

*Of Moral Weakness and Redemption:
The Impact of Malory on Tolkien.*

Megan Gifford

Frank D. Rigga asserts in “Gandalf and Merlin: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Adoption and Transformation of a Literary Tradition” that in the creation of Gandalf, Tolkien both drew on and adapted the Arthurian wizard Merlin. Rigga; however, compares Saruman to Dryden’s Osmond, asserting that he is representative only of the evils of previous Merlins (28). Saruman is not representative of viciousness throughout *The Lord of the Rings* as is Sauron, but throughout the trilogy is meant to be the object of pity due to his moral weakness. Rigga notes the similarities between Saruman and Malory’s Merlin unintentionally when he is contrasting Merlin and Gandalf, “In Malory’s account...Merlin’s ambivalence as a character with potential for both good and evil is foregrounded, and in his loss of power at the hands of a woman, the wizard appears less powerful and more human” (28). Both Merlin and Saruman are morally weak, which is the main causation for that spirit which James Douglas Merriman identified as “That spirit in the central story of Arthur [which] is profoundly tragic” (*The Flower of Kings*, “The Essential Arthurian Story”). In *Le Morte D’Arthur*, Malory molds Lancelot as a quintessentially morally weak character; Boromir is his counterpart in *The Lord of the Rings*. In her introduction to *Le Morte D’Arthur*, Helen Cooper realizes that, “Lancelot...will not give up: because he will not abandon his desire for the Grail, and cannot ultimately abandon his desire for Guenivere” (xiv). Boromir cannot resist the allure of the Ring. For Malory’s Merlin and Tolkien’s Saruman there is moral weakness and tragedy without redemption, but for the knights Boromir and Lancelot there is hope. The impact of Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur* on Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* allows the Oxford Inkling to craft a tale of moral weakness and, ultimately, of redemption.

In the tragic moral weakness of Merlin and Saruman there is temptation preceding each seduction to evil. Malory's "Of Nivie and Morgan le Fay" begins with the tale of Merlin and the damosel of the Lady of the Lake. Merlin was quickly "besotted" with the damosel, but, "she made Merlin good cheer till she had learned of him all manner of thing that she desired" (58). This single line of Malory had profound impact on Tennyson's temptress Vivien, who seduces Merlin in order to steal his fame. With the exception of later writers and this single line, Merlin's love for the damosel of the lake is unrequited. In fact, the lady comes to fear Merlin after he has attended her too closely.

And always he lay about to have her maidenhood, and she was ever passing weary of him and would have been delivered of him, for she was afraid of him for cause he was a devil's son, and she could not be shift of him by no mean. (59).

Merlin may be a devil's son, but he is more human than Gandalf. Merlin is tempted by the beauty of a woman, and he succumbs to her charm and his lust, at which point he becomes vicious in character. It is due to his relentless pursuit and vicious character that Merlin is sealed into a cave, "that he came never out for all the craft he could do" (59). Merlin is unable to escape the cave in which he is entrapped just as he was unable to escape his temptation.

To scholars of Arthuriana, the nobility of Merlin and the tragedy of his ensnarement is indisputable. However, to those who have only watched *The Lord of The Rings* movies as directed by Peter Jackson, the tragedy of Saruman will be less clear. Tolkien's Saruman becomes a foil of Sauron, but whereas Sauron was evil from long before the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Saruman's temptation, seduction, and chances at redemption are revealed through brief glimpses throughout the trilogy. Gandalf refers to Saruman both as Saruman the White and Saruman the Wise. In "The Scouring of the Shire" when Frodo and his fellow Travellers face

Saruman again Frodo asks that Saruman be spared in spite of all he has done in Middle Earth and even in the Shire. Frodo says, “He was great once, of a noble kind that we should not dare to raise our hands against” (1019). What causes Saruman’s temptation?

Saruman’s temptation is the power of Mordor, which he saw through the palantír.

Saruman was the greatest of the wizards sent to Middle Earth to help in the battle against great evil: evil such as Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings* and Morgoth from the *Silmarillion*. In “The Council of Elrond” when Saruman’s turn from wise counselor to agent of Mordor is first revealed, Gandalf says, “Saruman has long studied the arts of the Enemy” (257). Evil first had a foothold with Saruman through his study of it for the purposes of good. Gandalf learns more of Sauron’s Ring from the lore of Gondor, but Saruman had already allowed himself to be exposed to the temptation of evil long before he changed sides in the war of the Ring.

The source of Saruman’s moral weakness is his despair. Saruman lures Gandalf to Orthanc in order to give him a message of importance, but the message turns out to be, “A new power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all. There is no hope left” (“The Council of Elrond” 259). Saruman gives in to his moral weakness and becomes vicious when he chooses to become just like Sauron “We may join with that Power” (259). Saruman tempts Gandalf with despair as he has been tempted. After the destruction of Orthanc, Saruman turns the Shire into an echo of Mordor.

Saruman tries to turn the Shire into mini-Mordor, and partially succeeds. The trees are chopped down and the land barren. Bag End is in ruins. Worse than this, Saruman has been spreading hatred and ambition among the Shire folk, as is the case with Lotho Baggins and Ted Sandyman. Saruman may not be responsible for the vices of Lotho Baggins, but he certainly

succeeds in ensuring that Lotho becomes a mockery of Sauron, not unlike Saruman himself. Farmer Cotton tells the Travellers, “Seems he [Lotho] wanted to own everything himself” (1012). Could Sauron’s purpose be summed up more concisely?

In *The Two Towers* from “The Voice of Saruman”, Saruman is bewitching and dangerous, still powerful enough to tempt Theoden and achieve mischief. In *The Return of the King*, Saruman is reduced to a beggar, and less than a beggar; he is still filled with hatred and bitterness, but is now at the mercy of the Hobbits. Saruman’s speech to Frodo shows the plight he is in,

There was a strange look in his eyes of mingled wonder and respect and hatred... ‘You are wise, and cruel. You have robbed my revenge of sweetness, and now I must go hence in bitterness, in debt to your mercy. I hate it and you!’ (1019)

Saruman’s soul is in disarray. He is filled with the hatred of Mordor, and in the end he is undone by it. Having been shown mercy by his enemies, Saruman is undone by the hatred of his “friend” Wormtongue when he is stabbed and dies, with no hope of Valinor.

When the mist over Saruman’s body looks to the West, one can almost imagine it looking to Valinor, from whence it came, never to return again. Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, it becomes apparent that Saruman was seduced by the desire for the Ring in a similar manner to Boromir. Saruman wanted, at first, only to learn of the arts of the Enemy in order to fight the Enemy more adequately. Saruman fell to despair and to tyranny; he became Master of Isengard as Sauron was Master of Mordor. If that was all that happened to Saruman, it would have been villainous, but “The Scouring of the Shire” makes the end of the formerly white wizard tragic.

It is not stories of King Arthur and his wizards which are pulled from the shelf; however, it is stories of King Arthur and his knights. So it is to our two knights, Lancelot and Boromir,

that we turn for the hope of a happy ending, or more precisely a *eucatastrophe*, as Tolkien called it in his seminal essay “On Fairy-Stories”. Boromir and Lancelot both face and give into temptation. No matter how many times he is worn, or whether or not he is scorned, Lancelot cannot refuse the lovely Guenivere.

Malory was a knight himself, and as a knight, Malory identified the most closely with Lancelot, who had his own addition to the Pentecostal Oath, which was that a knight should remain chaste (108). Lancelot struggled to remain loyal to his oath, before finally succumbing to his temptation to be with the queen in the second half of the volume. Likewise, Boromir struggled to remain loyal to the fellowship and not succumb to the temptation of the Ring. Once Lancelot has given in to his temptation, he is caught, and finds himself unable either to fulfill his destiny as Grail knight or to free himself from his adulterous relationship with Guenivere.

It is to Malory we may turn for one of the earliest santifications of the Grail quest. For Malory, the Sangrail is not only a medieval holy relic, but is also a representation of the highest order of knighthood, which includes not only feudal honor and even chivalry, but also moral strength. When Lancelot gives in to his temptation, regardless of whether or not it was his fate to do so, he falls short of spiritual perfection, and proves himself to be morally weak. For this reason he is unable to obtain the Grail. In his essay on “The ‘Morte Darthur’”, C.S. Lewis writes, “The human tragedy becomes all the more impressive if we see it against the background of the Grail, and the failure of the Quest becomes all the more impressive if it is felt thus reverberating through all the human relationships of the Arthurian world” (109). Lancelot’s failure is not his failure alone, but is shared by all of King Arthur’s knights (save only Galahad) as well as any readers of the romance.

Lancelot does what Merlin never did; Lancelot realizes his mistake. In “The Tale of the Sangrail”, when Lancelot fails to achieve his quest, he weeps for sorrow of what he has lost, “And then Lancelot kneeled down and cried on our Lord mercy for his wicked works” (331). Of course, the quest of the Grail is before the discovery of Lancelot and Guenivere’s fateful adultery. It is reflective of the shared nature of Lancelot’s fault that his weakness in tandem with the ambitions of Agravaine and Mordred should bring about the death of Arthur, for the fault is that of the entirety of the Round Table. Even after Arthur has besieged Lancelot in France, Lancelot is still willing to ride to Arthur’s aid against the treacherous Mordred. Once Arthur is buried, *Le More Darthur* continues, ending only after the death of Lancelot. “So when Sir Bors and his fellows came to his bed, they found him stark dead; and he lay as he had smiled, and the sweetest savour about him that ever they felt” (525). It is hinted that Lancelot died a saint’s death, and due to his repentance heaven was waiting for him.

Boromir’s temptation is born out of despair and pride. Despair because Minas Tirith borders Mordor, and at the outset of *The Lord of the Rings* it was the concern of the men of Minas Tirith that they should not be able to hold out against the might of Sauron forever. Yet under the guise of helping his people lies Boromir’s pride. Boromir heard at the council of Elrond when it was first decided that Frodo was meant to take the Ring to Mordor that the Ring could not be used. He is reminded by Frodo in “The Breaking of the Fellowship” that, ““what is done with it turnt to evil”” (398). In spite of all warnings, in spite of his own internal struggle, Boromir cannot resist either the Ring or his own pride. Boromir tells Frodo in “The Breaking of the Fellowship”, “What could not Aragorn do? Or if he refuses, why not Boromir? The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would

flock to my banner!’” (398). Boromir shares the desire of Lancelot to achieve the Grail, but in the moment which he drives Frodo from the fellowship, he lacks culpability. It is not until Frodo has vanished that Boromir realizes his mistake, too late for Frodo to come back as Boromir wishes him to do.

Boromir does; however, realize his mistake, only just in time for him to die a true hero’s death almost and achieve his redemption. Boromir dies to save Merry and Pippin from the Orcs of Isengard, and when Aragorn finds him on the verge of death, he tells him, “‘You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace!’” (“The Departure of Boromir” 414). It is due to Aragorn’s reassurance that he died not in disgrace, but in victory that Boromir dies with a smile on his face (414). Yet how can Aragorn’s words that Boromir “gained victory” be believed, when the Hobbits were taken captive, and Frodo and Sam were headed off to Mordor without any guides?

The victory which Boromir gained was not over the army of Orcs, against which physical victory would have been impossible, for any single knight, even for doughty knights such as Lancelot and Boromir. The victory which Boromir gained, like that which Lancelot gained, was not a victory which ensured the stereotypical “happily ever after” but which offers the reader something much more profound. In “On Fairy-Stories”, Tolkien described the eucatastrophe which was essential for the success of such stories as, “a sudden and miraculous grace” (153). Merlin and Saruman, Boromir and Lancelot, and ultimately Malory and Tolkien are meant to show us a mirror, a mirror which calls upon us not only to confront our faults, but also to show us a chance, a chance with no expiration, even if it occurs in the moments before death, for us to triumph over our faults and gain victory.

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