

Humour in and around  
the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

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Mirth's Might: The Tenacity of Humour in the  
Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

**pre-publication offprint**

**Abstract**

A study of humour's appearances in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien reveals that for this author humour should be taken very seriously. "Mirth's Might" seeks out these instances of humour in Tolkien's legendarium and delves into how and why various forms of laughter and mirth act upon the characters in his stories. Going from Sam Gamgee to Túrin Turambar and travelling all the way from Niggle's Parish to Wootton Major, this essay discovers that humour holds many strengths each of which contributes to escape, recovery and consolation. In the pages of Tolkien, readers learn that humour is essential to the art of story-making and to life itself.

**The Playful Philosopher and the Pranking Poet**

J.R.R. Tolkien was at heart a hopelessly funny man. Behind Melkor, Sauron, the fall of Númenor, and the destruction of an enticing golden ring there lies a mind that took delight in switching old teeth for coins and composing clerihevs to parody close friends. Tolkien's sense of fun was so memorable it led his biographer Humphrey Carpenter to write, "He could laugh at anybody, but most of all at himself, and his complete lack of any sense of dignity could and often did make him behave like a riotous schoolboy" (*Biography* 134). This is the simple, childlike humour Tolkien embraced. Yet Carpenter's vision of a laughing-eyed prankster might prove rather jarring to those who think of Tolkien primarily as a philologist turned legendary mythopoet. The two images, one of a professor and one of a playful schoolboy, do not seem to fit.

However, they do. From a careful reading of Tolkien's legendarium and his other works, a striking picture of mighty mirth forms. All of the battered conquerors and unlikely heroes of Tolkien's stories are marked, almost eccentrically so, by a profound appreciation for and exhibition of humour. Indeed, beneath every

blow in good's defence, behind every step taken towards a goal after hope has glimmered away, there rests a strength sprung from a hearty laugh, a penchant for irony, and a knack for genuine, wholesome play. In Tolkien, mirth marks the mighty.

Of course, as with everything he touched, Tolkien's treatment of mirth's might is deep and complex. Preceding many of today's psychiatrists and physiologists (see Roy et al., and Wilkins and Eisenbraun), Tolkien noted the intricate causes and effects of humour, but rather than analyse them he put them into story, much to his readers' benefit. Humour in Tolkien is not merely what happens during a clever joke nor is laughter simply a sound that follows something amusing or glad. Rather, the circumstances surrounding humour and the characters experiencing it reveal that Tolkien understood the startling effects of humour for good or ill, that he grasped both its power and its mystery as it plays a fundamental role in human life. While no psychologist will find controlled test results and no physiologist will find conclusive neurological evidence in Tolkien, this author provides his readers with people, people like ourselves who share similar humour and hardships. Through that display, Tolkien reminds us that our tears and our laughter are strong, in more ways than we would imagine.

From all the individual instances of humour appearing within Middle-earth and beyond, three areas of strength in particular come forth. First, Tolkien suggests that a certain protection arises from cultivating a clean sense of humour and honing a talent for laughing cheerfully at the ironic. Even a little mischief seems encouraged. However, this general jollity soon matures into the second area of strength, namely, the ability to laugh at oneself. Here the serious services humour can perform start to shine, beckoning all heroic hopefuls to humour's strength. Finally, Tolkien welcomes his readers onto serious grounds indeed when his blood-smattered soldiers find strength to fight in a good laugh and a resilient smile, suggesting that Tolkien's humour was not so boyish after all. No, humour lives in honey-cloved gardens as well as death's gruesome field, and mirth can reach into the darkest night to open our eyes to day's dawning.

However, the benefits of humour do not end with those three strengths. Rather, within them we discover the very ideas Tolkien hoped Fantasy would express. Those virtues he could only describe in "On Fairy-Stories" come to life in the

characters populating Middle-earth, Niggle's Parish, Wootton Major, and Ham, as they display, through their laughter or lack thereof, the important role that humour plays in "Escape", "Recovery", and "Consolation". Humour can release us from the prison of this world's ills, help us regain a clear view of what life is really about, and open to us the possibility of a happy, unexpected ending. Yes, even wry commentary and childish giggles can contribute to the greater purposes of grand narrative. Even laughter can "rend indeed the very web of story, and let a gleam come through" (OFS 176). In short, humour is neither for the silly nor the weak. Humour, I believe Tolkien says, lives for those who engage in the battle of Good versus Evil and emerge victorious to a recovery of Tolkien's "Great Escape" and find a "fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of this world, poignant as grief" (OFS 175).<sup>1</sup>

### Protection in Mirth

"I keep a treasure or two near my skin, as precious as Rings to me. Here's one: my old wooden pipe." (Pippin at the foot of Orthanc in *The Two Towers*)

"In the hole in a ground there lived a hobbit." So begins *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. When one alights upon these words, one has no idea of the twisted dragons lurking under deep mountains in the east, no inkling of dark goblins secretly spreading in mines, no clue of the bloody battle about to take place between five armies, and certainly no thought of a Necromancer preparing to resurrect as the evil menace of the age. The funny thing is that, if the reader does not know of these evils, neither does our hole-dwelling hobbit. Bilbo Baggins and all his folk of the Shire have absolutely no idea of the great dangers storming around their sunny garden land, and they will remain shockingly unperturbed for the rest of the story, except for some uproar by a Baggins-gone-*Took*. What makes these half-pint hobbits so impenetrable? Is it possible for us the readers to enjoy the same protection they experience? Although we may not have wizards watching over us nor elves in mountains and forests taking the brunt of the world's evil wrath, a survey of hobbit traits unlocks a wealth of protective wisdom. Were we more like hobbits, perhaps we too could laugh at the evil in our midst.

Our survey begins with a lesson in cheer, learnt from some of the most carefree people on Middle-earth. The world was first introduced to hobbits on September 21, 1937, and their creator considered these the chief characteristics anyone need know about them:

There is no magic about [hobbits], except the ordinary everyday sort which helps them to disappear quietly and quickly when large stupid folk like you and me come blundering along, making a noise like elephants which they can hear a mile off. They are inclined to be fat in the stomach; they dress in bright colours (chiefly green and yellow); wear no shoes, because their feet grow natural leathery soles and thick warm brown hair like the stuff on their heads (which is curly); have long clever brown fingers, good-natured faces, and laugh deep fruity laughs (especially after dinner, which they have twice a day when they can get it). Now you know enough to go on with (*H* 12).

We certainly do. Notice what “enough” entails: hobbits are earthy, sprightly, jolly little people whose everyday magic consists in the ability to be left alone. This magic has more to do with the nature of hobbits in general than any sort of conjuring in particular. However, is that all Tolkien tells us in this paragraph? I think not, for nestled in this description of hobbits rests a description of their sharp minds. Tolkien contrasts hobbits against us “large stupid folk” and applauds them as clever with their fingers, an adroitness that rarely ends with handiwork. My aim in drawing our attention to this detail before embarking on our discussion of hobbit humour is to point out that Tolkienian mirth never belongs to simpletons. It is often simple, yes, but not for simpletons.

As well hobbits are a simple people who fully appreciate simple pleasures, wherein I believe lies their protective strength. They seem the sort of people who prefer delicious second meals to decadent second banqueting rooms and feel more comfortable bustling around in gay frocks than gorgeous gowns. They would rather be carefree and happy than cosmopolitan and concerned, at liberty to laugh at a humble joke than be the talk of the town. When they say something they honestly mean it, just as Bilbo genuinely meant his airy “Good morning!” to a grey old man on that fateful day. In other words, no guile lurks about a hobbit, and living as cozily and un-worriedly as possible proves their chief end. Since hobbits actively avoid anxiety, Gandalf’s charge to Frodo to keep the Ring secret and safe could not have been better placed. Hobbits simply do not go looking for, nor do they attract, trouble. Their very

own lifestyle keeps them protected from the desire to bother or be bothered. They are by nature safe.

Of course, Tolkien would never blandly tell us this. Instead, he depicts a hobbit's good-natured delight in life. The Shire sparkles as a sort of paradise, where all that matters is to relish food, gardening, village chatter, and the humdrum beauty of daily life. Right in the midst of this paradise there flashes a droll sense of humour, a taste for comedy which causes danger to slide off hobbit backs as if it were nothing more than the passing rain. Throughout *The Hobbit*, Bilbo grows more and more into a jokester until we find him laughing about the downsides of magical rings when they make one too invisible for warm beds (*H* 242). He slips out of Gollum's clutches by playing with riddles and later speaks to Smaug as though their conversation were a game of hide-and-seek! By the end of his adventure, Bilbo feels perfectly confident jesting with elves about how their lullabies would wake up drunken goblins and jokes with the elvenking that "even a burglar has his feelings" about stealing an admittedly large quantity of food (*H* 251, 247). Indeed, the very last act Bilbo performs in *The Hobbit* is to laugh in gratitude for how small he is in this wide world, even after having watched many of its perils befall his little frame. That humble playfulness is a strength rare and difficult to match.

This playfulness makes perfect sense in the Shire. Just like the simple pleasures in their down-to-earth quality of life, the slightly saucy, pranking, childlike humour of hobbits protects them by the power of innocence and a conscious insistence on maintaining that innocence. Take, for example, the tense exchange between the Gaffer and Sandyman the Miller at the very beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Here we note the sensitivity hobbits have to the difference between clean chuckles and malicious gossip. The Gaffer begins speaking to his heart's (and the surrounding hobbits') content about the oddities of the Bagginses, but as soon as Sandyman turns play into insinuations of murder and shady accumulations of wealth, the hobbits turn on the miller, just as they will eventually turn on Sandyman's son, Ted, when his corrupt mockery sets him on an evil path. For hobbits, that sort of talk is simply neither funny nor pleasant.

Pleasantness ranks so high in hobbitish esteem that when relational problems do arise – an occurrence even in the Shire – a bit of lighthearted gesturing is

all they require to settle their disputes. After all, how else did Bilbo bid his relatives goodbye than by leaving them with a few well-chosen presents? Bilbo's pointed sporting is hilariously evident in his gift "*for the collection of HUGO BRACEGIRDLE, from a contributor; on an (empty) book-case. Hugo was a great borrower of books, and worse than usual at returning them*" (FR 37). This "borrowing" habit could lead to serious family feuds in our world, but instead hobbits choose to sort it out through a proper joke. At least most hobbits. The Sackville-Bagginses seem determined to miss the humour in their gift of silver spoons (Lobelia, too, was a great borrower), but is it then a coincidence that these unfunny hobbits come very near to going bad before their story is over? In Tolkien, those who cannot take a joke tend to find themselves in morally precarious situations.

Still, Lobelia and Sandyman are, again, anomalies in the Shire's culture. Most hobbits, like Farmer Maggot and Fatty Bolger and Pippin Took and Bilbo himself "joke about serious things" and they come out perfectly unscathed in the end (FR 35). Perhaps this seems counterintuitive to the reader, but I believe Tolkien shows that the hobbits' knack for making light of the weight of the world is what keeps them, personally, safe in the end. Their childlike humour reflects an innate desire to give and take no trouble that oversteps their satisfied life, and this protects them from the critical crookedness of a Saruman, the cynical despair of a Denethor, and the bullying, belittling malignancy of a Sauron. These gross and evil humours strike hobbits as profoundly unfunny, for just as the Shire-folk still relish the inhalation of good green air, they still find contentment in the sweet hilarities of a good life.

In the midst of this paradisiacal encounter with halflings, however, Tolkien inserts a note of caution. The hobbits are individually protected from the dangers of ambition through their contented humour, but this protection is of the retreating sort, a kind of sanctuary from an evil world lurking just beyond their doors. Rangers are still required to watch over the Shire, and the hobbits' time of personal protection is running out in the light of global warfare. While we must not overlook this troublesome reality, we also must realise the happy humour of hobbits is, according to Tolkien and Aragorn and Gandalf, worth protecting. It is worth the adventurers, bounders, and wizards. It is worth the long rides across Middle-earth and the late-night searches in dark,

dank Gondorian libraries. Tolkien at the beginning of his story has therefore introduced a tension of humour and harm that will only be strengthened throughout his chronicle until they meet a final resolution at the end of his tale. But a hobbit's unambitious peace through his unambitious humour is a good, noble trait, even if something more, something we shall see in a moment, is requisite to keep that peace from devolving into denial and isolation. For now, let us continue with the knowledge that both protections – humour's integral protection from evil's unsatisfied hunger and external protection from evil's otherwise unchecked consumption – are real and good in Tolkien's mythology.

Although the protective quality of humour is most fully characterised in hobbits, there are a few correlating instances worth mentioning. The first resides dangerously near Old Man Willow and frightfully close to the Barrow-downs. I mean, of course, Tom Bombadil, that merry fellow with a face "creased into a hundred wrinkles of laughter" (*FR* 117). There breathes no one in Middle-earth so confident and safe, so caught within his own world of comfortable and changeless security, as Tom Bombadil. And what sets this bonnie man in a bright blue jacket with yellow boots above and apart from the rest? Why, his cry of "Merry dol! Derry dol! My darling!" (*FR* 117). Where Bombadil roams there follows laughter and gaiety and a sudden attack of fearlessness, such an attack that Sam sleeps like a log safe under the eaves of his jolly host's house. Although Sam does not understand the cause of his safe and sound sleep, Tolkien reveals that the mysterious power prevailing in Bombadil's sanctuary happens to be the same vigour supporting the Shire. Goldberry explains it best when she describes Bombadil's identity with, "He is, as you have seen him," and then reassures her new guests to "have peace now [...] until the morning! Heed no nightly noises! For nothing passes door and window here save moonlight and starlight and the wind off the hill-top. Goodnight!" (*FR* 122-123). Bombadil simply is as he is. Because he seeks nothing more, he need not fear rotten-hearted trees or bitter Barrow-wights. Thus Bombadil is Master, and he can laugh, laugh all the day. In fact, all he has to say regarding Old Man Willow is, "What? [...] Old Man Willow? Naught worse than that, eh? That can soon be mended. I know a tune for him" (*FR* 117). Bombadil's strength expresses itself in a song! This mirth is insurmountable, and it comes from being so himself that he can whistle a tune about it. Just as sweet fragrance dispels a

foul stench and light wards off darkness, none can imprison Tom Bombadil. None can imprison the merry heart.

To speak truth, this protective analogy of laughter and light is not original to me. It comes straight from Tolkien in *The Unfinished Tales*, where he uses it to rationalise why the Drúedain could not possibly have been used by Melkor to breed orcs. According to him, “Morgoth, since he can make no living thing, bred Orcs from various kinds of Men, but the Drúedain must have escaped his Shadow; for their laughter and the laughter of Orcs are as different as is the light of Aman from the darkness of Angband” (*UT* 401). Here lies some strong authorial authority on the seriousness of laughter and mirth as certainly an indicative, and potentially a protective force. Tolkien eliminates the Drúedain from the list of potential orc-ancestors without a second glance, simply because of the way the two races laugh. The Drúedain could not have been used to breed Orcs because their laughter is light. But Tolkien’s nonchalant confidence in the laughter of the Drúedain ought not surprise careful readers, for similar power is given to elvish merriment in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Frodo, marching steadily toward Buckland away from pursuant Black Riders, cannot help but feel an urge to put on the Ring, “so strong that, almost before he realised what he was doing, his hand was groping in his pocket. But at that moment there came a sound like mingled song and laughter. Clear voices rose and fell in the starlit air. The black shadow straightened up and retreated” (*FR* 77). Far from causing vulnerability, the laughing light of Gildor and his frolicsome companions banishes any presence of darkness in their midst, and so long as the hobbits remain with the elves, they only gain insight and security. An uncanny strength resides in elvish laughter and light.

The elves continue to emphasise this strength, for our last supporting illustration of mirth’s protective nature dwells in Rivendell, the Last Homely House at the very edge of the Wilds, secure under the shadow of the Misty Mountains. Despite its precarious surroundings, this happy vale shall ever speak to our minds of comfort and rest. Tolkien’s descriptions of Rivendell in *The Hobbit* intensify these qualities. After a few pages of preparation for the coziness about to come their way, a weary Bilbo and his tired companions stumble upon a troop of very merry elves. If we were at all wondering what makes the elves who dwell here different from the treacherous lands around them, a glance at

their culture proves sufficient to allay our curiosity. They laugh. They sing. They are, in fact, ridiculous, and we often forget that Tolkienian elves made their debut in *The Hobbit* warbling:

O! Will you be staying,  
Or will you be flying?  
Your ponies are straying!  
The daylight is dying!  
To fly would be folly,  
To stay would be jolly  
And listen and hark  
Till the end of the dark  
to our tune  
ha! ha!

This gleeful melody is quickly followed by quite the elvish introduction: “So they laughed and sang in the trees; and pretty fair nonsense I daresay you think it. Not that they would care; they would only laugh all the more if you told them so. They were elves of course” (*H* 49).

Surprised? But herein lies the very homeliness of Rivendell; this is precisely what heartens Bilbo and sets Gandalf at his ease. Remember my previous suggestion that Tolkien makes a clear connection between mirth and wisdom? Well, the people of wise, judicious Elrond are one of the merriest of them all, and they continue to be so even as readers enter the more mature version of Rivendell in *The Lord of the Rings*. The number of times the elves are described as merry is astonishing, and mentions of laughter in Elrond’s halls tumble one after another. Frodo laughs, Bilbo laughs, Aragorn laughs, and so do Elrond and Gandalf. Sam does well to exclaim, “Elves here, and Elves there! Some like kings, terrible and splendid; and some as merry as children” (*FR* 219), while an exchange between Pippin and Frodo summarises the mirth abounding in Rivendell: “It seems impossible, somehow, to feel gloomy or depressed in this place. I feel I could sing, if I knew the right song for the occasion.’ ‘I feel like singing myself,’ laughed Frodo” (*FR* 220). While this may not strike one as any great revelation, we must keep in mind that Frodo has just been stabbed with a Morgul blade by the Ringwraith on Weathertop. Yet now he, along with his older and wiser friends, are busy merrymaking! And that is the nature of The Last Homely House. “Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear, and

sadness” (*FR* 219). If laughter is contagious, Rivendell’s cheer heals the deepest wounds. It stands as a beautiful escape.

In fact, escape is precisely what Tolkien puts on display through his buoyant depictions of shelters along a terrible road. In true “On Fairy-Stories” fashion, the laughter of the Shire offers hobbits an escape from the “whims of evanescent fashion,” whims which would otherwise draw the folk of the Four Farthings to lusts that would destroy them, to lusts that had already destroyed so many other men (*OFS* 169). In the same manner, the laughter of Tom Bombadil and the elves in Rivendell opens to characters of Middle-earth the chance to escape from a terrible prison, even if for just a short while. But if just a short while enables heroes to continue on their journey, it is enough. What would have happened to Frodo and the Ring without Tom’s merry dols or the merry feasts of the Last Homely House? The possibilities chill our hearts, but they should also charge our hearts with the importance of escape – good, noble, dignified escape from the prisons of envy and bitterness and fear – through laughter. Mirth’s first strength is the sheltering of our souls.

### Discovery in Mirth

“I see,’ laughed Strider. ‘I look foul and feel fair. Is that it? All that is gold does not glitter, not all those who wander are lost.’” (Aragorn to some very frightened hobbits in *The Fellowship of the Ring*)

Thus for the shelter and protection of simple pleasures and simple laughs. But sheltering can only last for a time, and escape does not equal victory. Indeed, within the three examples of mirth’s escape – the hobbits, Tom Bombadil, and Rivendell – Tolkien quietly advances the idea that it would be very ill for us to rest contented in sanctuary. After all, Bilbo needs an adventure, Tom Bombadil is unanimously rejected as an option to guard the Ring because he would “most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold upon his mind,” and The Last Homely House must either answer the call to war or steadily repair to the Grey Havens (*FR* 259). Escape does not achieve the final goal. Ultimately, danger must be contested. Tolkien teaches us how to contest it by portraying a certain quality in each of those characters who do not merely avoid harm, but consciously skirmish with the source of evil in their own lives. It is

a subtle portrayal, to be sure, but one which upon discovery proves difficult to ignore. It is the picture of a man laughing at himself.

You see, there is such a thing as the danger of taking oneself too seriously, and Tolkien knew it well. Thus, through “Leaf by Niggle”, “Smith of Wootton Major”, “Farmer Giles of Ham”, hobbits, dwarves, and elves Tolkien encourages us to laugh at ourselves, as if just what we need were a mirror in which to better behold our foibles and correct them. Indeed, an opportunity for introspection might be precisely what we lack, and that is what the mirror of humour offers us. While sometimes our mirrors must take sombre and grave and even dangerous forms, such as Frodo’s strange dreams throughout *The Lord of the Rings* and Galadriel’s pool in Lothlórien, oftentimes correction can just as well be found in merrier looking glasses. In fact, the graver introspections often become needful simply because we neglect to make use of the frolicsome ones. In his works, therefore, Tolkien presents us with the utility and enjoyment of comic self-encounters. He offers us the power of laughing at ourselves.

This image of the man who laughs, nestled though it is within pages of beauty and grandeur and pain, slowly makes itself conspicuous both through positive and negative example. Here we see Gandalf contentedly smoking his pipe whilst snickering between puffs; there we note Saruman who cannot make fun without mockery. Here we find Pippin cracking jokes about himself in blissful abandon; there we encounter the Witch-king who cannot abide wisecracks in any form. And as the multi-storied picture unfolds, we gradually come to realise the virtue of a self-induced chuckle. For, far deeper than a moment’s relief from the weightiness of life, these laughing moments provide an open door to recovery, a clear vision which hopefully leads to a little miracle of growth.

All of Tolkien’s above mentioned works, as well as *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, begin with an opportunity for recovery. Their opening lines describe a place and people not our own but very like our own, imperfections included and perhaps writ rather large. As soon as we discover that Farmer Giles “was a slow sort of fellow, rather set in his ways, and taken up with his own affairs” who “had his hands full (he said) keeping the wolf from his door: that is, keeping himself as fat and comfortable as his father before him,” we instantly feel at home and comfortable, too (FGH 71). Certainly, we may chuckle at Farmer Giles’ long,

official-sounding name, and at Garm his dog who fears Giles mainly because “he could bully and brag better than [Garm] could,” but were we honest we would admit our chuckles bubble up mostly because in the farmer and his dog we see ourselves (FGH 70). The loveable, lazy yet clever Farmer Giles and his desire for respect touches us right at our funny bones, mainly because we share the same desires and idiosyncrasies. We see ourselves also in the protagonist of “Leaf by Niggle”, who has a nuisance of a kind heart, a propensity to be idle, and a knack for starting projects he does not finish because they are “too large and ambitious for his skill” (LN 195). The way Niggle curses in his heart the visitors whom he himself invited, and the fact that most of his accomplishments are the “many things that he had not the face to say *no* to,” are unfortunate realities in our own lives that we would never admit to were they not set forth before us in a congenial, smirk-inducing manner (LN 197). When it comes to neighbours, Tolkien proves positively hobbit-like in using humour to unmask the petty nature of our squabbles. Instead of a sermon, we smile our way to the conclusion that we really just ought to look after our potatoes, and that maybe not all canvas and paint should be used for house-repairs. The stories sting us with their clarity, but there could not exist a more enjoyable way to be stung.

“Smith of Wootton Major” proffers a sadder outlook on the importance of laughing at ourselves through the negative example of Master Cook Nokes. Whereas the Queen of Faery delights in laughter and dance and play, Nokes cannot stand the tiniest bit of humour at his expense. Actually, Nokes laughs all the time, but, as with most anything else good in life, he reserves that right to himself alone. Granting nobody permission to question his dignity, authority, or expertise, Nokes meets his downfall instead. First, he takes himself so seriously that the truly serious things in life, like the world of Faery, to him appear laughable by comparison. Second, by denying insight to others, Nokes denies insight to himself and thus remains blind to truths regarding his character. The end of the tale leaves him a gaunt fool, oblivious to art, beauty, wisdom, and the proper use of sugar.

On the other hand, the Faery world that ought not to be laughed at oddly enough inspires laughter. The Faery Queen’s gaiety has already been mentioned, but everyone else who enters Faery also imbibes the gift of laughing and being laughed with. The first Master Cook returns from his long holiday to Faery

a wiser man, and the narrator explains, “Now he was merrier, and often said and did most laughable things; and at feasts he would himself sing gay songs, which was not expected of Master Cooks” (SWM 247). For Smith Smithson, an encounter with Faery leads to a life full of song, including a merry dance with the Faery Queen herself and the humility to be graced with the sound of her laughter. And Smith learns, and he grows, and his works are beautiful. Finally, when a clumsy, silent little boy named Tim comes across the Even-star, he is suddenly changed, “and he laughed and became merry, and sang softly to himself. Then he got up and began to dance all alone with an odd grace that he had never shown before. The children all laughed and clapped” (SWM 280). That last sentence is easily overlooked in the joy of Tim’s transformation, but it is key. Tim can now be laughed with because Faery’s wisdom and joy have granted him Faery’s humility and humour. So the wise laugh and the humble are wise, for they have met the clear view.

This also we find in *The Unfinished Tales*, where even members of the White Council benefit from play. Although Tolkien does not use this version of the White Council in *The Lord of the Rings*, it still bears study, for here Tolkien offers us an unmistakable display of humour’s clear-sighted abilities through Saruman and Gandalf’s contrary approaches to laughter. The former walks as one clothed in lofty wisdom far above merry hobbits and their silly pipe-weed, whereas the latter sees strength in their jolly ways and mirth in general. If only, for Saruman’s sake, their differences stopped at pipe-weed! But they do not. Saruman, like Master Cook Nokes, takes himself much too seriously and therefore envies Gandalf to the point of distraction, secretly imitating him by taking up pipe-weed while openly scoffing at him for “playing with his toys of fire and smoke, while others are in earnest speech” (UT 366). Of course, Saruman “hated mockery, however gentle” (UT 366). Gandalf, however, shows a completely opposite attitude to laughter. He chuckles at Saruman’s exaggerated sensibilities but, instead of shaming him, gently prompts Saruman to a better understanding of himself by playfully suggesting that “smoke blown out [clears the] mind from shadows within” (UT 366). Nobody notices the crooked path Saruman is walking; that is, nobody but lighthearted, puffing Gandalf. He suddenly grows keen on Saruman’s relationship to the rings, and we get

the point that laughing grey wizards might have a clearer view of things than grave white wizards do.

Their different perspectives to merriment follow these wizards to the very end. Saruman, the one who cannot laugh unless it be to mock another, hides his wicked, self-deceived heart until he is back-stabbed by a servant. But the back-stabbing only takes place after Saruman has sold his soul to destroy the joyful culture of the hobbits, that “childish folk” unworthy of any serious attention (*UT* 366). On the contrary, Gandalf, who does not deem himself too wise to laugh and play with fireworks, reaches startling discernment about the Ring, the wizard, and his own role in the greater story of the Third Age. He observes in *The Fellowship of the Ring* that “it would be a grievous blow to the world [...] if all your kind, jolly, stupid Bolgers, Hornblowers, Boffins, Bracegirdles, and the rest, not to mention the ridiculous Bagginses, became enslaved,” and thus is content to remain a laughable and strange old man to the hobbits until he gives his life to protect them (*FR* 48). Gandalf sees clearly and conquers because he knows how to laugh.

Now, it is all well and good for readers to appreciate self-laughter when it is safely tucked away in a story not of this world, when we are not the ones doing the laughing. It is quite another matter to reenact that mode of self-discovery in our own lives. But Tolkien anticipates this recalcitrance on our part and therefore goads us to join in the fun by simply browsing through any one of his short stories. It proves quite impossible to pick up a copy of “Smith of Wootton Major” or “Farmer Giles of Ham”, or, most telling, “Leaf by Niggle”, and get through the tale without chuckling about the way our neighbour reminds us of Ham’s pessimistic blacksmith or how Nokes’s self-importance brings to mind that one college professor we had twenty years ago. Tolkien was an artist and, fantasy writer or no, his favourite subject was us, a truth inescapable as you see the eccentricities of our world come to life in his narratives.

However, Tolkien does not stop with merely presenting a funny picture of our world. The point of laughing at ourselves is not to make us laughable. That would be useless and cruel, like the mockery which took place before the Black Gates of Mordor. Rather, Tolkien takes his readers a step further into that almost cathartic power of humour he showcases in his legendarium. Of

course, Tolkien would prefer “recovery” and “escape” to “catharsis”, but they all point to the healing nature of humour he wants us to embrace. Instead of cornering us into a silly depiction of ourselves, he gifts us with a clear view of what we are like, thereby enabling us to escape from the prison of our current foibles into the pastures of what we could, and should, become. In other words, Tolkien shows us how the world is grey, and then gives us the tools to paint it green. And though he often hands us these paintbrushes through tears, he just as often does so through laughter. His hope, I believe, was for all his readers to end like Niggle and Parish who after a difficult process of self-discovery “both laughed. Laughed – the Mountains rang with it!” (LN 220).

### Victory in Mirth

“First he was a conspirator, now he’s a jester. He’ll end up by becoming a wizard – or a warrior!” (Frodo about Sam in *The Fellowship of the Ring*)

We have so far seen that in Tolkien those who are wise laugh the hardest and those who are good laugh the most. Now we shall discover that those who are great laugh the strongest. Mirth and might sing together in all of Tolkien’s writings, whether in Middle-earth or Wootton Major or Ham or Niggle’s Parish. Shocking is the number of times laughter rings out on the battlefield and perilous are the situations occasioning the silliest jokes and most playful banter. But it is the good mirth that prevails. In this third area of humour’s strength, then, we reach a fuller understanding of the way merriment fits into the cosmic battle of good versus evil, and we finally cross from escape and recovery into consolation.

Tolkien’s legendarium features at least three facets to the fighting power mirth can bring to this cosmic battle. The first facet of power is the Power to Decide. Although we might not immediately link laughter with decision, Tolkien forges this link in a variety of ways. For one, before many a terrible determination or dreadful leap in Tolkien’s works there echoes an eery laugh. In that horrid Kinslaying in *The Silmarillion*, Fëanor “laughed as one fey” before crying “What I have left behind I count no loss; needless baggage on the road it has proved. [...] Let the ships burn!” (S 90). This must be the most sickening moment in *The Silmarillion*, but it is not the only time sickening glee accompanies sicken-

ing deeds. Túrin, too, laughs as one fey before taking his own life, essentially calling his existence nothing but “a bitter jest, indeed” (S 225). Leaving *The Silmarillion* for *The Lord of the Rings*, we watch helplessly as Denethor, on the brink of choosing good or ill, laughs towards his conclusion: a fiery death on the pyre of his reason, sanity, and hope. These terrible decisions were each sped by a fiendish cackle.

Most of the laughing resolutions in Tolkien’s works, though, are made by merrier people in brighter times, even if they do not always lead toward brighter courses. Hobbits choose most clearly under mirth’s influence than anything else, as Bilbo so neatly shows in his Long-Expected Party and elaborate farewell joke. The prank Bilbo plays on all his dearest friends enables him to do something grand, something difficult: leave the Shire. Even if his vanishing act was rather “spoiled” by Gandalf’s additional flash of light, and even if Bilbo managed to “alarm or offend most of [his] relations” for his private enjoyment, one realises that just such a merry farewell was about the only way he could ever leave his dear old home, and indeed “was the only point [Gandalf] ever saw in the affair” (FR 31-32, 34). Frodo, as usual, follows in his uncle’s footsteps, for it takes not one but two merry feasts plus a jolly good conspiracy to get him away from the Shire. The first “very cheerful” party, which involves wine and a few witty pleasantries at the Sackville-Bagginses’ expense, occurs before Frodo leaves for his house in Crickhollow, while the second happy dinner entails some very merry mushrooms and the unmasking of an equally merry conspiracy of friends, which leaves Frodo laughing and feeling “happy; happier than I have felt for a long time” despite himself (FR 67, 103). Only after these parties and pranks is Frodo truly ready to leave his homeland. Mirth provides both Bilbo and Frodo the might to decide to leave.

And long after Frodo has left Hobbiton behind, the same sort of humble humour helps him make much darker decisions. How else than by laughing do Frodo and Sam in *The Fellowship of the Ring* seal their decision to break from the Fellowship? In the middle of a tense and tearful debate, Sam declares, “I’m coming too, or neither of us isn’t going. I’ll knock holes in all the boats first” (FR 397). Here lie two hobbits staring at a dreadful choice between friendship and hell, but look at Frodo’s response: “Frodo actually laughed. A sudden warmth and gladness touched his heart. ‘Leave one!’ he said. ‘We’ll need it’” (FR 397).

Frodo laughs, and the chasm of decision is crossed. This hobbit-like cheer and companionship see Sam and Frodo to the very end, even to the pass of Cirith Ungol. This also was a path chosen with laughter. Indeed, Tolkien explicitly states the case as if to make it easier for us to understand what mirth can do. As wave upon wave of evil men enter the Black Gate of Mordor, oliphaunts pop into Sam's mind and he cites a sweet, sunny poem about these legendary beasts – right in front of the Black Gate, with Gollum pawing at their heels, and in the midst of Frodo's tortuous choice between one terrifying unknown and another! Despite the seeming inappropriateness of Sam's childlike bit of verse, Tolkien explains, "Frodo stood up. He had laughed in the midst of all his cares when Sam trotted out the old fireside rhyme of *Oliphaunt*, and the laugh had released him from hesitation" (*TT* 633). Frodo's choice is hard, but after voicing a wry wish for a thousand oliphaunts to break into Mordor, he makes his decision: they go to Cirith Ungol. For hobbits, mirth gives might not just to leave, but also to go.

While this usage of laughter is fun to observe, humour's decision-making power makes more startling appearances in Tolkien's ring narratives, those soliloquies preceding a character's final decision regarding his or her relationship to the Ring. Everyone but Frodo and Sam, who are each doomed to carry the Ring for a time, employs laughter in their process of deciding against donning Sauron's baneful trinket. As Gandalf deftly retrieves the Ring from a clawing Bilbo, "a spasm of anger passed swiftly over the hobbit's face again. Suddenly it gave way to a look of relief and a laugh. 'Well, that's that,' he said" (*FR* 34). Bilbo's spastic look of wrath followed by sudden laughter reoccurs when Bilbo encounters the Ring in the Hall of Fire, and again he overcomes temptation by aid of "the light and music of Rivendell" until he "smiled and laughed happily" once more (*FR* 226). Bilbo laughs to let go of the Ring.

Though this outburst of laughter might be an odd coincidence, it characterises every one of the Ring's defeats in *The Lord of the Rings*. Gandalf requires light streaming in from a Shire window to settle his rejection of Frodo's pleading offer. Later Tom Bombadil, quite possibly the merriest soul alive, laughingly toys with the Ring before putting it on his finger as though it were child's play. And Tom does not vanish. Instead, the Ring vanishes in a sparkle until "Tom leaned forward and handed it back to [Frodo] with a smile" (*FR* 130).

Tolkien was right to describe this scene as “both comical and alarming,” but it is also telling (*FR* 130). Tom’s excessive jubilation acts as a shield against the wiles of the Ring. And lest we say this power belongs to Tom Bombadil alone, the interplay of mirth and the Ring continues when Aragorn confronts the golden band. Alone with Frodo, Sam, and Pippin, he points out the frighteningly obvious danger: “If I was after the Ring, I could have it – NOW!” (*FR* 168). But Strider embraces who he is, Aragorn son of Arathorn, the gold that does not glitter and the wanderer who is not lost, and his face softens into “a sudden smile” as he laughs heartily (*FR* 168). Aragorn passes his test, and the Ring passes into safety once more.

A more beautiful and terrible ring narrative awaits in the person of Galadriel. In her we also find more beautiful and terrible laughter. Her temptation begins with “a sudden clear laugh,” and then escalates into that horrifying line, “All shall love me and despair!” only to melt away as “suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad. “I pass the test [...]. I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel” (*FR* 356-357). Like Aragorn, Galadriel needs to laugh. She at last grasps a clear view of herself through laughter, and through laughter she gathers strength to embrace her perfect consolation.

However, this strength does not belong to kings and queens only, for Boromir and Faramir demonstrate the same melancholy mirth in their decisions to overcome the Ring. After all, “Boromir smiled” are the last words describing his life, a life he gave defending the four hobbits who made his mastery of the Ring impossible (*TT* 404). When Faramir later stumbles upon the Ring, his stern and glinting grey eyes seem anything but impervious to its call. Then he “sat down in his chair and began to laugh quietly,” and the tension recedes into ripples of calm (*TT* 665). Faramir’s laughter with the Ring lurking so near appears strange only if we forget the might of mirth to do hard things. Ring narratives simply provide stronger examples of the laughter which released Frodo from hesitation, and the mirth accompanying a hard task done well.

Laughter and hardship are invariable companions in the story of Middle-earth, as shown by the second facet of humour’s power, the Power to Battle. In fact, the partnership between mirth and might takes us back to the Ainur them-

selves, where Tulkas greets us with abounding laughter and fearful warfare. He “laughs ever, in sport or in war, and even in the face of Melkor he laughed in battles” (S 29). This war god may laugh, but he is no joking matter, for his “spirit of great strength and hardihood” saves the Valar: “and Arda was filled with the sound of his laughter. So came Tulkas the Strong, whose anger passes like a mighty wind, scattering cloud and darkness before it; and Melkor fled before his wrath and his laughter” (S 35). Strong, hardy Tulkas laughs, and that laughter dispels the strongest malice. If we ever had any doubts about mirth’s might, this truly epic scene must surely bid them flee, just as Melkor cowers before the joyous shouts of Tulkas.

Moving from Valar to Maiar, we find Gandalf’s jollity likewise grows into battle-strength. Unwittingly echoing characteristics of Tulkas, Frodo commemorates Gandalf as “swift in anger, quick to laugh” as though he realised both mirth and might joined to mark Gandalf’s life (FR 351). Frodo remembers well, for Gandalf was swift to laugh “long and merrily” with a sound “warm and kindly like a gleam of sunshine” (TT 485, 530). But when Gandalf’s sunshine strives with Saruman, the Witchking, or the Mouth of Sauron, it only blazes with victory. In fact, Gandalf’s struggle with Saruman before Isengard in *The Two Towers* conclusively ends with Gandalf indulging in a hearty fit of laughter. And although Gandalf had previously warned Merry and Pippin that jesting would make one susceptible to Saruman’s subtle words, Tolkien makes clear that Gandalf’s laughter made Saruman’s “fantasy [vanish] like a puff of smoke” (TT 568). I highly doubt we should not be thinking of *The Unfinished Tales* account, where laughter, clear vision, and smoke also make an appearance. Whatever the case, Gandalf’s mirth wins him many a battle before his work is done and his consolation arrives.

Much the same proves true of Aragorn, rightful King of Gondor, and Éomer his royal ally. Although some picture Aragorn as grim, Tolkien’s depiction of his character differs drastically. We find the Ranger laughing with hobbit friends as they await Black Riders in Bree, and again they laugh while undergoing recovery in the Houses of Healing. However, for the most moving picture of wartime laughter we must look to the Pelennor Fields, where not only recovery but also consolation greet the merry heart: “Now for wrath, now for ruin and a red nightfall! These staves [Éomer] spoke, yet he laughed as he said them”

(*RK* 829). What an incongruous image! In the face of despair, Éomer laughs. No help has come, but he sings. While this is undoubtedly Tolkienian homage to Northern courage – laughter in the face of despair – Tolkien does not allow the despair to win. Certainly, he makes us walk through the despair with Éomer, but he does not let the despair set his story's, or our story's, boundaries. Tolkien acknowledges the hopelessness, but in a distinct variation from Northernness, he does not let the hopelessness prevail. For then Éomer meets his consolation, his greatest eucatastrophe. A few moments into his future the despair he despised crumbles before the Return of the King, "and the mirth of the Rohirrim was a torrent of laughter and a flashing of swords" (*RK* 829). Yet again, Tolkien here specifically draws a connection between mirth and battle power. The flashing of the Rohirrim's swords ringing with the sound of their laughter is no coincidence. Rather, their mirth was their flashing of swords. The warrior's valour and gaiety flow from the same source and express themselves together, each weaving into the other, to give strength to both. While Tolkien sets up this picture of Northern bravery mainly to jar our expectations with a eucatastrophe, a reason behind the singing slaying, Tolkien does cause Éomer to walk through shadow and Éomer does persevere under the darkness, showing us that we can persevere even when we think we cannot win. And humour is the expression of that seeming incongruity – until the eucatastrophe comes. Just what the source of strength is that gives laughter and song to swords we shall discover in a moment, but for the present let us never forget that Éomer laughed before the King arrived. His laughter prepared him for a good battle, and the battle's good turn led to a joyous consolation.

Before I address eucatastrophe, I should provide some final samples of mirth's Power to Battle that beg for our attention. After all, how can a discussion of humour in Tolkien exclude the overtly funny battleground scenes in *The Lord of the Rings*? The swaggering competition between Gimli and Legolas for highest death toll exemplifies the perseverance a game can give. Beginning with the hopeless siege on Helm's Deep and continuing all the way to a desperate struggle on Pelennor Fields, the killing contest between this dwarf and elf enables them to combat evil until eighty-three orcs lie dead between them. On a less gruesome note, Tolkien shows how a competition of banter can also breathe perseverance into struggle. When Merry and Pippin find themselves caught by

a ruthless gang of orcs, witty play helps them devise a way out of their captors' clutches and into Fangorn Forest. Though their position is dark and dangerous, we laugh as Merry first congratulates Pippin on his "good work" of "playing up to [...]that hairy little villain" but hastily asserts that "Cousin Brandybuck is going in front now" with his unsurpassable knowledge of the lay of the land (*TT* 448). Their humour mingles with cleverness to produce a courage only a funny hobbit could display. Together the merry companions reach safety, leaving us to marvel at the power hobbits have to joke and at the power hobbits gain by joking. Yes, humour can help dwarves, elves, and even halflings win battles.

Not surprisingly, Merry and Pippin continue to play starring roles in the last area of mirth's victory, the Power to Hope and Heal. During the siege of Minas Tirith, both hobbits draw near to death's door, with Merry suffering the poison of the Witchking himself. Thankfully, Merry and Pippin find hope to heal through shared merriment, something Éowyn lacks until Faramir's warmth revives her. Similar to Faramir's warmth, Pippin's decision "to sound cheerful" as he escorts his friend to the Houses of Healing, is successful and his cheerful medicine stops Merry's descent into shadow (*RK* 841). Merry remains open to merriment, regardless of any recent altercations with witch wraiths, and this coupled with Pippin's pleasantries brings him to full healing. In fact, as Aragorn plainly states, "He is weary now, and grieved [...]. But these evils can be amended, so strong and gay a spirit is in him. His grief he will not forget; but it will not darken his heart, it will teach him wisdom" (*RK* 850-851). Not only does the king with healing hands put "strong" and "gay" together, and not only does he ascribe Merry's recovery to that strong and gay spirit, but he also states Merry's light heart will grant the hobbit hope to overcome his grief and teach him wisdom. Many are those who would benefit from just such a light heart, one that does not darken with sorrow but becomes purer, brighter, fairer through it. Little wonder does the Warden deem hobbits "a very remarkable race" and "very tough in fibre" (*RK* 852). His understanding is correct, as mirth gives Merry and Pippin the courage and victory for which they hoped.

It is well the Warden had a chance to see this remarkable recovery, because back in the Shire hope is steadily being beaten out of the hobbits, one by one, laugh by laugh. By the time Merry, Pippin, Frodo, and Sam return to their homeland, Saruman – that wizard who will not be mocked – has wrought

ruin on the hobbits by snatching away their hope so effectively that the good people of the Four Farthings “did not seem quite sure whether laughing was allowed” (RK 980). Here we learn through negative example that hope and humour go together. Only the very incorruptible hobbits, the ones with the highest propensity for jollification, such as Farmer Maggot (great friend of Tom Bombadil that he is) and the Cottons (who never give up on Sam for a certain lively, lovely reason), do not lose their humour and hope during Sharkey’s siege. They alone are ready to fight against and heal from Sharkey’s pessimistic rule. The rest of the hobbits have forgotten how to laugh.

In contrast to this sorry picture of sad hobbits, Merry, Pippin, Frodo, and Sam return as heroes, sitting “at their ease laughing and talking and singing” (RK 980). They bring a hope covered in laughter, full of healing, and crowned with victory, as the Scouring of the Shire proves well. From this scouring, we realise that their comedy has matured in spirit and grown wiser, much like Merry and Pippin have grown taller in body. If their laughter made them strong, now their strength emboldens their laughter. Far from anomalous, Tolkien paints this lightheartedness as normal for weathered conquerors. In *The Two Towers*, Gandalf who conquered the Balrog “can be both kinder and more alarming, merrier and more solemn than before,” while in the last chapters of *The Return of the King* a victorious Gandalf the White becomes “not so close as he used to be, though he laughs now more than he talks” (RK 576, 934). If Gandalf returns merrier from his long, dark night, should we be astonished when Tolkien says of Merry and Pippin, “if they were now large and magnificent, they were unchanged otherwise, unless they were indeed more fairspoken and more jovial and full of merriment than ever before” (RK 1002)? What happened to Gandalf in all his wars likewise happened to these hobbits in all their struggles: they learned to laugh. And their laughter brought hope and healing.

Indeed, they learned to laugh through their tears. This picture of mourning and mirth remains to complete our study of humour in Tolkien, to expose the full sting of laughter’s power to hope and heal. And where best to find mourning than in *The Silmarillion*’s most tragic character, Túrin Turambar? The man who laughed as one fey may yet teach us about mirth’s power to mend, for if ever one were without hope of recovery and consolation, it was Túrin. His murder of Beleg Strongbow, truest of friends, drives Túrin so mad that his life evapo-

rates into a horrifying, aimless hush. Could there exist a cure for such sorrow, a hope ready to heal the deepest of wounds? Yes. Awaiting Túrin's madness there sparkles a strangely simple remedy: a draught of water from the lake of "endless laughter" which is "fed from crystal fountains unfading, and guarded from defilement" (S 209). Túrin kneels to drink from these pure springs, and then he suddenly begins to weep only to arise "healed of his madness" (S 209). It is a moving scene, but do we grasp what we see? A madman is healed by weeping before a laughing lake. A murderer comes back to life through sorrow mingled with joy. Laughter and tears work together towards the strength of consolation, just as Nienna, the Vala of mourning, embodies. Tolkien describes her as mighty, "and those who hearken to her learn [...] endurance in hope" (S 28). These words sound familiar, linking might and hope and endurance all together. Why? Because Tolkien describes humour in exactly the same manner! The endurance Nienna teaches corresponds to the perseverance Tulkas shows, and her release of tears mingles with his release of laughter. By inspiring hope as well as strength, mirth and mourning will eventually lead us to consolation.

And thus the most glorious occasions require both laughter and tears, as Sam discovers when he awakes from Mount Doom's nightmare to the bliss of beholding Gandalf in the land of Ithilien. The darkness ended, the eagles come, and Gandalf alive once more – what could be more glorious than this? The joy surpasses Sam's expression and he is left speechless, but then Gandalf teaches him, and us, how to rejoice. After uttering that breathtaking sentence, "A great Shadow has departed," the Wizard laughs, "and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land; and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter, the pure sound of merriment, for days upon days without count" (RK 930-31). Here is Sam's lake of laughter, where the madness of Mordor melts before the purity of merriment which that madness had, for a time, dispelled. Pure laughter heals him, just as Túrin encounters Eithel Ivrin to allay his evil. And, like Túrin, Sam's immediate response to the overpowering purity of Gandalf's gladness is to weep. However, while each walk through a recovery of laughing tears, there awaits for Sam a greater release to a greater consolation than Túrin's experience affords. His tears accomplish more than conquering an illness; they bring him to that joy which comes in the morning, described by Tolkien in natural hobbit terms: "Then, as a sweet

rain will pass down a wind of spring and the sun will shine out the clearer, his tears ceased, and his laughter welled up, and laughing he sprang from his bed” (*RK* 931). From pure joy that awakens tears, Sam soars into life-giving laughter, and glimpses the consolation belonging to that great eucatastrophe of which Tolkien believes every fantasy should whisper. Sam becomes well again, to “feel like spring after winter, and sun on the leaves; and like trumpets and harps and all the songs [he has] ever heard” (*RK* 931). Here is a taste of heaven; here is laughter’s resurrection. Here dwells a joy as poignant as grief and the glory of a great consolation.

### **Melkor Laughed, Too: The Fount of Mirth’s Might and the Assurance of Consolation**

Although I have gone on at length to show the high regard Tolkien pays to humour, and the noble role it can play in our lives, I cannot leave the subject as it has so far been presented. Especially in the previous section I alluded to the notion that the side on which humour sits might be just as important to its power as the humour itself. Now comes the time to make the point emphatically: humour is not an end in itself. For Tolkien, the friendly grins in a sunny garden and the playful teasing on a dark battlefield either results from something deeper than the grin and the joke, or they are pointless. After all, Melkor laughed, too, and he lost. The secret of victory, then, does not lie in laughter itself. There must lie behind good, strong humour something much better and stronger than humour alone. But what is it? Wise men have said laughter is the best medicine, yet I believe Tolkien suggests an even wiser statement of the case might be “a merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance” and “doeth good like a medicine” (Prov. 15.13, 17.22). Did you catch the difference? Laughter is not the best medicine; the merry heart, the joyful soul that does the laughing, is. Mirth proves but a stepping stone, a tool whose potency depends entirely on the springs from which it sprung. And that spring is goodness itself.

Goodness, that essential quality derived from a perspective larger than selfish gain and a realisation of a higher story greater than our own, is the fount from which mirth’s might flows. It is Sam Gamgee looking up through a black sky and cherishing the white star still blazing. It is Túrin finding respite in pure

waters. It is Éomer smiling at the black ships with the banner of the White Horse rippling in the wind behind him. It is Parish and Niggle, after much toil and labour, laughing so that the mountains ring with their glee. They see the greater story, the bigger battle, the completed Parish, and it gives them the right hope and the right fears and the right purpose. This good brings them joy, even in the pitch of pain, because this good causes them to trust there really is a “Joy beyond the walls of this world, poignant as grief” that yet endures (OFS 175). Gandalf knows this good joy well, as we see through the eyes of our merriest hobbit:

Pippin glanced in some wonder at the face now close to his own, for the sound of that laugh had been gay and merry. Yet in the wizard’s face he saw at first only lines of care and sorrow; though as he looked more intently he perceived that under all there was a great joy: a fountain of mirth enough to set a kingdom laughing, were it to gush forth (*RK* 742).

Gandalf’s joyful heart is what causes uproarious laughter. Mirth is the expression of joy’s confidence, and joy’s confidence is bigger than oneself. It is the assurance that right will win, which was why Tolkien wrote, why his characters press on, why Bombadil tosses the Ring and Nienna weeps and Tulkas laughs and Rohan’s swords sang as they slew. Humour works only when we embrace the source of its strength, when we grasp history’s fuller story of consolation, that great eucatastrophe, and we fight for it. When mirth rests in good’s might, mirth will make us mighty, and we too will know victory.

Thus we end where we began, at the battle of good versus evil, but hopefully a bit wiser for the laughs. Joy now shines as something very grave indeed, and its mirth the one that leads to good’s triumph truly is as poignant as grief. But Tolkien, as usual, says it best through story, and so I conclude with one of his own conclusions, with laughter and tears, with that “piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire” from “On Fairy-Stories” (176), and with the beauty of consolation:

And all the host laughed and wept, and in the midst of their merriment and tears the clear voice of the minstrel rose like silver and gold, and all men were hushed. And he sang to them, now in the Elven-tongue, now in the speech of the West, until their hearts, wounded with sweet words, overflowed, and their joy was like swords, and they passed in thought out to regions where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness. (*RK* 933)

### About the Author

JENNIFER RAIMUNDO has been enchanted by Tolkien ever since her parents first read *The Lord of the Rings* aloud for family time. This enchantment grew into fascination and study as Jenn used her undergraduate program to learn more about Tolkien and his literary friends and then set out on a Master of Arts in Inklings and Medieval Studies with Signum University. Jenn has written several articles and conference papers on the Inklings, and plans to pursue a doctoral degree in the Inklings and Education. In addition to reading and writing about the Inklings, Jenn works at Signum University as the Lead of Institutional Planning. She currently resides in Washington, D.C., where she enjoys to hike and drink too much coffee.

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