The Hamletian Hobbit

Laura Marples

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In a letter to Father Robert Murray in 1953, Tolkien explained that *The Lord Of The Rings* was "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision." He also stressed that as a result "the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism" rather than manifested through "cults or practices", (one exception, of course, being the Standing Silence observed by Faramir and his men in Ithilien). This religious symbolism, though abundantly clear, is, however, remarkably subtle and specific. Whilst it would be difficult to imagine a clearer image of cross-carrying than the increasingly dolorous path of the Ringbearer towards Mount Doom, to think of Frodo as a Christ-figure is slightly misleading. Quite apart from the fact that, as Shippey points out, he is not the son of God, he is in no conceivable way a guru or a teacher of men, although he does display some qualities of quiet leadership and is a skilled and diplomatic speaker. I personally see Frodo's predicament, and in some ways also his character, as being far more Hamletian than Christlike. I say this not because I believe this was a conscious design on the part of Tolkien, but because I see striking similarities between the "quests" of both characters, and also because I feel that it emphasises just how much of an Everyman figure Frodo is. Indeed, what lies at the core of Frodo's special quality is that, as Verlyn Flieger has stated, he is "the most ordinary and the most extraordinary of the hobbits". To put it another way, Frodo, like Hamlet, is both an Everyman and a Prince. He is the quiet, diminutive and unassuming figure "expected to find a path where the great ones could not go, or dared not", yet at the same time he is a "jewel among hobbits" – the accomplished linguist immediately recognised by Gildor – the one singled out from all his people in the discernment of both Bilbo and Gandalf, and the one in whom Gandalf perceives the shining transparency (later also noticed by Sam) which causes him to muse that "he may become like a glass filled with a clear light for eyes to see that can." Frodo is perhaps a type of Christ, but no more so than Baldr or Prometheus. Perhaps the closest definition of him, in terms of saintliness, would be as an anticipation of a Christian knight – and a knight, one might say, beaten down and eventually 'reduced' to a mortified saint.

Clichés set aside, as well as both being 'scholars'", sacrificial figures, and heroic 'failures', both Frodo and Hamlet are called upon to 'save the world' since, broadly speaking, Elsinore is the world, as far as the play of *Hamlet* is concerned, and the eponymous Prince is commanded to cleanse it, just as the Ringbearer is 'commanded' to enter Mordor with the Ring. Crudely put, whilst Frodo must (attempt to) dispense with something, Hamlet must dispense with someone, – and the Ruling Ring and Claudius are each in some way personified as the immediate evil from which each 'world' must be delivered. Still more crucial, however, is the fact that, whilst Frodo goes on a journey in a much more literal sense than Hamlet does, like Hamlet, he is risking far more than his life; it is also his soul that is at stake. When Hamlet cries out against the burden which is laid upon him by his father's ghost, he utters the words "O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else? And shall I couple hell?" – in other words, must he join himself to hell, become a murderer himself, in order to avenge his father's death. Frodo too makes a clear statement of his understanding of the situation he is in when he says to Gandalf "I suppose I must keep the Ring and guard it, at least for the moment, whatever it may do to me." Although it is a case in point when Frodo actually assumes the responsibility of bearing the Ring to its destruction, it seems quite clear that he really seals his fate before he leaves Bag End – his intimation that "I should like to save the Shire, if I could" has led to musings such as "[Bilbo] went to gain a treasure, but I go to lose one, and not to return, as far as I can see." Moreover, it seems highly unlikely that Frodo would go to the considerable trouble of selling his home if this were not also an act of renunciation and an acceptance of his vocation – in other words, a way of symbolically 'letting go' – just as Bilbo gave away many presents at his last birthday party in the Shire – primarily, by his own account, as a means of making it easier to give up the Ring itself.

Dover Wilson states that, in the case of *Hamlet*, "Shakespeare adds more to the burden that the hero has to bear, until we feel that he must break beneath it." If we expect Frodo to walk through ever-increasing torment to Mordor, with the Ring, yet without being broken and corrupted by it, is that not rather like the Ghost saying to Hamlet "Taint not thy mind" whilst simultaneously commanding him to commit murder? The Wise at Rivendell do not even appear to make such a stipulation. Elrond's words to the Company before they set out are "On [Frodo] alone is any charge laid: neither to cast away the Ring, nor to deliver it to any servant of the Enemy nor indeed to let any handle it, save members of the Company, and of the Council, and only then in gravest need." Do the Wise then know that wilful destruction of the Ring will be impossible for Frodo? Is this in part what Elrond intimates when he states that "how your task is to be achieved I do not know"? He has seen Isildur fail to destroy the Ring, or at least elect to do otherwise. Although they do not explicitly state this, it appears that they are relying on other forces than Frodo's will alone. And Frodo himself clearly doubts his own abilities to complete the task – although it is not always clear in which sense he doubts them. He calls the journey "hopeless" even in Rivendell, and verbally echoes this lack of 'hope' at many stages along the road. "If we can nurse our limbs to bring us to Mount Doom", he says to Sam, "that is all we can do." But by the time he and Sam have entered Mordor, it is clear from Frodo's speeches that he knows he is incapable of giving up the Ring, let alone destroying it, and the knowledge of this lies at the core of his despair. He never speaks to his servant of the actual destruction of the Ring, as Sam realises with sudden alarm when his master is on the verge of physical collapse. To state that "There's a divinity that shapes our ends/Rough-hew them how we will" is perhaps too obvious, but Frodo clearly perceives that, whatever his own personal input to the quest, the outcome is ultimately out of his hands. Although he does "fail" to destroy the Ring himself, at least in any direct sense, to write him off as a failure seems to me about as relevant as calling *The Silmarillion* 'unfinished'. "Failure", Oscar Wilde quoted in "De Profundis", "is the formation of habits". This is quite a different situation from that in which a

protagonist is obliged to walk into temptation and is broken after long resistance and finally raped of his innocence. As T S Eliot once wrote, "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

The scene at Mount Doom is, however, remarkably ambiguous. Frodo states very clearly that he chooses to keep the Ring, but on the other hand Gandalf, when asked by Frodo why Gollum did not divest himself of the Ring if it was torturing him so much, gave the answer: "He had no will left in the matter. A Ring of Power looks after itself… it was really the Ring that left him." Of course, the Ring has a way of playing cruel tricks on its bearers before it takes a new master – as we see in "The Hobbit" when it slips off Bilbo's finger and he can be seen by the orcs when trying to escape. Bilbo, of course, escapes Isildur's fate – but the malicious wiles of the Ring are all too apparent here, and are surely partially responsible for the final "breaking" of Frodo, too. On the other hand, is Frodo also a victim of theology, sacrificed to sin because to allow him to succeed would be to virtually equate him with Christ, and thus a blasphemy? In any case, the Ring does not, Gandalf states, have exclusive choice in the matter of its "owners", and neither does Sauron. "Bilbo was meant to have the Ring, and therefore you were meant to have it", he tells Frodo. The struggle and agony are absolutely necessary for the progress and success of the quest, but so is the inner acceptance that "The readiness is all".

Frodo's story is actually presented in rather a similar way to that of Hardy's Tess. Teresa Durbeyfield, Thomas Hardy insists, is "A Pure Woman Faithfully Portrayed." Whilst Tolkien does not, within the text of "The Lord of the Rings", either intervene or argue a case for Frodo's moral purity, he allows his story to speak for itself, and unfolds it in rather a similar way. The hard facts are as follows. Tess must be seduced by d'Urberville, lie to Angel and marry him, and subsequently murder Alec when driven to her breaking point. Frodo has to give in to temptation, or be overcome, and claim the One Ring for himself at Mount Doom. What each author does is to depict the poignancy of both their fates and the horrific nature of the trials they both face – Tess at Flintcomb-Ash, Frodo on the plain of Gorgoroth. What they both do can be brutally described as sin, yet in each case the author evokes and garners the reader's pity over the course of a long and powerful narrative, and shows us how the protagonist is finally broken. Whilst Tolkien steers clear in his narrative from making any judgement of Frodo's behaviour, he does state in one of his letters that Frodo's failure is not in his opinion a "moral" one. As Angel Clare and his wife survey each other across the balustrade at The Herons with "a joylessness pitiful to see", Clare experiences a "vague consciousness" of something which later becomes clear to him – that "his original Tess had spiritually ceased to recognize the body before him as hers – allowing it to drift, like a corpse upon the current, in a direction dissociated from its living will." Hardy indeed stated that at this point he saw Tess as having drifted so far that she was beyond moral culpability. Has not something similar happened regarding Frodo's will? Are not both body and will essential and linked components of a person's machine of resistance? Tolkien himself stated that in Frodo's utter extremity, the breaking of his will was in a moral sense no different from the breaking of his body. And therefore, is Frodo's assumption of the Ring as his own really any different from Tess finally breaking and murdering Alec, or Maggie Tulliver being momentarily overcome by suffering and temptation and allowing herself to float down the river with Stephen Guest?

Frodo is of course a tragic hero, but this analogy with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* highlights the fact that whilst his sufferings and (shall we say) 'breakdown' in some ways resemble hers, he is quite definitely not a tragic hero in the sense that some of Thomas Hardy's characters are. We never hear a pre-quest Frodo talking about the world he lives in as a "blighted star", and I personally see nothing in Frodo's character to suggest that he was in normal circumstances prone to depression or even to melancholy. Two things about him are strikingly apparent. One of them is of course his vulnerability, but this only becomes apparent due to the nature of his own personal quest – a quest very different from Bilbo's, and also from Sam's. The other is how remarkably well-balanced a person he is, in spite of being orphaned in infancy and being by nature thoughtful and sensitive. I would argue that this is why he is able to resist the Ring for so long, and why his final breakdown is so heartrending. Branagh's observation of Hamlet's crisis was that "he is going through something that would knock anyone sideways"; "he would not normally be like this", and "his natural character, described so often in the play", is vibrant and curious. The clearest manifestation of Frodo's 'natural character' probably occurs in the episode where he and his two companions meet Gildor in the woods of the Shire at the very beginning of their quest. "Frodo sat, eating, drinking, and talking with delight, but his mind was chiefly on the words spoken", states Tolkien. There is something here of the joy and abandon which Hamlet temporarily feels when he meets the Players and his love of the theatre is awakened, even in the midst of his fears, dread and apprehension.

If *Hamlet* is, as Dover Wilson asserts, "the tragedy of a genius caught fast in the toils of circumstance and unable to fling free", then *The Lord of the Rings* is the tragedy of a sensitive intellectual who reaches the height of his spiritual and mental powers only to be pushed over the edge and all but completely broken. It charts the development of a naïve halfling, unsure of his own strengths, healed by Elrond whilst helpless and unconscious and 'content to lean' on the guidance of Aragorn and Gandalf, to the Ringbearer who gently turns Galadriel's challenge of temptation around and offers it back to her. It is the tragedy of the person who was only days previously conversing with Faramir of Gondor as an equal in the beautiful, wounded land of Ithilien, on matters crucial to the future of Middle-Earth, suddenly reduced to a traumatised heap on the floor of an orc-tower, and to a state of total exposure from which he never truly recovers. Moreover, once Frodo loses the Ring – as he does, temporarily, in Cirith Ungol – he never truly finds himself again – in quite a similar way to that in whch Shakespeare's Richard II loses his entire identity when he is bereft of his crown. The stark brutality of the scene in the orc-tower in a sense calls to mind the murder-scene in Richard II, and the equally shocking reaction of Frodo to Sam's disclosure that he has the Ring is the reader's first preparation for the total deracination of Frodo from his former life, and a chilling indication of how completely he is now enslaved to the Ring. Frodo's behaviour to Sam at this point is perhaps so shocking because it is so totally out of character, and in a way it is more dreadful than the scene in *The Silmarillion* when Túrin Turambar kills his best friend, Beleg – even though the consequences of Frodo's act are far less grievous. The situations are remarkably similar; both heroes are asleep or half-asleep, in captivity and suffering from trauma; Túrin slew Beleg Cuthalion "because he thought it was orcs come to torment him again."

The scene in the Tower of Cirith Ungol contains the most

Christlike image in the entire work. The orcs do not only strip Frodo – they also fight over his garments and belongings (rather like the soldiers casting dice for Christ's robe), and one of them later attempts to scourge him. This is, however, symbolic, and not an attempt on the author's part to actually equate Frodo with Christ himself. Indeed, whilst the visual impact of this scene is intensely Christian in terms of what it evokes, Frodo's words: "They stripped me of everything" echo almost exactly the repeated assertions of Odysseus when he speaks of what the (pagan, classical) gods have seen fit to do to him. Of course, when Hamlet writes to Claudius: "High and mighty, you shall know I am set naked on your kingdom", his meaning is literal, but only in the sense that he is without means or 'stripped of belongings', whereas Odysseus's meaning is both wider and more metaphysical. Frodo's is both literal and metaphysical, and prefigures his almost nihilistic speeches on the plain of Gorgoroth: "No taste of food, no feel of water, ... no image of moon or star are left to me. I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the Wheel of Fire."

Moreover, although the scene in the orc-tower is almost unbearably poignant, Frodo's apparent passivity at this point also requires closer analysis. If we consider Isabella's words from *Measure for Measure:* "th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies", "I'd strip myself for death as to a bed", we are surely reminded that Frodo's is not only an enforced 'martyrdom', but one against which he repeatedly rebels. What we actually observe in Frodo's tale is not the accepting sighs of a willing martyr – either perverse or otherwise – but the quiet though rebellious throes of a hero or knight being literally hammered into a sacrificial vocation. Each time Frodo attempts a deed which is heroic in the more traditional, aggressive sense, he is rebuffed and beaten down. At Amon Sul, he stabs at the Witch-King with his barrow-blade, but is immediately wounded himself, and it is the words he cries out that do most harm to the Ringwraith. Similarly, after he stabs the troll's foot in Moria, he is practically skewered against a wall by an orc-chieftain. Indeed, he is the only one of the four hobbits who never once takes a life. He wounds the troll, threatens Gollum, hurts the ghoulish Lord of the Nazgul by invoking Elbereth, and cuts off a hand in the Barrow – but there is no face here to give a human aspect to what Frodo does at this point in the defence of his friends.

Unlike the case with many Shakespearean heroes, Frodo's loss of innocence does not come from having to accept the fact that he has taken a life, and his downfall does not begin because he has killed somebody. Both Hamlet and Romeo begin the descent of the downward parts of their arcs when they have respectively killed Polonius and Tybalt. But in contrast, Frodo's doom is sealed, or at least his downfall begins, when he is first wounded – that is, not with the first blow he deals, but the first blow he is dealt. There is to be no complete recovery – at least, not in Middle-Earth, from the initial physical violation which he suffers at Weathertop, only two weeks after leaving home.

The early Frodo is very much an energiser, but this aspect of his personality remains with him much further into the quest than is often recognised. Acknowledged (at least in song) as leader or 'Captain' by his comrades, it is Frodo who urges his friends through the Old Forest, insisting that they "can't have a nap yet", and tries to sing a song to encourage his young companions – although he too eventually succumbs to sleep and has to be rescued by Sam. But it is also Frodo who insists that he and Sam descend the Emyn Muil before nightfall, vehemently grudging any delay, since it "plays into the enemy's hands". He does not have the shrewdness of Sam or the practicality of Merry, or the cheerful abandon of Pippin – but what he does clearly have, besides his growing spiritual strength and wisdom, is a remarkable ability to inspire devotion and love in other people.

If we ask ourselves at what point Frodo is really broken, we are perhaps asking ourselves two things – one, when does he lose the ability to give up the Ring, and two, when does he lose all hope of ever being able to go on living in Middle-Earth after the Quest. It is also clear that the two things are connected – but if there was indeed a point of no return, Tolkien stresses that "few others, possibly no others of his time, would have got so far." Christopher Tolkien spoke of the Ring as being "the ultimate machine, because it [was] made for coercion." What is interesting in Tolkien's own explanation of the Ring's increasing potency and inevitable effects on the Bearer as he nears Mount Doom is that he describes the force of the Ring in language very like that which one would use to describe a law of physics. "The pressure of the Ring would reach its maximum – impossible, I should say, for anyone to resist – certainly not after long possession, months of increasing torment, and when starved and exhausted." Similarly intractable are the words: "it exacts its purpose. You must either lose it, or yourself." Both Hamlet and Frodo are consumed by their quests, and of course, the Hamletian quote that screams to be recognised is: "[He] is of the faction that is wrong'd"! Frodo at Orodruin is, according to Tolkien's *Letters*, utterly incapable, either mentally or physically of a "purposed evil". Hamlet's apology to Laertes is far more self-justifying than Frodo's hints to Sam at the Havens of what he "might have had", but Frodo's "sore distraction" and madness under the duress of Ringbearing clearly has a Hamletian parallel, and a very poignant one: "If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,/And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,/Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it./Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,/Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;/His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy."

Of course, it is difficult to state at which point Marlowe's Faustus is 'damned'. Even after signing his soul away to the Devil in his own congealing blood, the Good Angel insists that he can still be saved, before he sleeps with a succuba who appears to him as Helen of Troy. Yet well before this irrevocably damning deed, the full complexity of the way back, if there still is one, is sounded in his all too poignant words: "My heart's so hardened I cannot repent." Something has clearly died in Frodo in his last days in Mordor – this time, when Gollum threatens to dispossess him, he is "untouchable by pity" – although it is maybe due to Frodo's own foresight that he is fortunately weaponless at this point. All the same, this quotation regarding the difficulty of repentance is maybe more applicable to Saruman, when he is faced with Gandalf's offer to him to leave Orthanc and chooses to remain. Pride is certainly operational here, but it may also be that Saruman feels the hardening of his heart and the impossibility of finding a way back to good. Perhaps the post-quest Frodo sees and fears this in the ruined wizard who has perpetrated the final insult upon him – not in attempting to take his life, but in destroying his home. Frodo, who has felt the full potency and temptation of the Ring, and only escaped because it was physically wrenched away from him, is able to feel pity for the fallen Maia and grief for his fall – but acknowledges himself impotent to save him. If Frodo's suffering process begins at Weathertop, surely the violation of Bag End is 'the last twist of the knife', or at least the final symbolic reminder that "There is no real going back."

The scene in Shelob's Lair is the reader's last sight of Frodo

as an active hero. He forces back the spider's eyes with Galadriel's phial, and is the closest he ever comes to being Bilbo's successor when he cuts her web and runs through the pass – just as Bilbo, many years before, ran singing through Mirkwood, slashing the spiders' webs. The Frodo who runs through the pass, shouting in joy to be free, is the last manifestation of his attempts to rebel in physical terms against the particular fate which is laid upon him. The leading character is cut down in flight, the active physical wounding of the ogress falls to Sam, and Frodo wakes up in the Tower of Cirith Ungol and is never the same again. Sam rises, in a sense, like a phoenix from his master's ashes.

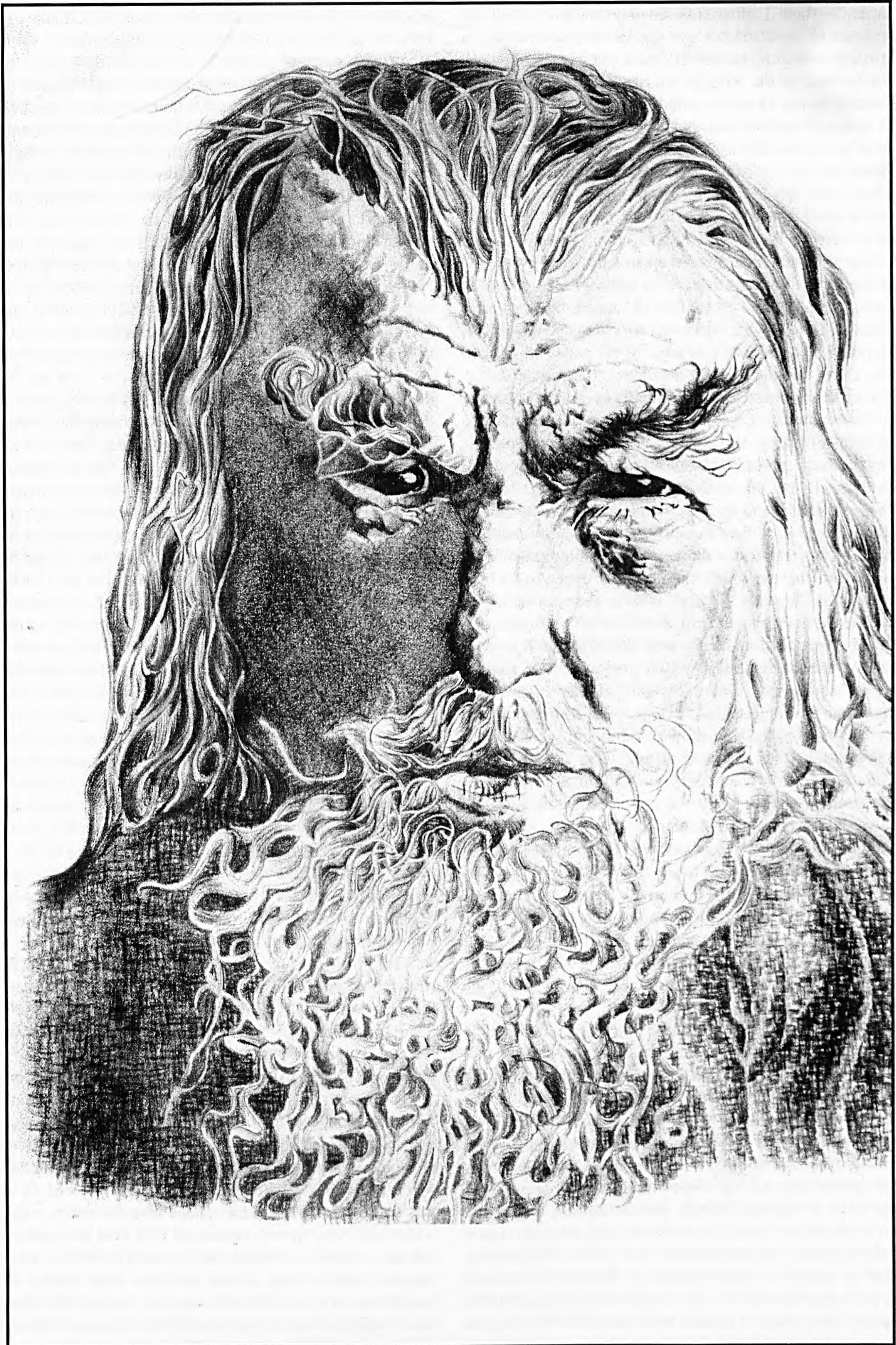
It is the very suddenness of this change in Frodo which is most striking. All that the reader has had to prepare him for the quivering wreck of a Ringbearer whom Sam finds in the Tower is his increasing sense of weariness, but Frodo is by nature fairly quiet, and has only rarely verbalised the pain and effort under which he is labouring. If we consider Frodo's state in Cirith Ungol, it is useful to remember that he was the only one of the four hobbits who did not lose his clothes in the Barrow, when he was more in control of the situation and his three companions were the helpless ones. The difference at this point brings home the complete reversal of physical power that has occurred. It also seems clear that when Faramir warns Frodo against taking the road to Cirith Ungol, he is thinking mainly of Frodo himself, and perhaps even prophetically – "I would not have you go to death or torment". This is very similar to the foresight which seems to be upon Aragorn when he says to the leader of the Fellowship: "It is not of the Ring, nor of the others, that I am thinking, but of you, Gandalf, and I say to you: "If you pass the doors of Moria, beware!" Moreover, the word used to describe Frodo's mood as he runs through the Haunted Pass is *fey* – and it seems highly unlikely that Tolkien would use such a word lightly. The original Frodo, who could have been healed in Middle-Earth, does actually die in that tunnel, and Frodo's real breaking-point occurs not at Mount Doom, but in Cirith Ungol.

"If it be now, 'tis not to come", are Hamlet's words, as he accepts and faces death. "Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows aught, what is't to leave betimes? Let be." Frodo accepts the command to enter Mordor with the words "What comes after must come" – although he does not enter it via the Black Gate, in the presence of which he utters these words. Hamlet himself is doomed – at least, once he has killed Polonius – and knows it – and, as Wilson points out, "Hamlet is fey, as heroes have been since the dawn of time." He is also solitary. Hamlet's quest, in the event, precludes any further involvement with Ophelia, and it turns out that he can trust no-one but Horatio. Frodo tries to save the Company from the Ring, and his friends from almost certain death, by absconding from Parth Galen and, of course, he is portrayed without ties either to parents, wife or betrothal, and for all Sam's care and love, Frodo is still ultimately – mentally – alone; the alienation effects of the Ring see to this. Neither is he aware of what efforts are being made – by the resurrected Gandalf and the Captains of the West, to keep the Eye away from Mordor and so aid him. Sam does not know of this either, but he is still able to draw hope from the "cry of woe and dismay" uttered by a Nazgûl as the Witch-King meets his doom, even if he does not know the precise cause of the Ringwraith's distress.

Mount Doom, at least from Frodo's point of view, is pure catharsis – and a catharsis accentuated by the fact that, for all the woundings and discomfort which he experiences throughout the saga, this is the only instance during the narrative when we actually see the hero bleed. No loss in terms of Frodo's blood has ever been reported up to now – in fact, as is so often the case with the protagonists of *Hamlet*, both his wounds have been by poison – of the Morgul knife-splinter and the bite of Shelob – and his other injuries – like the bruising after Moria – have been superficial, if painful. But Frodo's bleeding hand is accompanied by the eruption of Mount Doom, and with the free flowing of the red molten lava down the slopes of Orodruin, the reader feels a sense, albeit metaphorical, of a huge sacrificial outpouring, emblematic of a final release after months of restraint. Tectonics and geographical practicalities set aside, the flood in *The Mill On The Floss* serves a similar function metaphorically, when the heroine is finally – and temporarily – vanquished, after months of agonised temptation. Moroever – although this is an allusion to a polytheistic tradition – the image of Frodo's bleeding hand at the end of the Quest emphasises, both logically and metaphorically, what has been evident all along – that Frodo is not divine, that he is susceptible to sin, and that he is mortal and vulnerable.

As such, of course, he is believable and accessible. But he is also, for want of a better word, special, a jewel among his kind. Tolkien never tells us exactly how the Ring tempts Frodo, but Izz Huett and Marian's petition to Angel Clare on Tess's behalf should warn us against making too severe a judgement on lost battles against temptations we have never had to face: "HONOUR'D SIR – Look to your Wife if you do love her as much as she do love you. For she is sore put to by an Enemy in the shape of a Friend. Sir, there is one near her who ought to be Away. A woman should not be try'd beyond her Strength, and continual dropping will wear away a Stone – ay, more – a Diamond." And this vulnerability – the willingness, if necessary, not only to be hurt , but to fail personally for the greater good, is the core of Frodo's heroism.

What really differentiates Frodo's fate from Bilbo's or Sam's is the Norse element of *geifu* or luck. The cruelty of Fortune is well illustrated throughout world literature, and Frodo beholding the Ring as a wheel of fire during his last days in Mordor, as it almost engulfs him, might well have added "that mine own tears do scald like molten lead". It has been said of a prototype of Hamlet that "Had Fortune been as kind to him as nature", he would have rivalled the gods in deeds and wisdom. "Fortune or fate have helped you", says Gandalf to Frodo as he convalesces in Rivendell after his knife-wound – but Fortune appears to serve Frodo for as long as his Quest requires it to, and then drops him. Sam comes into contact with the Ring, and Bilbo possesses it far longer than Frodo in actual time – but neither of them is deprived – or at least not acutely – of health or longevity in the process. The real reason why Sam is Bilbo's literary successor is because, like Auoun, he is *inn mesti geifumaor* – a very lucky man – although this fact in no way diminishes either his courage or his loyalty. He wakes in Ithilien to what one critic has described as almost a vision of heaven – and to life and hope. He weeps and enthuses at the fact that "all [his] wishes have come true", and he insists that "I was born lucky, whatever my gaffer may say." This is, of course, to oversimplify Sam's story, but it is noticeable that we do not really hear of Frodo's reaction when he awakes after Mount Doom and realises that he is still alive. One of the clearest examples in world literature of the bond between the mediaeval *þegn* and *driht* or retainer and lord, it is perhaps one of the ironies of *The Lord of the Rings* that in the case of Frodo and Sam it is the retainer who inherits the earth – both in the box of Galadriel and the keys to Bag End, and the lord or master who becomes the exile – like one of the solitary figures of the Old English elegies whose tragedy is usually that of a retainer who



Gandalf *Natasha Gorton*

has lost his lord. The Seafarer remembers *hu ic geswincdagum oft prowade* – 'how I often suffered days of toil' – and the solitary figure of the Wanderer also speaks of sorrows which in some ways resemble the loneliness of the Ringbearer – trapped alone in the hell of the Ring in Mordor, and afterwards left bereft and grieving. Frodo's naturally balanced character - which I spoke of earlier – was, of course, nurtured by a certain security of social position.

When Frodo says goodbye to Sam at the Havens, his words hint at the complexity of his feelings. "I tried to save the Shire" is almost a silent appeal to Sam to 'tell my story'. Is Frodo anxious to have his tale set down, with nothing extenuated, as Othello put it? Although Frodo apparently undertakes the completion of the Red Book as a labour of love for Bilbo and as his final task upon Middle-Earth, it would appear that he is very clear in his mind as to what he intends to write in it. When Sam examines the book, he finds that most of the pages are written in "Frodo's firm flowing script" – a hand as strong as Gandalf's. This is more in the character of the quietly confident Frodo we knew at the beginning of the book - not overly confident, to be sure, in terms of taking on unknown dangers - he as much as describes himself to Gandalf as "I that am not shap'd for perilous quests" – but nonetheless calm and balanced. Perhaps Frodo's scholasticism and his skill with language are in the end all that remains to him. I here quote Wilson again, because he speaks so aptly of Hamlet in terms of his "tragic burden". He points out that the dying Hamlet has two concerns – both matters of great urgency to him. One is the succession in Denmark (in the event resolved by the arrival of Fortinbras and the "dying voice" of Hamlet), and the other is his own reputation – which, as Dover Wilson points out, "is all that remains to him in the ruin of his life". Frodo is similarly concerned with the completion of two tasks before he sails West – firstly, the securing of his legacy to Sam, and secondly, the labour of finishing – or almost finishing – the Red Book. "O God, Horatio – what a wounded name" – Frodo, unlike Tess, does not as such verbalise his feelings of unresolved guilt vis-à-vis the happenings at Mount Doom – that is to say, we never hear him exclaim anything like "How wickedly mad I was! Yet formerly I never could bear to hurt a fly or a worm", as Tess does after the murder of Alec – but on the other hand *The Lord of the Rings* is not a novel; its style and genre are, by Tolkien's assertion, those of the "heroic romance." Tolkien himself stated that Frodo's mental unrest and "unreasoning self-reproach" during his last days in Middle-Earth are quite clear to "the attentive reader".

Many critics and readers alike have pointed out that Frodo's survival is 'complicated' – as would Boromir's have been, had he not been sacrificed soon after falling prey to the lure of the Ring. Tolkien actually faces this complexity instead of killing Frodo off at Orodruin. Many critics applaud this decision, just as many disapprove, for instance, of what they term the "cop-out" ending of drowning Maggie Tulliver instead of having her face her society after having eloped – albeit subconsciously – with the lover of her own cousin. Hamlet himself dies – and after the deaths he has caused, both directly and indirectly, many would not consider it poetic justice for him to live – yet one also feels that he would no longer desire the throne of Denmark, since it is irrevocably defiled. Has Hamlet really had either the moral purity or the luck to cleanse it? Frodo does not appear to desire survival, but he is forced to face it. He in a sense returns to a defiled garden – the "rank and gross" may be weeded out of the wounded Shire, but not from Frodo's mind, and this is one reason why he has to sail – in order to be healed of such memories and for the burden of guilt to be lifted from him, as he comes on Eressea to understand – as Tolkien hinted in one of his letters – his place in the wider scheme of things.

Frodo's greatest moments are his quietest ones; not the instances when he strikes off the barrow-wight's hand, or stabs at the troll or the Nazgûl – but his times of painful resistance and his self-mastery on Amon Hen. The maturity of Tolkien's view of heroism becomes clear in *The Hobbit* when he states that the bravest thing Bilbo ever did was to walk down Smaug's tunnel alone. He also knew that being a hero could be miserable and degrading. Bilbo in the halls of the Elven-King feels the wretchedness of a burglar forced to furtively steal from the same house day after day, just as Frodo experiences the misery of "toiling and slinking", even though he possesses the courage and natural abilities to be a more traditional kind of hero. Frodo's equivalent moments are in his labours on the Stairs on the threshold of Mordor – unable as yet to encompass a concept so huge as actually reaching Mount Doom. I see no cause to doubt Frodo's characteristic sincerity when he says to the departing Faramir, called away to combat in Ithilien, "We would come with you ... if my errand permitted it." Yet fate leads or drags him on a different sacrificial path, and the golden Ring which he bears illustrates how he is symbolically married to his vocation. The signs of bereavement and profound melancholy which he exhibits after the Ring's destruction are all too like what one might experience after the loss of a much beloved spouse. Moreover, as Frodo contemplates the peril of Faramir and the massacre of Osgiliath, weeping at the vainness of his mission and castigating himself once for having squandered time, he resembles the solitary Prince who rebukes himself for "a rogue and peasant slave" and envisages "The imminent death of twenty thousand men." But of course, a resolution like "My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth" would be of no use whatsoever to the Ringbearer, whose final, losing battle is, and has to be, entirely internal. In the end, he renounces the sword altogether, whereas Hamlet, 'in the last need', reclaims it, to accomplish the sacred filial duty of revenge. In the battle of the Pelennor Fields, with his barrow-blade, Merry, in a sense (and unconsciously) avenges Frodo's initial wounding by the Witch-King, as well as the death of Théoden. The role of physical leader indeed passes to him, as is seen very clearly in 'The Scouring of the Shire'; Frodo's leadership is increasingly of a purely spiritual nature.

One further point I would like to touch upon is Frodo's relationship with Sam. Although I would say that Sam's closest Shakespearean equivalent is the shrewd and faithful Kent of *King Lear*, the literary friendship which most resembles theirs is the one shared by Hamlet and Horatio. It seems strange to me that some people have difficulty in understanding Frodo and Sam's relationship, when the depth of devotion between them is far from unprecedented, either in life or literature. Sam, of course, reflects the batmen of the First World War, the heroism of which Tolkien was in awe of. But the whole poignancy of Frodo and Sam's relationship, as others have noted, lies in the fact that, like Horatio, Sam cannot save his prince, but has to watch him being slowly consumed by a kind of spiritual death and taken further and further from his aid. In Mordor, Frodo and Sam are both at their closest and their most distant. Horatio cannot bear to live when his friend dies – but, on the other hand, he is looking at the physical ruin of the dynasty of Elsinore and the imminence of foreign rule. Frodo does not have to dash a cup of poison from Sam's lips – Sam is far too much of a survivor for that – but his message at the Havens is clear and poignant – live for me, and "report my cause aright".

Kent's final, haunting words, though: "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go/My master calls me; I must not say no", could well be applied to Sam, years later, when his own time to sail West comes. The reason why the bittersweet passing of Frodo, the 'accidental' (although clearly destined) and self-reproaching hero, pierces is so deeply, is the same reason why our breath catches when, in Spielberg's film, Schindler drops his golden ring while trying to decipher the inscription inside it, and breaks down in Stern's arms, sobbing "I didn't do enough – I could have got more out – I threw away so much money; you have no idea."

My final point regarding Frodo is that, of all the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, he is the one who most closely follows Gandalf. Although it takes various experiences to hammer Frodo into the role of the sacrificial pilgrim, his spiritual growth accelerates quite considerably after Moria, once Gandalf himself has set a precedent of self-sacrifice. It is the loss of Gandalf, and the acknowledgement that he gave himself freely, which causes Frodo to respect his counsels so deeply and to follow them with such humility, even amidst fear. Hence his almost pathological loyalty to the advice of Gandalf in his insistence, against the rationale of Sam, that they spare Gollum and pity him. Frodo cannot see the entire picture, but he knows that other forces are at work, outside the microcosm of the Ringbearer. He gives himself to the Quest as utterly as Gandalf gives up his life in Moria, and with an urgency that alarms both Sam and Gollum. United in purpose if not in motive, they do not need to utter "Let's follow, 'tis not fit thus to obey him" when, at the Black Gate, Frodo once again asserts an inclination to enter Mordor alone. "He waxes desperate with imagination", says Horatio to Marcellus as the Danish prince rushes after the ghost of his father. Sam's thoughts when Frodo, dragged by the Ring, runs towards Minas Morgul (from which the Lord of the Nazgul shortly issues) and collapses on the threshold of the bridge, are probably similar. Quite apart from the danger posed to their mission by Frodo's "sprint" towards the "luminous tower" of Minas Morgul, Sam's fears for what might be happening to Frodo's soul and sanity are perhaps paralleled by Horatio's frantic plea to his friend: "What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,/Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff… And there assume some other horrible form/Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason/And draw you into madness?" The Morgul-King, who tempts Frodo to put on the Ring, has not yet emerged from the city of the Ringwraiths, but his proximity to the Ringbearer is sufficient to parallel Horatio's fear that the "honest ghost" of *Hamlet* might be a 'devil', 'abusing' the Prince to 'damn' him. Like Horatio and Marcellus, both Gollum and Sam run after their 'master' to pull him back from what threatens him. Visually, the two scenes resemble one another; Branagh's film of *Hamlet* in particular portrays Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus at this point as a kind of 'trinity'.

Of course, Frodo to all intents and purposes joins the ranks of the Wise in the end, albeit without portfolio – although the acquisition of wisdom comes at a huge personal cost – the loss of his innocence and total exile from his own people and his former life. But his tragedy is akin to that of the elves – if they fade and pass away, so does he, as is symbolised by the increasing physical translucence which comes with his gradual ennoblement. And it is worth noting that Frodo's tragedy and loss are heightened, not undercut, by the passing of an entire Age and culture, as the most prominent figures amongst the remaining elves accompany him in the passage to the West and out of mortal spheres – just as the death of Hamlet is made more poignant, not less, by the fall of the entire house of Elsinore, in the "quarry" observed by Fortinbras.

For four hundred years, scholars have asked themselves why Hamlet delays in avenging his father's death, and even why Hamlet feigns madness, or whether or not he is indeed mad. But by the very ambiguity of his narration of the episode at Mount Doom, Tolkien has not so much betrayed Frodo to sin and failure as secured an almost comparable literary reputation for him. If Frodo's character has not simply been sacrificed at Mount Doom for the sake of plot and theological correctness, then why, ultimately, does he claim the Ring? Why, indeed, does anyone do anything? Is it for no apparent reason whatsoever, like the Ancient Mariner sealing his own lifelong guilt and remorse by senselessly killing the albatross? This, I think, was Sméagol's case, and Déagol was the bird in question, the sacrificial figure of Abel, strangled by Gollum as he joined the ranks of the Grendel-kin. But shocking as Frodo's transformation is under the power of the Ring, it is the corruption of a gentle soul pushed beyond the limits of its endurance. This is what makes him, if one feels compelled to so categorise, a tragic hero in the Greek sense rather than the Shakesperian, since his ultimate failure cannot really be pinned down to an individual character flaw. As Verlyn Flieger states in *Splintered Light*, "What has happened has happened." Perhaps Vyvyan Holland's final words from the Preface to Wilde's *De Profundis* would make an apt continuation of this: "Let us leave it at that." For Frodo's tale is not all doom and loss. This is the hobbit who stood hand in hand with Aragorn upon Cerin Amroth, sensed the blessedly pungent aura of Lothlórien, and mused that "he was in a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into forgetfulness" and that "When he had gone and passed again into the outer world, still Frodo the wanderer from the Shire would walk there, upon the grass among elanor and niphredil". T S Eliot observed in *The Four Quartets* that "to apprehend the point of intersection of the timeless with time is an occupation for the saint." This is the person who looked upon Henneth Annun, "fairest of the falls of Ithilien, land of many fountains" and spoke with Faramir – a character who is in many ways his twin-soul. This was also the recovering halfling, barely saved from death or wraithdom, who looked in awe at a lady under a canopy and "saw her whom few mortals had yet seen; Arwen, daughter of Elrond, in whom it was said that the likeness of Lúthien had come on earth again." This same lady, offering him her jewel and a hope of healing, probably divines her own mother's tragedy in his eyes as she bestows her parting gifts upon him – the first person, as Tolkien pointed out, to notice the already apparent signs of post-quest unease in Frodo. She verbally encapsulates the abundant measures of joy and rare privilege and agony and pain in Frodo's life when she says to him: "wear this now in memory of Elfstone and Evenstar with whom your life has been woven!" And Arwen is right. Bilbo tells Thorin that to share in his adventures has been "more than any Baggins deserves", but Thorin's sublime benediction emphatically asserts otherwise: "No! You have more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West." Hamlet's tale shows in part the loneliness of royalty and the sacrificial responsibility of the true prince; Frodo attains wisdom, nobility and true greatness through weakness and through being broken and alienated by his duty. And Frodo's has been a mixed cup: one of pain but also of blessedness. He has been "broken by a burden of fear and horror", but, in Tolkien's own words, broken into something else – remade, as it were: a mediæval knight battered into the mould of a saint. True enough, he has "supp'd full with horrors". But he has also drunk the milk of Paradise.