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Some Boethian Themes in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*

ABSTRACT: There appear to be quite a few parallels between Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* (*Consolatio Philosophiae*), and they seem to concern particularly, though not only, the character drawing in Tolkien's book. Those parallels are pre-eminently connected with the fact that both Boethius and Tolkien like to think of the most extreme situations that can befall a human. And both are attached to the idea of not giving in to despair, and of finding a source of hope in seemingly desperate straits. The idea that there is some link between Boethius and Tolkien is naturally not new. T.A. Shippey talks about it in his *The Road to Middle Earth*, but he concentrates on the Boethian conception of good and evil, which is also of course an important matter, but surely not the only one that links Tolkien and Boethius. On the other hand, it is not my intention to claim that there is something in Tolkien's book of which it can be said that it would have been absolutely impossible without Boethius. Still, I think it may be supposed that just like Boethian motifs are natural in the medieval literature of the West, so they can be thought of as natural in the work of such dedicated a medievalist as J.R.R. Tolkien.

KEYWORDS: Tolkien, Boethius, consolation, the self, possession, religion, morality.

1. Introduction

The purpose of the present article is not to suggest that Tolkien faithfully followed into the footsteps of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (480–524). I basically agree with M.J. Halsall:

Nothing in Tolkien's published works and/or Letters, nor his Biography, testifies to his incorporation of any particular philosophical model or cosmological theory in the construction of his own mythology in general, and cosmogony in particular. (Halsall, 2020: 36)

On the other hand, the popularity of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* in the Middle Ages and even in the later epochs seems to make it highly probable that Tolkien, as an expert medievalist, may have been inspired by this seminal work.

The main Boethian theme is of course that of consolation, and it is this topic I am going to concentrate upon, though not only. Let me start with the matter of consolation understood as a source of mental strength, rather than, as Samuel Johnson put it, "alleviation of misery",¹ or, in the words of Boethius himself, "medicine to ease pains"² (*remedium doloris*)³ (*Consolatio*, I, 1) (Watts, 1969: 36).

2. The Consolation of Théoden

Tolkien's Gandalf, as a comforter of Théoden, the king of Rohan, unlike Lady Philosophy, who comforts Boethius, is not interested in making the king become reconciled to his downfall. On the contrary, Gandalf wants Théoden to turn against his enemies and teach them a lesson. This is something Boethius may have dreamt about; he certainly had powerful enemies whom he had no reason to love, and his sovereign King Theodoric the Great could be very cruel, but he did not even dare to admit to such dreams, let alone try to make them become a reality.

It is with the following words that Gandalf turns to Théoden in order to awaken his original better self:

'Now Théoden son of Thengel, will you hearken to me?' said Gandalf. 'Do you ask for help?' He lifted his staff and pointed to a high window. There the darkness seemed to clear, and through the opening could be seen, high and far, a patch of shining sky. 'Not all is dark. Take courage, Lord of the Mark; for better help you will not find. No counsel have I to give to those that despair. Yet counsel I could give, and words I could speak to you. Will you hear them? They are not for all ears. I bid you come out before your doors and look abroad. Too long have you sat in shadows and trusted to twisted tales and crooked promptings.' (Tolkien II, 1976:104)

¹ <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/>

² The quotations from Boethius follow the English translation by V.E. Watts.

³ The quotations from the Latin, that is, the original, version of Boethius's book follow: James J. O'Donnell, (ed.) Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae*, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0121%3Abook%3D1%3Asectio%3DP1>.

Remarkably enough, in somewhat similar terms Lady Philosophy, in Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, describes and proposes to cure the disease of despair that the Narrator is suffering from:

It is nothing serious, only a touch of amnesia that he is suffering, the common disease of deluded minds (*nihil, inquit, periculi est, lethargum patitur, communem illusarum mentium morbum*). He has forgotten for a while who he is, but he will soon remember once he has recognized me . . . The night was put to flight, the darkness fled, and to my eyes their former strength returned. In the same way the clouds of my grief dissolved and I drank in the light. (*Consolatio*, I, 2) (Watts, 1969: 38)

Boethius, like Théoden, is cured through *anamnesis*, that is through recollecting what he once was and through returning to that, temporarily forgotten, old and more genuine self.

Unfortunately, the consolation offered in this scene by Lady Philosophy has only a short-term effect. A little while later she asks Boethius: "Tell me why you are weeping and why your eyes are full of tears" (*Consolatio*, I, 4) (Watts, 1969: 40). Her philosophical medicine has to be applied several times before the patient, that is Boethius, is ultimately comforted, that is, before he produces within himself a correct, from a philosophical and moral point of view, state of mind. In this state of mind he is expected "to avoid vice and cultivate virtue" (*Consolatio*, III, 11) (Watts, 1969: 169), but we do not see whether he manages, or in what manner, to translate this principle into action. In the case of Théoden, things are much simpler: he is cured almost in an instant, and to be cured means for him to fight, which he does in great style. Ultimately, he is killed on the battlefield, but he dies contented, knowing for sure that he has been fighting for a good cause, and that he has proved his mettle. To criticize Boethius for not being specific about his cultivating of virtue would be of course grossly unfair. It is well known that when he was writing his *Consolation* he was on death row, so he really had little to look forward to. Thus the models of heroism represented by Théoden and the one embraced by Boethius must differ widely, the latter man's range of possibilities is extremely narrow, which largely justifies the difficulty with which he reaches some kind of consolation, but his attitude, nevertheless, or rather exactly for this reason, fully deserves to be called heroic.

This is just one example of Tolkien's possible use of Boethian inspiration to create some of the most memorable scenes in *The Lord of the Rings*. Such appeals to discard the ways of darkness and embrace those of light are in fact frequent enough in *The Consolation* and they may be considered as either Platonic or Christian, or both, so as such they need not be associated with Boethius. But the note of hope concerning the character of an individual, suggesting that they will be eventually able, in spite of some temporary wavering, or even oc-

casual falling into despair, to see the true light, seems specifically Boethian. And it is this motif that may have impressed also Tolkien, because in *The Lord of the Rings* we find several such characters. Apart from the already mentioned Théoden, we may naturally add Boromir, but also Frodo, Bilbo and even Gandalf and Galadriel, because they all feel, and have to overcome, the temptation of the Ring, which represents the forces of darkness and despair.

3. *The Lord of the Rings* as a crypto-Christian, post-medieval epic

According to V.E. Watts: “*The Divine Comedy* as a whole could be regarded as a great elaboration of Boethius’ concept of the ascent of the soul to the contemplation of the mind of God and its return to its true home or *patria* in the scheme of the universe” (Watts, 1969: 8). If then the great medieval epic poem by Dante is inspired by Boethius to the extent of borrowing from him its basic narrative scheme, perhaps something similar can be said of *The Lord of the Rings*, a medievalist epic novel by J.R.R. Tolkien? By “Boethius” naturally we usually mean his very influential book *The Consolation of Philosophy*, written probably in 523. In the book, we have a dialogue between the author’s persona and Lady Philosophy, who “descends to Boethius from on high, and leads him back through various paths to God Himself” (Watts, 1969: 21). It seems possible to think of *The Lord of the Rings* as a similar work in which the figure of Boethius is replaced by Frodo, an adept in wisdom, who travels through the inferno of Mordor and becomes morally fortified with virtue and understanding. Boethius’s guide, Lady Philosophy, and Dante’s guides Virgil, Beatrice and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, are represented by the mutually complementary figures of Gandalf and Galadriel, standing for the male and female, respectively, avatars of wisdom, who both lead Frodo, and the hobbits who accompany him, on the paths of wisdom, making them acquainted with both the experience of utter evil and that of supreme good. When Watts comes to the conclusion that “Boethius professed a sort of *christianisme neutralisé*” (Watts, 1969: 30), that is a doctrine that is basically compatible with Christianity without being explicitly or obviously Christian, cannot we also apply this observation to Tolkien, who saturated his great novel with Christian allusions without making it unequivocally Christian?

This point is also strongly made by K.E. Dubs, who says: “Unlike, for example Augustine, who depends on the Christian view of history as linked to scripture, Boethius presents the philosophical issues quite apart from any link to Christian history (the Creation, the Fall, the Passion and so on). For Tolkien, who

was creating his own mythos, his own history, such an independent presentation was essential” (Dubs, 2004: 134). I basically agree with this; however, it is clear enough that this statement loses much of its relevance if we apply it, instead of *The Lord of the Rings*, to *The Silmarillion*. In the latter work, there is an attempt to construct something like a Christian history, the motifs of the Creation and Fall are plainly visible, with Ilúvatar and Melkor as Tolkien’s God and Satan, and Fëanor as Tolkien’s Adam, but even *The Silmarillion* is far from being so explicitly Christian as, for example, C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*.

4. Lady Philosophy and Galadriel

About Lady Philosophy it is said: “Her varying height ... is symbolic: sometimes she is of average height, offering the practical philosophy ... sometimes she pierces the sky leading back to God from Whom she came” (*Consolatio*, I, 1) (Watts, 1969: 35–36). Cannot we say the same of the varying status of Gandalf, who sometimes plays the role of a village entertainer and a source of practical wisdom, and sometimes appears as a larger than life representative of God’s glory and God’s justice? Besides, Lady Philosophy is not only a woman of “varying height” but also “a woman both old and young” (Lewis, 1964: 80):

I became aware of a woman standing over me. She was of awe-inspiring appearance, her eyes burning and keen beyond the usual power of men. She was so full of years that I could hardly think of her as of my own generation, and yet she possessed a vivid color and undiminished vigor. It was difficult to be sure of her height, for sometimes she was of average human size, while at other times she seemed to touch the very sky with the top of her head, and when she lifted herself even higher, she pierced it and was lost to human sight. (*Consolatio*, I, 1) (Watts, 1969: 35–36)

We may compare this to the presentation of Lady Galadriel, who is shown together with her husband Celeborn, but there is no doubt that she is the more important figure:

Very tall they were, and the Lady no less tall than the Lord; and they were grave and beautiful. They were clad wholly in white; and the hair of the Lady was of deep gold, and the hair of the Lord Celeborn was of silver long and bright; but no sign of age was upon them, unless it were in the depths of their eyes; for these were keen as lances in the starlight, and yet profound, the wells of deep memory. (Tolkien I, 1976: 336)

The above description is naturally very idealistic: Galadriel is shown as having the best of both worlds, she is very beautiful, but she also shows signs of such wisdom that only very advanced age can grant. And it is clear enough that she is such a strongly magical creature that she can effortlessly combine extreme beauty, that is youthful appearance, with equally extreme age.

Even the artistic form of *The Lord of the Rings* combines, like Lady Philosophy, or Gandalf and Galadriel, many aspects, prose alternates there with verse, which is a generic feature of the so called Menippean satire, and it so happens that *The Consolation of Philosophy* is classified as a Menippean satire and also mixes up prose and poetry, even though the proportion of poetry in Boethius may be greater than in Tolkien. Within that prose, we see in Tolkien a combination of realistic and fantastic, or magical, motifs, elements of low and high style, comedy and tragedy, the harmonious and the grotesque, which is also the feature of the Menippean satire, even though not really of *The Consolation*. Whether *The Lord of the Rings* can be classified as Menippean satire is an interesting question, which, however, I do not pretend to be able to solve. Let it be only noticed that quite a few important modern and early modern literary works have already been described as Menippean satires, for example, More's *Utopia*, Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, Bulgakov's *Master and Margerita* and many others (Diniejko, 2016). If this category is capable of including so many very different books, one can, it seems, cast doubt on its usefulness.

5. Frodo and Orpheus

In Tolkien, we have visions of utmost degeneracy that has its grotesque aspects. It is enough to think of the Ringwraiths, Sauron, and naturally Gollum, who become degenerate owing to their obsession with power and material goods. Boethius, in this context, prefers to use the example of the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, pointing to Orpheus as the one who paid dearly for his decision "to turn his eye to darkness":

Happy the man whose eyes once could
Perceived the shining fount of good;
Happy he whose unchecked mind
Could leave the chains of earth behind.
Once when Orpheus sad did mourn
For his wife beyond death's bourn,

His tearful melody begun
Made the moveless trees to run, (*Consolatio*, III, XII, 1–6)
...
As he stands the lords beseeching
Of the underworld for grace.
The triform porter stands amazed,
By Orpheus' singing tamed and dazed;
The Furies who avenge men's sin,
Who at the guilty's terror grin,
Let tears of sorrow from them steal;
No longer does the turning wheel
Ixion's head send whirling round;
Old Tantalus upon the sound
Forgets the waters and his thirst
And while the music is rehearsed
The vulture ceases flesh to shred
At last the monarch of the dead
In tearful voice, "We yield," he said:
"Let him take with him his wife,
By song redeemed and brought to life.
But let him, too, this law obey,
Look not on her by the way
Until from night she reaches day."
But who to love can give a law?
Love unto love itself is law.
Alas, close to the bounds of night
Orpheus backwards turned his sight
And looking lost her twice to fate.
For you the legend I relate,
You who seek the upward way
To life your mind into the day;
For who gives in and turns his eye
Back to darkness from the sky,
Loses while he looks below
All that up with him may go.
(*nam qui Tartareum in specus
uictus lumina flexerit
quicquid praecipuum trahit
perdit dum uidet inferos*) (*Consolatio*, III, XII, 27–58) (Watts, 1969: 113–115)

This mythical story, as retold by Boethius, does not concern a corrupt character, but rather a character that gives in to a moment of weakness, but this is enough for his world to collapse. Let it be noted that the protagonist of the story is shown as a truly angelic figure. Orpheus's melodious song introduces an element of peace and harmony into a world torn by conflicts and rivalry. His

descent into the Underworld is shown as bringing a momentary relief to such denizens of the lower world that were punished with most extreme and elaborate tortures: Tantalus, Ixion and Tityos. His song melts even the heart of the terrible Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the entrance to the Underworld, and also the heart of “the monarch of the dead”.

The dramatic tension of the story is comparable to that of Frodo’s difficult mission that brought him to the land of Mordor. Frodo, like the Boethian Orpheus, even though he seems to have no artistic talents, is capable, as the chief Ring-bearer, being at the same time merely a halfling, of awaking pity and sympathy, even though, unlike Orpheus, he also can awake envy in spite of his rather miserable condition. The fiercest and most domineering characters become much milder in the presence of Frodo, and this concerns even Boromir, who attempts, again in a moment of weakness, to take away Frodo’s ring by force. Frodo’s moment of weakness, comparable to that of Orpheus, comes naturally at the top of Mount Doom, in the Sammath Naur (“Chambers of Fire”), where he claims the Ring for himself, thus threatening the whole point of his mission at the moment when it is almost accomplished, which certainly resembles Orpheus’s “turning his eye back to darkness”, at the very moment of what appears to be his greatest triumph. Frodo’s mission is saved, as is well known, by Gollum, who, like Eurydice, in a sense, falls back into darkness being already, in many ways, a creature of darkness.

6. The Ring as a paradoxical symbol of material possession

Boethius at some point praises simple life, which in itself may not be very remarkable, but the language he uses is interesting enough:

But wealth does very often harm its owners, for all the most criminal elements in the population who are thereby all the more covetous of other people’s property are convinced that they alone are worthy to possess all the gold and precious stones there are. You are shuddering now at the thought of club and knife, but if you had set out on the path of this life with empty pockets, you would whistle your way past any highwayman (*atqui diuitiae possidentibus persaepe nocuerunt, cum pessimus quisque eoque alieni magis audius quicquid usquam auri gemmarumque est se solum qui habeat dignissimum putat. Tu igitur, qui nunc contum gladiumque sollicitus pertimescis, si uitae huius callem uacuis uiator intrasses coram latrone cantares*). (*Consolatio*, II, 5) (Watts, 1969: 68)

Frodo's mission, consisting in carrying the Ring into the middle of the Enemy's country, may be thought of as a Boethian experiment. Boethius seems, roughly speaking, to divide people into two groups: the covetous, who are attached to (other people's) material goods (*auri alieni avidus*) and therefore are constantly afraid of losing them; and the wanderers with empty pockets (*vacuus viator*) who trust in moral, rather than material, goods and need not be afraid of highwaymen. It seems characteristic that Boethius thinks of the materialistic and greedy people as, first of all, desiring other people's goods.

Now Frodo, the protagonist of *The Lord of the Rings*, seems to combine those two Boethian categories into one, or even to overcome them. This happens, first of all, because Frodo is a hobbit, that is, someone belonging to a race of which it can be said that "They were hospitable and delighted in parties, and in presents, which they gave away freely and eagerly accepted" (Tolkien I, 1976: 14). Thus a hobbit appears as a creature that, on the one hand, is not averse to private property, on the contrary, welcomes it, but, on the other hand, does not seem excessively attached to it, or conditioned and restricted by it. Such creatures certainly were not anticipated in Boethius, but it is still very Boethian of Tolkien to foreground, already at the beginning of his great book, the problem of attachment versus non-attachment. Eventually, Frodo, who is shown as a more or less average hobbit, will become the Ring-Bearer, that is, someone who is burdened with a piece of property that awakes a most fatal and pernicious attachment. Frodo's hobbitishly playful attitude to property, or at least to some kind of property, is clearly not enough to be equal to the challenge of the Ring, but Frodo, in spite of finding it more and more difficult to resist the temptation of the Ring, remains, throughout his ordeal, a pre-eminently virtuous person. In other words, he is somebody who combines high moral qualities with having something very heavy in his pocket, and later round his neck, even though it is an object that increasingly occupies his mind. In this capacity he cannot "whistle his way past the highwaymen", on the contrary, he attracts the attention of all particularly dangerous and covetous creatures who want to get hold of the Ring. The chief "highwayman", that is Sauron, watches Frodo's movements with rapt attention and very evil intentions, but, paradoxically, Frodo and his friend Sam eventually manage to outwit him.

Lady Philosophy, concerning the subject of material possession, says, in a very satirical vein, the following:

It seems as if you feel a lack of blessing of your own inside you, which is driving you to seek your blessings in things separate and external (*in externis ac sepositis rebus*). And so when a being endowed with a godlike quality in virtue of his rational nature thinks that his only splendour lies in the possession of inanimate goods, it is the overthrow of the natural order. (*Consolatio*, II, 5) (Watts, 1969: 67)

Also this sounds like a challenge to the situation shown in Tolkien's book. His characters are very much preoccupied with chasing material objects. Those objects, however, are usually not quite separate, external and inanimate. This can be described as another Boethian experiment in which Tolkien attempts to go beyond Boethius, though virtually in the same direction. Talking about the pernicious influence of the One Ring in Tolkien, T.A. Shippey states the following: "Gandalf insists that the Ring is deadly dangerous to all its possessors: it will take them over, 'devour' them, 'possess' them" (Shippey, 2001: 114). Thus, Tolkien seems to suggest that Boethius was unduly optimistic in believing that possessive and greedy people put their trust in "things separate and external". The Ring is basically such a thing, but it possesses the power to, as it were, turn the tables against its possessor, it is capable of repossessing its possessor, to become the owner of its owner. In so doing it is of course no longer a "thing separate and external", but this makes it even more dangerous and its influence even more dehumanizing.⁴

Anthony Kenny summarizes Boethius's argument about the highest good and the pursuit of happiness in the following way: "I cannot find happiness in wealth, power, or fame, but only in my most precious possession, myself" (Kenny, 2005: 21). Tolkien definitely does not seem happy with this piece of advice, even though he has no quarrel with the basic statement that transitory values do not give happiness. But he questions the stability of "myself", allowing for the possibility that one's self becomes, as it were, invaded, overcome and distorted by forces over which even the best and the most powerful in Tolkien's world have little or no control.

Now let me characterize briefly the figures of Tom Bombadil, Gandalf and Galadriel, who play the role of Frodo's chief mentors, that is they have a position similar to Lady Philosophy in relation to the Dreamer, that is Boethius, in Boethius's work. They are mentors and role models in relation to Frodo's great task, which is that of being the Ring-bearer. Carrying the Ring may be treated as metaphor of a basically Boethian predicament, consisting in coming to terms with one's personal great misfortune which is also a temptation. In the case of Boethius, this is mainly the temptation of falling into despair, and of doubting in the goodness or omnipotence of God, while for Frodo the temptation consists rather in yielding to the magic of the Ring, which offers great powers at the cost of losing one's integrity and identity.

Probably the most resistant to the power of the Ring is Tom Bombadil, a rather mysterious character, sometimes compared to the Finnish mythical hero and demigod Väinämöinen, but even he does not seem to possess the ability of destroying or neutralizing the Ring. He does not even try to do anything of the

⁴ The paradoxical and ontologically uncertain status of the Ring is adequately discussed in: Shippey, 2003: 142.

kind, nor does anybody at first expect him to. From his own point of view, there is clearly no need for him to be able to do anything about the Ring. It is not an object that could threaten his integrity, his possession of himself.

Bombadil, however, does not seem to be able to realize that if the Ring falls into the hands of Sauron, nobody's integrity is going to be safe. Thus, Bombadil's policy may be criticized as short-sighted. And such a criticism is implied in the scene of the Council of Elrond, when at some point the motion of leaving the Ring in the hands of Bombadil is tabled, incidentally by Erester, an Elf and Elrond's trusted counsellor:

'He is a strange creature, but maybe I should have summoned him to our Council.'

'He would not have come,' said Gandalf.

'Could we not still send messages to him and obtain his help?' asked Erester.

'It seems that he has a power even over the Ring.'

'No, I should not put it so,' said Gandalf. 'Say rather that the Ring has no power over him. He is his own master. But he cannot alter the Ring itself, nor break its power over others. And now he is withdrawn into a little land, within bounds that he has set, though none can see them, waiting perhaps for a change of days, and he will not step beyond them.'

'But within those bounds nothing seems to dismay him,' said Erester. 'Would he not take the Ring and keep it there, for ever harmless?'

'No,' said Gandalf, 'not willingly. He might do so, if all the free folk of the world begged him, but he would not understand the need. And if he were given the Ring, he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind. He would be a most unsafe guardian; and that alone is answer enough'. (Tolkien I, 1976: 254)

It might be claimed that Bombadil represents a kind of character that has been foreseen and described by Boethius:

You cannot impose anything on a free mind, and you cannot move from its state of inner tranquility a mind at peace with itself and firmly founded on reason (*mentem firma sibi ratione cohaerentem*). The tyrant Nearchus thought he would be able to torture the philosopher Zeno into betraying his fellow conspirators in a plot against his person, but Zeno bit off his tongue and threw it into the face of the enraged tyrant. (*Consolatio*, II, 10) (Watts, 1969: 70)

Bombadil clearly is such a free mind, his perfect mental equilibrium is visible in his habit of laughing heartily even when faced with what for others is a deadly threat:

‘You won’t find your clothes again,’ said Tom, bounding down from the mound, and laughing as he danced round them in the sunlight. One would have thought that nothing dangerous or dreadful had happened; and indeed the horror faded out of their hearts as they looked at him, and saw the merry glint in his eyes.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Pippin, looking at him, half puzzled and half amused. ‘Why not?’

But Tom shook his head, saying: ‘You’ve found yourselves again, out of the deep water. Clothes are but little loss, if you escape from drowning . . .’ (Tolkien I, 1976: 144)

Indeed, for somebody like Tom, there is nothing external that can frighten him or even make him lose his temper. His contempt for the loss of the hobbits’ clothes is a metaphor of his hermit-like contempt for all worldly possessions. But all this is not enough. Boethius’s philosopher, in the passage above, can show convincingly his contempt for the tyrant, and even his contempt for death, but the tyrant can still kill him and many other people, and the philosopher has no remedy against it. In this sense he may be compared to Tom Bombadil, who, in spite of his enormous magical powers, declares, when parting with the hobbits: “Out east my knowledge fails. Tom is not master of Riders from the Black Land far beyond his country”. (Tolkien I, 1976: 147)

But Bombadil’s stature seems far greater than that. The nature and limits of Bombadil’s mastery are to some extent explained in a conversation between Frodo and Tom’s wife, Goldberry:

Frodo looked at her questioningly. ‘He is, as you have seen him,’ she said in answer to his look. ‘He is the Master of wood, water, and hill.’

‘Then all this strange land belongs to him?’

‘No indeed!’ she answered, and her smile faded. ‘That would indeed be a burden,’ she added in a low voice, as if to herself. ‘The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master. No one has ever caught old Tom walking in the forest, wading in the water, leaping on the hill-tops under light and shadow. He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master’ (Tolkien I, 1976: 126).

Bombadil then avoids the trap of possession, he is “the Master of wood, water, and hill”, but he is not their owner. In this respect, he resembles Tolkien’s Ents, who are called the Shepherds of Trees, or tree-herds,⁵ while he should perhaps be called, in a somewhat Heideggerian manner, a Shepherd of Being, even though, as an inhabitant of the Old Forest, he cares about trees too. A symptom

⁵ The chief of the Ents is called Treebeard, and he, like Tom Bombadil, is called “Eldest of all” (Tolkien II, 1976: 58).

of his special relationship to the very principle of being, is that, as Goldberry puts it, nobody can catch him, he appears only to those to whom he wants to appear. In other words, he is, he cultivates his being, and only on his own terms. So presumably no Tolkienian Dark Lord can kill him or get hold of him, unless Bombadil so wishes himself. Bombadil describes himself as “the Eldest”: “Eldest, that’s what I am. Mark my words, my friends: Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn” (Tolkien I, 1976: 132). This seems to imply immortality. If there is no “before Bombadil”, then neither can there be any “after him”.

Sam, Frodo’s servant and, the same time, his closest friend, calls Tom “a caution”: “‘I am sorry to take leave of Master Bombadil,’ said Sam. ‘He’s a caution and no mistake. I reckon we may go a good deal further and see naught better, nor queerer’” (Tolkien I, 1976: 148). While it is possible that Sam means only that Tom is an “extraordinary person”,⁶ because the word “caution” can mean just this, there is also a chance that he uses the word “caution” in a rather old fashioned sense, “the person who becomes safety, a surety”, and one of the examples of this sense, provided by Oxford English Dictionary, is “[Christ] becomes caution to His Father for all such as resolve and promise to serve Him”. This would mean that Bombadil is a Christ-like and God-given protector of those who sincerely recognize his authority. Then he can stand surety for such persons before God’s throne. As we read in St Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews:

“By so much was Jesus made a surety for a better testament . . . Wherefore he is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him” (Heb. 7.22–25). Indeed, it is enough, in the hour of dire need, to invoke Bombadil by means of a simple and childlike prayer:

Ho! Tom Bombadil, Tom Bombadillo!
By water, wood and hill, by the reed and willow,
By fire, sun and moon, harken now and hear us!
Come, Tom Bombadil, for our need is near us! (Tolkien I, 1976: 135)

And he will surely come and save those who call on him, as we can see in Chapter 8 of *The Fellowship of the Ring* where he saves the hobbits from a terrible Barrow-wight only a moment after Frodo sends up this devout aspiration or holy ejaculation (Tolkien I, 1976: 142), which Tolkien calls very modestly “a rhyme to sing” (Tolkien I, 1976: 135).

⁶ Such was apparently the interpretation of Maria Skibniewska, the first Polish translator of Tolkien’s works, who translates Sam’s “a caution” as “dziwna z niego osoba” [he is a strange person indeed] (Tolkien I, 2006: 202), whereas Jerzy Łoziński translates it as “bardzo on ostrożny” [he is very cautious indeed] (Tolkien I, 1996: 222), which is clearly a misunderstanding suggested apparently by the primary meaning of the noun “caution”.

Tom Bombadil's elevated and semi-religious status is, however, limited to a certain, rather narrow, perimeter beyond which he seems determined never to venture, and beyond which his authority and influence do not extend. The trouble is there are no clear limits of that territory. As Gandalf says in the passage quoted above: "he is withdrawn into a little land, within bounds that he has set, though none can see them". One might ask how Gandalf knows that this land is "little", if no one can see its boundaries.⁷ The word "little" seems relative enough, and let it be noticed that also Boethius grapples with the problem of the size of the world in which we live. And he comes to the following, scientifically correct, conclusion: "It is well known . . . that beside the extent of the heavens, the circumference of the earth has the size of a point; that is to say, compared with the magnitude of the celestial sphere, it may be thought of as having no extent at all" (*Consolatio*, II, 7) (Watts, 1969: 73). Boethius needs this motif to illustrate the smallness and insignificance of our world, and of human affairs, so also of his personal worries, however big they may seem to someone who is immersed in them, but the indeterminacy of Bombadil's habitat may serve the opposite purpose and suggest that it may be far bigger than it seems.

This hypothesis is to some extent confirmed by the rather mysterious words of Gandalf spoken at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, when the War of the Ring is already won:

I am going to have a long talk with Bombadil: such talk as I have not had in all my time. He is a moss-gatherer, and I have been a stone doomed to rolling. But my rolling days are ending, and now we shall have much to say to one another. (Tolkien III, 1976: 242–243)

Gandalf is naturally playing on the old English proverb: a rolling stone gathers no moss, but in this way he establishes a vital link between himself and Bombadil. The difference between them is reduced to the wider range of Gandalf's activity than that of Bombadil's, but now, when Gandalf's help is no longer so much needed, this difference disappears, as a result of which Gandalf and Bombadil turn out to be, as magical helpers and possibly also as the so called Maiar,⁸ avatars of each other. It is remarkable that when Gandalf declares the end of his mission, he says:

⁷ It may of course be assumed that the land of Tom Bombadil is in practice limited to the so called Old Forest, which extends more or less between the river Brandywine, which also marks the eastern border of the Shire, where the hobbits live, and the treeless Barrow-downs, behind which there is the village of Bree with its Inn of the Prancing Pony, where Frodo and his fellow hobbits, riding eastward, meet Aragorn for the first time. But it is never said that Tom would not be able to leave the Old Forest if he so wished.

⁸ The Maiar belong, together with the Valar, but below them in rank, the Ainur, "who participated in the Creation and who made and ordered the world". (Tyler, 2002: 7).

‘Do you not yet understand? My time is over: it is no longer my task to set things to rights, nor to help folk to do so’. (Tolkien III, 1976: 242)

And when Bombadil withholds further help, he says more or less the same, even though he clothes it in more colloquial terms:

‘I’ve got things to do,’ . . . ‘my making and my singing, my talking and my walking, and my watching of the country. Tom can’t be always near to open doors and willow-cracks. Tom has his house to mind, and Goldberry is waiting’. (Tolkien I, 1976: 145)

An additional link between Gandalf and Bombadil is provided by the fact that they both have what might be called female avatars: in the case of Tom it is his wife Goldberry, in the case of Gandalf it is the powerful sorceress Galadriel. She seems to be merely a friend of Gandalf’s, but, in the scene of the final parting at the Grey Havens, we see Galadriel and Gandalf boarding together,⁹ in the company of other immortals and Ring-bearers, the ship bound for the Undying Lands. It is striking that in this scene Tolkien emphasizes the fact that Galadriel wore NENYA on her finger, a magical ring whose symbolism was related to water, while Gandalf proudly displayed NARYA on his finger, also called the Ring of Fire (Tolkien III, 1976: 273–274). It is naturally well known that the symbolism of water is both complementary and opposite to the symbolism of fire, and a combination of both elements stands behind the Chinese conception of the *yin-yang*, water being traditionally associated with femininity and fire with masculinity.

It is remarkable that Galadriel gives to Frodo, before he sets out on the most dangerous part of his journey, the Phial of Galadriel, which is potent charm which she describes as follows:

“In this phial is caught the light of Eärendil star, set amid the waters of my fountain. It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out. Remember Galadriel and her Mirror!” (Tolkien I, 1976: 357). Later Frodo, but also his friend Sam, will use the Phial in particularly difficult and life-threatening situations, and the proper way of using it is to dazzle the enemies with its intense light and also to utter simultaneously the words of a hymn, in the Elvish language, addressed to Varda, the wife of Manwë, the king of the god-like Valar:

*A Elbereth Gilthoniel
silivren penna míriel*

O Elbereth Starkindler,
white-glittering, slanting down sparkling like a jewel,

⁹ It is perhaps significant that in the Grey Havens she is not accompanied by Celeborn, her husband, even though he also is a high-born Elf, she is accompanied instead by Elrond her son-in-law, and the Chief of Elves, who is also the Bearear of Vilya, the Ring of Air, “the mightiest of the Three”, which controls the other two rings: Galadriel’s ring NENYA, and Gandalf’s ring NARYA.

<i>o menel aglar elenath!</i>	the glory of the starry host!
<i>Na-chaered palan-díriel</i>	Having gazed far away
<i>o galadhremmin ennorath</i>	from the tree-woven lands of Middle-earth,
<i>Fanuilos, le linnathon</i>	to thee, Everwhite, I will sing,
<i>nef aear, sí nef aearon!</i>	on this side of the Sea, here on this side of the Ocean! ¹⁰

In the lair of the terrible spider Shelob, we see Sam using a shortened and simplified version of this hymn which is definitely more proper as an ejaculatory prayer in one's hour of need (Tolkien II, 1976: 301–302):

<i>A Elbereth Gilthoniel</i>	O Elbereth Starkindler,
<i>o menel palan-díriel,</i>	from heaven gazing afar,
<i>le nallon sí di'nguruthos!</i>	to thee I cry now beneath the shadow of death!
<i>A tiro nin, Fanuilos!</i>	O look towards me, Everwhite! ¹¹

There is a rather obvious link between Elbereth, which is an epithet of Varda meaning “the star queen” (Tyler, 2002: 182), and Galadriel. It is the latter that captures in her Phial the light of Eärendil's star. The nature of Eärendil's star is a little complicated:

The Star of Eärendil, also known as Gil-Estel, or Rothinzil by the Edain, was a light created by the Silmaril carried into the sky by Eärendil the Mariner. It was particularly visible in the morning and evening, and was referred to as the Evening Star.¹²

This sounds like an obvious allusion to Venus, called both the Morning Star and the Evening Star, but it seems more important that the light of Eärendil's star takes its origin from a Silmaril. The Silmarili are magical jewels made by Fëanor, one of the first Elves, but the light that the jewels emit comes from Varda, that is Elbereth, herself, which is why she is also called “Gilthoniel”, the Kindler. Thus Galadriel's phial is also, in a sense, Elbereth's phial. In this way the relatively simple motif of soliciting a powerful protector's help, as it appears in the relationship between Tom Bombadil and the hobbits, is transformed into an almost fully-fledged religion in the centre of which there is Galadriel, the wise and graceful queen of Elves, who, on the one hand, is an avatar of the ever-busy, helpful sorcerer Gandalf, but, on the other, she represents the Queen of the Stars, that is the Queen of Heaven, herself.

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Elbereth_Gilthoniel. No translation of the hymn is provided in *The Lord of the Rings*

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Elbereth_Gilthoniel.

¹² https://lotr.fandom.com/wiki/Star_of_E%C3%A4rendil.

In comparison with Galadriel, Gandalf appears a definitely simpler creature. He can help only when he is present, and he quite often is, for various reasons, absent, there is not even a method of summoning him, in the way you can summon Tom Bombadil. Galadriel, on the other hand, even though she basically does not leave her enchanted forest of Lorien, can help indirectly and from a distance via the powerful magical objects, or relics, she leaves in the hands of her worshippers. This is not only the matter of Galadriel's Phial, but also the "three golden hairs" of hers that she gives to Gimli, the Dwarf; a little wooden box, with the first letter of her name, that is G, on the lid of it, which she gives to Sam. With the help of the box Sam is going to become a much more successful gardener than he otherwise would have been, while Gimli's hands "shall flow with gold" and yet "gold shall have no dominion" over him. (Tolkien I, 1976: 356–357)

7. The religious (or quasi-religious) forms and beliefs in Tolkien and Boethius

The matter of calling on a deity when some help or enlightenment are needed was not far from Boethius's mind either. There is a passage where the problem of prayer is directly addressed, even though this is done from a Platonic, or Neo-Platonic, rather than Christian, point of view:

'. . . Since then you have realized the nature of true happiness and seen its false imitations, what remains now is that you should see where to find this true happiness.'

'Which is the very thing I have long and eagerly been waiting for.'

'But since in the *Timaeus* my servant Plato was pleased to ask for divine help even over small matters, what do you think we ought to do now to be worthy of discovering the source of that supreme good?'

'We ought to pray to the Father of all things. To omit to do so would not be laying a proper foundation.'

'Right,' she said, and immediately began the following hymn.

'O Thou who dost by everlasting reason rule, ...

Disperse the clouds of earthly matter's cloying weight;

Shine out in all Thy glory; for Thou are rest and peace

To those who worship thee; to see Thee is our end.

Who art our source and maker; lord and path and goal.' (Consolatio, III, 1)
(Watts, 1969: 96–97)

There are some similarities between Boethius's religion and the one that emerges from *The Lord of the Rings*. What they share is the assumption that an

act of admiration is close to the centre of religious experience. What they also share is the absence of any forms of institutional religion or cult.

Another thing is the belief, common to both Tolkien and Boethius, that nothing is purely accidental because everything is governed by a divine and inscrutable, though intentional, force that can be called providence. As Boethius says elsewhere: “It is the supreme good, then, which mightily and sweetly orders all things” (*Consolatio*, III, 12) (Watts, 1969: 111). We can see a belief in providence, for example, in some of Gandalf’s statements in a conversation with Frodo:

‘ . . . Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you were also meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought.’ (Tolkien I, 1976: 62)

‘ . . . Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. 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 Gollum has some part to play in it, for good or evil, before this is over. The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many – yours not least.’ (Tolkien I, 1976: 65)

Things are then “meant to happen”, there is no such thing as pure luck or accident. Such is also, in a sense, the situation in fairy tales. Interesting adventures happen only to the hero, or heroine, and they know, intuitively, how to turn them to their advantage, even though they may also temporarily fall into trouble. And just as in the fairy tales it is impossible to say who the force that “means things to happen” is,¹³ while in Boethius this force is naturally God, combined perhaps with Good, Wisdom, and Fortune. Instead, however, of a typical, in folklore, happy ending, we have, in *The Lord of the Rings*, some kind of heavily qualified happy ending shot through with melancholy and the pervasive “sic transit” motif.

On the other hand, however, the religion of *The Lord of the Rings* feels very different from that of Boethius. Principally, it seems, because it implies a personal love, or mercy, shown by semi-divine or semi-angelic figures, such as Tom Bombadil, Gandalf, Galadriel, or Frodo, figures that can be appealed to for help in specific difficult situations, in the same way as Christ was called upon by his disciples, or by others that needed his help. It is then the presence of intermediaries, those who translate the absolute into human terms, that makes the

¹³ In the words of the renowned folklore scholar Max Lüthi: “The hero is the lucky one. It is as if invisible ties linked him with the secret powers or mechanisms that shape the world and fate. Without his being aware of it, his behavior is shaped by cogent laws. As though drawn by a magnet, he, the isolated one, pursues his confident course and follows the precise line of conduct that the framework of his cosmos demands of him” (Lüthi, 1986: 57).

difference. In Boethius's book this role is to some extent played by Lady Philosophy, who may be, as we have seen, compared to Lady Galadriel, but she is merely personified wisdom, and her attitude to Boethius, or rather Boethius's persona, created for the sake of this philosophical, but also literary work, is an attitude of a stern and distant teacher, benevolent only in the sense of being willing to teach.

As already a long time ago was recognized and thoroughly discussed by Shippey, the influence of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* on Tolkien's work is clearly visible in the English writer's partial acceptance of the theory, represented both by Boethius and Augustine (or rather St Boethius and St Augustine), that evil has no substance and consists in the absence of good.¹⁴ This view is contrasted with the Manichaean conception of evil, according to which "Good and Evil are equal and opposite and the universe is a battlefield" (Shippey, 2003: 141). The cases where evil in *The Lord of the Rings* is connected with pure negativity and emptiness (both metaphorical and literal) are indeed numerous, and it is also clear that evil in Tolkien is not entirely devoid of substance, in other words, it is not entirely subjective. The War of the Ring has some aspects of "psychomachia", that is a Soul War, a conflict within one's soul or psyche, but it is also a real war, while the problems that Boethius grapples with in his treatise can be reduced to a psychomachia.

My take on the relationship between Boethius and Tolkien is a little different, even though I accept the conclusions reached by Shippey. In the present article, I am more interested in the possibility of treating Tolkien's trilogy as a source of consolation and a novel about consolation, inspired by Boethius's *Consolation*. I readily admit that these two topics are related to each other, if evil has no substance, and is, as Boethius's Lady Philosophy insists, "always bereft of all power" (*Consolatio*, III, 4) (Watts, 1969: 118), then consolation must be very easy to find. It is enough to persuade yourself that the wicked suffer horribly from their wickedness, and the realization, conscious or unconscious, that their wickedness is contrary to the laws of God and laws of nature, while the good may derive great happiness from their goodness alone, no matter how objectively miserable their life may be. This sounds simple enough, but as Boethius, the narrator, admits himself: "It is a strange thing to conclude and hard to accept" (*Consolatio*, III, 5) (Watts, 1969: 128).

Besides, such a consolation is somewhat irrelevant, it is addressed to those who can afford the luxury of contentedly enjoying their own goodness. It is of little use for those who cannot trust in their own goodness, who cannot be sure that they have turned their mind to higher things (*Consolatio*, III, 5) (Watts,

¹⁴ See especially the subchapter "Views of Evil: Boethian and Manichean" (Shippey, 2003: 140–146).

1969: 130), or that those “higher things” are indeed higher.¹⁵ After all, have we not been warned, by no less a person than Jesus Christ himself, that to trust in one’s own goodness may easily be condemned as righteously hypocritical, that is Pharisaic (Luke 18, 9–14)? King Théoden, who appears at the beginning of this essay could have thought that he also, when he listened to Wormtongue’s advice, turned his mind to higher things, such as peace, as opposed to war. And yet Gandalf (and Tolkien) condemns this pacifism as a mere mask for cowardice and laziness. When Gandalf opens Frodo’s mind to the possibility that showing mercy to such a wretched creature as Gollum makes sense, he does not really turn his mind from base things to high ones, he rather turns Frodo’s mind from high things, such as the sense of justice, to yet higher ones, such as mercy. This is why I suggest that in *The Lord of the Rings* we have to go beyond Boethius’s *Consolation*, though basically in the same direction. It is a direction no doubt compatible with Christianity. Even though, like Boethius, Tolkien avoids explicitly Christian motifs, he offers us a much more Christian, and also much more Catholic, consolation, which is visible in the Biblical allusions and the appearance of characters modelled on saints, angels and devils, who, however, may also be suspected of owing much to Germanic or Finnish mythology.

Tolkien attempts to go beyond Boethius also in his treatment of the material world and material possessions. Thus he shows Frodo as a Boethian traveller that “whistles his way past the highwaymen”, even though his purse is not empty, and also in the conception of the Ring, which is like Boethius’s “external object”, but it will not remain separate from his owner, on the contrary it will try to “devour” him. The Ring, as Shippey has already noticed (Shippey, 2003: 141), undermines, as an embodiment of the “substance of evil”, in some degree, the purely subjective perception of evil characteristic of Boethius. So Tolkien’s attitude to a broadly conceived materialism is not necessarily more tolerant than that of Boethius. He sees much more keenly the terrible temptations to which such materialism, represented by the attachment to the Ring, can lead. This is because he realizes, being after all a twentieth-century writer, that evil may take very insidious and malignant forms, and may camouflage itself as spiritual values. At the same time, he believes, like Lady Galadriel, that hands that flow with gold need not be necessarily enslaved by it.

We should also take into account the fact that Tolkien most probably was, as an Old English scholar, familiar with the Old English translation of Boethius, associated with King Alfred, who may have commissioned this translation, or was indeed himself involved in it. Shippey underlines that “[King Alfred] . . ., unlike

¹⁵ I mean the passage: “But let us see what is decreed by everlasting law: if you have turned your mind to higher things, there is no need of a judge to award a prize; it is you yourself who have brought yourself to a more excellent state (*uide autem quid aeterna lex sanciat. melioribus animum conformaueris: nihil opus est iudice praemium deferente, tu te ipse excellentioribus addidisti*); . . .”

Boethius, had the experience of seeing what Viking pirates did to his defenseless subjects; and again unlike Boethius had taken such drastic measures against evil as hanging Viking prisoners, and rebellious monks, ..." (Shippey, 2003: 141). These differences made it apparently difficult for Alfred to accept the Boethian theory of evil, known also the privation theory of evil, i.e. of evil as absence of good. The conclusion would be that for Alfred evil was all too real to think of it merely as absence. And yet it would be, I am afraid, impossible to find any statements, in Alfred's translation of *De Consolatione*, where he would openly question Boethius's way of thinking, even though he adds to this translation some passages of his own.

Let us quote one of such Alfredian passages because it may have been a source of inspiration for Tolkien and because it contains a vision of what might be called objective evil. The passage concerns the well-known Biblical story of the Tower of Babel. The reason why Boethius would not be able to refer to it is not far to seek, his book resolutely and consistently avoids any obvious references to Christianity, or to the Bible, so he prefers to talk about the rebellion of the giants against Jupiter:

Se Nefrod het wyrcan ænne tor on ðæm felda ðe Sennar hatte, and on ðære biode ðe Deria hatte swiðe neah þære byrig þe mon nu hæst Babilonia. Þæt hi dydon for þam ðingum þe hi woldon witan he heah hit wære to ðæm heofone and hu ðicce se hefon wære and hu fæst, oððe hwær þær ofer wære. Ac hit gebyrede, swa hit cyn was, þæt se godcunda wald hi tostencte ær hi hit fulwyrcean mosten, and towearp þone tor, and hiora monigne ofslog, and hiora spræce todælde on tu and hundseofontig geþioda. Swa gebyreþ ælcum þara ðe winð ðæm godcundan an walde. (Irvine and Godden, 2012: 264)¹⁶

It is remarkable that Alfred presents the story of the Tower of Babel not quite in keeping with the Biblical text.¹⁷ He makes Nimrod, the proverbial hunter, and "the first man to wear a crown" (Calvocoressi, 1990: 177), directly responsible for the construction of the tower, whereas in the Bible it is the initiative of some anonymous crowd. Alfred also changes the motivation for this venture, it is no longer the ambition merely to "reach unto heaven" (Carroll and Prickett, 1997: 11), but rather a quasi-scientific project of examining the nature and dimensions of heaven, and even seeing what is there beyond heaven. Alfred's Nimrod would certainly have appreciated a powerful telescope.

¹⁶ This Nimrod ordered the building of a tower on the field that was called Sennar, and in the nation that was called Deira, very near the city which is now called Babylon. They did that because they wished to how high it was to heaven and how thick it was and how firm, or what was above it. But it came about, as was fitting, the divine power scattered them before they were allowed to complete it, and cast down the tower, and killed many of them, and divided their speech into seventy two languages. So it befalls everyone who contends against divine power (Irvine and Godden, 2012: 265).

¹⁷ Alfred's version of that story follows extra-Biblical Hebrew and Islamic traditions.

From a Tolkienological point of view, however, it is even more remarkable that Alfred's Nimrod corresponds quite well to Tolkien's Sauron. Sauron's tower from which he hopes to challenge the rule of the god-like Valar is naturally Barad-dûr, on the top of which there is the all-penetrating Eye of Sauron. Barad-dûr collapses immediately after the destruction of the Ring of Power, which suggests that it was of the same nature as the Ring and stood for the very principle of unlimited power. As we could see, Nimrod is regarded as the first powerful monarch in the Biblical history and his passion for hunting is reflected in Sauron's relentless hunt for the Ring, with the Nazgûl as his hunting hounds.¹⁸

However, the main question is as follows: Does the story of Nimrod, or of Sauron, contradict or undermine in any sense the Boethian privation theory of evil? Indirectly it may do so, if we concentrate on the menacing and expansive aspect of the evil power. But this is exactly what Tolkien warns his readers against. Saruman, the corrupt wizard, and Denethor, the half-mad ruler of Gondor, are spending a lot of time gazing into their palantiri, the Seeing Stones, which Sauron uses to impress his victims with visions of his apparently irresistible might. It is much better to focus on the positive catastrophe, the sudden fall of the dark tower, which shows the power of evil as more of an illusion than a reality. It could have this Biblical and Alfredian story that inspired Tolkien with the conception of Eucatastrophe. Tolkien's way out of the dilemma between Boethianism and Manichaenism consists in showing the power of evil as real and unreal at the same time.

In his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, Tolkien underlines the importance of the consolatory aspect of fairy tales, he talks specifically about the "Consolation of the Happy Ending", and introduces the notions of "eucatastrophe" and "dyscatastrophe". Eucatastrophe is a particularly ambiguous and paradoxical idea, described as follows:

It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (Tolkien, 1992: 33)

Indeed the ending of *The Lord of the Rings* offers such a rather catastrophic happy ending, and more or less the same can be said about *The Consolation of Philosophy*, where what is presented as a successful philosophical argument takes place in the shadow of a great personal tragedy.

¹⁸ It is perhaps unimportant but there are nine of them, and in Alfred's version of the Babel story there is a mention of seventy-two languages, which is another un-Biblical motif, and seven plus two equals nine.

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Bio-bibliographic Note

Andrzej Wicher teaches history of English literature in the Institute of English Studies at the University of Lodz. Professor Wicher's field of research is Medieval and Renaissance studies, cultural studies, and modern fantasy literature, with a special emphasis on the presence of folk-tale motifs in works of literature. Apart from numerous scholarly articles, he is the author of the following books: *Archaeology of the Sublime. Studies in Late-Medieval English Writings* (Katowice 1995), *Shakespeare's Parting Wondertales—a Study of the Elements of the Tale of Magic in William Shakespeare's Late Plays* (Łódź 2003), and *Selected Medieval and Religious Themes in the Works of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien* (Łódź 2013). He also translated some Middle English poems, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Pearl*, into Polish.