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Tolkien and the
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Platonic Tripartition and the Peoples of Middle-Earth

Abstract Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* employ traditional races from fairy tales: elves, men and dwarves. These peoples are differentiated principally by their dominant desires but also by their speech, diet, and realms. I argue that these three races are significantly inspired by the three aspects that characterize the *Republic's* tripartite soul – *logistikon*, *thumoeides*, and *epithumetikon* – along with their respective principal desires: desire for truth, greatness, and material goods. For Tolkien, therefore, these races have a corporate or political psychology that explains who they are as peoples in the history of Middle-earth. I offer a comprehensive view of the major races, connecting the dwarves with the appetitive artisans of the *Republic*, humans with the honour- and glory-seeking auxiliaries, and elves with the ruling guardians. This treatment explains the artisanal dwarves as well as the battle-loving men (and women) of Rohan and Gondor and the nostalgic, 'anamnetic' condition of exile that distinguishes the elves. Indeed, the condition of elves in many descriptions recalls a Platonic philosopher returned to the Cave as well as the Neo-Platonic sagacity pictured in the biographies of Plotinus and Proclus.

Keywords Plato, Tolkien, Republic, Tripartite, Race

The relationship and connections of Tolkien's writings to the Platonic philosophical tradition are vast and exciting fields open to exploration from a rich diversity of directions. There is, for example, the obvious similarities between the Ring of Power and the Ring of Gyges of the *Republic*.¹ More popular are studies that explore Tolkien's cosmology in light of Neo-Platonic metaphysics of late antiquity, whether of Christian (e.g., Augustine, Boethius) or pagan (e.g., Plotinus) derivation.² Less attention is given to attempting a comprehensive view of the political view that Tolkien employs in his legendarium. Such an analysis will be essayed here, though with my scope focused mainly on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as more mature expressions of Tolkien's vision of Middle-earth.

In what follows, I shall eschew commenting on whether I am toiling in vineyard of the classical tradition or in classical reception.³ Tolkien's work has been argued to be within the tradition of the classical epic,⁴ but my specific interest here is in how Platonic themes are handled in Tolkien's work. In many ways, he employs a Platonic style. Plato's dialogues are works in which the treatment of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics overlap and are closely intertwined; Tolkien, who was professionally familiar with various Platonic corpora,⁵ also produced tales in which various philosophical themes intersect and play off each other. This feature partly motivates me: to show how Tolkien's political psychology is embedded in his larger philosophical vision.

As Tolkien is not Plato, and because he has other theological commitments, we can expect that what is received from Plato will be reshaped and accommodated in a different picture than the one Plato assumes. As such, my approach to the reception of the politics of the *Republic* will be to see how it is borrowed or revisioned, in the language of Keen and Marshall,⁶ rather than simply copied.

1 See Katz (2003).

2 Scarf (2013) 127 and Vaccaro (2017) 81–2 provide helpful introductions to such approaches.

3 Following Tatum (2014), I shall avoid drawing hard boundaries on this point. In any event, a work (e.g., the *Aeneid* or the *Divine Comedy*) can be part of the classical epic tradition and studied as a locus of classical reception.

4 Newman (2005) 236.

5 Chisholm (2019) 89.

6 Keen (2006) and Keen (2019) 12. In the context of reception studies, Keen defines borrowing as when “elements of Classical antiquity are used to build an imagined society. ... [O]nly the author and audience are aware of the origins of features of imagined culture – the mem-

But before starting on my main theme, it is profitable to begin with a juxtaposition of the views of Tolkien and Plato on craft and creation as an avenue towards appreciating the latter's influence on the former.

INTRODUCTION: THE CRAFT OF CREATION

Tolkien is, so to speak, a poet of reception. The human poet or maker, in his view, produces or crafts from what she has received. We make using materials that have been given to us, that have been handed on to us, and not from raw, empty, 'content-less' creativity. The human poet is always within a tradition that is grounded, at the very least, in the natural world, to say nothing of the oral and literary traditions that artists necessarily find themselves in. In the poem *Mythopoeia*, the speaker observes, "Yet trees are not 'trees', until so named and seen – / and never were so named, till those had been / who speech's involuted breath unfurled,"⁷ making a connection between seeing and naming, meaning that human perception is "but neither record nor a photograph, / being divination, judgement, and a laugh." Perception is not the dead, physical capture of impressions but a vital act, responsive to and interpretive of the natural world. In this living response, the mind takes up images of the world into its "cunning forges" and "secret looms" where, as Tolkien describes in the essay "On Fairy-Stories", imagination combines, separates, and recombines what it received from perception.⁸ Learning to see things as they are (perception) awakens our capacity and desire to see how they might be (imagination).

This desire to create, to make and remake, is part of who and what we are as human beings. *Mythopoeia* designates the human being as, by nature, a sub-creator, i.e., a subordinate of the Creator of the universe. The speaker also recognizes that even if humans have misused their powers of craft to produce wicked

bers of the culture themselves are not, and cannot be, for there is no connection between them and Earth's antiquity." Marshall's revisioning is operative where "[w]orks [are] not set in the ancient world... [and] [k]nowledge of specific facts [is] needed to interpret [the latter text]"; without this knowledge the reader has only a "partial reading" of the text.

7 TL 86.

8 PS 133.

creations,⁹ we – following a classical principle¹⁰ – nevertheless make by right and, indeed, “[t]he right has not decayed. We make still by the law in which we’re made.”¹¹

In exercising his power as a sub-creator, man fulfills his nature and takes up his proper place in Tolkien’s ordered and hierarchical universe. As such, human beings are called to be creative in their lives (and indeed cannot help being so in at least some minor capacity). According to Matthew Dickerson, Tolkien’s position is that through our creativity we partner with and glorify the Creator as well as enrich the world.¹² This partnership is not just fulfilling a role but imitating the Creator himself; as a sub-creator, the human being participates in the dignity and activity of the Almighty. In *Mythopoeia*, poetry is part of the lives of even the blessed in heaven. For Tolkien, imitation of God is part of the human vocation or purpose.

The centrality of art and craft in Tolkien’s anthropological vision is not a theme reserved to his commentaries; it is a topic that is directly engaged, at various levels, in much of his artistic work. Thus, beyond *Mythopoeia* and “On Fairy-Stories”, making and creativity are prominent in the plots of *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Smith of Wootton Major*, and *Leaf by Niggle*. Tolkien is not just a poet of reception; he is a poet of creation.

On the face of it, Tolkien’s insistence on the dignity and necessity of making would seem to put him at odds with Plato, particularly with regard to the ethical and political vision of the *Republic*. Plato’s Socrates famously banishes the poets from the ideal city, Kallipolis, in Book X of the *Republic*, on account of “an ancient quarrel” between poetry and philosophy. The basic thrust of the argument, it would appear, is that poetry is misleading and deceptive, and thus a threat to the right order – i.e., the justice – of the city.¹³ And yet, Plato regularly employs unverifiable myths in his dialogues. How might one deal with the apparent inconsistency? Max Latona proposes that the danger lies not in myth *per se* but in poetry as an instance of making. He argues that Plato has a low opinion of

9 As Walsh (2015) 16 notes, for Tolkien, one’s moral character is often revealed in how one employs one’s creative powers.

10 *Abusus non tollit usum*, i.e., abuse of a good does not take away the (right) use of it.

11 TL 87.

12 Dickerson (2016), 132–5.

13 Plat. res. 10,595b.

makers and is suspicious of things innovative and creative, because truth is reality received, not made, delivered to us through memory. Hesiod and Homer are banished from Kallipolis because they are novel and original, relative to the Platonic myths, which Socrates claims not to have authored but to have heard and inherited through even more ancient tradition.¹⁴ Creativity would therefore be a departure from truth. There are of course many different attempts to address Plato's apparent inconsistency; I bring up Latona because his interpretive missteps are instructive.

Plato cannot think that the truth is something made, but that is not because he thinks the truth is old; it is because he thinks the truth is eternal. Antiquity is not a marker of veracity.¹⁵ More importantly, *Republic X* has the curious distinction of being the only place in the Platonic corpus where God is said to be a "real maker" of a Form, which as eternal cannot have been created.¹⁶ Immediately following this statement, we are also told that, in imitation of the creative God, the human craftsman fashions the physical object that is patterned after the Form. Furthermore – still in *Republic X* – Socrates goes on to say that in living virtuously, the just man aims "to make himself as much like a god as a human being can."¹⁷ Our approximation of the divine life cannot simply mean attaining immortality as far as humanly possible,¹⁸ since, according to *Republic X*, humans have immortal souls. We become godlike, rather, by adopting a godlike way of life, i.e., by imitating God. While it is outside our scope to untangle Plato's thoughts on art, we can at least say that humans are to aspire to godlike virtue and activity, which means that Plato cannot have a low opinion of makers. Plato and Tolkien therefore coincide in their high view of art.

Beyond even his use of myths, Plato is a poet after Tolkien's heart. The philosophical dialogue, likely based on the mimes of Sophron of Syracuse from early 5th Century BC, reaches a level of stunning artistic accomplishment in Plato. The diversity of ways in which literary devices, styles, and genres are combined and

¹⁴ Latona (2004) 192, 198, 208–10.

¹⁵ Latona attempts to leverage Plato's theory of recollection to justify the claim that Plato cares about the historical pedigree of a theory, but recollection is transcendent: not memory into the past, but rather memory out of time, of the eternal.

¹⁶ Plat. res. 10,597d. This claim is in apparent contradiction with the preceding 10,596b where it is explicitly stated that "no craftsman makes the form itself."

¹⁷ Plat. res. 10,613b.

¹⁸ Pace Gerson (1987) 94.

mixed in the corpus is an example of imagination functioning in exactly the way Tolkien admires. It is therefore unsurprising to find Platonic themes and imagery to find themselves in Tolkien's work.

My particular project here is to explore how Socrates' division of the soul and city into three elements – reason, spirit, and appetite – corresponds to the three main races of Middle-earth – elf, human, and dwarf. By understanding the psychology of the *Republic*, we may better understand the corporate psychology of the different communities. In the history of reception, this idea is a delicate one, given how Plato was adopted as a political philosopher in the Weimar Republic. The outlook of the *Republic* was used to argue that *human* inequity is a law of nature and that peoples have predispositions that are grounded in biological race. The Platonic tripartite city was interpreted and appropriated as a precursor to the racist vision and politics of the National Socialist party.¹⁹ Still, that is only one example of Platonic reception, and it helpfully demonstrates the mediaeval maxim that what is received is received according to the mode of the receiver:²⁰ thus, we too often see what we want to see. Tolkien has rather different ends in employing Plato, ends which affect what he selects to use and how he elects to use it.

I should nevertheless point out that on this theme Plato is himself a philosopher of reception. The division of the city into three classes is a trope that has its roots in Hesiod and Indo-European cultures in general.²¹ My narrower interests are in how Plato distinctively borrows and revises this schema in his articulation of political and individual psychology, and how Tolkien develops the Platonic picture for his own artistic purposes. This approach will be mutually illuminating, offering insights for how we read both Plato and Tolkien. To that end, a brief overview of the *Republic's* tripartite psychology is in order.

Socrates develops the constitution of Kallipolis as a means to understand virtue in the soul of the virtuous man: the just city is a model, as it were, of the just man. Kallipolis' founding myth is that its people, who as children of the Land

¹⁹ Chapoutot (2016) 195, 200, 227.

²⁰ *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*. See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a, q. 75, a. 5.

²¹ Latona (2004) 201–2. The three classes in Socrates' Kallipolis appear to be a simplified version of the five generations of society in Hesiod, typed by four metals of varying worth. More generally, the priest-king, warrior and labourer are a pattern for many traditional Indo-European class structures. Socrates acknowledges his debt to Hesiod in Plat. res. 8,546e–574a.

share the same parentage, are divided according to which metals are mixed into their souls: gold and silver for the rulers and auxiliaries respectively, while iron and bronze are found in the farmers and other craftsmen.²² As the city develops, these groups become the guardians, the warrior-auxiliaries, and the artisans. The philosopher-kings are essentially drawn from the first class. In the individual human being these categories correspond to the calculating, spirited and appetitive elements of the soul.²³ One useful way of thinking of these elements is as possible lifestyles we continually choose between, each with its own attractions and a shape that it gives to life,²⁴ since, as Socrates later explains, each has its own pleasures and proper loves: the rational element loves wisdom, the spirited loves honour, and the appetitive loves profit. The three different groups in the city correspond, ultimately, to different ways of life.

The *Republic* clearly treats the three classes as within a single people, while I argue that Tolkien creatively reflects them in the three races of elf, human, and dwarf. Socrates himself provides the precedent for this application, since he, like Caesar dividing Gaul, parses the Mediterranean into three, according to which of the three psychologies is dominant: Phoenicia and Egypt for money-lovers; Thrace, Scythia, and northern territories for the spirited; and, unsurprisingly, love of learning characterizes the Greeks.²⁵ Beyond the unexamined, if understandable, Hellenocentrism of this view, Plato is a forerunner to Vergil's invocation of the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, in the *Aeneid*.²⁶ It is unremarkable,

22 Plat. res. 3,414d–415c.

23 Plat. res. 4,439d–e.

24 Rist (1996) I,109. Charlton (2008) 294, in a related vein, says that the three classes represent the three basic kinds of goals or objectives (the altruistic, the social, and the individual) that humans have.

25 Plat. res. 4,435e–436a. Ferguson (1950) 11 drily calls this connection between a people, their land, and their psychology the “climatological point of view,” but with Bell (2015) 122 I believe that “individuals and regimes do not develop autochthonously but emerge, in large part, from out of a given socio-political milieu,” taking into consideration the terrain, resources, and climate of the region.

26 Verg. Aen. 7,136. In his commentary on the *Aeneid*, Maurus Servius Honoratus observes *nullus locus sine genio*, that there is no place lacking its proper spirit, i.e., a spirit proper to both place and people. Even today such an instinct informs our habit of characterizing peoples (e.g., nations, cities, tribes, colleges and universities, etc.) according to regional stereotypes. Per Christie (2013) 86, Tolkien takes the figure of the hero to be “an embodiment of national character.”

therefore, to see Legolas, as he traverses Rohan and hears Aragorn chant one of the native people's songs, reflect that "the language of the Rohirrim" is "like to this land itself; rich and rolling in part, and else hard and stern as the mountains ... laden with the sadness of Mortal Men."²⁷ Tolkien appreciates the tradition of discerning the spirit of a people in their land, their tongue, and their ways. This perspective should inform how we view his fictional peoples.

ON THE DWARVES

I shall begin with the Dwarves, whom we know the least about, in part because Gimli and his father Glóin are the only ones we meet in *The Lord of the Rings*, which makes extrapolation more complicated, even if Dwarves are much more central to *The Hobbit*. The genesis of the race is given in the *Silmarillion*, where we learn that they were not created directly by the creator-God Ilúvatar but by one of his Valar or high angelic servants, Aulë, without Ilúvatar's permission. Aulë is eventually found out, though he is unable to give his creations real life and intelligence as the planned Elves and humans will have. Ilúvatar, however, forgives Aulë and grants the 'new' race life and consciousness, but he keeps them in slumber or stasis until after the other two races are brought to life. These latter two are Ilúvatar's children by choice and the Dwarves are his children by adoption, and on account of Aulë's unsanctioned initiative, there will often be discord between the Dwarves and the other races.²⁸ Already, there are parallels with Plato.²⁹ Socrates in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus* says that often the rational and spirited elements need to be allied against the appetitive.³⁰ In the *Republic*, the higher political classes are of precious metals, while the lower class is of a base metal: with education, one can draw leaders from either of the two higher classes but not from the lower.

²⁷ *TT* 508.

²⁸ For a useful summary of the creation of the Dwarves see Dickerson (2016) 128–30.

²⁹ I say "parallels" because on this point it is less clear whether we are dealing with borrowing or coincidence. As Newman (2005) 232 points out, "convergence" is possible because an author intimately familiar with classical culture could arrive at a 'classical' idea without consciously drawing from sources with which he is familiar.

³⁰ Plat. res. 439d–e; Phaidr. 246a–257a.

A more direct connection of the Dwarves to Kallipolis' artisanal class can be found in the description of the Dwarves and their desires. As we have already seen, the third class is characterized by money-loving. This is meant to communicate their attentiveness to material goods in general, even though Socrates, for the sake of vividness, is wont to play up the more titillating and scandalous appetites for the pleasures of lust and gluttony.³¹ Similarly, Tolkien's Dwarves are reliable lovers of precious artefacts. Their quest song in Bilbo's home relates their desire "to seek the pale enchanted gold ... to claim our long-forgotten gold ... [and] to win our harps and gold from [Smaug]!" Hearing them, Bilbo feels "the love of beautiful things made by hands and by cunning and by magic moving through him, a fierce and jealous love, the desire of the hearts of dwarves." And later the narrator informs the reader that the noble Elrond "did not altogether approve of dwarves and their love of gold" and that Bilbo does not wholly appreciate the hold of gold on dwarvish hearts.³²

Tolkien's characterization of the Dwarves has contributed to discussions about anti-Semitism in his works. Rebecca Brackmann, for instance, interprets the Dwarves of *The Hobbit* to be coded with anti-Semitic tropes, which she says are abandoned in *The Lord of the Rings*. She reads the creation of the Dwarves as similar to supersession, in which Christians understand themselves to succeed and surpass Jews as the Chosen People, and takes issue with *The Hobbit* for describing Dwarves as generally bearded, whiny, timorous, and avaricious.³³ Her chief proofs are that the Dwarves "complain constantly"; that their "dominant psychological attribute in *The Hobbit* is their love of gold", such that they "intertwine their very identity with their artifacts"; and that Tolkien undermines Thorin's seemingly heroic entrance into the Battle of the Five Armies by stating that "the great dwarf gleamed like gold in a dying fire", thus turning the reader's mind to recalling "the Dwarves' love of gold, their definitional trait."³⁴ These pernicious depictions are undone and repudiated through the characterization of Gimli in *The Lord of the Rings*, who is courageous and alive to the aesthetic – rather than merely monetary – value of the material world.³⁵ Putting

31 Rist (1996) 106.

32 *Hobbit* 14–6, 50, 241.

33 Brackmann (2010) 89, 93.

34 Brackmann (2010) 90–3.

35 Brackmann (2010) 97.

aside the question of supersession, since, *inter alia*, there are no covenants between Ilúvatar and the races for Tolkien, and that the Dwarves actually come later in the intention of the Creator than Elves and humans,³⁶ I argue that the Platonic frame better explains the Dwarves,³⁷ who are consistently depicted throughout the Ring Saga.

The chief trouble, perhaps, comes from the narrator of *The Hobbit* remarking that “dwarves are not heroes, but calculating folk with a great idea of the value of money; some are tricky and treacherous and pretty bad lots; some are not, but are decent enough people like Thorin and Company, if you don’t expect too much.”³⁸ As harsh as this sounds, it is actually consistent with the *Republic*, where greatness is not expected from the bronze-souled artisanal class, but may be found among the silver- and gold-souled warriors and guardians. Indeed, *Republic* VIII offers the pattern that possibly inspires the ‘ordained’ tension between Tolkien’s Elves and Dwarves when Socrates explains that there is natural opposition between the pursuit of virtue and the pursuit of wealth, and that “when wealth and the wealthy are honoured [highly] in a city, virtue and good people are honoured less.”³⁹ Furthermore, Book IX describes the profit-lovers in ‘dwarvish’ language, explaining that they are often “looking downward like cattle ... with their heads

36 It is nevertheless worth pointing out that the idea of supersession, that a person or people can be “supplanted and replaced”, is in fact native to the Hebrew scriptures. In the case of peoples, the covenant with Noah, made with all men, is superseded by the covenant with Abraham. And in the case of persons, Jacob, through trickery, takes the place of Esau and receives the blessing of Isaac: the Israelites become the Chosen People in part because their patriarch supplants and replaces his elder brother. Furthermore, Jacob elevates Judah over Reuben, his firstborn son, when giving his children his final blessing, thus setting the stage for the covenant with the prophet-king David, who is of the tribe of Judah. Supersession is integral to the story of the Hebrew people; even if the theme was present in Tolkien’s work, it would be more likely to be a Judaic trope than an anti-Semitic one. In fact, the creation of the Dwarves has more parallels with the story of Ishmael and Isaac, since Ishmael is born first but is never considered the legitimate heir of Abraham since he is not born of Abraham’s lawful wife. Isaac and his descendants (i.e., the Jewish people) parallel the Elves and the humans, and that would make Tolkien’s cosmology pro-Hebrew, not anti.

37 For instance, Reid (2017) 162 points out that ranking species of soul with regard to their dwellings is a longstanding Platonic trope.

38 *Hobbit* 196.

39 Plat. res. 8,550e–551a. See also res. 2,439d. Weiss (2012) 74 goes as far as to argue that the reason why the ascent from the Cave is so arduous and needs to be compelled is that the journeying soul is fighting against its appetitive element.

bent over the earth,” and are susceptible to “mad passions.”⁴⁰ So much, then, for the Dwarves’ weakness to irritability and lust for gold.

Brackmann’s chief mistake is to assume that the Dwarves’ love for material artefacts is inherently avaricious,⁴¹ whereas Plato and Tolkien are subtler. What one wants is a healthy love for material goods, hence why Galadriel blesses Gimli to possess wealth without being possessed by it.⁴² *The Hobbit* takes care to contrast the Dwarves with goblins, who “are cruel, wicked, and bad-hearted. They make no beautiful things, but they make many clever ones ... especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once.”⁴³ Relatedly, dragons “hardly know a good bit of work from a bad, though they usually have a good notion of the current market value; and they can’t make a thing for themselves.”⁴⁴ The Dwarves, on the other hand, are makers of *beautiful* works, the best craftsmen in the Third Age of Middle-earth. This is true both in *The Hobbit* where even the Elvenking of Mirkwood admires their handiwork – and had tried to cheat them out of due payment (i.e., the narrator sides with the Dwarves over Elves in this instance)⁴⁵ – as well as in *The Lord of the Rings* where the material renewal of Gondor will be had, Legolas and Gimli pledge, through Elven gardeners and builders from the Dwarves.⁴⁶

More important than their virtuous craftsmanship, the Dwarves in *The Hobbit* are courageous and loyal. At several moments, e.g., with the trolls and goblins, they have an opportunity to abandon Bilbo and clearly do not wish to. And as for Thorin’s appearance at the Battle of the Five Armies, I propose that Brackmann misses an allusion to the *Iliad*. Like the son of Peleus, Thorin takes to the field of battle after harbouring anger on account of losing what is, in his mind, his legitimate war prize. The imagery of gold and flame recalls Achilles at the ships as the Greeks fight desperately for the body of Patroklos and his new brilliant ar-

⁴⁰ Plat. res. 586a–c.

⁴¹ Brackmann (2010) 97.

⁴² *FR* 376.

⁴³ *Hobbit* 59.

⁴⁴ *Hobbit* 23. Importantly, Hawkins (2008) 32–5 convincingly argues that greed is one of the most prominent sins in Ring Saga, experienced by characters from each of the races, whereas lust, for example, is only depicted in a human being.

⁴⁵ *Hobbit* 155.

⁴⁶ *RK* 872.

mour, which incorporates gold, that Hephaistos fashions for him.⁴⁷ At the risk of tedium: gold is not intrinsically compromised for Tolkien. And, as with Achilles, joining the fray costs Thorin his life.

Crucially, Tolkien's Dwarves are capable of wonder in the face of beauty and goodness. They are, of course, the makers of the Arkenstone, which stuns even the Elvenking and Bard the grim archer of Lake-town. Amidst the dragon hoard, Fili and Kili, young Dwarves, noticeably reach for harps to play music, which we are informed dragons do not have real interest in. And throughout their adventure, the Dwarves' relationship with Bilbo steadily grows from one of professional usefulness to one of real esteem, admiration, and devotion.⁴⁸ Poignant is the parting of Thorin and Bilbo, where the dying Dwarf king confesses, "[i]f more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world," affirming that he ultimately holds friendship over material wealth and beauty. Like Bilbo, Thorin does not begin *The Hobbit* as a hero, but he is arguably one by the end. Just as Socrates recognizes a capacity for goodness in his artisans, so does Tolkien in his Dwarves – indeed to a greater degree.⁴⁹

ON HUMANS

According to my paradigm, Tolkien's humans should correspond to Socrates' class of auxiliaries, those who possess *thumos* or spiritedness. Of the three classes, the thumotic soul is the most controversial among readers of the *Republic*. Part of the problem is that Socrates appears to begin with a bipartite soul, dividing reason from appetite, before arguing for the need of a third element.⁵⁰ This has led to debates about whether *thumos* is a distinct element in the soul,⁵¹

⁴⁷ Hom. Il. 18,205–214, 608–616.

⁴⁸ Keys (2013) 222 relates the evolution of the friendship between Bilbo and the Dwarves in an Aristotelian key.

⁴⁹ I prefer not to comment on the Dwarves' beards as connected to anti-Semitism.

⁵⁰ Plat. res. 439d–e.

⁵¹ See Burger (2003) and Burger (2005) for some of questions raised on this point. She believes that the thumotic soul has its own proper conception of justice, insofar as there is a desire to see others praised, blamed, rewarded and punished for what they do, independent of the preoccupations of reason and appetite.

or whether the warrior class of auxiliaries are a natural part of the polis.⁵² We may proceed with a general impression based on Socrates' descriptions: the spirited have the disposition of warriors, are susceptible to anger and shame, are lovers of victory, and need to be tamed.⁵³

A workable, if somewhat over-simple, heuristic for thinking about spiritedness is considering Aristotle's two descriptions of the human organism as possessing reason and as a political animal.⁵⁴ The appetitive element in our souls is concerned with the material goods that are necessary for or attractive to us as animals, and the rational element is attentive to truth and learning. The spirited element speaks to our condition as socio-political beings. As Thomas Smith puts it, *thumos* "urges us to a sense of dignity and self-worth ... [and] is also the locus in the soul of the desire for honour and glory. Thus, it is the wellspring of ambition, a drive both essential and profoundly dangerous to political order."⁵⁵ Plato's Socrates twice invokes Homer's Odysseus as a valuable model of moderated spiritedness.⁵⁶ In both instances, Socrates quotes Odysseus calming himself after suffering a slight, so that he may exact his vengeance at the opportune moment rather than sabotage his plans through immoderate anger and recklessness. The episode is offered as a lesson in taming spiritedness – and a reminder that without *thumos* Odysseus could not have endured and succeeded in his quest home.

Turning to the Third Age of Middle-earth, we see that heroic humans are patterned after Plato's auxiliaries. Even in *The Hobbit*, where the denizens of Lake-town are not significant players, the grim figure of Bard the Bowman is clearly thumotic. In *The Lord of the Rings*, spiritedness is more visible, both collectively and individually.

Honour, courage, and military prowess are some of the chief values and virtues of the Rohirrim. Faramir, a wise captain of Gondor, describes the people of

52 Coby (2001) defends the place of the auxiliaries in the city but does so in part by arguing that spiritedness is ultimately rooted in acquisitive desire.

53 Plat. res. 2,375b–c; 3,410e; 4,439e; 581c.

54 Aristot. eth. Nic. 1102b; pol. 1253a.

55 Smith (2016) 40–1. Contrary to Robinson (1995) 125, the *Republic* does not generally assume spiritedness to be an evil influence.

56 Plat. res. 3,390d; 4,441b. See Hom. Od. 20,17–8. For discussion of Plato's elevation of Odysseus over other Homeric heroes, see Adluri (2014) 10, 25.

Rohan as “tall men and fair women, valiant both alike,” who have lately come to be “enhanced in arts and gentleness,” seemingly an echo of Socrates’ injunction that the ideal warriors of the city should be both spirited and gentle.⁵⁷ Comparing Gondor and Rohan, Faramir continues: “[A]s the Rohirrim do, we now love war and valour as things good in themselves, both a sport and an end.”⁵⁸ Rohan’s loves of honour and valour are never far from being invoked as inspiration or explanation for their actions and interactions. As the Wild Men negotiate with Théoden, the king of Rohan, about helping the Rohirrim chart their way to Gondor, their leader pledges his loyalty by saying that “[h]e will go himself with the father of Horse-men, and if he leads you wrong, you will kill him.” Théoden replies: “So be it!”⁵⁹ The exchange presents two very different human cultures, which achieve mutual understanding in view of their shared respect for honour. Upon reaching the threshold of battlefield, Théoden marshals his men by crying, “Yet, though you fight upon an alien field, the *glory* that you reap there shall be your own for ever” (emphasis added). The appeal to glory is a fitting preparation for the Achillean vision of Théoden charging down to succor Gondor: “His golden shield was uncovered, and lo! it shone like an image of the Sun, and the grass flamed into green about the white feet of his steed.”⁶⁰ The Rohirrim are a people of spiritedness.

With the Gondorians, circumstances are rather more complex. As descendants of the Númenóreans, the noblest race of men who became, collectively, Elf-friends in the First-Age, elven virtues – art, learning, longevity of life – set the people of Gondor apart from the other races of men. But by the time of the Third Age, Gondor is in decline, partly evidenced in their becoming more warlike, i.e., more spirited. As Faramir reflects, “though we still hold that a warrior should have more skills and knowledge than only the craft of weapons and slaying, we esteem a warrior, nonetheless, above men of other crafts.”⁶¹ As a consequence of this evolution of Gondor’s corporate spirit, Boromir, Faramir’s elder, more

57 Plat. res. 2,375b–c. Coby (2001) 380 notices that it is education in the liberal arts that moderates spiritedness.

58 *TT* 678–9.

59 *RK* 833.

60 *RK* 836, 838. The parallels with Thorin’s entrance into (and end in) the Battle of the Five Armies further confirm that Tolkien was not undermining the Dwarf.

61 *TT* 679.

thumotic brother is revered both by the people and by their father Denethor as the best of the men of Gondor. Faramir, though recognized by a few as “wise and learned in the scrolls of lore and song, ... and yet a man of hardihood and swift judgement in the field”, is gentler and less esteemed. These fathers and sons remind us of Socrates’ observation that the particular weaknesses of the spirited soul are tendencies towards envy, violence and peevishness.⁶² Both Denethor and Boromir are willing to use the Ring as an advantage in the defence of Gondor and exhibit irritability and impatience when Gandalf or Frodo frustrate their designs.⁶³ Faramir, in contrast, forswears the Ring even before he knows its full significance, essentially deferring to the judgement of the Council of Elrond. Faramir thus represents moderated spiritedness, though the people of Gondor are sliding towards a ‘purer’ – and more unbalanced – form.

Tolkien’s most subtle treatments of spiritedness come in how thumotic characters respond to death and defeat. If these characters have little beyond honour and valour to rely on, they tend to collapse and become dispirited, i.e., they fall into despair. Unharmonized *thumos*, Thomas Smith perceives, presents as disordered fight or flight: “either a kind of psychic paralysis that refuses to risk what one cherishes, or an excessive combativeness that sees threats everywhere and strikes out to combat them.”⁶⁴ Despair intensifies both these tendencies to self-annihilating extremes, i.e., despair can be implosive or explosive. Denethor and Éowyn are examples of implosion, and Éomer of explosion.

After Boromir’s death and Faramir’s grave injury, and having become aware of the extent of Mordor’s forces, Denethor opts to commit suicide by burning himself and his wounded son on a pyre. His line having seemingly failed and his city apparently falling, he loses all hope and gives up. As Gandalf diagnoses, “the despair of his heart ... overthrew his mind.”⁶⁵ For her part, Éowyn of Rohan, a “fearless and high-hearted” (i.e., greatly spirited) soul⁶⁶ who, above all, fears to be caged without a “chance of doing great deeds,”⁶⁷ suffered grievously in “bitter-

⁶² Plat. res. 9,586c.

⁶³ Smith (2016) 34 points out that immoderate *thumos* is liable to overreact in the face of threats.

⁶⁴ Smith (2016) 46.

⁶⁵ *RK* 856.

⁶⁶ *TT* 523.

⁶⁷ *RK* 784.

ness and shame” as she impotently watched Théoden fall into “dishonoured dotage” before the arrival of Aragorn, whom she naively came to love not for himself but as symbolizing “a hope of glory and great deeds.” After Aragorn heals her physically but does not requite her love nor take her as a companion, she acknowledges that she is restored to health but not (yet) to hope: she is still suffocating in “sorrow and unrest.”⁶⁸ In contrast, the despair of Éomer after the death of Théoden and (seemingly) Éowyn is explosive in that he throws himself upon his enemies without any desire to live. “Death, death, death! Death takes us all!” he cries, succumbing to a berserker rage without attending to how “his fury had betrayed him.”⁶⁹ His despair would have killed him if he did not regain his senses.

How, then, ought a thumotic soul face doom? The key is to keep one’s mind. As Glaucon says to Socrates, “[i]t is not in accord with divine law to be angry with the truth.”⁷⁰ Unlike those in Rohan and Gondor who bristle when Gandalf bears evil tidings,⁷¹ the right response of the thumotic soul to difficulty is to meet it, and, if death and defeat are unavoidable, to meet them with sober resignation. Thus Éomer, recovering from his battle frenzy and seeing the numbers of his foes only increase, recognizes that “he was still unscathed, and he was young, and he was king: the lord of a fell people. And lo! even as he laughed at despair he looked out again on the black ships, and he lifted up his sword to defy them.”⁷² Better still is the clear-sightedness with which Faramir renounces the Ring: “I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway. Not were Minas Tirith [the capital of Gondor] falling in ruin and I alone could save her, so, using the weapon of the Dark Lord for her good and my glory. No, I do not wish for such triumphs.”⁷³ Spiritedness tempered by wisdom raises the gaze of the soul beyond perishable glories and victories to enduring realities that make it truly noble.

⁶⁸ *RK* 867, 959. For critiques of Éowyn’s love for Aragorn, see Walsh (2015) 34–42; Moore (2015) 206.

⁶⁹ *RK* 844, 846.

⁷⁰ *Plat. res.* 5,480a.

⁷¹ *TT* 512–3. *RK* 749. In Rohan he is called “a herald of woe,” “Stormcrow,” and “Ill-news”; in Gondor some say that he comes “with tidings of grief and danger, as is [his] wont.”

⁷² *RK* 847.

⁷³ *TT* 671.

ON THE ELVES

The three elements of the soul in the *Republic* have distinct pleasures and loves. The rational element enjoys learning, on account of its love of wisdom.⁷⁴ Among the classes of the polis, it is the guardians – i.e., those who correspond to the rational element – from whom the rulers of the city are best raised. On the face of it, these are two rather different aims: wisdom and rule. However, in the Platonic tradition, these stand for two activities of reason, which we might characterize as mind acting speculatively and mind acting practically. Given the centrality of truth and wisdom in Platonic philosophy, it is no surprise that right action flows from right understanding. As such, Tolkien’s Elves, particularly the High Elves who lived for a while with the Valar,⁷⁵ are distinguished both for their wisdom – they are the most learned of the major races – and for their superior, otherworldly arts. As their story is summarized in *The Hobbit*, the Eldar, the Elves who journeyed into “Faerie in the West, ... [there] lived for ages, and grew fairer and wiser and more learned, and invented their magic and their cunning craft in the making of beautiful and marvelous things, before some came back into the Wide World.”⁷⁶

Part of the rule that the rational element exercises in the soul is purifying and ennobling the spirited and appetitive elements’ pursuit of their proper pleasures.⁷⁷ In making sure that lower pleasures are sought and enjoyed in due measure, the rational part exercises custody for the whole; and in ordering the activities for the lower classes, the guardians govern the polis as a unity.⁷⁸ A variation of this idea appears in how characters close to the High Elves become more integrated or even develop preternatural abilities. Thus, in Rivendell Bilbo’s *Hobbit* appetite for food and drink becomes more temperate, even as he

74 Plat. res. 9,580d–581c.

75 An image that resonates with Socrates’ belief in the *Phaedo* that beyond this world the just man may live with the gods and other just men. Plat. Phaid. 63b–c.

76 *Hobbit* 154. Importantly, while Dwarves are exceptional craftsmen, Elven arts are portrayed in a significantly more fantastic or mystical register.

77 Plat. res. 9,586e.

78 Coby (2001) 390 is therefore wrong to claim that reason has no interest in right order *per se*.

better appreciates “the Elvish appetite for music and poetry and tales.”⁷⁹ Likewise, Galadriel’s blessing purifies Gimli’s love for gold. And, of course, Aragorn and Faramir, possessing and honouring their Númenórean lineages, exhibit mature spiritedness and, indeed, the capacity for prophetic insight.⁸⁰

The Elves also recall a crucial Platonic doctrine, viz., that of *anamnesis* or recollection. In the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, Socrates suggests that true wisdom and understanding is pursued through recovering or recollecting prior knowledge we had in a disembodied state, wisdom which we lost in being incarnated in this world. The *Republic* dramatizes a related account in the journey of the soul out of the Cave of ignorance, only to return back inside after having perceived the truth outside.⁸¹ Common to these descriptions is the notion that for one who seeks wisdom, life among men is an experience of being displaced, and yearning for a return to or recovery of something lost. Such, as it happens, is the condition of the Elves. The first Elves to appear in *Fellowship* thus describe themselves: “We are Exiles, and most of our kindred have long ago departed and we too are now only tarrying here a while, ere we return over the Great Sea.” Likewise, the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* speak of the restlessness of Elvish hearts and their desire for a respite that transcends this world: “In the hearts of the Exiles the yearning for the Sea was an unquiet never to be stilled; in the hearts of the Grey-elves it slumbered, but once awakened it could not be appeased.”⁸² The Elves are incarnations of Plato’s erotic intellect, their hearts nicely expressed by Elrond: to desire not “strength or domination or hoarded wealth, but understanding, making, and healing, to preserve all things unstained,”⁸³ all while living in a fading or passing world.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ *FR* 230, 237.

⁸⁰ *FR* 246, 297. Boromir comes to Rivendell after Faramir is visited several times by an apparition in a dream (a visitation that comes only once to Boromir), and Aragorn has a premonition of the danger that passage through Moria poses to Gandalf. Also, part of the reason that the Rohirrim are more developed than the Wild Men may be that they have something of the Elves’ reverence for memory. See Garth (2020) 152.

⁸¹ Plat. *Men.* 81b–e, 86b–c; *Phaed.* 72e–77a; res. 514a–520e.

⁸² *RK* 1128.

⁸³ *FR* 268.

⁸⁴ Tolkien (2021) 162 dramatically articulates the Elves’ sense of loss and remembrance: “In Elvish sentiment the future was not one of hope or desire, but a retrogression from for-

It is fitting, therefore, that the two principal seats of Elven power allied against Sauron are themselves political and ecological achievements and manifestations of recollection. Not only are the Elves ‘anamnetic’ as a people, their realms are such as well: for Frodo, “[i]n Rivendell there was the memory of ancient things; in Lórien the ancient things still lived on in the waking world.” The former is Remembrance, the latter Remnant. Rivendell is more associated with renewal and healing (“Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear, and sadness.”), a homely rest open to guests, while Lothlórien is a closed preservative that somehow conserves the freshness of the first experience of the world’s beauty. In both realms, time passes more slowly,⁸⁵ somewhat arresting decay and decline.⁸⁶

The ‘anthropology’ of the Elves also makes use of several Platonic tropes that have their roots in Plato’s portrait of Socrates. In the *Phaedo* and *Symposium*, Socrates is presented as a contemplative sage with wisdom and virtue superior to other men. These depictions are the motif for later Neo-Platonic hagiographies, such as Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus* and Marinus’ *Life of Proclus*. Typically the work of the students or followers of eminent philosophers, such biographies aim both to provide a history of the life of a godlike man and, in inspiring and impressing readers, to promote a philosophical school.⁸⁷ They provide possible inspirations for Tolkien’s Elves.

Light is one of Plato’s preferred images for wisdom and virtue as seen, for example, in the *Republic*’s Allegory of the Cave or the description of Socrates in the *Symposium* as hiding within him, behind a plain exterior, “godlike [figures] – so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing.”⁸⁸ Plotinus and Proclus are likewise depicted as luminous, with their excellence shining forth through their bodies, particularly in the face and eyes.⁸⁹ Tolkien, too, favours a metaphysics and epis-

mer bliss and power. ... Their position, as of latter-day sentiment, was as of exiles driven forward (against their will), who were in mind or actual posture ever looking backward.”

⁸⁵ *FR* 224, 231, 350–1, 388.

⁸⁶ Christie (2013) 90–1 explores how in the *Silmarillion* the Elven rings are noted for their power against weariness and deterioration.

⁸⁷ Dillon (2006) 162, 164.

⁸⁸ *Plat. symp.* 217a.

⁸⁹ *Porph.* 13; *Marinus* (1986) 18. Dillon (2006) 163 mentions the eyes as especially important since they are “the most significant physical aspect of a divine man, or indeed of any intellectually distinguished individual.”

temology of light, “rife with ... luminous imagery.”⁹⁰ This leads him to depicting superior Elves as walking with “a shimmer, like the light of the moon ... [that] seemed to fall about their feet.” The Elf-lord Glorfindel initially appears to Frodo with “a white light ... shining through the form and raiment ..., as if through a veil,” which he unveils to become “a shining figure of white light” during the pursuit of the Black Riders. This transfiguration is possible because the lords of the Eldar, like Platonic sages, “have dwelt in the Blessed Realm [and] live at once in both worlds.”⁹¹ And in general Tolkien’s Elves have radiant eyes aglow with brightness akin to starlight.

Alongside their luminosity, Plotinus and Proclus are said to possess unusually penetrating minds and senses. Porphyry reports how Plotinus could discern the characters of men, at one moment detecting a thief simply by looking upon the criminal. He also relates how Plotinus, reading his heart, perceived that Porphyry was suffering from suicidal ideation and counseled him to take a holiday to rest. Marinus also takes care to stress that Proclus was an excellent examiner and judge, especially when giving counsel.⁹² Elrond and Galadriel are Elves distinctively gifted in this way, the former discerning that the addition of Pippin to the Fellowship would be risky and the latter being able to read the desires of the hearts of the Company who manage to arrive at Lórien.⁹³

Tolkien further drives home the spirituality of the Elves through their food and drink. Like Plotinus and Porphyry, who strictly abstain from eating meat,⁹⁴ the Elves – excepting the lower Mirkwood Elves⁹⁵ – appear not to be flesh eaters, if they can help it. From Rivendell and Lórien respectively, the Fellowship receive *miruvor* and *lembas*, an invigorating liquor and a waybread that is food for both soul and body.⁹⁶ At Isengard, Merry and Pippin find salted pork and

⁹⁰ Vaccaro (2017) 89.

⁹¹ *FR* 80, 209, 214, 222–3. In Neo-Platonism, this trope communicates profound interior life made manifest in exterior features. See Goarzin (2017) 16.

⁹² Porph. 11; Marinus (1986) 31.

⁹³ *FR* 276, 356–8.

⁹⁴ Porph. 2; Marinus (1986) 27, 34.

⁹⁵ *Hobbit* 140.

⁹⁶ *FR* 290, 369. Dickerson and Evans (2011) 112 argue that Elven food for the way is a fore-taste of fulfillment beyond this world.

rashers of bacon, which Treebeard refers to as “man-food,”⁹⁷ supporting the claim that Elves are vegetarian. Tom Bombadil and the Ents, beings as ancient as the Elves, host meatless tables.⁹⁸ The eating of flesh from rational animals is a sign of special depravity, as seen in the habits of trolls, orcs, goblins, and monstrous spiders – and Gollum. Grasping at a reason for the Elven diet, it would seem that, given Elves’ reverence for living things, they do not do violence to animals for the sake of consumption. Honey, milk, fruit, grain, and so on are naturally replenished foods, the harvesting of which does not take any lives. As Dickerson and Evans put it, Elves do not even appear to farm, but “simply partake of the earth’s bounty as it occurs naturally.”⁹⁹

And just as Neo-Platonic sages live a less corporeal life than regular men – e.g., having less interest in sleep, eating, drinking and sex¹⁰⁰ – so do the Elves. They sleep less than men and depend less on food and drink. Long lived though they are, they also have few children. And their sexes are morphologically closer to each other than those of humans: Galadriel and Celeborn are both tall, grave and beautiful, and Galadriel possesses a voice “deeper than a woman’s wont.”¹⁰¹ This may be Tolkien’s interpretation of Socrates’ insistence that both men and women, as long as they are qualified in intelligence, may rule as philosophers.¹⁰²

But even though Tolkien ascribes to the Elves’ ‘incorporeality’ or high spirituality its special dignity, he also underlines that their mode of life is not for the rest. This tracks with Socrates’ definition of justice or right order as every part fulfilling its proper role.¹⁰³ While Elven gifts can bestow blessings, we have already seen that their diet and farming practices are not for all. In a similar vein, Faramir diagnoses Gondor’s decline as due not just to increased spiritedness but also to excessive Elvish spirituality and neglect of human corporeality: the

97 *TT* 561.

98 *FR* 124–5; *TT* 471.

99 Dickerson and Evans (2011) 97.

100 *Porph.* 23; *Marinus* (1986) 35.

101 *FR* 354–5. Martinez (2010) 69 helpfully point out that traditionally, elves in literature are described in ways that ‘shortened’ the distance between genders (e.g., application of adjectives usually reserved to womanly (i.e., female human) beauty to male elves).

102 *Plat. res.* 5,454d–e. The Elves are instances of physical and spiritual stature in harmony. See *Plat. res.* 3,402d; Martinez (2010) 73; Walsh (2015) 28.

103 *Plat. res.* 4,433a.

Númenóreans “hungered after endless life unchanging. ... Childless lords sat in aged halls musing on heraldry; in secret chambers withered men compounded strong elixirs, or in high cold towers asked questions of the stars. And the last king of the line of Anárion had no heir.”¹⁰⁴ Part of the renewal and healing that Aragorn brings to Minas Tirith is that eventually “the houses were filled with men and women and the laughter of children.”¹⁰⁵ The Elves are inspiring and orienting figures for the other races, but they are not the model. The peoples of Middle-earth are to obey the natures given them by their Creator, not to aspire to what they are not.

ON WIZARDS

The idea of flourishing in one’s proper place has its roots also in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates explains we have been given posts that we cannot abandon and must discharge honourably.¹⁰⁶ This advice fits perfectly with Gandalf’s counsel that the vocation of each and all is not to define our place in the world, but “to decide ... what to do with the time that is *given* us” (emphasis added).¹⁰⁷ Gandalf’s consistent willingness to offer advice, both wanted and unwanted, and to intervene in historical events stands in marked contrast to the Elves of the Third Age, who are more reticent with counsel, but supportive.¹⁰⁸ Since wizards thus appear to have greater authority to guide the affairs of the races, they correspond more faithfully to Plato’s philosopher-kings, whom Socrates names as necessary for the right ordering and coordination of the city.¹⁰⁹ As servants of the Valar, the wizards rank higher in nobility than the Elves, but this also means that their cor-

104 *TT* 678.

105 *RK* 968. Tolkien may also be critiquing Socratic sayings that appear to pit soul against body. See Collier (2013) 27.

106 Plat. *Phaid.* 62b.

107 *FR* 51.

108 *FR* 84, 363. Both Gildor and Galadriel shrink from giving Frodo advice, and Gildor specifically is uneasy about interfering with the affairs of wizards. They do help, however, with discerning what choices are to be weighed.

109 Plat. res. 5,473c–d.

ruption produces greater evil. This accords with Socrates, who says that “if souls with the best natures get a bad education, they become exceptionally bad,” and Marinus, who reports a Platonic saying about the figure of the genius: “Here is a man who will be a great good, or its contrary!”¹¹⁰ The opposite of the philosopher-king is the tyrant, and that is just what Saruman and Sauron are, to lesser and greater degrees.¹¹¹

The philosopher-kings of the *Republic* marry two activities, contemplating enduring truth and ordering the city: they look “toward what is in its nature just, beautiful, temperate, and all the rest; and ... toward what they are trying to put into human beings.” On the basis of this dual activity, combining the contemplative and the practical, the Neo-Platonists taught that the Platonic sage cares for himself, for his friends, and for his community – perhaps even for the whole world.¹¹² The wizards of Middle-earth exhibit such concerns, in healthy and unhealthy ways. Gandalf notes of himself, “Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good,” while Saruman invokes “[our] 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 and idle friends.” And even after they become estranged, Saruman tempts Gandalf by proposing, “[m]uch we could still attempt together, to heal the disorders of the world.”¹¹³ Both are therefore moved to order the world but come to view their roles in radically different ways.

Gandalf sees himself as a servant and a steward. He tells Pippin, “the rule of no realm is mine, neither in Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy

110 Plat. res. 6,491d–e; Marinus (1986) 26. The general Latin principle is *corruptio optimi pessima*, that the corruption of the best does the worst harm.

111 Intriguingly, both Sauron and Saruman served Aulë, the smith of the Valar, *pace* Tally, Jr. (2010) 18, this does not mean that “the instinct or desire to create new things – that is, to become like God himself – almost inevitably leads to the Fall,” but that deviating from will or providential order of Ilúvatar is self-destructive. See Moore (2015) 208 on the liberating power of obedience to reality and Hawkins (2008) 36 on Sauron and Saruman’s pride. As Rist (1996) 122 notes, Plato sees the grasp for power, especially power beyond one’s station, as corrupting.

112 Plat. res. 6,501a–b; Porph. 2; Marinus (1986) 28–32. Contrary to Coby (2001) 387–8 and Boys-Stones (2004) 5, the philosopher is not disengaged or indifferent. As Bell (2015) 116–7, 128 and Goarzin (2017) 12 argue, care for the other and for the city are natural concerns of the philosopher.

113 *FR* 61, 259; *TT* 581.

things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care.” Saruman, for his part, “will not serve, only command.”¹¹⁴ Like Plato’s philosopher-king, Gandalf serves an order beyond himself. In Tolkien’s mythos, there is only one true King, Ilúvatar, and all others – the kings of the Valar, the Elves, men and Dwarves – have mere delegated authority, which they must exercise wisely, humbly, and obediently, in a necessarily hierarchical cosmology.¹¹⁵ Hence the constant refrain that those who attempt to establish themselves as a sovereign power, independent of the providential order of the cosmos, only deform themselves and their environments.¹¹⁶ The distinction between those who serve and those who manipulate, between Gandalf and Saruman, is further stressed in their speech. Gandalf’s mode is prophetic, ready to discover and disclose difficult truths, while Saruman, by way of threat, flattery, or fraud, seeks merely to persuade for the sake of his private purposes, being sophistic and anti-philosophical.¹¹⁷ In the end, Gandalf is the philosopher-king Saruman could have been, the chief Enemy of Sauron in Middle-earth.¹¹⁸

114 *RK* 758; *TT* 584.

115 Dickerson and Evans (2011) 38, 42; Scarf (2013) 132–3; Vaccaro (2017) 89.

116 *TT* 486: “But Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves.” *RK* 914: “The Shadow that bred [the orcs] can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own. I don’t think it gave life to the orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them; and if they are to live at all, they have to live like other creatures.” In these passages, Tolkien skillfully captures the Platonic doctrine that tyranny is a perversion of the self and the cosmological order; it is not, as Sushytska (2012) 67 claims, simply a lack of political order.

117 Vaccaro (2017) 99; Chisholm (2019) 92–4. Relatedly, in another happy coincidence, Socrates says that tyrants are unable to have friends, and Sauron is said to have “few servants but many slaves of fear.” Saruman is in a similar position; in the end, he is alone with Wormtongue, who follows him resentfully, not out of devotion, and who eventually kills him. See *Plat. res.* 9,580a; *TT* 576–87; *RK* 900, 983, 1020.

118 *TT* 459; *RK* 971, 979.

CONCERNING HOBBITS

If wizards can be accommodated in the Platonic scheme, can Hobbits? It does not seem so, but that is possibly by design. Throughout the Ring Saga, Hobbits are continually remarked to be out of place. During Bilbo's adventure, the Dwarves are received as the fulfillment of near-forgotten prophecy, but the people are not quite sure what to do about Bilbo: "no songs have alluded to him even in the obscurest way." Hobbits do neither feature in the old songs, nor in the old smells, according to Smaug, nor in the old lists, by Treebeard's reckoning.¹¹⁹ They are the overlooked and the underestimated, the simple whose worthiness for the grand stage is often doubted.¹²⁰ But in Middle-earth, they too get to be heroes. Though Tolkien revises many aspects of the *Republic's* political framework, through the Hobbits he fashions the tip of his Christian critique of Plato.

The wizards and the Elves in many ways represent the right understanding and exercise of wisdom and power in the Third Age of Middle-earth. Tolkien, however, makes sure to show that these characters are neither infallible nor perfectly efficacious in their plans and purposes. Saruman succumbs to temptation, the Brown (Radagast) and Blue wizards (Alatar and Pallando) lose themselves in distraction, and the Elves of the White Council trust Saruman longer than they should. Through small, simple loves, on the other hand, Bilbo is immune to gold lust and Sam is victorious over the temptations for the Ring.¹²¹ Tellingly, Elrond is against the inclusion of Merry and Pippin in the Fellowship, though Gandalf – who also recruited Bilbo for the Dwarves – supports them, albeit more out of intuition than with argument. Though Pippin makes mistakes at Moria and Isengard, the younger Hobbits play a crucial role in the rousing of the Ents and the slaying of the Lord of the Nazgûl. Through them, both Rohan and Gondor are saved – and Boromir atones for attempting to claim the Ring.¹²² The validation of the weak and unlearned Hobbits recalls the canticle of Mary of Nazareth, which celebrates the elevation of the lowly and the humiliation of the

119 *Hobbit* 183, 206; *TT* 464–5.

120 Tyson (2014) 30.

121 *Hobbit* 262–3; *RK* 900–1.

122 *TT* 496–7; *RK* 859.

proud, and the letter of the Apostle Paul which teaches that, in the eyes of the world, the Christian Gospel is folly and weakness.¹²³

In highlighting the limits of the Wise, Tolkien stresses that history is ultimately guided and guarded by a hidden Providence.¹²⁴ While the *Republic* does recognize an ultimate, invisible order that governs all, it is still the responsibility of the philosopher-king to discover this luminous order and to dispose affairs in the world after its pattern. The Christian, however, gives himself in trust to a good but dark Providence, an order not simply beyond his comprehension but also mainly beyond his perception. Thus, Gandalf asks Bilbo rhetorically, at the end of *The Hobbit*, “You don’t really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit?” When the Council of Elrond convenes, the Lord of Rivendell meditates, “[you are] called, I say, though I have not called you to me. ... You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet it is not so. *Believe* rather that it is so ordered.” (emphasis added).¹²⁵ Unlike Plato’s Socrates, Tolkien greatly values faith, relinquishing the need to know and to control. History’s “long defeat”¹²⁶ can be faced only through trust and hope in Providence. The Hobbits capture the view that redemption is not found through worldly wisdom and power, which Sauron has in abundance.

An important challenge to the wisdom of Sauron is sacrificial love. We see this when the Captains of the West launch a futile attack on Mordor, presenting themselves as bait in an attempt to create a chance for Frodo to destroy the Ring.¹²⁷ But it is Frodo who is the best portrait of Christlike suffering. His journey through Mordor is reminiscent of Christ’s walk to Calvary and death.¹²⁸ Walking his path, he loses not only his companions, his weapons, and his hope of survival, but loses even himself, insofar as his Hobbit consolations are stripped from him: “No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me. I am naked in

¹²³ Luke 1: 46–55; 1 Corinthians 1: 17–25. Newman (2005) 238–9 notices how Tolkien subverts or frustrates genre expectations.

¹²⁴ Tyson (2014) 33 discusses visibility and invisibility as an important theme for Tolkien.

¹²⁵ *Hobbit* 276; *FR* 242, 357.

¹²⁶ *FR* 357.

¹²⁷ *RK* 88o.

¹²⁸ Dickerson (2015) 211.

the dark.”¹²⁹ This language parallels the Apostle Paul’s description of Christ’s entry into the world as *kenosis*, a self-emptying.¹³⁰ Even after succeeding in the quest,¹³¹ he is not honoured in the Shire, bears his wounds – of “knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden” – like stigmata, and finally is destined not to recover a home among his people.¹³² Not only does Frodo represent the small in the world, accept a trial beyond the ability of the wise and the powerful, and place his trust in hidden Providence, he must also give up his life, his home, his place in the world: more than any other character, he is a complete sacrifice, a literary imitation of Christ, not of Socrates.

CONCLUSION: ART IN A BROKEN WORLD

Tolkien stands, therefore, within the Platonic tradition. He does not simply repackage the vision of his predecessors, but enters into dialogue with it and makes his own mature poetic and philosophical contributions. His mythos illuminates the abiding relevance of Platonism in the contemporary world, across the different branches of philosophy. Through Tolkien we can appreciate how Platonism allows for ethics that value craftsmanship and the pursuit of glory and honour, rather than falling back on the caricature of the philosopher as aloof from and indifferent to the world. Indeed, Tolkien shows that Platonism may even be a valuable tradition from which to articulate political concern for the environment. That said, Tolkien does also offer a critique of ancient Platonism’s picture of human excellence: the learned philosophical sage. Middle-earth shows us other, humbler forms of exemplary goodness.

Beyond appreciation and critique, there is also development. As is clear in the *Republic*, Socrates is attentive to the need for the world, and especially for human society, to be rightly ordered. So insistent is Plato on this theme that

129 RK 938.

130 Philippians 2:6.

131 Dickerson (2015) 214 believes that Frodo fails, but I argue that Frodo fulfilled his role in the Providential plan and thus succeeded.

132 RK 989, 1025, 1029.

for Socrates even punishment for evil should (ideally) be therapeutic,¹³³ i.e., aimed at restoring order. Tolkien elaborates on this theme by making mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation one of the principal foci of the War of the Ring.¹³⁴ In conversation with Frodo, Gandalf prophesies that “the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many”; Bilbo’s merciful refusal to slay Gollum – as well as Frodo and Sam’s choices to appreciate and respect that decision while Gollum is in their power – leads to the success of the quest and Frodo’s final forgiveness of Gollum.¹³⁵ Likewise, what marks and confirms Aragorn as the true king of Gondor is not his skill at arms, but his arts of healing: “*The hands of the king are the hands of a healer. And so the rightful king could ever be known.*” One of his names is “*Envinyatar, the Renewer,*” and at his coronation it is said that “wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands.”¹³⁶ Also, Théoden names Gandalf as skilled in healing,¹³⁷ and Elrond is a master healer. These are but a few examples of a persistent melody: that to create and to restore are analogous acts, and that we are called to imitate both of these divine activities, both for our good and for the good of the world.¹³⁸

In this context, Plato casts a light that, intriguingly, may reveal Tolkien’s shortcomings. While Socrates recognizes that it is beyond our power to purify ourselves – as individuals or communities – of all tendencies to evil,¹³⁹ Tolkien goes further and gives us whole races that are *necessarily* morally corrupt. No nature in the Platonic cosmos is inherently evil, which means Tolkien’s world is more broken. While orcs, goblins, trolls are useful for the plot, their metaphysical status is unclear: where do they actually come from, and are all their desires corrupt? Importantly, Tolkien is himself troubled by the status of these races in his legendarium, even saying that the orcs “are not easy to work into

133 Plat. res. 2,38ob.

134 Bruce (2012) 113.

135 *Hobbit* 81; *FR* 59; *RK* 947.

136 *RK* 863–71, 968.

137 *TT* 518.

138 Dickerson (2016) 141; Keys (2013) 212.

139 Plat. res. 571b, 572b. Gerson (1987) 88.

the theory and system.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed, the goblins of *The Hobbit* have children (who are born evil?) and some orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*, like Shagrat and Gorbag, evince a capacity to value trust and wish for more peaceful lives.¹⁴¹ If Gollum, who enjoys goblin-flesh and is ready to consume hobbit, is theoretically redeemable, Tolkien offers no satisfying explanation why the rehabilitation of the foul races is beyond the pale.¹⁴² So, while Tolkien has some questions for the *Republic*, Plato would have his own for Middle-earth. And this is one kind of the fruitful dialogues possible when studying classical reception.

In Tolkien’s works, some of the most enduring ideas and images in the Platonic corpus are borne to us through time, not entirely unlike how hallowed relics are translated through space in reliquaries. And, like reliquaries, Tolkien’s tales inform how the Platonic ideas are presented and approached, as well as contribute to their ongoing, developing reception. But Tolkien’s mythos also has its own integrity as an artistic achievement, and so appreciating its Platonic inheritance helps us as readers see it in a light at once ancient and new.

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140 MR VIII–X shows that the author entertained various possibilities for the origins of orcs as he tried to work out how a corrupt race might come into being and reproduce. Tolkien goes so far as to consider that perhaps orcs are irredeemable not per se. It was the teaching of the Wise in the Elder Days that “[Orcs] might have *become* irredeemable (at least by Elves and Men).” (emphasis added).

141 *Hobbit* 76; *TT* 738.

142 Tally, Jr. (2010) 23.

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