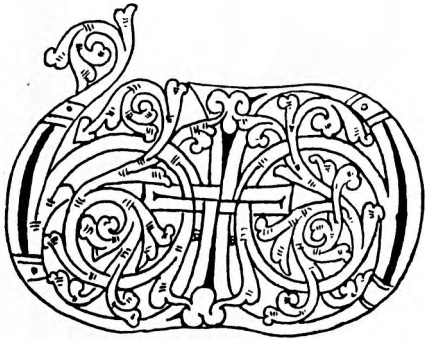




## Here Lies Gandalf by Archie Mercer



WHEN I first read 'The Hobbit' and 'The Lord of the Rings' (one volume at a time, from the B.S.F.A. library) I found them enjoyable despite Gandalf.

His activities, it seemed to me, detracted from rather than added to the story. Some commentators have gone on record to the effect that they thought Tom Bombadil, or the Ents, didn't really belong to the work but had a sort of patched-in-afterwards appearance. Except that he cropped up too often and at too great length to have been patched-in, Gandalf gave me a similar feeling. He seemed to be virtually a 'deus ex machina', always on call to pull the heroes out of tight corners that heroes ought to be capable of getting out of by themselves. When he fell in Moria, the only thing that kept me from rejoicing outright was a feeling that it wasn't for keeps, that he'd be back. (And of course, he was!)

Subsequent readings showed me, as they will, that I'd grossly underestimated him. To dismiss him as a 'deus ex machina' made less sense with each reading. And yet, I'd got rather a vague hold of something. Gandalf's powers were considerably greater than he was willing to admit. They did not, however, amount to omnipotence.

Sooner or later he fell into place in my mind. He was the master chess-player with a vast assemblage of pieces on the board, playing against Sauron with a similar vast array. Not only was he the player; he was also the most powerful of his own pieces, his own 'queen' as it were, and in addition the rules of the variant permitted him in certain circumstances to move some of his opponent's pieces too - and of course vice versa.

In order to demonstrate this, I shall cite in sequence each relevant instance in the books, and endeavour to account for it.

What amounts to Gandalf's 'standing orders' appears in Appendix B (III.455) "(the Istari) ... were messengers sent to contest the power of Sauron, and to unite all those who had the will to resist him; but they were forbidden to match his power with power, or seek to dominate Elves or Men

by force or fear." Gandalf was clearly the important one of the five, and the extent to which his power was in fact circumscribed is, as shall be seen, something of a moot point.

However my argument starts not with Gandalf but with Gollum. Gollum is first met with in 'The Hobbit' (P.66). "I don't know where he came from," disclaims Tolkien-as-narrator, "nor who or what he was." The Professor misleads us, for in Book I P.84 he tells us both who and what Gollum was.

The thing is that Tolkien narrates 'The Hobbit' with, as it were, two voices. When he's talking of Bilbo Baggins and his deeds, he looks at him and them through his own, Tolkien's, eyes. When on the other hand, he's talking about people and things that Bilbo encounters, he looks at them through Bilbo's eyes. This double standard applies to a lesser extent throughout the 'LotR', as between the Hobbits on the one hand and the non-Hobbits on the other, but it is particularly noticeable in 'The Hobbit'. As with Gollum, so with Gandalf. We are shown Gandalf, not in all his power and might, but Gandalf as he wished others to see him. It boils down to basic psychology - it better served Gandalf's purpose to appear less than he in fact was, thus creating more of a fellow-feeling for a fallible colleague on the part of those who served as his chess-pieces.

I am not therefore necessarily concerned with Tolkien's intentions when he wrote: nor even necessarily with the various intentions of the Hobbits who compiled the Red Book from which the tales were taken. What I am concerned with is what is actually written, and how it may be interpreted - which isn't always as straightforwardly as might appear on the surface.

Gandalf's first display of possibly-less-than-total omniscience was when he was discussing the map of the Lonely Mountain with the Dwarves and Bilbo (H.20). Gandalf mentioned a closed door "...which has been made to look exactly like the side of the mountain. That is the dwarves' usual method - I think that is right, isn't it?' 'Quite right' said Thorin." This instance is entirely trivial of course, and represents no more than the wizard deferring politely to the dwarf chieftain. There is no question of Gandalf having been wrong.

The next occasion (H.39) was when they were trying to get into the trolls' cave. "... they could not open it, not though they all pushed while Gandalf tried various incantations." Now this would be strictly a cover-up job on Gandalf's part, because he'd rather that Bilbo found the key than that he himself did. Bilbo duly obliged.

Elrond, not Gandalf, was the first person to translate in public (H.49/50) the runes on the two swords and the moon-letters on the map. Had Elrond not been conveniently available, though, Gandalf would doubtless have admitted cheerfully to understanding the sword-runes, and most likely to reading the moon-letters too, whatever the hour or the date.

On the pass through the Misty Mountains, during the storm Gandalf showed disquiet (H.53) on account of the stone giants. The stone giants were in fact no trouble to the party.

Escaping from the caverns under the Misty Mountains, Bilbo rejoined

the main party (H.84/85). Gandalf was at that precise moment talking about going back to look for him - but only talking. It wasn't necessary to go back. Gandalf himself brought all the dwarves through safely, and was simply waiting for Bilbo. He must have had a damn good idea that not only would Bilbo emerge safely, but when and where, and he had held the dwarves there until he did.

Finally so far as 'The Hobbit' is concerned, there is the episode of the "Fifteen birds in five fir trees" (H.92/99). The whole party - Gandalf, Bilbo and the thirteen dwarves - had been treed by wolves and goblins, who had then set fire to their refuges. Gandalf's pyrotechnical display had almost routed the wolves before goblins appeared to back them up, but the goblins and wolves together appeared to be too much for him - until the eagles suddenly put in an appearance. And what pray brought the Eagles? Why, none other than Gandalf! His pyrotechnics were as effective a summons as was required.

Moving on to Book I of 'The Lord of the Rings', we find Gandalf in the early chapters doing a whole lot of dissembling. "I have merely begun to wonder about the ring", he said (I.68) at the end of the first chapter - nevertheless the advice he gave Frodo seems to indicate considerably more knowledge on Gandalf's part than he was willing to admit to. Then, in the second chapter, 'The Shadow of the Past' (I.76 et seq.) when he told Frodo of the Ring's history, to take him literally is to make him look unnaturally gullible. The famous statement (I.88) that "...Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker", however, can be taken literally - bearing in mind that it was Gandalf himself who 'meant' Bilbo to find it!

Turning from direct consideration of the Ring itself to consideration of Gollum (I.91), Gandalf was still dissembling at full blast. It seems to me, however, that he contrived to manipulate Gollum to much the same extent - though in somewhat different fashion - as he manipulated the more personable characters, the main object in this case being to tempt Sauron into premature activity. The Gandalfish dissembling continues into the third chapter (I.100), with Gandalf feigning ignorance of the course of future events as he advised Frodo to leave the Shire - planning all the while the precise course of those events.

The episode of the undelivered message entrusted to Barliman Butterbur (I.266/231) gives some idea of how much confidence Gandalf had in his own overall planning. The message was of apparently vital importance, yet it is clear from the context that Gandalf was by no means certain that it would be delivered in time. This seems to imply that he knew he had sufficient reserves in the fire to take care of things some other way in the event of its non-delivery - as is in fact exactly how it was.

Throughout Book II, right up to his disappearance at the Bridge of Khazad-Dûm, Gandalf continued to dissemble away like mad - and his hearers appeared to believe him quite happily, even where the dissembling tended to become highly transparent. He disclaimed knowledge that the Nazgûl had arisen (I.291), admitted to having been fooled by Saruman and also to having let Gollum escape him (I.329), and again (I.333) claimed to have been improbably slow on the uptake with regard to the Ring's true identity. Then (I.338) he walked into Saruman's clutches, ostensibly unaware of the way things had

developed in that quarter. When the Ring went south, he modestly let Aragorn's judgement rule (I.372) with regard to fieldcraft and weathercraft lore. He even dissembled (I.424/5) as he fought his heroic rearguard action against the Balrog.

Looking at things from Gandalf's presumed viewpoint, though, there was much woven in and around the foregoing that required - not just - a verbal smokescreen. He revealed an apparent foreknowledge of Gollum's role (I.336) "... he may play a part yet that neither he nor Sauron has foreseen", though he covered up a bit for this (I.356) by attributing some of his Gollum-lore to Gwaihir. Shortly afterwards (I.360) he dissembled as he predicted that Frodo might find unlooked-for foes and friends on the way. His sense of deep strategy showed as he arranged for Merry and Pippin, against Elrond's advice, to accompany the Ring further (I.361).

Gandalf's prediction of the weather to be found in the Redhorn Pass (I.375), his skating quickly over the possibility that the party might travel better via the Gap of Rohan than through or under the mountains (also I.375) and his - in the circumstances - unanswerable plug for the Moria route (I.385/6) seem to indicate that not only did he want them to travel via Moria, he made 100% certain that that was what they would do. References were made to the possibly supernatural origin of the Redhorn Pass snowstorm, but none of those present seems to have considered that Gandalf himself would be entirely capable of arranging such a demonstration of weather-control had he wished. Obviously, he did wish. His professed inability to burn snow (I.381) is all part and parcel of this. Nobody, surely, had asked him to do precisely that - but equally surely he might have melted it with some of his well known pyrotechnic effects, had he cared to. Again, Gandalf was the one, who after much shilly-shallying for effect (I.401/2) opened Durin's doors into Moria. He also demonstrated his thorough familiarity with the geography of that realm.

I must admit that I am unable to account for Aragorn's prophecy (I.388) that Moria might be fatal for Gandalf personally - unless either he was wholly or partly in the secret, or possibly had a glimmering of something going on but let Gandalf mislead him as to precisely what it was.

The question arises as to why Gandalf should have wished the party to travel by the Moria route. Only two things in particular seem to have happened whilst they were there: the discovery of Balin's tomb with the book of Mazarbûl, and the Balrog incident. The former is of interest rather than of importance, being merely the tying-up of what otherwise would have been a loose-end - a loose-end in fact that the work need not have mentioned in the first place had the Moria journey not been made. That leaves the Balrog. It seems clear that Gandalf wished to confront the Balrog, and in order to lure it from the depths where it lurked he needed bait. The bait he used was the One Ring.

The Balrog incident is particularly important whichever view one takes of Gandalf and his motives. It leaps from Book II (I.424/430) to Book III (II.133/136): the first reference takes things up to Gandalf's disappearance, the second is his story of what happened subsequently. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Gandalf was confident of his superiority over the Balrog, and was impatient to put this to the test. I cannot place any reliance on Gandalf's

own narrative of his adventures: it looks to me no more than a piece of blatant myth-making. Gandalf, if anyone, is surely entitled to compose his own myths if he wishes: but it is the part of the perceptive reader to smell out a myth, and then roll it back to see what may lie beneath. In this instance, all we can say for sure is that Gandalf disappeared off-stage in the Balrog's company and returned some weeks later with his powers considerably enhanced - but without the Balrog.

Before spinning his myth, though, Gandalf indulged in a typical bout of dissembling. As soon as he had been identified by his friends at the edge of the Fangorn Forest, he started boasting and dissembling simultaneously (II.125/126) and then (II.127) we can see for a moment right into his mind when he spoke of the repercussions of Merry's and Pippin's invasion of the forest.

One curious statement of Gandalf's, repeated twice (II.131 and 209), concerns Treebeard's status as the oldest living creature in Middle-earth. As is well known, Tom Bombadil (I.182) also claimed that status. Personally I tend to take Tom's word rather than Gandalf's: Tom lacks the wizard's deviousness. Presumably Gandalf had access to the truth of the matter, so if he prevaricated he must have had some reason. The best I can think of is that it was a diplomatic move aimed at smoothing the way for an alliance with the Ents of Fangorn. He had planned mightily for that alliance, but had as usual to dissemble concerning his plans (II.131/132), and I cannot accept that (II.189) the result was indeed "Better than my design, and better even than my hope..."

Despite Gandalf's warning (II.232) to his companions, the interview with Saruman before Orthanc was not fraught with any particular perils - except of course for Saruman himself! Gandalf disclaimed the power "to destroy Orthanc from without" (II.243) - it is a moot point whether it was indeed impregnable to Gandalf, or whether it simply suited his purposes to leave the shorn Saruman there out of the way while our side got on with the war on the eastern front. It is clear from the context, however, that Gandalf manipulated Gríma as successfully as he did Gollum.

The episode of Pippin's borrowing of the Palantír (II.250/256) is more than a little odd. Surely Gandalf would instantly have known the Palantír for what it was, and I half-suspect that he was not really asleep when Pippin removed it from his custody. Despite Pippin's few moments of horror, and the cries of doom and disaster from all around, Gandalf was not in fact unduly concerned over the affair, which has a general air of having been stage-managed from the start. Gandalf may well have deemed it preferable at that juncture to draw Sauron's attention to Orthanc and the Emnets of Rohan, and thus away from Gondor and the mountain dales where the Rohirrim were gathering, and have deliberately encouraged Pippin to have a surreptitious peep.

Although Gandalf is physically off-stage throughout Book IV, it's certainly not a case of out of sight equalling out of mind. Faramir just about sizes up the matter (II.353) when he says: "This Mithrandir was, I now guess, more than a lore-master: a great mover of the deeds that are done in our time."

Onward to Book V, and Gandalf admitting personal responsibility for the successful outcome of the Orthanc/Rohan situation (III.22). Shortly thereafter (III.27), in priming Pippin prior to the latter's interview with Denethor, he

cunningly suggested what Aragorn and his followers were up to, but in such a way that, to a casual listener, he would have appeared only to be thinking aloud.

Gandalf can be observed in slam-bang action, with no pulling of his powers, in the episode (III.99/100) where he rescues Faramir from the Orcs before Minas Tirith. But a few pages later (III.107/8) he's back in full dissembling form when he expresses fear that Gollum may prove treacherous - but notes at the same time that "...a traitor may betray himself..."

Gandalf individually was certainly more than a match for any single one of Sauron's chief henchmen, as witness (III.125/6) his confrontation with the Witch King. In fact, as I see it, the only limitation on his powers was his inability to be everywhere at once. He schemed to place his 'pieces' where they might do most good, but it has to be borne in mind that for certain things he himself was necessary on the spot. It is entirely credible (III.154) that, in order for him to save Faramir's life, "...others will die..." that he might have saved instead. This aspect of things is soon echoed (III.161 + 165) - there was simply nobody else available to do certain things that required instant action or none. Elrond might have served, or Galadriel, but each had chosen to be elsewhere - and at that, having all three of them concentrated in Minas Tirith could have been fatal had Sauron got wind of it.

Gandalf's planning paid off when, in Book VI (III.278/9) he recognised the successful end of the quest with the arrival of the Eagles. How he had summoned them this time is not clear: possibly it was by prior arrangement. But the Eagles were certainly among his pieces, and precisely where he wanted them to be. He and they promptly impersonated the 7th (airborne) US Cavalry (III.280/2) and charged off to effect a last minute rescue of Frodo and Sam.

When Aragorn was crowned King (III.303/4) he commanded that Gandalf should be the one actually to place the crown on his head, saying "...for he has been the mover of all that has been accomplished, and this is his victory." There were still numerous loose ends to be tidied up, some of which Gandalf dealt with in person, others (as in the Shire) through selected surrogates. Gandalf it was who showed Aragorn the new white tree (III.308), and when he bowed out of further action (III.340/1) he made no secret that he still knew considerably more of what was going on than the Hobbits did!

(Page references: H = The Hobbit, Allen & Unwin paperback  
I, II + III = The Lord of the Rings, Ballantine paperback)

