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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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The Quest for Pity and Mercy in Tolkien's Middle Earth

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As a lover of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, I would like to muse briefly on the books' theme of pity and mercy, in particular that shown by Bilbo and Frodo. I will start with several selected quotations from the books, then speculate on Tolkien's sources, and conclude with Tolkien's "sermon illustrations" of pity and mercy.

Selected Quotations

We each have our beloved Tolkien passages. My favorite one-liner in *The Hobbit* occurs just as Gollum has lost the Ring: "Thief, thief, thief! Baggins! We hates it, we hates it, we hates it for ever!" I wish to focus on the passage that immediately precedes Gollum's lament:

"Bilbo almost stopped breathing, and went stiff himself. He was desperate. He must get away, out of this terrible darkness, while he had any strength left. He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him. No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him, or tried to yet. And he was miserable, alone, lost. A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering. All these thoughts passed in a flash of a second. He trembled. And then quite suddenly in another flash, as if lifted by a new strength and resolve, he leaped."¹

Gollum has lost his prey, Bilbo Baggins, and his precious, the Ring, but little does he know that he almost lost his life. Bilbo's first instinct was to stab and

kill Gollum, or at the very least to blind him. But then, "A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart." Bilbo's pity stayed his hand, and prevented him from killing Gollum when he had the chance.

I was surprised to discover that today's version of *The Hobbit*, the prologue to the "tribal bible," is the "revised standard version." This passage on pity was not in the original (1937) edition of *The Hobbit*. Tolkien substantially rewrote the "Riddles in the Dark" chapter, to emphasize Gollum's wretchedness and Bilbo's pity, as he was writing *The Lord of the Rings*.² He sent his new version of the chapter to his publisher, Allen & Unwin, as "a specimen of rewriting" which he had not necessarily intended for publication.³ Tolkien was taken by surprise when the new version of the chapter found its way into the publisher's page proofs for the second (1951) edition of *The Hobbit*. This rewritten version is the one we have today.

Early on in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, in the second chapter of the book, Tolkien stresses this theme of pity and mercy in a conversation between Frodo and Gandalf. Incidentally, this conversation was set much later in the movie, after entering the mines of Moria:

Frodo: ". . . What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!"

Gandalf: "Pity? It was pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity."

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Frodo: "I am sorry. But I am frightened; and I do not feel any pity for Gollum. . . . he is as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy. He deserves death."

Gandalf: "Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not the least."⁴

Author Ralph C. Wood considers this speech to be "the moral and religious center of the entire epic," "its animating theme."⁵ He notes that this passage, "The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many," is "the only declaration to be repeated in all three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*."⁵ In this chapter we also discover that Gollum was shown mercy not only by Bilbo, but by others in the intervening years. The author Fleming Rutledge observes the "conspicuous Mercy shown to Gollum even before the saga begins, starting with Bilbo, then continuing with Aragorn and the Wood-elves and then Frodo (instructed by Gandalf), then Faramir, and finally in the last hour even Sam, who refrained from killing Gollum on the brink of Doom. This Mercy (Pity) is the theme that is highlighted by Tolkien perhaps most of all."⁶

When Frodo gets his first chance to kill Gollum, in their face-to-face encounter in *The Two Towers*, he begins to feel pity: "Poor wretch! He has done us no harm."⁷ Gandalf's previous words on pity and mercy come back to Frodo's mind as "voices out of the past," so that Frodo is merciful toward Gollum. When Frodo gets another chance to have Gollum killed, in "The Forbidden Pool" chapter of *The Two Towers*, pity again intervenes. Frodo stays Faramir's hand:

Faramir: "What have you to say now, Frodo? Why should we spare?"

Frodo: "The creature is wretched and hungry, and unaware of his danger. And Gandalf, your Mithrandir, he would have bidden you not to slay him for that reason, and for others."⁸

As regards pity and mercy, Gollum is the exact opposite of Frodo. His ownership of the ring begins with a total lack of pity. He murders his own brother, Deagol, to possess the ring. He leads Frodo and Sam into Mordor via Shelob's lair, in the hope that she will

kill them and he will repossess "his Precious." Just outside Shelob's lair on the stairs of Cirith Ungol, Gollum almost repents and shows pity toward Frodo. In this scene, Gollum returns to find Frodo and Sam sound asleep:

"Gollum looked at them. A strange expression passed over his lean hungry face. The gleam faded from his eyes, and they went dim and grey, old and tired. A spasm of pain seemed to twist him, and he turned away, peering back up towards the pass, shaking his head, as if engaged in some interior debate. Then he came back, and slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo's knee—but almost the touch was a caress. For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing."

But at that touch Frodo stirred and cried out softly in his sleep, and immediately Sam was wide awake. The first thing he saw was Gollum—"pawing at master," as he thought.

'Hey you!' he said roughly. 'What are you up to?'

'Nothing, nothing,' said Gollum softly. 'Nice master!'

'I daresay,' said Sam. 'But where have you been to—sneaking off and sneaking back, you old villain?'

Gollum withdrew himself, and a green glint flickered under his heavy lids. Almost spider-like he looked now, crouched back on his bent limbs, with his protruding eyes. The fleeting moment had passed, beyond recall . . ."⁹

Sam's thoughtless response to Gollum was for Tolkien perhaps the most tragic moment in *The Lord of the Rings*. According to one of Tolkien's letters, Sam "plainly did not fully understand Frodo's motives or his distress in the incident of the Forbidden Pool. If he had understood better what was going on between Frodo and Gollum, things might have turned out differently in the end. For me perhaps the most tragic moment in the Tale comes . . . when Sam fails to note the complete change in Gollum's tone and aspect. 'Nothing, nothing,' said Gollum softly. 'Nice master!' His repentance is blighted and all Frodo's pity is (in a sense) wasted. Shelob's lair became inevitable."¹⁰

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Frodo and Sam have one last chance to kill Gollum, on Mount Doom at the end of the quest. Both would have been justified in killing Gollum, after the evil he did to them in Shelob's lair, yet both spare him. At this point Frodo is "untouchable now by pity,"¹¹ and it is Sam who reaches "the point of pity at last . . . but for the good of Gollum too late."¹² Sam finally has the chance to deal with Gollum, but:

"Sam's hand wavered. His mind was hot with wrath and the memory of evil. It would be just to slay this treacherous, murderous creature, just and many times deserved; and also it seemed the only safe thing to do. But deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched. He himself, though only for a little while, had borne the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum's twisted mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief in life ever again . . ."¹³

Frodo is the champion of pity and mercy in *The Lord of the Rings*, showing these virtues up to the end of the trilogy. In "The Scouring of the Shire," he has the chance to kill Sharkey (Saruman). Like Gollum, Saruman is worthy of death for all the evil he has caused, yet Frodo intends to spare his life: "But I would not have him slain. It is useless to meet revenge with revenge: it will heal nothing. Go, Saruman, by the speediest way!"¹⁴

Tolkien emphasizes in his letters that pity and mercy were essential to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*: "It is the pity of Bilbo and later Frodo that ultimately allows the Quest to be achieved . . ."¹⁵ Frodo "(and the Cause) were saved—by Mercy: by the supreme value and efficacy of Pity and forgiveness of injury."¹⁶ "The 'salvation' of the world and Frodo's own 'salvation' is achieved by his previous *pity* and forgiveness of injury."¹⁷ Because Frodo was consistently merciful, always sparing Gollum, he receives mercy and is spared at the moment of his final temptation at the Crack of Doom. At the very end Frodo fails in his quest to destroy the Ring, and Gollum becomes the means of Frodo's salvation. Tolkien would describe this event as a *Eucatastrophe*,¹⁸ a "good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn'" representing a "miraculous grace, never to be counted on to recur."¹⁹ Two other synonyms for Tolkien's *Eucatastrophe* might be what C.S. Lewis described as "a severe mercy"²⁰ and another Inkling, Charles Williams, described as "a terrible good."²¹

Speculations on Tolkien's Sources

I would like to pose the question, "Where did Tolkien come up with these virtues of Pity and Mercy,

so embodied by Bilbo and Frodo?" What were his sources? Perhaps I pose this question at my peril. A professor at my undergraduate school once quipped: "Creativity is the art of covering up your sources."²² C.S. Lewis "generally disliked source criticism, the interpretive approach that assumes major characters and images in a story can usually be traced to something in an author's life or reading habits. For one thing, he [C.S. Lewis] found that such guesses, however plausible, were often wide of the mark."²³ Tolkien also objected to the:

" . . . contemporary trend in criticism, with its excessive interest in the details of the lives of authors and artists. They only distract attention an author's works (if the works are in fact worthy of attention), and end, as one now often sees, in becoming the main interest. But only one's guardian Angel, or indeed God Himself, could unravel the real relationship between personal facts and an author's works. Not the author himself (though he knows more than any investigator), and certainly not the so-called 'psychologists.'"²⁴

"Much of the saga, as Tolkien himself says, 'wrote itself'—a phenomenon acknowledged by many writers of fiction, but especially emphasized by Tolkien in his letters because he believed that God was the Writer of the Story."²⁵

Another major difficulty in trying to guess at Tolkien's sources is that pity and mercy are recurrent themes in all of the great religions and in great literature. Tolkien was strongly influenced by Anglo-Saxon literature, Germanic and Norse mythologies, Finnish mythology, the Bible, and Greek mythology.²⁶ Tolkien wrote in 1938 that *The Hobbit* was "derived from (previously digested) epic, mythology, and fairy-story . . . Beowulf is among my most valued sources; though it was not conspicuously present to the mind in the process of writing . . ."²⁷ Tolkien had specialist knowledge of Anglo-Saxon (Old English) and Old Norse, the literature of which includes the theme of mercy. In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis chose quotations from Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse, as well as many other sources, to illustrate the universal law of the *Tao*, "The Law of Mercy."²⁸

"They said that he had been the mildest and gentlest of the kings of the world." (Anglo-Saxon. Praise of the hero in *Beowulf*, 3180)

"There, Thor, you got disgrace, when you beat women." (Old Norse. Harbarthsljóth 38)

Perhaps it is only a coincidence, but the central kingdom of the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy was called

Mercia.²⁹ The name Mercia, or Mierce, is Old English for “boundary folk.”²⁹ How ironic that the theme of Mercy is at the heart of *The Lord of the Rings*, just as Mercia was at the heart of the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy. Tolkien did consider himself to be of “Mercian” ancestry.³⁰

Greek mythology is another source to be reckoned with. Tolkien “was brought up in the Classics, and first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer.”³¹ The purpose of Greek tragedy was to arouse a *catharsis* of pity and fear.³² The Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge comments on Tolkien’s “tragic sensibility”:

“. . . *The Lord of the Rings* is not a tragedy; but ‘pity and terror’ are at the heart of it, and it lifts up our hearts through tears at the end . . . [The] outworking of Tolkien’s saga is mingled with heartbreak. Yet ‘it may lift up your hearts’—and this itself is surely an echo of the *Sursum Corda*, which Tolkien, as a Roman Catholic, would have heard in the Mass all his life: ‘Lift up your hearts! We lift them up unto the Lord!’”³³

Tolkien’s Christian faith must surely be considered as a source for his theme of Pity and Mercy in Middle Earth. Tolkien gives important clues in his letters: “. . . I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic.”³⁴ “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.”³⁵ But in a seeming contradiction, Tolkien later denied that his Christianity was a conscious schema as he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien insisted that he “didn’t deliberately try to insert Christian meaning into his work—a point over which he disagreed with C.S. Lewis, in whose fantasy he felt the Christianity too explicit.”³⁶ “The [Christian] meaning, in fact, is implicit rather than explicit. It is incarnate in the whole world of the story.”³⁵ Fleming Rutledge astutely notes that even if Tolkien was not consciously aware of his biblical and liturgical references, “he was so steeped in the Scriptures, the Christian tradition, and the liturgy that these influences suffuse the work at almost every point.”³⁷

The Holy Bible is replete with narratives about pity and mercy. The very character of God is mercy.³⁸ “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.” “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him.” (Psalm 103:8,13). Three Old Testament characters that come to mind are Jonah, Hosea, and David. The book of Jonah shows God’s great mercy on Jonah in the sea, on repentant Ninevah, on the prophet again in his self-pity, and even on brute animals. Tolkien translated this book in *The Jerusalem Bible*, published in 1966.³⁹ The book of Hosea also acts out God’s mercy; God

promises to have mercy on Hosea’s daughter named “Without Mercy” (Hosea 1:5 and 2:23, Douay-Rheims). A pastor once described the story of Hosea as “The Second Greatest Story in the Bible.”⁴⁰ David covered up his sins with Bathsheba and Uriah, and then “had no pity” (2 Samuel 12:6). The psalms contain many passages about our need for God’s mercy, including David’s Psalm 51: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy great mercy. And according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my iniquity.” Or Psalm 136:1 (KJV): “O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.” Every verse in Psalm 136 ends with the chorus, “for his mercy endureth for ever.”

The theme of mercy appears again and again in the New Testament, in Jesus’s sermons, stories, and in his encounters with sinners and the sick. “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7). In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the “neighbor” was the one that showed mercy (Luke 10:25-37). The plea of the publican, or tax collector, was “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13). The cry of the blind beggar, repeated twice, was “Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me” (Luke 18:38-39). These last two pleas have now been incorporated into the popular Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”⁴¹ In the Catholic rosary, there is a variation on the Jesus Prayer called the Fatima Prayer: “O my Jesus, forgive us our sins; save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those who have most need of thy mercy.”⁴² Stratford Caldecott observes that in *The Lord of the Rings*, “Each of the four main heroes undergoes a kind of death and rebirth as part of their quest, a descent into the underworld”.⁴³ The Fatima prayer could apply to each character—Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, and Aragorn. Each character is, in a sense, saved “from the fires of hell.”

“Sermon Illustrations” of Pity and Mercy

I would like to conclude with what I have called Tolkien’s “sermon illustrations” of pity and mercy. As a disclaimer, I must point out that Tolkien’s purpose was certainly not to teach Christian theology or to preach a sermon.⁴⁴ It was very important to Tolkien that there should be no explicit reference to God or Christian doctrine in his epic tale.⁴⁵ “He deliberately veiled the theological and doctrinal matters that were important to him, seeking among other things to replicate the ostensibly pagan atmosphere of the Northern sagas that he so loved.”⁴⁶ There is indeed a Christian message in *The Lord of the Rings*, but Tolkien disguised it thoroughly. As Tolkien put it, “The religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.”⁴⁷

With this disclaimer in mind, at heart Bilbo and Frodo reflect Tolkien’s Catholic Christian understanding of the principles of mercy, as put forth in *The Holy Bible*: (1) We need mercy ourselves. (2) We

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don't deserve mercy, but God is merciful towards us anyway. (3) We need to be merciful to others.

We really need mercy ourselves, as did David in the Old Testament (Psalm 51) and the tax collector and the blind beggar in the New Testament (Luke 18:13,38). I wonder if Tolkien had the cry of the blind man in Luke 18:38, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me," in mind in the favorite passage I quoted at the start of the talk. Bilbo was tempted to put Gollum's eyes out, to "blind" him.

We're all wretched like Gollum and don't deserve mercy. Tolkien often uses the word "wretched" to describe Gollum. Again, I wonder if he had *The Holy Bible*, particularly Revelation 3:17, in mind: "Because thou sayest: I am rich, and made wealthy, and have need of nothing; and knowest not, that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." The second half of this verse sounds so much like a description of Gollum! "Wretched" is a term that a biblically informed Christian would use to describe a sinful person in need of God's grace (cf. Paul's description of himself in Romans 7:24, "O wretched man that I am!"). Despite the fact that we human beings are wretched and don't deserve mercy, God chooses to pity us and to show us mercy anyway (Exodus 34:5,7, Psalm 103:8, James 5:11).

Accordingly, we need to be merciful toward others (Matthew 5:7, Luke 10:25-37). Our receiving mercy is to an extent contingent on our showing mercy toward others: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (the 5th Beatitude, Matthew 5:7). God forgives us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us (the Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:2). Bilbo and Frodo prove to be archetypes of the biblical Good Samaritan (Luke 10:36-37): "Who proved to be a neighbor? The one who showed him *mercy*."

Notes

- ¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit*, Revised and expanded edition annotated by Douglas A. Anderson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 2002. pp. 133-134.
- ² Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981, p. 141.
- ³ *The Annotated Hobbit*, p. 128.
- ⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Fellowship of the Ring," Part 1 of *The Lord of the Rings*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002, p. 58-59.
- ⁵ Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, p. 150.
- ⁶ Fleming Rutledge, *The Battle for Middle Earth*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004, p. 340.

- ⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Two Towers," Part 2 of *The Lord of the Rings*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002, p. 618.
- ⁸ "The Two Towers," p. 693.
- ⁹ "The Two Towers," p. 722.
- ¹⁰ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, pp. 329-330.
- ¹¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Return of the King," Part 3 of *The Lord of the Rings*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002, p. 954.
- ¹² *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 330.
- ¹³ "The Return of the King," p. 955.
- ¹⁴ "The Return of the King," p. 1031.
- ¹⁵ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 191.
- ¹⁶ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 251-2.
- ¹⁷ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 234.
- ¹⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984, p. 153.
- ¹⁹ Joseph Pearce, *Tolkien: Man and Myth*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1998, p. 104.
- ²⁰ Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1977, p. 210.
- ²¹ Charles Williams, *Descent Into Hell*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1937, p. 19.
- ²² Ronald Long, lecture at Messiah College, c. 1972. (I am not aware of Professor Long's source for this quotation.)
- ²³ David C. Downing, *Into the Wardrobe: C.S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles*, San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005, p. 32.
- ²⁴ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 288.
- ²⁵ *The Battle for Middle Earth*, p. 198.
- ²⁶ "J.R.R. Tolkien," entry in Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tolkien>
- ²⁷ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 31.
- ²⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1947, pp. 115-116.
- ²⁹ "Mercia," entry in Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercia>
- ³⁰ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 108.
- ³¹ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 172.
- ³² Aristotle, *Poetics*, in Hazard Adams, *Critical Theory Since Plato*, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992, p. 49.
- ³³ *The Battle for Middle Earth*, p. 82.
- ³⁴ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 288.
- ³⁵ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 172.
- ³⁶ Colin Duriez, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Handbook*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992, p. 60-61.
- ³⁷ *The Battle for Middle Earth*, p. 11.
- ³⁸ *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, p. 149.
- ³⁹ *The Jerusalem Bible*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1966.
- ⁴⁰ James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets, Two Volumes Complete in One Edition*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, p. 13.

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⁴¹ Brother Ramon and Simon Barrington-Ward, *Praying the Jesus Prayer Together*, Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2001. (Simon Barrington Ward was C.S. Lewis's chaplain at Cambridge.)

⁴² Richard Gribble, *The History and Devotion of the Rosary*, Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1992.

⁴³ Stratford Caldecott, *Tolkien, Lewis and Christian Myth*, unpublished manuscript, p. 8. (Quoted from *Tolkien: Man and Myth*, p. 116.)

⁴⁴ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 414.

⁴⁵ *The Battle for Middle Earth*, p. 8.

⁴⁶ *The Battle for Middle Earth*, p. 192.