

10-1-2015

# Dominion: Examining the Subject of Power in Tolkien

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The discussion of power and one's use of it in literature is far from a novel one. This is especially so regarding how one uses power to rule others. Two notable and conflicting ways to rule are using one's power over the ruled, to keep control of them, and using one's power *for* the ruled, by helping and supporting them. The clash between these two can be seen as early as the first book of the Jewish and Christian bibles, wherein God gives humans "dominion over...all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth," asking them to "replenish the earth, and subdue it" (*King James Bible*, Genesis 1:26, 28). By asking humankind to both subdue and replenish, God is asking them to use both the previously noted ways to rule: to dominate and to aid. This naturally creates a conflict about how to balance these techniques in order to rule correctly. This disagreement between these two is seen elsewhere in literature, and no more so than in J.R.R. Tolkien's fictional universe.

Tolkien's works primarily deal with massive conflicts between the forces of good and the oppressive forces of evil. Yet, when the war is over, and the good have triumphed, they must find the best way to rule over the lands they have freed. Thus, the question of what is the right way to rule in the author's creation is both an interesting and significant one, as well as necessary for a better understanding of his books. After a thorough investigation into and analysis of Tolkien's legendarium, one finds that the author presents both incorrect and correct forms of ruling. In his depictions of how the certain characters exert or attempt to exert control, Tolkien shows that dominion of any aspect of creation, or control by mastery and domination, is evil. On the other hand, using one's power to support one's subjects – or, metaphorically, to be a gardener that helps something grow – is the best use of power or authority.

In order to prove these two main claims, this paper will review *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, examining their presentation of the ways certain characters' rule or try to rule. This will begin by looking at the cases where ruling is being done negatively, which will be situations where one is claiming dominion over others or other things. Then, it will look at the instances of ruling that are shown to be best, which will be situations where one refuses to dominate and or acts as a gardener for those he or she has authority over, aiding rather than dominating them. In the end, questions will arise from this gardening metaphor that might complicate the idea of ruling altogether, but the contrast between the aforementioned right and wrong ways to use power in Tolkien's work will be nonetheless established.

The first example of dominion's negative nature can be seen with Melkor. After the world is conceived by Eru Ilúvatar, he shares a vision of it to his chief subjects, the Ainur, who marvel most of all at the coming of the "Children of Ilúvatar," the Elves and Men who would occupy the world (*The Silmarillion* 16). At first it seems that Melkor, the preeminent member of the Ainur, entertains the option of going to aid the Children's coming by "controlling the turmoils of the heat and the cold that had come to pass through him," but he instead seeks to hold dominion over them: "he desired rather to subdue to his will both Elves and Men...and he wished himself to have subjects and servants, and to be called Lord, and to be a master over other wills" (16). This can be seen as bad in that it runs counter to Ilúvatar's creation and will, which is highlighted when he says to Ulmo, "'Seest thou not how...Melkor hath made war upon thy province'" (19)? The creator describing Melkor's actions seeking dominion as making "war" clearly presents them in a negative fashion, and the incorrect way in which to interact with the world.

Melkor's desire to be master over others' wills is the first instance of the dominating type of rule, and the majority of the other examples either come from his influence, his second-in-command, Sauron, or Sauron's own influence. The effect of Melkor's influencing others toward the evil pursuit of dominion can best be seen in the journey of the Noldor to Middle-earth led by Fëanor. The Noldor's departure was partially the result of Fëanor's drive for vengeance on Melkor in response to his stealing of the Silmarils and killing of Finwë, but another motivation for the flight was to find a new land to rule over (*The Silmarillion* 79, 82-83). This is a major part of Fëanor's speech in which he convinces some of his fellow Elves to leave Valinor, urging them "to follow him and by their own prowess to win freedom and great realms" (83). This clearly evidences a desire for dominion of land, and it "[echoes] the lies of Melkor," who had previously woven thoughts of "mighty realms that they could have ruled at their will" into the minds of the Noldor (83, 68).

The Noldor's want to rule their own place might not seem overwhelmingly bad in the eyes of a modern reader, but its badness is seen through it leading to several bad outcomes. Most of these adverse outcomes occur almost immediately after the Noldor begin their trip and include the following: The Kinslaying at Alqualondë, where the Noldor slew Teleri for their ships; the Doom of the Noldor, which is the Valar's curse upon them; Fëanor abandoning Fingolfin and his contingent of Elves; and, eventually, the death of Fëanor, "the mightiest of the Noldor," at the hands of Gothmog (*The Silmarillion* 87-90, 107). All this leaves little doubt that the Noldor's journey seeking vengeance and the ability to claim dominion over something presents the latter goal negatively, which had been evilly planted by Melkor. Looking now at his second-in-command, more evidence comes up that depicts dominion as essentially bad.

After Melkor's banishment, Sauron's pursuit of power continues down the same road of dominating others. Sauron "strove ever for the dominion of Middle-earth," and this can be unmistakably seen with the powers imbued in his ultimate weapon, the One Ring (*The Silmarillion* 267). The Ring's main power, on top of extending the life of the bearer and making the wearer invisible, is that it dominates others: "Sauron made One Ring to rule all the others...he could see and govern the very thoughts of those that wore [the lesser rings]" (287-288). Its ability to subdue directly aligns it with Melkor's ruling through domination, and its unquestionable evilness shows how that use of power is bad. This malevolence does not need to be thoroughly explained because it is obvious: *The Lord of the Rings* follows a quest to destroy the Ring in order to rid the world of evil. In fact, as will be discussed later, certain characters' refusal to use it and its dominating power provides significant proof for their own goodness. That being said, Sauron furthers the argument against this type of authority in other ways.

Similar to Melkor's effect on the Noldor, Melkor and Sauron's influence on the Númenóreans leads them to detrimentally rule others through domination. Upon the island of Númenor lived the best of Men, who resisted Melkor's control before his downfall, but they had one central flaw: their fear of death, which had been planted in them by the Dark Lord (*The Silmarillion* 259, 263-265). At first, they would sail to Middle-earth and help the people there, but as their longing to escape death by going the Undying Lands, they began to take rather than give to those people: "they appeared now rather as lords and masters and gatherers of tribute than as helpers and teachers" (263, 265-267). The situation on Númenor steadily declined in its separation from the Valar and the Eldar, but this decline was catalyzed when Sauron arrived as prisoner on the island. Sauron's words about places to be won twisted his captors even further against the Valar, leading to their worshipping of Melkor, hewing of Nimloth (the sacred White

Tree), and significant enslaving of the men of Middle-earth (271-274). The shifts in their treatment of the Middle-earth peoples show their increasing orientation toward the dominating style of rule, and this growth is complete when the majority of the Númenóreans sail west and lay claim to the Undying Lands (278). The result of all of this clearly condemns this drive towards dominion, with Ilúvatar smiting those who had landed upon Aman, consuming their fleet and Númenor itself in a chasm, putting the Undying Land beyond mortal reach, and letting escape only those of that race that fled to Middle-earth (278-279).

The fall of Númenor, what befalls the Noldor, and the obviously negative portrayal of the desires of Melkor and Sauron all demonstrate their pursuit of dominion as wrong. Another interesting form of dominion that could be considered is regarding the Jewels of Fëanor, the Silmarils. These living jewels are inherently good in their perfection and beauty, and they were consecrated to burn any of ill-will who touched them (*The Silmarillion* 67). Yet, peoples' lust for them and unending desire to possess them causes so much evil: it partially leads to Fëanor's aforementioned chasing of Morgoth; and the son's of Fëanor furious hunt to recover them, which they twice took an unbreakable oath to do, ends in the the Second and Third Kinslayings, respectively at Doriath and at the Mouth of Sirion (69, 83, 107, 236-237, 252-254). The pursuit for the possession of the Silmarils is very much like other examples of dominion because the desire to own them is not different from the desire to rule over of a people or land. Both show someone trying to make something else theirs. Therefore, the evil that results from the pursuit of them only furthers the argument against this kind of dominion. What makes the Silmarils unique is that, unlike lands or people, they were not created by Ilúvatar. Resultantly, a question arises: Does the evil from the issues over who possesses the Silmarils evince the badness of owning and dominating something, or does it simply show living creation outside Ilúvatar as bad?

One can look at Aulë's conception of the dwarves to answer this. Whereas the Silmarils' creation was unanimously met with "wonder and delight," Ilúvatar scolds the Valar when he finds out about the dwarves, which arguably shows the badness of a creation outside of Eru's (*The Silmarillion* 67, 43). Aulë, accepting the wrong of his act, moves to destroy its products, but his own creator stays his hand because he "had compassion upon Aulë and his desire;" his desire is this: to have "other than [he is], to love and to teach them" (43). Going on, Ilúvatar's punishment for, as he puts it, Aulë's "impatience" in creating living things before his own Children's arrival is that the dwarves must be laid to rest until that time, and that they will oftentimes clash with the Elves thereafter (44). Based on the reasons for punishment, the badness of the dwarves' conception is not in their conception alone, but in that it was done in a way that ran counter to Ilúvatar's own plan involving his Children. Consequently, the example of the dwarves dismantles the argument that the Silmarils are inherently bad as conscious inventions external to Ilúvatar; in fact, it can also further the original argument about the Silmarils being another example that reveals the evil of dominion.

The paradoxical concoction of the dwarves shows the badness of dominion because of the goodness of Aulë's intentions with them. As previously explained, Ilúvatar stops Aulë from humbly smiting the dwarves on account of him making them in order that he can instruct them "so that they too might perceive the beauty of Eä" (*The Silmarillion* 43). This joy in creating and love for and desire to help his creations mirrors an earlier explanation of why he forms things: "the delight and pride of Aulë is in the deed of making, and in the thing made, and neither in possession nor in his own mastery" (19). As with all his inventions, Aulë does not arrogantly take pride in the dwarves as his own, nor does he want to claim them as his subjects. This perception of creation very much runs counter to the Silmarils' ownership and Melkor, Sauron,

the Noldor, and the Nūmenóreans dominating endeavors, all of which seek to possess something and keep it under their control. Although Aulë is innately in a position of authority over all that he creates, he uses this power to teach, support, and cherish his subjects as separate to himself. These aspects all align themselves with the metaphor of a gardener, who seeks to help his plants grow like Aulë aids the dwarves, and begin to build an argument for what is seen as the correct way to rule in Tolkien's legendarium.

There are other examples regarding the Valar that support the rightness of this non-dominating type of rule. The Valar provide useful examples because, with the exclusion of Melkor, who withdrew from their ranks, all of their choices can be understood as good if they go unquestioned by Eru. One such example that can quickly be seen is their hierarchy. Each of the Ainur that came to Arda have his or her own separate areas of strength that occupy different pieces of the world, but Manwë, who understands Ilúvatar's objectives, is the King of Arda (*The Silmarillion* 26-29). However, these rankings are qualified: "Though Manwë is their King and holds their allegiance under Eru, in majesty they are peers" (29). Thus, his position as ruler of them is not a dominating one, but rather as a counseling one amongst equal, which was given to him because he best understands their creator, aiding them all. A second example is what the Valar do in Arda.

The Valar enter Arda after Melkor and before the Children of Ilúvatar and walked on the earth, working to give it order (*The Silmarillion* 21). All of their efforts, which Melkor constantly undid, were done "to rule the Earth and to prepare it for the coming of the Firstborn" (22). Although this does put them in a position of governing over land and creatures, it is a position they use to only benefit the coming of the Children, like a gardener readying his or her garden before sowing seeds. This analogy is strengthened when one notes the description of Melkor's

reaction at the arrival of the other Ainur to the earth: he envies them because “the Earth was becoming as a garden for their delight” (21). As peer gardeners, the Valar show the best way to use authority: to benefit those over whom they have power

The Valar could be further analyzed to support the argument for the goodness of the ‘gardening’ sort of ruling, but there are other examples in Tolkien’s works that also powerfully reinforce this understanding and counter the idea of dominion. Four prime characters that do this are Gandalf, Galadriel, Aragorn, and Samwise Gamgee. These characters significantly have several things in common. First, they all in some way refuse the dominating power of the One Ring, as well as some not using the full extent of their own powers to dominate. Second, they work in some way to better those that their positions or abilities allow them to, whether it is through instruction, gifts, healing, or some other kind of aid. Finally, all of their works are clearly presented as good because they conclude in the successful overthrow of Sauron. Through all of this, Gandalf, Galadriel, Aragorn, and Samwise serve as evidence to boost the notion of the incorrect and correct ways to rule in Tolkien’s world

Gandalf, otherwise known as Olórin or Mithrandir, is probably the best example of one who rules without dominating because his entire mission on Middle-earth as one of the five Wizards is to occupy such an assisting role. The task of the Wizards, given to them by Ilúvatar, is understood to work “to unite all those who had the will to resist; but they were forbidden to match his power with, or to seek to dominate Elves or Men by force” (*RotK* 1059). This almost directly mirrors this paper’s definition of the proper way to use authority. Gandalf, as his role necessitates, refuses to dominate others. This is best seen in his refusal to take the ring when Frodo offers it to him because he knows he would yield its power (*FotR* 60). Additionally, Gandalf twice rejects the possibility of dominating his fallen counterpart, Saruman: once after he

breaks the latter's staff at Orthanc, saying "I do not wish for mastery;" and again when he, Galadriel, Celeborn, and the hobbits encounter the now impoverished and in-rags Saruman and Wormtongue on the road back to the Shire, going as far offering the two help (*TT* 569-571; *RotK* 960-962).

There is a myriad of instances where Gandalf's provides aid throughout the novels, but here are two examples: his leadership of the Fellowship, whose name denotes how the company is built as peers, akin to the Valar; and his guiding Aragorn to the sapling of the White Tree (*RotK* 949-950). All that Gandalf does is shown to be good when he says, "My time is over," because it reveals that he has completed his previously explained task as Wizard (974). All that is said above gives only a pithy explanation of Gandalf's role in Middle-earth, but this review is enough to show how Gandalf aligns himself with the role of gardener-like helper and evidences its rightness. A succinct discussion of Galadriel can do this same.

Galadriel, as both a Noldor and a part of the House of Finwë, is an intriguing character because the study of the Noldor earlier, which zoomed in on Fëanor and his sons, negatively illustrates their, and specifically this family's, use of power. Yet, Galadriel is built by Tolkien as a clear example of the correct use of power. When Frodo offers her the Ring, Galadriel imagines how she would use it in a way that does not seem necessarily bad: "I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountains! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! All shall love me and despair!" (*FotR* 356). This complicated description shows that Galadriel would use the Ring's power to create a good world, but a world that would "despair" under her dominion. Her subsequent refusal is immediately signaled as the right decision when she says, "I pass the test" (357). This denial of the Ring clearly denounces dominion, even if it could be a good one.

Galadriel further exemplifies the correct use of power through her aid to the Fellowship. She helps them in two main ways: by allowing Frodo and Sam to look into her Mirror, wherein they experience visions that embolden Sam and give some wisdom to Frodo; and by giving various gifts to the eight, which includes bread that keeps them on their journeys, boats that help them on their way, and a phial of star-light that gives Frodo and Sam light when they need it most (353-357, 360-367). Galadriel's work as helpful ruler or gardener is exhibited as her correct role because of her ability to sail to the Undying Lands after her refusal of the Ring and Sauron's downfall.

Similar to both Gandalf as Maiar and Galadriel as Queen of Lorien, Aragorn's role as heir of Gondor places him in a position of extraordinary authority, but dissimilar to them, he enters into that position over the course of *The Lord of the Rings*. Of the other four examples, Aragorn is the least directly tempted to claim the Ring; he is never straightforwardly offered it by Frodo as the previous two, nor is it ever thrust upon him like Sam. However, there are two times in the books that either reveal his ability to claim it, or have him partially offered it. The first is when Sam and Frodo are talking to him about Gandalf's letters; here, Aragorn makes it clear that he could easily take possession of the Ring when he responds to doubts about his intentions saying, "If I was after the Ring, I could have it – NOW!" (*FotR* 168). Secondly, Aragorn's taking it is to some extent suggested at the council when his identity as heir is announced, to which Frodo responds, "then [the Ring] belongs to you" (240)! Though neither of these instances directly invite Aragorn to seize and use the Ring, they significantly demonstrate that he does not take it when he very well could have.

Aragorn's refusal to dominate is better seen by how he does not abuse his rank as heir. Two examples of his not abusing his kingship occur before his crowing. One is when he fights

under and rides out for King Theoden of Rohan at Helm Deep, when his position arguably places him above the latter (*TT* 527). The second example is after the battle of Pelennor Field, when Aragorn chooses to not enter Minas Tirith, his city as king, because he does not wish to create any strife (*RotK* 843). Although they occur before he is actually crowned king, it is easy to imagine Aragorn choosing to use his being heir to dominate over others; but he does not act this way. When one examines the goodness of the help Aragorn provides for others, his filling the mold of a ruler who strives to support rather than master becomes clearest.

Early on, Aragorn occupies a role very similar to Gandalf's as guide and leader. This is demonstrated by how Gandalf appoints him as the four hobbit's guide from Bree, how he immediately assumes the role as leader of the Fellowship after Gandalf falls, and how he makes the difficult decision to hunt Merry and Pippin instead of chase Frodo and Sam (*FotR* 166-167, 324; *TT* 409). More than anything, though, Aragorn's healing abilities reveal his drive to help (as well as fulfill the prophecy of his kingship). His healing powers are seen first when he enters the House of Healing to aid Merry, Éowyn, and Faramir after the battle on Pelennor, and again with his healing of Frodo and Sam after the destruction of the Ring (*RotK* 844-845, 931). In the end, Aragorn is the most difficult example of the gardener-ruler to explain because he must reveal authority more than any other in order to assume his role as King of Gondor. Nonetheless, his refusals of other kinds of dominion, and his acting as guide and healer affirm that he does indeed fulfill this role on top of elucidating its goodness with his part in defeating Sauron and his celebrated and prophecy-fulfilling ascendance to the throne.

The final character that affirms the metaphorical gardener-ruling style is the only one to have actually borne the One Ring, but Samwise Gamgee is a unique and complicated example in other ways, too. Unlike all three, Sam does not spend the vast majority of the books in any kind

of leadership position. In fact, he actually occupies a space of subservience for the most part, first as Bilbo and Frodo's gardener and then as Frodo's sidekick and aid. Yet, Sam's importance is irrefutable and an argument could be made that his heroism exceeds any other's in the story. Evidence for Sam's significance can be found throughout the books, such as Gandalf and Elrond both separately insisting on his accompanying Frodo on the quest (*FotR* 62-63, 264). Possibly the most revealing way Tolkien designates his prominence is in the very last pages of *The Return of the King*. The book does not end with another character of a mighty rank, or with a character whose might far outmatches a hobbit's. Instead, it ends with Sam returning home to his family and saying: "Well, I'm back" (*RotK* 1008). As a result of the way the book establishes Sam's distinction, his lack of authority should not be considered a way in which he cannot fit the ruling role being argued for in this paper. Rather, his humbleness and his deeds, which are essential to the completion of the Fellowship's quest, will be used to solidify the claim that the use of power to aid and support is presented as the highest pursuit in Tolkien's work, while also perhaps suggesting that a lack of authority is better than any variety of ruling.

As previously noted, Sam is one of the very few who bore and wore the One Ring. Accordingly, he was tempted by it more intimately than anyone. Thinking Frodo dead, Sam takes the Ring so as to continue the quest (*TT* 715-716). He bears it as he works to rescue Frodo in Cirith Ungol, wherein the latter snatches it back. Before this, the reader gets to very plainly see the Ring tempting Sam to claim it. It tells him what it could give him by filling him with fantasies of his elevation to a powerful hero, and a vision of all the land being made a lush garden (*RotK* 880-881). Sam's rejection of these temptations are based on two things: his "love of his master" and "his plain hobbit-sense," which tells him that he is not big enough for such a position of authority (881). His refusal is massively significant because it firstly denies the

dominating power the Ring offers him, and because it also gives an actual explanation for why Sam does not welcome the power: his own humbleness. Sam's genuine humility makes the idea of him claiming dominion over anything other than "one small garden" as completely absurd to both himself and the reader. One might assume that Gandalf and Galadriel's refusals were the result of very different lines of thought, but it is with Sam alone that Tolkien provides a basis for a refusal of the Ring. As a result of this, the importance of this modesty is emphasized. Moving from his refusal to hold dominion over others, Sam additionally aligns himself with the previous examples by providing assistance more surely than any other character.

Though it is not from a position of authority, Sam's care for Frodo throughout their journey is a constant. While Sam's experience with gardening would have trained him to tend plants, his gardening skill are demonstrated beyond flora with his perpetual concern, attentive support, and insurmountable love for Frodo. In his watching over Frodo like a garden, Sam presents both the goodness of this kind of support, while also strengthening the gardening metaphor used previously. He cooks for Frodo, tries to protect him from Gollum and others, sacrifices water and food for him, and even carries him before the end (*RotK* 915, 919-921). Through all of this, Sam always keeps himself inferior to Frodo, only ever referring to the Baggins as "Master" or "Mr. Frodo;" and his loyalty to him is never in question, faithfully following him to the point where he nearly drowns (*FotR* 396-397). The goodness of Sam's assistance, as well as his refusal to dominate anything even when he can, need hardly be expounded upon because the entire quest to destroy the Ring would have failed without the gardener.

All in all, Sam very paradoxically proves the evilness of rule through domination and the rightness of rule like a gardener because he does not actually rule. Whereas Aulë, the other

Valar, Gandalf, Galadriel, and Aragorn differently demonstrate that this is the proper use of one's power, they all did so from positions of authority or leadership, Sam does not. Yet, his humbleness and lack of power do not inhibit his ability to affect a monumental triumph via his complete support another; if anything, these things allow him to refuse dominion and to use the full extent of his power to help far better than the others. Perhaps, then, Tolkien's works do not simply exhibit rule that focuses on helping subjects, like a gardener over a garden, as greater than rule by holding dominion over subjects, but also demonstrate that this focus on helping is even better without authority altogether. That all being said, far more research would be necessary to substantiate this assertion, which does not oppose the original proposition that has been thoroughly evidenced.

As with any works that deal with colossal clashes between good and evil, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* force readers to consider what makes the different sides respectively good and evil. Regarding the manner by which one rules, the author clearly presents what is right and wrong, and thusly good and evil, in his writings about Middle-earth. Within Tolkien's sweeping legendarium, ruling over something by subduing and dominating it is always one of the central evils, which is exhibited by the negative portrayal of Melkor, Sauron, the Noldor, and the Númenórean's claims or pursuits of dominion. On the other hand, the good way to rule can be seen through the Valar, Gandalf, Galadriel, and Aragorn focusing on the helping of those whom they have the power to affect. The latter ruling style can be understood through the metaphor of gardening because a good gardener must tend carefully to his or her plants in order garden successfully. Although it might complicate the idea of "ruling," Samwise Gamgee's role in the legendarium reinforces the goodness of this style. The topic of power and its use is something encountered regularly, but it is something that is difficult to

understand in reality. The danger in crossing the threshold into a world as expansive as Tolkien's is that, like the real world, one might find themselves with an endless tally of questions; here, at least, it seems there is an answer.

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