


Rothfuss's *The Name of the Wind* or Scott Lynch's *Gentleman Bastard* series), most fantasy novels tend towards a historical tone as if the author were imparting lost tales of what happened long ago. This is certainly the case with *The Lord of the Rings*, Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen* series, and Bakker's *Prince of Nothing* series. The main stylistic mark of successful fantasy is a tone appropriate to the story being told. Tone helps ease a reader into a narrative and helps them to believe in the story — either as a ripping yarn or as a serious moralistic tale.

The unquantifiable

The most important quality of good fantasy is one that does not fall under the categories of plot, character or style but is an amalgamation of all three: “the capacity to incite wonder”⁴. Fantasy has the unique ability to show events, people, and worlds that could not possibly be seen in real life: to evoke the sense of wonder that comes from encountering the unexplained. G. K. Chesterton said fantasy shows that “the universe is wild and full of marvels”⁷. In defending fantasy as a genre, Jorge Luis Borges said⁸ that fantasy is the most ancient genre: “dreams, symbols and images traverse our lives; a welter of imaginary worlds flows unceasingly

through the world”. Fantasy articulates this everyday power of imagination and transports readers to realms beyond the ordinary, encouraging them to think outside their comfort zone and consider other ways of living. Fantasy, with its expansiveness and its possibilities, broadens the reader's experience of the world, increases their curiosity, and forms a bridge to complex philosophy and heady morality. In other words, “stories prepare us for the day to come”. Ultimately, a good fantasy novel inspires wonder in the same way as a magic trick: the best ones leave you wondering how it was done. 

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The wizard and the rhetor: rhetoric and the ethos of Middle-earth in *The Hobbit*

CHAD CHISHOLM

Early in *The Hobbit* when the wizard Gandalf arrives at the clearing in the woods, he finds that Thorin Oakenshield and his 12 dwarf companions have been captured by the trolls Bert, Tom and William. Shortly before their captivity, Thorin had fought valiantly, using a torch to burn Bert in the eye and to knock out one of Tom's front teeth, before William finally takes Thorin from behind and places him in a sack. Now the trolls, more incensed than before, are quarrelling about the most expedient way to cook these unlucky 13: roast them slowly, mince and then boil them, or “sit on them one by one and squash them into jelly”. After much heated debate, the trolls decide to follow Bert's idea to roast the dwarves immediately and save them for a later snack. However, once they come to their tenuous consensus, the trolls hear a voice (which Bert takes to be William's) say “No good roasting 'em now, it'd take all night”. William and Bert immediately begin to quarrel again and finally decide to boil the dwarves, when the voice (which Bert and William take to be Tom's) begins to quibble about fetching the water for the pot. This starts the argument

afresh, and the three trolls start fighting again, which goes on awhile until the sun peeks into the clearing in the woods and the voice says, “Dawn take you all, and be stone”. The trolls freeze into statues, and Gandalf, who had been disguising his voice, steps triumphantly into the clearing.

Although it is unclear whether Gandalf used magic or acting to dissemble his own voice for the trolls, his strategy for keeping the trolls from eating the dwarves and arguing until morning is shrewdly rhetorical and begins long before he contributes a single utterance to the trolls' culinary conversation. For instance, before he speaks, Gandalf listens to Bert, Tom and William argue and fight over roasting or boiling, and deduces the character (ethos) and emotional state (pathos) of his audience: that the churlish companionship of the three trolls is hardly filial, but held in place mostly by their gluttonous urges and desire for plunder, which leads to a mutual suspicion that makes their alliance shaky. Gandalf then infers that the trolls could be credulous enough that if he were to exploit these tensions, he might persuade them to focus their anger more on themselves rather than the dwarves.

Gandalf here is being very Aristotelian. In Book II of *Rhetoric*, Aristotle uses chapters 1 through 17 to enumerate the emotions or passions so that the rhetor can use them in order to effectively persuade his audience. For example, in chapter 2, Aristotle discusses anger as an impulse that is always directed towards another person, often because of an insult, and that “people who are afflicted by sickness or poverty or love or thirst or any other unsatisfied desires are prone to anger and easily roused: especially against those who slight their present distress” (ref. 1, p. 251). Aside from describing the characteristics of anger, Aristotle further claims that “the orator will have to speak so as to bring his hearers into a frame of mind that will dispose them to anger, and to represent his adversaries as open to such charges and possessed of such qualities as do make people angry” (ref. 1, p. 257).

Then in chapter 10, Aristotle discusses the passion of envy, which he claims is the only emotion that is distinctively bad or evil. “Envy,” says Aristotle, “is pain at the sight of such good fortune as consists of the good things already mentioned; we feel it towards our equals; not with the idea of getting something for ourselves, but because the other people have it” or “We feel envy also if we fall but a little short of having everything” and that in general “those who aim at a reputation for anything are envious” (ref. 1, p. 303). No matter the station or degree in life, Aristotle suggests that among those whom we consider ‘equals’, any perception of increase in fortune will raise the emotion of envy in the envious man. Envy is always competitive, and Aristotle cautions the rhetor that if “we ourselves with whom the decision rests are put into an envious state of mind... it is obvious that they will win no pity from us” (ref. 1, p. 307).

Later in Book II, Aristotle moves on from emotions to the differences in individual character that the rhetor should consider when trying to persuade members of the audience — examining the probable characteristics of young persons, old persons and those who are middle-aged — because Aristotle wants to show the rhetor how persons in each age group might (in all probability, of course) respond to different sorts of arguments and proofs. The rhetor must appeal to these values if he wants to persuade the audience. The rhetor in this case, Gandalf, uses scenic elements that are already in his favour. Henri Bergson, in his theory of laughter, claims that many comedic situations are caused by the complementary forces of tension and elasticity:

If these two forces are lacking in the body to any considerable extent, we have sickness and infirmity and accidents of every kind. If they are lacking in the mind, we find every degree of mental deficiency, every variety of insanity. Finally, if they are lacking in the character, we have cases of the gravest inadaptability to social life, which are the sources of misery and at times the causes of crime. (ref. 2)

The relational tension between Tom, Bert and William, coupled with their dearth of intellectual agility, does much of Gandalf’s work for him so that he can act merely as an ignition spark to their own self-immolation.

With the trolls, Gandalf uses a prescriptive rhetoric similar to Aristotle’s, but the wizard puts his rhetorical abilities to full use when he, Bilbo Baggins, and the 13 dwarves come to the house of Beorn — the half-man, half-bear creature who lives in a great wooden dwelling in the middle of the woods outside Mirkwood Forest. Thorin, Bilbo and company have just escaped from the goblins of the Misty Mountains with the aid of Gandalf, but they are without food or transportation, and Beorn is the only person in the area who can aid them. Unfortunately, Beorn is not amenable towards needy company, but without some aid Thorin’s expedition to the Lonely Mountain will surely fail, and the adventurers will likely perish either by starvation or at the mercy of their enemies.

Although the rhetorical situation Gandalf faces with Beorn is not as dire as with Bert, Tom and William as no one is about to be roasted or boiled, everything hangs on Gandalf’s ability to persuade Beorn to help them. This is even more difficult because Beorn is far more shrewd and decent than a cabal of feckless trolls. However, before they reach Beorn’s lands, Gandalf has several advantages, one of which is his familiarity with Beorn’s origins and history. As Gandalf explains to Bilbo:

Some say that he is a bear descended from the great and ancient bears of the mountains that lived there before the giants came. Others say that he is a man descended from the first men who lived before Smaug or the other dragons came into the hills out of the North ... As a bear he ranges far and wide. I once saw him sitting all alone on the top of the Carrock at night watching the moon sinking towards the Misty Mountains, and I heard him growl in the tongue of bears: ‘The day will come when they will perish and I shall go back!’ That is why I believe he once came from the mountains itself.

As they reach Beorn’s lands, Gandalf cautions the dwarves “not to annoy him” and that Beorn “can be appalling when he is angry, though he is kind enough if humoured”. Then the wizard instructs the company to come to the house two at a time, so Beorn will not be startled, and tells them to come in pairs after he whistles, and to continue to do this at five minute intervals. Gandalf then takes Bilbo with him and the two proceed alone while the other 13 wait in the woods. Gandalf and Bilbo find Beorn in a courtyard who asks, rather tersely, “Who are you and what do you want?” After Beorn says he has never heard of Gandalf, the wizard asks Beorn if he knows the wizard Radagast, who is Gandalf’s cousin and lives nearer to Beorn on the southern border of Mirkwood. Beorn does know Radagast, “not a bad fellow as wizards go”, and he begins to somewhat soften his tone. Then Gandalf begins to tell Beorn the story of their adventure in the Misty Mountains, the trouble with the goblins, their victory and escape, which greatly amuses Beorn because he despises goblins as invaders and enemies of nature.

Once again, Gandalf is Aristotelian — he uses his knowledge of Beorn’s character, his history, and his location to place the cranky bear-man into a favourable mindset that is more open to persuasion. Gandalf’s plan is so clever and

persuasive, that Beorn, rather than being annoyed at finding that Gandalf has been fiddling with the number of dwarves (at one time the wizard says he was with “a friend or two”, then “several of our companions” and then its “more than six of us” ...) is almost jocular, and in his amusement helps correct Gandalf’s equivocal arithmetic as if it were a game. Beorn is so pleased, he offers the company food, lodging and he also does some scouting for them, learning that the goblins have an attack party that is out searching for the dwarves and wizard that killed the Great Goblin, who was their king. Beorn gives them advice on how to evade this group by taking the northern pass through Mirkwood that will take them near the Lonely Mountain.

What is also noticeable is that Gandalf, in dealing both with Beorn and the trolls, does not tell the truth, or at least not the whole truth. Indeed, he deceives the trolls into believing he is one of them, and he purposely misleads Beorn about the numbers of Thorin’s company. Such dissembling tactics, on the other hand, seem to be a violation of Plato’s and Aristotle’s views of rhetoric, which are that the rhetor must always be truthful. However, Gandalf here seems to be following Quintilian, the rhetorician of Imperial Rome, who maintains that the rhetor must be honest and just, of course, although Quintilian manufactures a special back door that is a unique innovation for Classical Rhetoric:

A good man may sometimes think it proper to tell a lie, and occasionally even in matters of small moment, as, when children are sick, we make them believe many things with a view to promote their health, and promise them many which we do not intend to perform ... and much less, is it forbidden to tell a falsehood when an assassin is to be prevented from killing a man, or an enemy to be deceived for the benefit of our country so that what is at one time reprehensible in a slave is at another laudable even in the wisest of men. If this be admitted, I see that many causes may occur for which an orator may justly undertake a case of such a nature, as, in the absence of any honourable motive, he would not undertake’ (ref 3, p. 417).


In other words, the rhetor must be honest with himself, and therefore manipulation or even lying can be acceptable if done for justifiable reasons, such as when Gandalf wants to save his companions from being roasted, or likewise when they are cold, wet and hungry, to get them food to eat and a bed for the night. Therefore, although Gandalf here might not be truthful, he is adhering to what many Classical rhetors often refer to simply as ‘the good’, which is what is best for the greater number of people.

However, in another sense, Gandalf by misrepresenting the truth is adhering to the ethos of Middle-earth (formed carefully by Tolkien), which makes the argument that for Gandalf to remain honest and true to his own convictions (which Quintilian implies must be overriding), he has no choice but to deceive his audience for the sake of his companions. Otherwise, the wizard will fail to uphold his values and adhere to the most ‘honourable motive’ within him.

In the end, Gandalf the Grey abides by the rules of the

Classical rhetor that acknowledges, what Plato argues in the *Phaedrus*, that “there never is nor ever will be a real art of speaking which is divorced from the truth” (ref. 4, p. 235). Therefore, Gandalf is only a rhetor second, after he is first a philosopher. As Plato makes a distinction between teaching the truth to others and being persuasive, he argues that those who seek the truth must learn philosophy before rhetoric, and that rhetoric must be employed in the service of philosophy so that souls of persons might be led to truth. In contrast to Saruman the White (who becomes Saruman of Many Colours), rhetoric for Gandalf is only a tool so that he might be the philosophic hero of Tolkien’s world, whereas Saruman becomes the archetypical Platonic representation of the Sophist rhetor that places persuasion as the measure of all things, even before truth.

And yet, rhetoric in Tolkien’s fiction serves a larger role than merely advancing the plots of his novels or adding depth to his wizards. The novels themselves are arguments: from the early stages of the Middle-earth tales, Tolkien establishes an ethos within his world: for example, there are certain values that all of the characters are supposed to know and are not to violate, and when they do, the terrible consequences are understood. In the opening pages of *The Silmarillion*, for instance, we see Melkor who ends the harmonious fellowship of the Music of the Ainur with his wandering “alone into the void places seeking the Imperishable Flame”: once this happens, then within Melkor “desire grew hot ... to bring into Being things of his own”, which is dangerous because “being alone, [Melkor] had begun to conceive thought of his own unlike those of his brethren”. As such, Melkor begins to violate the natural laws of Middle-earth, which further illustrates that Tolkien is placing at the centre of his world a rhetorical argument that holds through all of his fiction, using his words and his textual characters as tropes for his worldview, which is that both a love and life of adherence to truth is more important than the pursuit of self-interest, empowerment or even simple expediency.

Gandalf, therefore, is the hero of Middle-earth not because he is persuasive as a speaker or powerful as a wizard, but because he knows what is true, and he cannot bear its corruption by the trolls nor, later, Saruman, and Gandalf uses his rhetoric to lead others to that truth, which matters most whether or not it is profitable. In the rhetoric that Gandalf uses throughout Tolkien’s fiction, he urges the other characters not only to learn the values of Middle-earth, but to discover and remember the absolute truths and forms of their shared world, and thus find peace and certainty at their core. This, from a Platonic point of view, is what all persons yearn for beyond dragon treasure or all the power of which mortal kings can dream. 

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