came out of the Far West and were messengers sent to contest the power of Sauron, and to unite all those who had the will to resist him; but they were forbidden to match his power with power, or to seek to dominate Elves or Men by force or fear.

(*Rings* 1084)

Though the specific power that sent them and gave them their task is not mentioned, it is obvious that they are servants of this power.

Sent, then, with the task to aid the inhabitants of Middle-earth to destroy Sauron, Saruman takes up residence at Orthanc and studies the lore of the ring and the arts of Sauron himself which, for many years, helped the wizards and those others who make up the White Council (250, 257). However, this arcane study eventually leads to Saruman's downfall. He begins to covet the power that he was sent to destroy, and thereby corrupts himself. Like Wormtongue, he forgets his place as servant, and instead wishes to become a master. Gandalf discovers Saruman's treachery when he seeks for his help at Isengard and is instead imprisoned (259). Saruman reveals that not only does he believe that an alliance with Sauron is wise, but that he considers himself capable of overthrowing Sauron and ruling Middle-earth on his own:

A new Power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all. There is no hope left in Elves or dying Númenor. This then is one choice before you, before us. We may join with that Power. It would be wise, Gandalf. There is hope that way. Its victory is at hand; and there will be rich reward for those that aided it. As the Power grows, its proved friends will also grow; and the Wise, such as you and I, may with

patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it. We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things that we have so far striven in vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak or idle friends. There need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means. (259)

When Saruman says “we,” he of course means “I.” We see how far he has fallen from his original servant’s purpose. Rather than “contest[ing] the power of Sauron,” he seeks to claim it (1084). When he cannot persuade Gandalf to aid him, he tries to force him by imprisoning him at Orthanc, which is expressly against his orders not to “dominate . . . by force or fear” (1084). The domination of others is, in fact, his ultimate goal, as that is exactly how Sauron wields his power, how the ring corrupts those who bear it. Even without the ring, Saruman begins this quest for mastery through dominance. He begins to create a great army of his own, “in rivalry of Sauron and not in his service, yet,” says Gandalf (260). He seduces Gríma into betraying his master, dominating Théoden’s will with his own (521). He breeds a new race of orc, presumably by mixing orcs with men, who can endure the light of the sun (472). He uses the *palantír* of Orthanc to see what he can of Middle-earth, including Mordor, until he is trapped through the *palantír* by Sauron, and was forced to become his servant (598). He sends his Uruk-hai to try to capture Frodo, apparently under Sauron’s orders, who no doubt expected the ring, if it were found, to be sent to Mordor (445–46). He sends his army to Rohan, to destroy or at least delay them, so that they may not aid Gondor against the assault of Mordor (529–47). But eventually his treachery can spread itself out no longer. The Ents rise up against Isengard in retaliation for the despoiling of Fangorn, and the Huorns travel to Helm’s Deep (485–87, 541). Saruman’s army is destroyed, and he is trapped in Orthanc, with only Wormtongue for company, surrounded by water and Ents (574).

The Effects of Treachery

Although the treachery of Saruman against his master and his fellow servants caused much damage for those who were fighting against Sauron, in the end the person most hurt is Saruman himself. As Gandalf is discussing Saruman's double treachery with Aragorn, he makes the observation that "a treacherous weapon is ever a danger to the hand. Saruman also had a mind to capture the ring, for himself, or at least to snare some hobbits for his evil purposes. So between them our enemies have contrived to bring Merry and Pippin with marvellous speed, and in the nick of time, to Fangorn, where otherwise they would never have come at all!" (497). In capturing Merry and Pippin, Saruman causes his own destruction. The Ents are awakened and roused due to the hobbit's tidings; and Sauron is made aware that two hobbits were taken towards Isengard, when they should have been taken to Mordor (497). Yet Saruman does not give up. Even after Isengard is destroyed along with his great armies, still he attempts to talk his way out of any punishment. He tries not to show his hand even though he revealed his true intent long ago, playing Gandalf and Théoden off each other as they stand at the foot of Orthanc. Both see through his ploy, resisting his persuasion, and Gandalf, although willing to show Saruman mercy if he will repent, is finally forced to break Saruman's staff and remove from him all his power, except the power of his voice (578–83).

Wormtongue, the willing betrayer of Théoden, unknowingly betrays Saruman by throwing the *palantír* out of the window of Orthanc. Hating his new master, and also hating Gandalf for exposing his treachery, Gríma's throw of the *palantír* does not hit either mark, however much pain its loss causes Saruman (584). Even after Saruman and Wormtongue escape from Isengard, Wormtongue's hatred for his master grows (enhanced, no doubt, by Saruman's inhumane treatment), but he has not the will to leave his master (983). Wormtongue, having betrayed his master and his people, ultimately has nowhere else to go. Finally, however, after being forced by Saruman to kill Lotho Sackville-Baggins, Gríma can take no more. He slits Saruman's throat before being killed himself by hobbit archers

(1020). Thus the betrayer is himself betrayed. The servant who had committed treachery for his master's sake commits treachery against that master.

The ultimate fate of these betrayers is what we would expect in both historical fealty and Catholic thought. To break faith with one's lord was punishable by death throughout most of history (Bloch 228), and to deliberately disobey, as expressed in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, would be "regarded formally as a deliberate scorning of the authority itself, it would involve a divorce between the soul and the supernatural principle of charity which is tantamount to a grievous sin" (Delany). Saruman and Wormtongue in the end get no more than they deserve in dying for their crimes. Their stories can almost be read as a warning parable for the would-be betrayer.

A Bad Servant is a Bad Master

Denethor is the Tolkien character whose downfall is most directly related to his roles as master and servant. As Steward of Gondor, Denethor has the responsibility to watch over and rule the kingdom in the absence of the king. Appendix A tells us that "each new Steward indeed took office with the oath to 'hold rod and rule in the name of the king, until he shall return.' But these soon became words of ritual little heeded, for the Stewards exercised all the the power of the kings" (*Rings* 1052). By the time Denethor becomes steward, nearly a thousand years have passed since the death of the last king (1087, 1090). It is not surprising, then, that Denethor neither expects nor welcomes any claim to the throne. But although his usurping of mastery is understandable, it does not therefore become excusable. As he took oath, he promised to rule in the name of the king. He sits not on the throne of Gondor, but on a chair at the foot of the dais; he wears no crown, and bears only a white rod—all tokens of his position not as king, but as a servant to the king (754). He should not need to be reminded by Gandalf that his task as steward is to keep the realm of Gondor intact, and yet Gandalf has to remind him of the duties of his office (758).

In fact Denethor's attitude toward his office is not so much a matter of forgetting his position as

a servant as it is of resenting it. When his sons were still children, he told them that whereas in other places a steward might become a king, “in Gondor ten thousand years would not suffice” (670). Yet in later years he seems to have changed his opinion. When Pippin looks into the *palantír* of Isengard, we learn that they were the property of the kings of old, and their very existence was secret to all but a few (597). It is natural to infer that the use of the stones was at the King’s discretion, and that it is perilous for any to look into them who do not have the right to do so. Aragorn confirms this when he himself looks into the Orthanc *palantír*, stating that he was “the lawful master of the Stone, and [he] had both the right and the strength to use it” (780). From our first meeting with Denethor, we get hints that he has a hidden source of knowledge. He even mentions the stones, and how they are lost, “they say” (757). As Beregond eats with Pippin after taking him on a tour of the citadel, Beregond talks of rumors that Denethor wrestles with Sauron in his tower at night, seeing things that others cannot see, including the future and the mind of Sauron (765). Denethor tells Gandalf that “counsels may be found that are neither the webs of wizards nor the haste of fools. I have in this matter [the matter of the ring] more lore and wisdom than you deem” (813). That “wisdom” comes from a servant’s daring to invade his master’s prerogative.

When Faramir returns from Osgiliath mortally wounded, Denethor is stricken, and goes to the Tower. “And many who looked up thither at that time saw a pale light that gleamed and flickered from the narrow windows for a while, and then flashed and went out. And when Denethor descended again he went to Faramir and sat beside him without speaking, but the face of the Lord was grey, more deathlike than his son’s” (821). After this watershed incident Denethor gives no more thought to the defense of Minas Tirith, although he had been working for no other end up until that point. This over-stretched servant falls into despair, eventually ordering his servants to carry Faramir to the Silent Street, and burn both himself and his son alive. Denethor at this crisis reveals the source of his mysterious knowledge, and the cause of his downfall: he has a *palantír*, and has looked into it (853). He further

reveals his jealousy of his master, Aragorn:

“With the left hand thou wouldst use me for a little while as a shield against Mordor, and with the right bring up this Ranger of the North to supplant me. But I say to thee, Gandalf Mithrandir, I will not be thy tool! I am Steward of the House of Anárion. I will not step down to be the dotard chamberlain of an upstart. Even were his claim proved to me, still he comes but of the line of Isildur. I will not bow to such a one, last of a ragged house long bereft of lordship and dignity.”

“What then would you have,” said Gandalf, “if your will could have its way?”

“I would have things as they were in all the days of my life,” answered Denethor, “and in the days of my longfathers before me: to be the Lord of this City in peace, and leave my chair to a son after me, who would be his own master and no wizard’s pupil. But if doom denies this to me, then I will have *naught*: neither life diminished, nor love halved, nor honour abated.” (853–54)

Although Gandalf tries to convince Denethor that his surrendering the rule of Gondor to its rightful king would not be a loss of honor, Denethor, from his ambitious perspective, will not hear it. He burns himself alive, clutching the *palantír*, the symbol of his downfall, in his hands. Gandalf explains how Denethor’s ambition led to his fall:

In the days of his wisdom Denethor would not presume to use [the *palantír*] to challenge Sauron, knowing the limits of his own strength. But his wisdom failed; and I fear that as the peril of his realm grew he looked in the Stone and was deceived: far too often, I guess, since Boromir departed. He was too great to be subdued to the will of the Dark Power, he saw nonetheless only those things which that Power permitted him to see. The knowledge which he obtained was, doubtless, often of service to him; yet the vision of the great might of Mordor that was shown to him fed the despair of his heart until it

overthrew his mind. (856)

Denethor's longing to be a master but no longer a servant led him to meddle outside the realm of his responsibility. That overreaching precipitated not only his own personal destruction, but pain and loss for those under his care. When he betrayed his master, feeling himself to have both the strength and the right to look into the *palantír*, he became not only a bad servant, but also a bad master. The more he knew about the doings of Mordor the more he despaired; the more he despaired, the less hope he had to help either himself or his people. Most corrosively, he gave up all thought of the defense of the city. His hopelessness from overreaching beyond his station caused him to choose to destroy himself, rather than enduring the destruction he thought inevitable or to being "supplanted" by the coming of the king. Denethor's suicide is the dramatic capstone of the career of the servant who presumes the role of the master, proof positive that hierarchy in Middle-earth is a matter of life and death.

The lust to become master of all and servant of none is Denethor's undoing in more ways than one. Faramir—who is loyal to his father but, like Éomer, makes his decisions with reference to more than just his lord's commands—allows Frodo, with Sam and Gollum, to leave Ithilien to continue on their quest (668). In taking that initiative he, like Éomer, disobeys the command of his lord that all those caught in Ithilien were to be sent to Minas Tirith. Faramir contravenes this command and, like Éomer with his master Théoden, risks his life if Denethor does not agree with his decision. Denethor is incensed by his son's disobedience (812). Like Boromir his firstborn son, Denethor covets the power of the ring, the mastery it would allow him. He believes Boromir would have brought it to him, and that Faramir should have done so (813). Discounting Faramir's loyalty and in punishment for not bringing the ring to him, Denethor sends Faramir to Osgiliath to turn back the invading hosts of Mordor. Faramir, against his better judgment, obeys this unjust command, asking only that, if he returns, Denethor will think better of him. "That depends on the manner of your return," is Denethor's sole

concession. (816). It is in the battle for Osgiliath that Faramir is wounded and brought back to Minas Tirith burning with fever. Too late Denethor realizes how much his loyal son and servant Faramir means to him: it is the thought of the loss of Faramir that sends Denethor finally over the edge (856). A wiser master, one who did not covet power, would have met a better end.

Thoughtful Obedience

The choice of Faramir to obey Denethor's unjust command in this instance is in some ways puzzling. Faramir knows that Denethor's order is a bad idea, that it has small chance of success, and that even if it is remotely successful, too many men will die in the attempt. We have already seen that Faramir can and does rely on his own judgment rather than strictly on his master's orders when faced with a decision, as he did when allowing Frodo and his companions to continue with their mission. However, we have not yet seen him disobeying a direct order, which this is. Although Faramir disagrees with his father's decision, he follows his orders anyway, both because of his own loyalty to his father's hierarchical status and as a gesture of atonement for his elder brother Boromir's death (816). Faramir's decision not to rebel leads to his own near-death, and absolutely leads to the death of many of his men, to say nothing of causing Denethor to descend into madness. So was Faramir justified in obeying his father's order?

This situation bears a striking similarity to a chapter in Tolkien's own life. When he first fell in love with the woman who was to become his wife, Tolkien was a boy of eighteen, studying to enter Oxford, competing for a scholarship. Edith was twenty-one and not Catholic. (*Letters* 52). Tolkien's guardian, Father Francis Morgan, disapproved. He ordered Tolkien to stay away from Edith, neither seeing her nor communicating with her, until he was twenty-one (Carpenter 50–1). Understandably, Tolkien strongly disagreed with Father Francis's command, but felt he could not disobey. "I had to choose between disobeying and grieving (or deceiving) a guardian who had been a father to me, more than most real fathers, but without any obligation, and 'dropping' the love-affair until I was 21. I don't

regret my decision, though it was very hard on my lover” (*Letters* 53). Finally, on his twenty-first birthday, Tolkien wrote to Edith, only to discover that she was engaged to another man. The engagement had been formed more for convenience than love, however, and was soon broken (Carpenter 68–69). Eventually Tolkien and Edith were married. The three years they were separated because of Tolkien’s decision to obey his guardian, who combined both father and spiritual leader in one, were difficult for both parties. But Tolkien looked back on the experience as a positive one: “The effects were not wholly good. . . but I don’t think anything else would have justified marriage on the basis of a boy’s affair; and probably nothing else would have hardened the will enough to give such an affair (however genuine a case of true love) permanence” (*Letters* 53).

Like Tolkien, Faramir chose to follow his father’s orders because his sense of duty and loyalty bade him do so, even though he disagreed with the command. Also like Tolkien, his decision eventually leads to good things for him: it is Faramir’s presence in the Houses of Healing that leads to his meeting Éowyn, whom he eventually marries.

The Greater Good

Pippin, who pledged his services to Denethor as a token of the gratitude he felt for Boromir’s sacrifice for himself and Merry, is caught in a different web of conflicting loyalties (*Rings* 755–56). At first Pippin may have looked on his service as a game or a mere gesture of goodwill, but his illusions are quickly dispelled. He is given a uniform and a duty: waiting on the steward as his esquire (806). After a long day at this duty, Pippin reflects more realistically on his situation: “In some other time and place [he] might have been pleased with his new array, but he knew now that he was taking part in no play; he was in deadly earnest the servant of a grim master in the greatest peril” (808). But however much he dreads his duties, he remains committed to them.

Upon meeting Faramir, Pippin’s choice to serve is strengthened; he loves Faramir at first sight and wishes to serve him (810), so much so that when Denethor orders Pippin away from the Silent

Street, releasing him from his obligation to wait upon him, Pippin does not want to go (825). Knowing that Faramir is not yet dead and that there may remain some hope of saving him, yet bound to obey the commands of his master, Pippin is faced with a hard decision, much like that of Éomer with Théoden or Faramir with his father. In the case of Éomer, it was clear that the king had not his full faculties, and was being controlled by his servant Wormtongue. Faramir's fealty to Denethor was compounded by familial loyalty not only to his father but to his dead brother. But Pippin, having known Denethor only a short time, is unable at first to determine the motivation behind his actions. Even when convinced that Denethor is "fey and dangerous," Pippin cannot immediately find a cause for him to be so (827). There is no Wormtongue standing by Denethor's chair, breathing foul words into his ears, no easy explanation for Denethor's behavior. And yet Faramir's life is in danger, and Pippin loves Faramir as he never loved Denethor. Pippin is faced with a hard choice: to let his master do as he will, even when his will endangers not only his life but the lives of others, or to try to stop him. Pippin chooses the greater good.

He does so emphatically. Not only does Pippin choose to directly disobey, he tries to convince others to do so as well. While running to find Gandalf, Pippin warns one of the servants on guard that his master is not himself, and asks him to delay fulfilling his orders until Gandalf arrives. "Who is the master of Minas Tirith?" the man answered. 'The Lord Denethor or the Grey Wanderer?' 'The Grey Wanderer or no one, it would seem,' said Pippin" (827). When Pippin meets Beregond he informs him of what is happening, and asks him to try to stop Denethor if he can. Beregond replies that he cannot leave his post without the Lord's command, but Pippin insists, "Well, you must choose between orders and the life of Faramir" (827). To Pippin, obviously, the latter option is the only choice. Beregond makes the same decision. While Pippin runs for Gandalf, Beregond goes to the Silent Street, determined to keep Denethor from killing his son.

Gandalf leaves his responsibilities at the battle at a crucial moment to prevent the Denethor disaster. He foresees that others will die because of Denethor's actions, and that "evil and sorrow" will

be the ultimate result (850). Some of that evil and sorrow reveals itself before Gandalf and Pippin even reach Denethor: the porter to the tombs has been slain, which murder Gandalf declares the work of the enemy. “Such deeds he loves: friend at war with friend, loyalty divided in confusion of hearts” (851). When they reach the House of the Stewards, Beregon is standing between the servants of Denethor, who are brandishing torches, and the door; he has slain two of the servants, and the others are calling him a traitor to his master (851). Denethor commands his servants to slay Beregon, and threatens to do it himself. But before he can act, Gandalf intervenes (852). Denethor objects to Gandalf’s actions on grounds of hierarchical responsibility. ““Since when has the Lord of Gondor been answerable to thee?” said Denethor. ‘Or may I not command my own servants?’ ‘You may,’ said Gandalf. ‘But others may contest your will, when it is turned to madness and evil’” (852).

Having sought to usurp his master’s place, Denethor has fallen into despair, giving up his responsibilities as master, although he has not yet divested himself of the service of his own servants. Gandalf tries once more to recall the steward to a sense of his duty. “Your part is to go out to the battle of your City, where maybe death awaits you. This you know in your heart” (852). ““Come!’ said Gandalf. ‘We are needed. There is much that you can yet do’” (852–53). But Denethor refuses to reclaim his duties, choosing instead to kill himself in despair, ordering his servants to do so. Two of them come; he grabs a torch from one, throws it on the bier prepared for Faramir, and casts himself on it (854). Gandalf, Pippin, Denethor’s servants, and Beregon look on in horror, but are unable to prevent Denethor’s death (852).

Gandalf, grieving at the end of the Steward of Gondor, turns to the servants of Denethor who obeyed him without question. “You have been caught in a net of warring duties that you did not weave. But think, you servants of the Lord, blind in your obedience, that but for the treason of Beregon Faramir, Captain of the White Tower, would now also be burned” (855). He then tells Beregon that while he must bear some punishment for the part he has played, he should also be rewarded by being

allowed to wait on Faramir in the Houses of Healing (857). The implication is clear: those who choose to obey blindly, without thought to the consequences of their obedience, act wrongly, while those who wisely choose to disobey act rightly.

Tolkien's Take on Fealty

This series of acts of obedience and disobedience is the most striking example of the difference between Tolkien's ideas of loyalty and those of historical fealty. Defying or rebelling against one's lord, except in cases where the lord has failed to fulfill his responsibilities to his vassal, was one of the worst crimes a vassal could commit, often punishable not only by death but by torture (Bloch 232). In cases like these it did not matter whether the lord was in the right or in the wrong, nor what laws might be broken. Bloch calls this an "unqualified surrender":

"Raoul, my lord, may be a greater criminal than Judas; he is, nevertheless, my lord"—on this theme the *chansons* composed innumerable variations, and it sometimes found an echo in legal agreements as well. . . . clearly the obligation of fealty was too overriding for it to be permissible to ask oneself which of the parties had the better case. "It matters little if my lord is in the wrong," thinks Renaud of Mantauban; "he will bear the blame." He who surrenders himself completely *ipso facto* relieves himself of personal responsibility. (234)

Gandalf's words to Denethor's servant, and the various rewards and punishments given to Pippin and Beregon, belie this historical practice. For a vassal, free will was no longer an option. However, in Catholic teachings, there are limits placed on obedience to superiors. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* states that "we are not bound to obey a superior in a matter which does not fall within the limits of his preceptive power. . . . many other things have to be taken account of, as the greater or lesser advertence in the act, the relatively important or trifling character of the thing imposed, the manner of enjoining, the right of the person who commands" (Delany). In the case of Denethor, the steward as

servant does not have authority to decide whether he lives or whether he dies, or whether he takes his family with him, as Gandalf reminds him (*Rings* 853). In addition Denethor has given up his responsibilities to his servants, by failing to give thought to their protection, and in so doing has given up some of his right to command. Denethor's madness has robbed him of a master's wisdom to the extent that it now rests on his servants to use their own wisdom in choosing to obey or disobey.

The question of whether to obey a command when lives are at stake is similarly raised in *Beowulf*, a poem Tolkien loved. Near the end of the poem Beowulf and his men go to fight a dragon which is threatening the kingdom. Having sworn an oath to face the dragon, he orders his men to stay away from the fight: "This fight is not yours, / nor is it up to any man except me / to measure his strength against the monster / or to prove his worth" (lines 2532–35). Beowulf goes to fight the dragon alone, but he is old and the dragon begins to overpower him. Wiglaf, a kinsman and a vassal of the king, is moved to go to his aid:

And now, although
 he wanted this challenge to be one he'd face
 by himself alone—the shepherd of our land,
 a man unequalled in the quest for glory
 and a name for daring—now the day has come
 when this lord we serve needs sound men
 to give him their support. Let us go to him,
 help our leader through the hot flame
 and dread of the fire. As God is my witness,
 I would rather my body were robed in the same
 burning blaze as my gold-giver's body
 than go back home bearing arms. (2642–53)

Wiglaf does go, although the other knights stay behind, and together, Beowulf and Wiglaf slay the dragon. Beowulf, however, is wounded, and dies—bestowing the kingdom on his knight who disobeyed him (2798–815). After Beowulf’s death Wiglaf rebukes those of Beowulf’s guard who would not go to the aid of their lord (2860–91). Such a striking parallel to Beregond risking his life for his Captain’s, and to Gandalf’s rebuke to Denethor’s guards, cannot be coincidence. Like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Beowulf* is a Christian story set in a pre-Christian age, and both stories reflect a Christian model of the obligations of fealty: when there is a greater good at stake, disobedience is right.

The Role of Grace

The last of the relationships among the minor characters are, at first glance, hard to categorize. Some servants who are disobedient are either eventually punished for their disloyalty, such as Wormtongue, Saruman, and Denethor. Other servants are justified in their disobedience by the unreasonable orders of their masters or for an unswerving loyalty beneath their disobedience, like Éomer, Faramir, Pippin, and Beregond. But some servants seem to have intriguingly little justification for their disobedience—Éowyn, for instance, and Merry. Éowyn, as niece to Théoden, has been appointed to remain in Rohan while he leads the warriors of Rohan to Minas Tirith (*Rings* 523, 801). Merry, who pledged his sword to the king and was accepted as his esquire, is also ordered to remain behind, to serve Éowyn should she need (777, 801). Both of these orders seem to be perfectly wise: Éowyn, as a woman, would not traditionally ride with the warriors, even in the war-mad society of Rohan. Someone needs to stay and govern those left behind, and Éowyn is the last of Théoden's kindred. Merry, small of stature and unschooled in the art of war, would seem to be more of a burden than a boon in a battle. Théoden remarks that the journey to Gondor is too far for Stybba the pony to take, and that Merry’s added weight could not be borne by the horses of any of his riders (801–02). King Théoden wishes to keep both his niece and his new liegeman safe, and so orders them both to stay behind. But his servants Merry and Éowyn have other plans.

Both Merry and Éowyn are motivated by good intentions. Merry speaks of how all his companions have gone to the battle (or, like Frodo and Sam, to worse), and that he would be ashamed to stay behind, even if he could be of little use (801). Éowyn, who feels trapped at home and wishes to earn renown and victory in battle, first asks to accompany Aragorn on the Paths of the Dead; when he refuses, she secretly joins Théoden's army as Dernhelm (784, 804). By the time she takes up this disguise, however, she seems to Merry to be "one without hope who goes in search of death (803). Éowyn, sharing Merry's desires, tells him that "such good will [to go where Théoden goes] should not be denied," and takes him with her (804). Good intentions, while certainly honorable, are not yet justifiable. There are no lives at stake, as in the case of Pippin and Beregon, only the pride of the servants. At first glance, it would seem that Merry and Éowyn have doomed themselves, just as Wormtongue and Saruman have. Indeed, after days of traveling, Merry himself wonders if he did right in coming, and wonders if Théoden knows of his disobedience and is angry (830).

Yet events turn out to be quite the opposite of what we, having read the rest of the novel, would expect. Instead of being punished for their disobedience, it turns out that Merry and Éowyn are exactly where they needed to be: in the battle of the Pelennor fields. Because of Denethor's madness, Gandalf cannot pursue the Witch-King of Angmar, Chief of the Nazgûl, to the field of battle. Instead, the ringwraith attacks Théoden, which leads directly to his death. Close to the king when he falls are Merry and Éowyn. In bringing our attention to Eowyn's presence, Tolkien uses some very interesting language: "One stood there still: Dernhelm the young, faithful beyond fear; and he wept, for he had loved his lord as a father" (840). Éowyn, who has disobeyed the king, abandoned the duty he has laid on her, and ridden with his army in deceit, is yet "faithful beyond fear"—a remarkable statement (840). Both Merry and Éowyn, indeed, hold a great amount of love and respect for their master—their disobedience is anything but an act of malice toward their lord.

Without Merry and Eowyn's presence on the battlefield, the witch-king could not have been

destroyed. Long ago, according to the appendices, Glorfindel the elf prophesied that “not by the hand of man will he fall” (1051). Between them, Éowyn, a woman, and Merry, a hobbit, are able to defeat the witch-king. Merry’s sword, which he thrust into the leg of the Nazgûl, was made long ago in Arnor where the witch-king was their chief enemy. “No other blade, not though mightier hands had wielded it, would have dealt that foe a wound so bitter, cleaving the undead flesh, breaking the spell that knit his unseen sinews to his will” (844). Though Merry’s sword-thrust is not fatal to the witch-king, it causes enough damage that when Éowyn thrusts her own sword through the ringwraith’s head, he is destroyed. Gandalf, on hearing the death-cry of the Nazgûl, says that “beyond hope the Captain of our foes has been destroyed, and you have heard the echo of his last despair. But he has not gone without woe and bitter loss” (856).

It seems almost as though Merry and Éowyn felt the way they did, ambitious servants though they clearly are, for no other purpose but to get them to the place where they were needed. No one in Middle-earth blames Éowyn or Merry for their disobedience, although many lament their wounds. Merry, before Théoden dies, asks for the king’s forgiveness, which is freely given: “Grieve not! It is forgiven. Great heart will not be denied. Live now in blessedness” (842–43). If Théoden had known of Éowyn’s presence, surely she too would have been similarly forgiven.

So do we find, in the story of Éowyn and Merry, an illustration of the adage that even in matters of fealty “it is easier to get forgiveness than permission”? Perhaps there is a little of that. Merry and Éowyn’s great deeds do help atone for their disobedience. But there may be something deeper going on here. Just as Bilbo and Frodo were “meant” to have the ring, so it seems that Merry and Éowyn were “meant” to be present at Pelennor. Gandalf himself remarks that both Merry and Pippin’s presence has prevented “far more grievous . . . evils” from occurring (859). Those evils are, at their heart, traceable to the fall of Denethor: it is Denethor’s madness that causes Gandalf to leave the battle at the crucial moment, and Pippin’s doing to bring him to Denethor, and it is Merry’s presence on the battlefield that

allows the witch-king to be destroyed, preventing him from wreaking even more destruction than he was immediately able to do. The power that is not mentioned seems to have taken a hand, and provided a way in which to mitigate the fall of Denethor. Certainly Merry and Éowyn are rewarded for their disobedience: both receive the renown in battle they so desired, and Éowyn finds Faramir, whom she eventually weds.

The story of Merry and Éowyn is reminiscent of the story of Joseph and his brothers, the children of Jacob. Jealous of their father's preference for Joseph, his brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt. Although Joseph spends years in prison and as a slave, eventually he becomes second only to Pharaoh himself in power, and is able to save not only Egypt from drought and famine, but his family as well (Genesis 37, 39-47). An inherently evil act is therefore turned, by God's grace, into good. As Joseph himself states "Be not afraid, and let it not seem to you a hard case that you sold me into these countries: for God sent me before you into Egypt for your preservation" (Genesis 45:5). This does not excuse the behavior of the brothers any more than it excuses the behavior of Merry and Éowyn. And yet in both cases good still came of bad.

From the Minor to the Major

In reviewing the relationships between the minor characters, we have seen both the ideals of the hierarchical master/servant relationship and many of the ways in which it can go wrong. These relationships reflect, in many ways, the types of situations in which people might find themselves in similar hierarchical relationships, such as what one finds in the Catholic church. But for a Catholic, there is another significant master/servant relationship that has little to do with the hierarchical structure of the church itself. While the ordinary Catholic is dependent on the church to administer the sacraments, forgive sins, and mete out punishment, the lay Catholic is also connected more directly to God Himself. As we look at the dynamics between Frodo, Sam, and Gollum, we can see reflected the most crucial servant/master relationship of all: that of man with God.

In making this claim I add a caveat: Frodo is mortal, and, like all mortals, imperfect. It would be ludicrous to declare that Frodo is always, or even most of the time, a direct one-to-one counterpart to God. To do so would be to dismiss Tolkien's declaration on allegory and applicability as already discussed. But I do feel that in *some* instances in the general, over-all story, Frodo can be *likened* to God, and Sam and Gollum to ordinary mortals. These times are more or less analogous to the times when Frodo serves as a Christ figure. Much like Aragorn is a Christ figure at times (in the guise of the triumphant king) and Gandalf is a Christ figure at times (in his resurrection), Frodo also plays a Christ-like role at times on his journey. My reasons for thinking this will, I hope, become clear as we discuss the nuances of these relationships in more detail.

Samwise the Loyal

Unlike the previous relationships we've been looking at, the relationship between Frodo and Sam is at once less formal and more personal. Hobbit society is largely egalitarian: there is no aristocracy; hobbits don't tend to own manors worked by dependent serfs; and it's okay for everyone to talk to everyone else. There is no evidence at all to suggest that when Sam began serving as Frodo's gardener that he took any kind of formal oath of fealty or homage. It seems, then, that Sam is in many ways no more than Frodo's employee. And yet there are also aspects of the situation that show their relationship as much more than employer and employee. When Sam is discovered to have been listening at the window while Gandalf and Frodo have been discussing the ring, Sam acknowledges that he heard that Frodo was going away: "I did, sir. And that's why I choked: which you heard seemingly. I tried not to, sir, but it burst out of me: I was so upset" (64). Few run-of-the-mill employees would act this way on hearing that their boss was to leave. Clearly Sam holds an affection for Frodo even before they begin their journey together.

Sam, having been brought up right by his father, the Gaffer, does his duty in the garden of Bag End, and clearly sees his role in the journey to Rivendell as doing everything possible to make life

easier for Frodo. He packs more than his share in his own pack, to make Frodo's lighter, and makes sure Pippin doesn't eat all the food the elves leave for them (70, 86). When talking to Frodo of leaving the Shire, he reveals some of the conversation he had with the elves the night before: "'If you don't come back, sir, then I shan't, that's certain,' said Sam. '*Don't you leave him!* they said to me. *Leave him!* I said. *I never mean to. I am going with him, if he climbs to the Moon; and if any of those Black Riders try to stop him, they'll have Sam Gamgee to reckon with,* I said'" (87). Sam's expression of devotion demonstrates just how deep his love for his master is; that devotion will be sorely needed in the course of the quest.

As the journey goes on Sam continues to demonstrate his devotion to his master. He jumps to defend Frodo against Strider, whom he mistrusts; he anxiously looks after Frodo after his wound with the Morgul-blade, and does his best to give him the rest and care he needs; he anxiously tends Frodo after their arrival in Rivendell before he wakes up; and he sneaks into the council of Elrond, to see what will become of his master (164, 210, 222, 271). Elrond wryly acknowledges Sam's intense loyalty to Frodo when he decides to send Sam with him to Mordor: "You at least shall go with him. It is hardly possible to separate you from him, even when he is summoned to a secret meeting and you are not" (271). Sam follows Frodo anywhere and everywhere. For his part, Frodo treats Sam with respect and affection: trying to make sure Sam takes no more than his fair share of the packing load, asking for Sam before any of the others when he wakes up in Rivendell, and listening to and believing Sam when he tells of seeing Gollum in the river, to suggest only a few examples. (70, 219, 382–84). When Frodo, after being frightened by Boromir's attempt to get the ring, tries to sneak off alone, Sam, who knows his master better than any of the company, guesses where he has gone, and goes after him, nearly drowning in the process:

"That's hard, trying to go without me and all. If I hadn't a guessed right, where would you be now?"

“Safely on my way.”

“Safely!” said Sam. “All alone and without me to help you? I couldn’t have borne it, it’d have been the death of me.”

“It would be the death of you to come with me, Sam,” said Frodo, “and I could not have borne that.”

[. . .]

“So all my plan is spoilt!” said Frodo. “It is no good trying to escape from you. But I’m glad, Sam. I cannot tell you how glad. Come along! It is plain that we were meant to go together.” (406)

By the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, it is obvious that both Frodo and Sam hold each other in high affection, and have as near to an idyllic master/servant relationship as can be imagined in such circumstances.

Enter Gollum

Gollum’s appearance causes a certain amount of dissonance in Frodo and Sam’s relationship. Sam, not without cause, wants to kill him straight off (615). Frodo, however, is inclined to treat Gollum with pity, as Bilbo did before him, knowing something of the strength of the ring and the reason Gollum has become what he is. Still, Frodo realizes, perhaps better than anyone, that Gollum can cause mischief for them in many ways (615). Frodo, recognizing that Gollum could be of use as a guide to Mordor, extracts an agreement from him that he will lead them to Mordor (616). Still wary, however, he watches for Gollum to try to escape. When he does, Gollum is bound with Sam’s elven rope, but the rope burns him, and Frodo is forced to find another way to compel Gollum to stay with them (617). Finally, Gollum, fearing the elven rope, promises by the ring that he will serve the master of the ring, which seems to satisfy Frodo (618).

It does not satisfy Sam. While he sees that there is a change in Gollum after making the

promise, he has no faith that his loyalty will last. Sam goes so far as to threaten Gollum with the rope again, despite his protestations that he would not run away, that “Sméagol promised” (619). Even after spending a day in his company, Sam worries that Gollum might try to eat him as he sleeps (621). Sam survives, and Gollum seems, in the first few days, actually to be sticking to his promise. Sam continues to keep a close eye on him, though, and he notices another change in Gollum after the Nazgûl flies overhead: “He was more fawning and would-be friendly; but Sam surprised some strange looks in his eyes at times, especially towards Frodo; and he went back more and more into his old manner of speaking” (630). Because Sam’s watchfulness of Gollum increases as a result of this change, he witnesses the argument between Gollum’s two selves: his better self, Sméagol, and his worse self, Gollum. Overhearing the struggle between Sméagol, who wants to keep his promise, and Gollum, who wants only the ring, Sam realizes that Frodo is in even more danger than he at first suspected: Gollum wants the ring, and the promise he made will not stop him. As Gollum’s hands twitch toward Frodo’s throat, Sam pretends to wake up, stopping Gollum from hurting Frodo for the moment. But Sam realizes that Gollum is just as dangerous near them as he would be if they let him go, and becomes, if possible, even more suspicious of his actions (633–34).

Sam’s distrust of Gollum is motivated mostly by care for his master: Gollum is more than capable of betrayal and murder, having done both before, and he fiercely covets what Frodo possesses, the ring. But his distrust, however justified, causes Sam to treat Gollum badly. Unlike Frodo, he offers no kind words to Gollum, even when events prove Gollum right, and is more likely to speak to him sharply than not, as when they are hesitating before the Black Gate into Mordor: “‘Then what the plague did you bring us here for?’ said Sam, not feeling in the mood to be just or reasonable” (637). This propensity of Sam’s to treat Gollum badly, though born out of loyalty to Frodo, leads to trouble for all three.

The Eye, The Ring, and the Promise

Frodo, on the other hand, though he himself does not completely trust Gollum, behaves as though he does, at least most of the time. He treats him kindly, offering him some of the elves' *lembas* and apologizing when Gollum can't eat it, trusting Gollum to return when he leaves to find food he *can* eat, and following him as he leads the way across the Dead Marshes (622, 624, 626). But Frodo cannot keep his mind wholly on Gollum, the way Sam can, as the distracting weight of the ring increases with each step to Mordor. "What went on in [Gollum's] wretched heart between the pressure of the Eye, and the lust of the Ring that was so near, and his grovelling promise made half in the fear of cold iron, the hobbits did not guess. Frodo gave no thought to it" (631). Gollum, indeed, as we see from his argument with himself, is torn between not just two but three overwhelming desires: to keep the ring away from Sauron, to get it for himself, and to keep the promise he made to Frodo. But soon something happens that weakens one of his desires and its concomitant loyalty: the events at the Forbidden Pool.

Gollum is away from the campsite when Faramir discovers Frodo and Sam, having been disgusted by Sam's insistence on cooking the rabbits he provided (653). That night, however, he comes to the Forbidden Pool in Ithilien, intent on catching some fish. Faramir rouses Frodo from sleep, showing him Gollum and explaining that to enter the pool is punishable by death. Frodo is faced with a hard choice: for Gollum to die would in some ways be a blessing; but Frodo feels the weight of the master's duty to his servant fully. "The servant has a claim on the master for service, even service in fear," he tells Faramir (687). When Faramir tells Frodo that Gollum must be either captured or killed, Frodo volunteers to lure him away from the pool, even though he realizes that his attempts to save Gollum's life will seem like a betrayal to Gollum (686–87). And so it is. Although Frodo does what he does to save Gollum's life, Gollum sees it only as treachery: "Masster, masster! Wicked! Tricky! False!" he cries, as Faramir's soldiers capture him (688). Frodo's immediate attempts to regain Gollum's trust meet with rebuffs, though eventually Gollum does promise Frodo, with a "save us nice

master,” not to go near the pool again (690). But the incident cannot be wholly forgotten. Even as the trio leaves Faramir’s stronghold, Gollum recalls Frodo’s actions: “‘Nice Master!’ said Gollum. ‘Sméagol was only joking. Always forgives, he does, yes, yes, even nice Master’s little trickses. Oh yes, nice Master, nice Sméagol!’” (696). But Frodo is far from forgiven. If there was any doubt left in Gollum’s heart as to whether or not he should continue to honor his promise to Frodo, there seems to be none now.

That scenario is, I believe, one of the most striking instances where Tolkien reflects how a relationship with a mortal master differs from man’s relationship to God. Frodo, with wisdom that Gollum does not have, acts in the only way possible to save Gollum’s life. Gollum, with his limited knowledge, can see only betrayal. The scripture found in Isaias 55:8–9 relates here: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts: nor your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are exalted above the earth, so are my ways exalted above your ways, and my thoughts above your thoughts.” One of the fundamental characteristics of a mortal servant (and a mortal master) is that he has only a temporal viewpoint, while God is omniscient. In a letter to a reader Tolkien refers to men as “finite judges of imperfect knowledge” (*Letters* 326). It is impossible for mortals to read completely and judge fairly the real motives of others. Even more to the Tolkien point, it is impossible for mortals to understand and judge the real motives and actions of God. As happens with Gollum, that failure to fully comprehend the actions of the master can lead to betrayal.

In any case, this seeming betrayal on the part of Frodo seems to cause Gollum to decide in favor of getting rid of Frodo to take the ring for himself. There is no hesitation as he leads them towards Mordor and the tunnel Shelob inhabits. As they near the stairs of Cirith Ungol, Gollum disappears as the hobbits sleep, which Sam (quite rightly) deeply suspects, and again disappears right before they enter the tunnel to Mordor (*Rings* 701, 715). He has been visiting Shelob, laying the final plans for Frodo’s death.

Betrayal and Grace

Finding both Frodo and Sam sleeping on his return from visiting Shelob, Gollum has a moment of near repentance for what he he is about to do:

Gollum looked at [Frodo and Sam]. A strange expression passed over his lean hungry face. The gleam faded from his eyes, and they went dim and grey, old and tired. A spasm of pain seemed to twist him, and he turned away, peering back up towards the pass, shaking his head, as if engaged in some interior debate. Then he came back, and slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo's knee—but almost the touch was a caress.

[. . .]

Immediately Sam was wide awake. The first thing he saw was Gollum—"pawing at master," as he thought.

"Hey you!" he said roughly. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing, nothing," said Gollum softly. "Nice Master!"

"I daresay," said Sam. "But where have you been to—sneaking off and sneaking back, you old villain?"

Gollum withdrew himself, and a green glint flickered under his heavy lids. . . . The fleeting moment had passed, beyond recall. (714–15)

Sam, not knowing the debate going on inside Gollum, treats him roughly, ruining a moment that might, if allowed to continue, have lead to redemption. Just as Gollum could not understand that Frodo was saving his life at the Forbidden Pool, so Sam's limited knowledge of his fellow servant caused him to speak words that ends any chance at redemption. Tolkien himself commented on this scene several times, stating that "the clumsiness in fidelity of Sam was what finally pushed Gollum over the brink, when about to repent" (*Letters* 234). In some measure Sam's devotion to Frodo caused Gollum's

downfall.

How often such conflicted loyalties complicate real life, Tolkien knew only too well. The devotion we feel to the church or to God may rub others the wrong way; self-righteousness may cause a repentant soul to go back to his old ways when rebuffed by those he wishes to join. Of course Sam cannot be totally blamed for Gollum's lack of repentance. Tolkien himself stated that "by temporizing, by not fixing the still not wholly corrupt Sméagol-will towards good in the debate in the slag hole, he weakened himself for the final chance when dawning love of Frodo was too easily withered by the jealousy of Sam before Shelob's lair. After that he was lost" (*Letters* 235).

And lost Gollum is. He carries out his plan to have Frodo killed; he repays Sam his hard words and rough treatment by attacking him while Frodo is stalked by Shelob, preventing Sam from coming to the aid of his master until it is too late to stop him from being bitten by Shelob (*Rings* 725). Later, when Sam and Frodo have made it almost to the Crack of Doom, Gollum again attacks Frodo, hissing as he grabs at the ring, "Wicked masster cheats us, cheats Sméagol, *gollum*" (943). But Frodo is able to overpower him, and chooses once more to show him mercy: "Begone, and trouble me no more! If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom" (944). Frodo then runs to the Crack of Doom while Sam remains behind with Gollum.

Sam at first wishes to strike out at Gollum, as he has wanted to from the beginning, but something restrains him:

It would be just to slay this treacherous, murderous creature, just and many times deserved; and also it seemed the only safe thing to do. But deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched. He himself, though only for a little while, had borne the ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum's shrivelled mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief ever in life again (944).

Sam the servant, in parallel with his master Frodo, shows Gollum mercy, though he deserves none.

Here, as when Merry and Éowyn were where they needed to be when they needed to be there, is where grace comes in. Frodo's task is an impossible one: having carried the ring that long, there is no way he is going to willingly destroy it. And indeed, he cannot. Instead he claims the ring for himself and puts it on (945). But because of his and Sam's selfless acts in showing Gollum mercy, the quest was still fulfilled: Gollum attacks Frodo, so intent on getting the ring that he bites off his finger. Overjoyed in his possession of his Precious, Gollum dances—right into the Crack of Doom. The ring is destroyed (946). Frodo himself acknowledges that Gollum has played a crucial role when he says “But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end” (947). Tolkien also acknowledges that it was an act of grace, in the form of Gollum, that allows Frodo to complete his Quest: “[Gollum] did rob [Frodo] and injure him in the end—but by a ‘grace’, that last betrayal was at a precise juncture when the final evil deed was the most beneficial thing any one [could] have done for Frodo! By a situation caused by his ‘forgiveness’, he was saved himself, and relieved of his burden” (*Letters* 234). But just as with Joseph's brothers, the mere fact that Gollum's was the hand (or teeth) that saved the quest from disaster does not excuse Gollum from his deeds. “Gollum was pitiable, but he ended in persistent wickedness, and the fact that this worked good was no credit to him” (234).

In fact master Frodo needed both of his servants to fulfill his quest: Sam to get him to Mount Doom in the first place, Gollum to do what he cannot: destroy the ring. In a small way the situation is reminiscent of Christ's: to fulfill His mission to atone for the sins of the world and die on the cross, He needed both His faithful servants to watch with Him in the garden, and His unfaithful servant Judas to set the wheels of His crucifixion in motion by betraying Him with a kiss (Matthew 26:36, 46–49).

Requisite though their disloyal actions are, neither Gollum nor Judas can be excused for them.

The Reward of Service

Sam's service was altogether different from Gollum's. Even when he treated Gollum badly, he did so out of concern for his master. Love of his master caused Sam to fight Shelob with "a fury . . . greater than any she had known in countless years," and inflict a such a wound that "no such anguish had Shelob ever known, or dreamed of knowing, in all her long world of wickedness" (*Rings* 729). Sam's loyalty to Frodo runs so deep it extends beyond death. "Don't go where I can't follow," sobs Sam, believing his master to be dead (730). Brokenhearted, Sam must make a choice: to take the ring and try to fulfill the Quest, or to remain by Frodo's side. Although he finds it difficult, he finally decides that Frodo would have wanted him to carry on; he takes the ring and starts to leave (732). Hardly had he left, though, than he repents of his choice and returns to Frodo, only to be too late to prevent the orcs from discovering him. To Sam's joy, he learns that Frodo is not dead, and now he no longer doubts his duty: he must rescue Frodo from the orcs or die in the attempt (740, 897). To aid in his task, Sam puts on the ring, and, miraculously, the love of his master allows Sam to resist the temptation to claim it as his own (897).

Sam, in his dramatic servant loyalty, succeeds in rescuing Frodo, and they start on their long trek across Mordor. As Frodo becomes ever-more incapacitated by the power of the ring, Sam does all in his power to help him. He finds water, and wants to drink it first in case the water is bad (920). He gives his share of *lembas* to Frodo, as well as the last of their water (928). He even takes charge of the journey, ordering Frodo to sleep or to walk, and Frodo obeys (935). Unlike Wormtongue or Denethor, however, who seek to usurp their masters, Sam seeks only to save his master. He realizes that his job will be "to help Mr. Frodo to the last step and then die with him" (934). But though he can no longer hope that he will return home, his will to go on becomes stronger. "I'll get there, if I leave everything but my bones behind," he says to himself. "And I'll carry Mr. Frodo up myself, if it breaks my back and heart. So stop arguing!" (939). And though he knew all was hopeless and that he ought to despair,

he would not: “His will was set, and only death would break it” (940). Sam does carry Frodo, both literally and figuratively, so that by the will of the servant the master fulfills his quest.

Frodo knows that a good deal of the credit for the completion of his task should go to Sam, even before it is completed. “Frodo wouldn’t have got far without Sam,” he says, imagining a child listening to their story (712). By the end of the journey, and even before, Frodo no longer thinks of Sam as a servant: he has become, instead, a friend, just as Christ refers to His Apostles as friends: “I will not now call you servants: for the servant knoweth not what his lord doth. But I have called you friends: because all things whatsoever I have heard of my Father, I have made known to you” (John 15:15). When finally they return to the Shire, Frodo invites Sam and Rosie to live with him; and when he leaves for the Grey Havens, Frodo makes Sam his heir (*Rings* 1024, 1029). Thus the servant through good and faithful service becomes the master: “Well done, good and faithful servant: because thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will place thee over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21).

Conclusion

When Tolkien described *The Lord of the Rings* as “fundamentally religious and Catholic,” it was almost as if he threw down a challenge to critics to discover how this statement might be true. Through the years many scholars have tried, but most have only been able to discover in what ways the work is *religious* (specifically Christian), not in how it is *Catholic*. As one of the fundamental distinguishing characteristics of the Catholic church is its rigid hierarchical structure, I have sought to find that structure reflected in the novel. Through the various master/servant relationships that Tolkien portrays, he reflects not only the ideal of master and servant working together for good, but also the ways in which this intimate relationship can go horribly wrong.

Aragorn represents an ideal master, one who is wise and good, and his servants are either rewarded or punished according to their loyalty to him. In the stories of Wormtongue and Saruman, we

see how betrayal and seeking to usurp the power of the master leads to the downfall of the servant. Denethor's fall illustrates how a bad servant becomes, in turn, a bad master. The choices of Faramir, Pippin, Beregon, and the servants of Denethor reflect the difficulties a servant has when trying to decide whether or not to continue following a poor master. Merry and Éowyn show us that sometimes grace may intervene in what seems to be a fairly straightforward situation of disobedience. And the story of Frodo, Sam, and Gollum, from betrayal to ultimate loyalty, at times reflects the complicated relationship between mortals and deity. Tolkien builds into the master/servant relationships of Middle-earth the never-ending human tension between obedience and free will.

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