



## Concerning Power: An Exploration of Character and Leadership in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

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### Abstract

*Although seldom studied as a commentary on leadership and the various forms of underlying power, The Lord of the Rings offers extended insight on power and its relation to human nature. Tolkien recognizes the potential evil of power, but he also understands humanity's need for leadership and power. It is in this paradox that the studies of John French and Bertram Raven are immensely insightful. In a 1959 study and continuing research of more recent years, French and Raven conclude that there are six basic types of social power used to influence people. Each of these bases of power can be found in characters in The Lord of the Rings. They are portrayed in a way that helps to illuminate the importance that Tolkien places on utilizing self-awareness, teamwork, and community when exercising power.*

Although seldom studied as a commentary on leadership and various forms of underlying power, *The Lord of the Rings* offers extended insight on power and its relation to human nature. There can be little doubt that, on a surface level, Tolkien is wary of power—Middle Earth almost falls due to a malicious buildup of it. While Tolkien's not so subtle allusions to Hitler's ironworks and proliferation of weapons fashion some of Tolkien's political commentary, his exploration of leadership and human nature have far-wider applications. Tolkien recognizes the potential evil of power and how easily humans are swayed by the influence it promises, yet he also understands humanity's need for leadership. It is in this paradox that the studies of John French and Bertram Raven are insightful. In a 1959 study and continuing research, French and Raven concluded that there are six basic types of social power used to influence people. Each of these types or bases can be found in characters in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Using this study as a tool for understanding power, the implications that can be drawn from *The Lord of The Rings* illuminate a clearer picture of the way in which Tolkien values power. He portrays power in complex and, at times, seemingly contradictory ways; on one hand, it is no secret that Sauron is amassing a large arsenal of weapons and a vast army. On the other, Aragorn initially balks at the idea of appropriating power. However, as the story progresses, he procures more and more of the influence he has long avoided, eventually possessing

more power than Sauron ever did. By utilizing self-awareness, community, and teamwork over authoritarianism and brutality, Aragorn, in particular, showcases the way that Tolkien envisions the ideal use of power.

As French and Raven demonstrate, there are many different types of power. The power that Sauron, Aragorn, and others possess comes from very disparate places and results in quite dissimilar applications and implications. While Tolkien was writing before French and Raven delineated their types of power, his keen observation of human nature and interaction develops a narrative replete with all of French and Raven's categories of power. In French and Raven's study, the term "agent" refers to the person exercising influence using one of the six bases, and the person who this power is being used on is referred to as the "target" (1). There are six different power bases—information, reward, coercive, legitimate, expert, and referent—that agents can use to impose social influence on a target. Social influence is "a change in the belief, attitude, or behavior of a person (the target of influence), which results from the action of another person (an influencing agent)" (1). Social power, then, is the potential for social influence. There are multiple, sometimes innumerable, factors that determine which type of power an agent will use—any particular agent is not restricted to one source of power and may, in fact, use multiple bases on one target to accomplish a single goal.

### **Power Bases in *The Lord of the Rings***

Information power is the first base. When it comes to this base of influence, knowledge is power. Raven gives the example of a supervisor telling a subordinate of a new, more efficient way to do his job. The subordinate understands the reasons for this change and accepts this new behavior (2). Information power is unique in that it brings about socially independent change: "Altered behavior, though initiated by the influencing agent (supervisor) now continues without the target necessarily referring to, or even remembering, the supervisor as being the agent of change" (2). This change, if it brings about positive results, can be counted on continuing with or without the supervision or surveillance of the agent of that information power.

As a wizard, Gandalf wields information power more efficiently than anyone else, as is demonstrated in his interactions with Frodo. When Frodo first learns of Bilbo's departure and that the Ring is now in his possession, Gandalf gives him these words of instruction: "I should not make use of it, if I were you. But keep it secret, and keep it safe" (*Fellowship* 63). As time goes on, it becomes irrelevant that it was Gandalf who first uttered those words. Eventually, Frodo's experiences become more important than the warning's origin. "Keep it secret, keep it safe" is engraved in Frodo's very being; this idea is the mantra which he lives by for the time that he carries the burden of the Ring. Gandalf's role in this message fades into oblivion until all that remains is the warning, spurring on Frodo and keeping him alive.

Coercive power is the most sinister of all the bases defined by French

and Raven. They explain: “Coercive power stems from the expectation on the part of [the target] that he [sic] will be punished by [the agent] if he fails to conform to the influence attempt” (147). The strength of coercive power depends on what is being threatened—threats of rejection may bring about a weaker coercive power than threats of bodily harm to the target. Not surprisingly, such threats generally cultivate unhealthy relationships between the agent and target. Because of its high potential to create harmful side effects, coercive power is to be used with great caution (Lunenburg 3). Raven also differentiates between personal and impersonal forms of coercive and reward power. While threat of bodily harm or loss constitutes impersonal coercive power, the “threat of rejection or disapproval from someone we value highly can serve as a source of powerful [personal] coercive power” (Raven 3). This desperation to maintain a position in the agent’s good standing can be potent.

The central antagonist of *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron, wields immense influence. Even without the Ring that he created as his ultimate weapon, he is a formidable force to be reckoned with—his impersonal coercion touches both his friends and foes. The threats of Sauron’s forces affect the armies of the West even as they are marching to do battle: “And from that evening onward the Nazgûl came and followed every move of the army. They still flew high and out of sight of all save Legolas, and yet their presence could be felt, as a deepening shadow and a dimming of the sun; and though the Ringwraiths did not yet stoop low upon their foes and were silent, uttering no cry, the dread of them could not be shaken off” (*Return* 199). The entire army knows that the only thing holding back the Nazgûl is Sauron, and they know that Sauron has the ability to make good on the threat of the hovering menaces. Still, they carry on; Sauron’s intimidation is ineffective because those being threatened have a higher purpose than survival to work toward.

Sauron did not use threats only on his enemies, as Matthew Dickerson observes: “Tolkien gives illustrations of Sauron’s power everywhere. It is the power to force others to his will. We see this in the sharp contrast between the *foes* of Mordor and the *forces* of Mordor; the former fight against Sauron of their own free will. The latter are little more than slaves, driven by fear” (Dickerson 112, emphasis original). Sauron leads selfishly and with malice, and ultimately this influence fails him. When the Ring—and with it, Sauron’s might—is destroyed, his forces flee, no longer slave to his command: “‘The realm of Sauron is ended!’ said Gandalf. . . The Captains bowed their heads; and when they looked up again, behold! Their enemies were flying and the power of Mordor was scattering like dust in the wind . . . the most part fled eastward as they could; and some cast their weapons down and sued for mercy” (*Return* 279-80). This coercive base is completely dependent upon the ability to act upon threats. Once Sauron’s physical power is shattered, so is his influence. Coercive power seldom encourages friendly relations between the target and agent. Sauron has nothing to fall back on without his ability to harm and make good on his threats; no loyalty to depend on when all else is lost. This lack of relationship with the community around him is ultimately

what distinguishes him from Middle Earth's great leaders of the West.

Similar in its application to coercive power is reward power "defined as power whose basis is the ability to reward. The strength of the reward power of [the agent] increases with the magnitude of the rewards which [the target] perceives that [the agent] can mediate for him" (French and Raven 147). Because the value of the reward has a significant impact on the strength of the influence, it is important for those utilizing the reward base to be aware of the needs and desires of those whom they are hoping to sway. If the reward offered, no matter how spectacular, is not of value to the target, the agent is stripped of all power (Lunenburg 3). As with coercive power, Raven differentiates between personal and impersonal forms of reward power. Impersonal reward power refers to material rewards—promise of personal gain or elevation to a superior position. The personal facet of reward power transcends tangible rewards and enters a realm that is much more relationship based: "It should be clear that personal approval from someone whom we like can result in quite powerful reward power" (Raven 3). It is interesting to note that in order to use personal coercive power, the target must already have the agent's approval; in order to use personal reward power, the relationship between agent and target must be tenuous at best. This deep need for approval can drive a target to go to extreme measures.

The best example of personal reward power—albeit exerted with an astonishing lack of wisdom or compassion—in *The Lord of the Rings* can be found in the relationship between Lord Denethor, the Steward of Gondor, and his son, Faramir. Never quite able to match the perfection that his father sees in his older brother, Faramir is desperate to win the approval of his father. Ultimately the reward power that Denethor has over Faramir overrides all else, and the younger son resigns himself to ride toward the enemy and almost certain death at his father's bitter request: "At length Faramir said: 'I do not oppose your will, sire. Since you are robbed of Boromir, I will go and do what I can in his stead—if you command it.' 'I do so,' said Denethor. 'Then farewell!' said Faramir. 'But if I should return, think better of me!' 'That depends on the manner of your return,'" (*Return* 109). Denethor's influence over Faramir is great because Faramir is desperate for the reward that is being offered—his father's love and approval. It does not matter to him that the task may be futile, even fatal. Faramir's identity is wrapped up in his father's opinion of him; he is controlled by the incentive of his father's love and is willing to do anything in order to get it.

It is clear at first glance that the One Ring has immense power: "One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them" (*Fellowship* 81). It is less obvious, however, that the power the Ring possesses and capably utilizes is reward power. It is entrenched in deception, corruption, and self-destruction, but it is nevertheless reward power. The Ring takes advantage of human weaknesses and offers fame, glory, and countless other wonders to those whom it controls. It offers to exalt its bearer above all others and lend him the ability to effortlessly trample all who would threaten to get in the way. These rewards are seldom material and almost never

realized. Thus, given the small odds of a person's getting any real benefit from the Ring, it is a testament to its extreme capability of deception that many fall under the spell of its allure.

The most drawn-out example of the effects of the Ring's power on those who succumb to its gilded appeal comes in the character Sméagol. Eventually known as the creature Gollum, Sméagol is immediately drawn by the Ring's allure. He is so overwhelmed by desire for the Ring that he becomes murderous, turning on his friend for an object that he has only glimpsed: "There in his hand lay a beautiful golden ring; and it shone and glittered in the sun . . . and he caught Déagol by the throat and strangled him, because the gold looked so bright and beautiful" (*Fellowship* 85). This manic obsession with the Ring stays with Gollum for the remainder of his life and eventually leads him to his fiery death. Gollum fully embraces the pull of the Ring and actively seeks out its rewards.

Boromir also yearns for what he perceives the Ring will give him: "The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner!" (*Fellowship* 515). He knows what the Ring can bring him, and yet some deeper understanding of it gives him restraint for a time. Ultimately, he lacks the wisdom to understand the fully corrupting nature of the Ring. Boromir's desires, lack of character, and insecurities override any misgivings he might have, resulting in a costly moment of weakness: "I tried to take the Ring from Frodo . . . I am sorry. I have paid. . . . Boromir did not speak again" (*Two Towers* 18). Boromir may have been seduced by the Ring's power, but, in the end, knowledge of the wrongness of his actions prevails, proving that there is more nobility in Boromir than one may think.

Gollum wants the Ring for selfish reasons—he wants the pleasure that it could give him. For Boromir, the desire for personal glory is only one facet of his motivation. He must also be aware that the Ring would possibly allow him to protect his city and make his father proud of him. With the Ring at his disposal, Boromir dreams of the chance to propel Gondor into an era of strength, peace, and stability. Boromir's motives are mixed, making it difficult to label him as exclusively selfish or gallant—he is simply human. In Lord Denethor's eldest son, Tolkien highlights the complexities of human nature. It is Boromir's lack of character that undermines his leadership and causes him to gravitate towards the seedy and unsavory world under the control of the Ring.

The reason that Frodo, the Ring-bearer himself, succumbs to the Ring is perhaps the most telling of the potency of its enticement. He resists its draw through a shocking array of trials and tribulations while carrying it to Mount Doom. He knows deep in his soul that the Ring must be destroyed, yet when he comes to the end, the resolve to complete his task leaves him altogether: "I have come . . . But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" (*Return* 274). Just as it took only a moment to draw in Sméagol, the Ring needs but one moment more to overcome Frodo. It is only because of Gollum's selfish craze as he rips the Ring from Frodo's finger that he is freed from its deception.

There are those who recognize the danger and corruption that the Ring brings; its power, while utterly bewitching some, is ultimately not strong enough to influence all who encounter it. Gandalf, Aragorn, and Galadriel are all offered the Ring, and all fervently refuse its draw. They know the nature of the Ring at its core, and as they also are very aware of their own weaknesses, they realize that it would be dangerous for them to wield the Ring and be subject to its influence. Even Samwise Gamgee, nothing more than a humble hobbit, can see through the Ring's deception. Sam recognizes the true rewards of the Ring—emptiness and misery. Instead of corrupting him, Sam's short time of bearing the Ring gives him mercy, even for Gollum after all of his trickery and betrayal. When given the opportunity to rid the earth of the creature, Sam could not: "Deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could not strike [Gollum] lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched. He himself, though only for a little while, had borne the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum's shriveled mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief ever in life again" (*Return* 273). Sam's experience with the Ring results not in his downfall, but in the opportunity to grow in wisdom and compassion.

Expert power, although similar, is more personal than the aforementioned information power since it "results from the target's faith that the agent has some superior insight or knowledge about what behavior is best under the circumstances" (Raven 3). The most classic example of this base is taking the advice of a lawyer on legal matters or doing as a doctor suggests in regards to a medical problem. However, expert power is not given to someone blindly because of his or her position: "Experts are perceived to have expertise in well-defined functional areas but not outside them. To be granted expert power, followers must perceive the power holder to be credible, trustworthy, and relevant" (Luthans qtd. in Lunenburg 4). Tolkien crafts several such trustworthy characters in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Galadriel is a figure well-respected, even revered, due to the influence she wields in her own community as well as throughout Middle Earth, and for the wisdom with which she does so. This influence is derived from expert power. Because of her Elvin race, Galadriel has lived for many ages, and thus witnessed the creation of the Rings of Power and the original downfall of Sauron. Her experience makes her invaluable to the renewed effort to triumph over the enemy. She holds perhaps the most influence over the Ring-bearer himself, Frodo. Her expertise is relevant due to their mutual understanding of the pull of the Ring. She has felt it, though with less constancy, to the same degree that Frodo has. Yet, she continually denies the temptation and refuses the Ring: "'I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer. . . . You will give me the Ring freely!' . . . then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again. . . . 'I pass the test . . . I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel'" (*Fellowship* 473-4). Frodo knows that Galadriel has the knowledge and experience in resisting the Ring that is vital to the success of his quest, and so he submits to her expert power over him, as is wise, for "Galadriel

uses her power for healing, not domination” (Enright 99). Galadriel recognizes that using the Ring is completely out of her realm of authority; it is not her place to assume its power. Frodo trusts that Galadriel’s insight in this area is sound and so her expert power was able to come to fruition in the life of Frodo and many others.

Gandalf is consistently portrayed as possessing wisdom and being trustworthy. He is the character who the others rely on for information regarding current events and strategy for combating Sauron. His competency is well-known, but Gandalf is keenly aware of his weaknesses. When asked by Frodo to take the Ring, Gandalf vehemently refuses, knowing that it would bring about no good: “‘You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?’ ‘No!’ cried Gandalf, springing to his feet. ‘With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly. . . . Do not tempt me!’” (*Fellowship* 95). Just as Galadriel does, Gandalf proves the validity of Frodo’s trust in his expertise by recognizing his limits.

The fifth power base is legitimate power. According to Raven, legitimate power stems from social norms that give authority to those in superior positions in the context of a social structure. There is a rather limited range of appropriate use of this type of power—the legitimate power of agents stretches only as far as their authority reaches into the life of the target. For example, while it is completely within an executive’s authority to have his secretary compose a company memo, asking that secretary to send a personal email for him would be an abuse of his authority that the secretary may or may not choose to honor. In this way, a large part of legitimate power is the agent’s ability to use discretion when making decisions to exercise authority. An agent may abuse power, but the target has every right not to accept the authority on an irrelevant matter (Lunenburg 2).

Since it is a tale of kings and kingdoms, stewards and great cities, *The Lord of the Rings* is riddled with authority figures possessing legitimate power whose influence affects every aspect of the lives of their subjects. Reflecting the feudal system of the Middle Ages, this kind of power is incredibly important in Middle Earth societies—it dictates their way of life. Perhaps the most interesting and telling displays of legitimate power are found in those characters whose power is twisted and abused. Théoden provides an excellent demonstration of this, as well as of when it is used wisely—his legitimate power is used for both good and evil. Théoden, King of the Mark of Rohan, is one of the greatest examples of wielding legitimate power. Although beloved by his people, the reader’s first impression of this king is of a weak old man being manipulated by a servant of Saruman, Gríma Wormtongue. Even while Wormtongue is heavily influencing Théoden, his decisions—no matter how absurd—are, for the most part, followed. Even Gandalf and the rest of the Company (Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli) recognize that to rebel against his authority would be foolish. When ordered to leave their weapons behind on entering Théoden’s court, Gandalf admonishes a hesitant Aragorn: “‘This is idle talk . . . Needless is Théoden’s demand, but it is useless to refuse. A king will have his way in his own hall, be it folly or wisdom’” (*Two Towers* 146). Regardless of the lack of sensibility of Théoden’s demands, it

is still within his jurisdiction to rule on such matters.

A notable exception to Théoden's absolute authority comes from Éomer, his nephew and the captain of the Rohirrim, Rohan's Horse-Lords. Éomer recognizes the madness overtaking his king and attempts to take matters into his own hands: "'It is true,' said Théoden. 'He had rebelled against my commands, and threatened death to Gríma in my hall'" (*Two Towers* 153). As a result of disobeying Théoden's orders, Éomer ultimately saves the hobbits Merry and Pippin, denying Isengard a "great prize" (*Two Towers* 161). Regardless of Wormtongue's temporary deception, it is still clear that the people of Rohan have great respect for their king. Even Éomer, who had been imprisoned because of his deviance from Théoden's plans, is the first to come forward when the newly liberated king is in need of a sword: "'Take this, dear lord! . . . It was ever at your service' . . . Éomer was there. No helm was on his head, no mail was on his breast, but in his hand he held a drawn sword; and as he knelt he offered the hilt to his master" (*Two Towers* 155). The legitimate power of King Théoden garners the continued loyalty, merited or not, of his people. While this admiration is for the person of Théoden, it is also very clearly attached to his position. As Théoden lies dying on the battlefield, he makes it clear that Éomer is now the lord of his people: "Slowly Théoden opened his eyes. Seeing the banner he made a sign that it should be given to Éomer. 'Hail, King of the Mark! 'Ride now to victory!'" (*Return* 145). At Théoden's death, the reign of Éomer begins, and all of the influence that was Théoden's is now at Éomer's disposal.

Gandalf uses legitimate power in addition to his information and expert power. Following the Battle of Pelennor Fields, Denethor lays dead, Faramir struggles to cling to life, and the city is left without a ruler. Some of the city leaders suggest Aragorn, but when consulted, he refuses the position. Instead, he gives this advice: "'it is my counsel that Gandalf should rule us all in the days that follow and in our dealings with the Enemy.' And they agreed upon that" (*Return* 169). Even before this formal show of receiving authority, Gandalf has no trouble stepping into this type of role and exerting the power it brings. When Denethor succumbs to despair and refuses to acknowledge any chance of Faramir's survival, Gandalf is not afraid to step into a role of legitimate power and confront Denethor: "'What is this, my lord?' said the wizard. 'The houses of the dead are no places for the living. . . .' 'Since when has the Lord of Gondor been answerable to thee?' said Denethor. 'Or may I not command my own servants?' 'You may,' said Gandalf. 'But others may contest your will, when it is turned to madness and evil'" (*Return* 156). He proceeds to take over the city and save the lives of Faramir and countless others, effectively using the legitimate power that has been thrust upon him by the leaders of the city.

Throughout the trilogy, Gandalf displays information, expert, and legitimate powers. He uses these bases masterfully, invoking them when they are beneficial and recognizing where his influence is relevant and needed. Gandalf has enough wisdom and humility not to grasp for leadership when it is not necessary. This understanding is part of what makes his expert power strong. He

is well aware of the limits of his qualifications and is willing to step aside when someone else is better equipped for the situation at hand. Gandalf's expertise is what grounds him in the other types of influence that he has—he has information to guide Frodo because of his experience as a wizard, and he is given legitimate power because he has proven himself to be wise and capable in exerting his expert power.

The last base of social power is referent that “stems from the target identifying with the agent, or seeing the agent as a model that the target would want to emulate” (Raven 3). While the other bases affect the relationship between the target and agent, referent power absolutely relies on the good will of an already-existing relationship. Without the admiration and respect of others, no one can hope to have referent power because it “can lead to enthusiastic and unquestioning trust, compliance, loyalty, and commitment from subordinates” (Lunenburg 6). This base also differs from the others in that it is possible for the agent, the target, or both to be unaware of the influence that is being exerted. Therefore, the thought process of the target is altered and his or her behavior is affected regardless of the agent's reactions to these changes. All the target wants is to gain the approval and good will of the agent.

Referent power is arguably the most important of French and Raven's bases of social power in *The Lord of The Rings*. This is the power that captures the hearts and souls of people and makes them willing to lay down their lives for their cause and their leader. Without referent power, there can be no valiant, last-ditch efforts defying all reason and against all hope. These types of campaigns are, in the end, an integral part of defeating Sauron and his collaboration of evil forces. Executing referent power well, as showcased in *The Lord of the Rings*, is ultimately contingent upon character. Without the influence of noble and virtuous characters, the tiny spark of hope that sustains their comrades would have been put out long before their hard-fought victory was realized. The referent power of Éowyn and Aragorn is, while significantly different in their respective applications, vital to the success of the West.

Éowyn is a complex character, especially when analyzed through the lens of leadership. This shield maiden of Rohan, as the reader first meets her, equates power with battle prowess, and since she is not allowed to fight, sees herself as weak: “Her understanding of power remains the male-dominated, physically oriented kind” (Enright 104). Nonetheless, others are not blind to her far-reaching influence. When the men of the Mark are going to battle, she is seen as the obvious choice for temporary rule: “She is fearless and high-hearted. All love her. Let her be as lord to the Eorlingas, while we are gone” (*Two Towers* 162). Even Aragorn recognizes the importance of her role: “a time may come soon . . . when none will return. Then there will be need of valour without renown, for none shall remember the deeds that are done in the last defence of your homes. Yet the deeds will not be less valiant because they are unpraised” (*Return* 67-8). Aragorn recognizes her character; he perceives in her valor and courage as well as compassion and a caring spirit. Éowyn cannot, but Aragorn sees her great

influence and its exponential potential for growth.

Although this referent power is mostly unrealized in Tolkien's novels, Éowyn realizes significant influence over Merry. Merry wants to be a warrior, but given his stature as a hobbit, is a less than perfect candidate. Still, he goes to battle. Merry has the truest of intentions, but the strength that he needs once in the gritty heat of battle comes from Éowyn's example: "Merry crawled on all fours like a dazed beast, and such a horror was on him that he was blind and sick. . . . A little to the left facing them stood she whom he had called Dernhelm. But the helm of her secrecy had fallen from her. . . . Éowyn it was, and Dernhelm also . . . and suddenly the slow-kindled courage of his race awoke" (*Return* 141-2). Merry's respect for Éowyn transforms into a desire to emulate her courage, and he does just that in the Battle of Pelennor Fields.

### **Aragorn: Developing as a Leader with Multifaceted Power**

Aragorn is almost certainly one of the most powerful men in *The Lord of the Rings* saga; he develops as a leader of strong character who successfully integrates several different types of power. Aragorn is first introduced in *The Fellowship of the Ring* as a Ranger, a dark and mysterious stranger with presumably no home and no family. He does not even claim his name, let alone his royal bloodline, choosing instead to be known as "Strider" and live a transient life. Yet as the narrative unfolds, Aragorn grows in courage and wisdom as he surrounds himself with a community who believes in him, and his employment of various types of power increases as he steps into leadership as the rightful King of Gondor in *The Return of the King*.

Aragorn holds legitimate power as Elendil's heir and the rightful king all along. Despite the validity of these titles, Aragorn's legitimate power is sometimes challenged. Boromir is skeptical of Aragorn at first meeting, saying, "'The Sword of Elendil would be a help beyond our hope—if such a thing could indeed return out of the shadows of the past.' He looked again at Aragorn, and doubt was in his eyes" (*Fellowship* 325). Aragorn hardly disagrees with Boromir; he is very conscious of his perceived shortcomings, "'for my part I forgive your doubt . . . Little do I resemble the figures of Elendil and Isildur as they stand carven in their majesty in the halls of Denethor. I am but the heir of Isildur, not Isildur himself'" (*Fellowship* 325). Here Tolkien is likely alluding to all humans descending from Adam and the weight of human fallenness. Because Aragorn has very much struggled with his identity as heir, feeling inadequate and fearful, such a challenge to his authority could have destroyed Aragorn as a leader and his ability to wield power. Instead of crumbling in insecurity, however, he faces his inner fear of failing as Isildur did before him. He knows that he is his own man, despite his ancestry, and can trust himself to use this newfound power constructively. As he faces these fears and insecurities, he gains courage and matures as a leader, claiming his legitimate power as king.

Demonstrated almost immediately, Aragorn also possesses referent

power. Aragorn is aware of the fact that he is admired, but just as he is at first wary of his legitimate power, he is slow to embrace his referent power. Much like Éowyn, Aragorn is rather unaware of just how much he deserves the influence that he has at his disposal. Especially early on, Aragorn feels completely unworthy, blaming himself for things over which he has no control. After witnessing Boromir's death, Aragorn laments, "Now the Company is all in ruin. It is I that have failed. Vain was Gandalf's trust in me. What shall I do now?" (*Two Towers* 18). He understands that Gandalf has trusted him with the leadership of the Company, but at his apparent failures he cannot fathom why.

Two people have an especially important part in encouraging Aragorn to assume the powerful roles meant for him: Elrond and his daughter, Arwen. Aragorn loves Arwen from the moment he meets her, and her impact on his life and character is immeasurable. Arwen encourages Aragorn when he has no hope and no confidence in his ability to overcome: "Dark is the Shadow and yet my heart rejoices; for you, [Aragorn], shall be among the great whose valour will destroy it.' But Aragorn answered: 'Alas! I cannot foresee it, and how it may come to pass is hidden from me. Yet with your hope I will hope'" (*Return* 425). Elrond, while initially wary of his daughter's relentless love for the Ranger, eventually affirms their relationship and throws his entire being into supporting Aragorn as he leads the forces of the West against Sauron. He does not doubt the true destiny of this man whom Arwen loves, saying: "She shall not be the bride of any Man less than the King of both Gondor and Arnor" (*Return* 425). Encouragement alone does not make one a leader, however. Character must be forged and mettle must be tested. After hearing Elrond proclaim Aragorn's heritage in full, Frodo believes that the Ring should clearly be in his possession: "'Then it belongs to you, and not to me at all!' cried Frodo in amazement, springing to his feet, as if he expected the Ring to be demanded at once" (*Fellowship* 324). Aragorn refuses because he knows that his kingship, while valid, does not warrant him any right to bear the Ring. He understands that the power of the Ring would be more likely to overcome him because of his position. In this humble action, Aragorn proves the legitimacy of his authority and displays the maturation of his integrity.

Others also have no trouble recognizing all of the qualities that make Aragorn so deserving of, and rich in, referent power. Countless people see him as a worthy leader, causing them at times to abandon all sense of self-interest in efforts to come alongside and aid him. When Aragorn is told to put aside his weapon in Théoden's court or fight "alone against all the men in Edoras," Gimli responds with very clear allegiance: "'Not alone!' said Gimli, fingering the blade of his axe, and looking darkly up at the guard, as if he were a young tree that Gimli had a mind to fell. 'Not alone!'" (*Two Towers* 146). The support that Aragorn enjoys is not exclusively given by those who have had time to know him—even those who are at first confrontational soon recognize that Aragorn is someone deserving of respect. Those in Théoden's hostile court under Wormtongue's poisonous infiltration almost immediately recognize something noble in Aragorn: "The guard stepped back and looked with amazement on Aragorn. 'It seems that

you are come on the wings of song out of the forgotten days . . . It shall be, lord, as you command” (*Two Towers* 147). Even towards almost certain death, Aragorn inspires people to follow him. On what may well be a fool’s errand fraught with peril, Legolas and Gimli continue to follow their friend and leader. Even Aragorn is leery of the Path of the Dead, saying, ““But I do not go gladly; only need drives me. Therefore, only of your free will would I have you come, for you will find both toil and great fear, and maybe worse.’ ‘I will go with you even on the Paths of the Dead, and to whatever end they may lead,’ said Gimli. ‘I also will come,’ said Legolas, ‘for I do not fear the Dead”” (*Return* 64). Legolas, Gimli, and countless others trust Aragorn enough to follow him into any danger. This massive amount of well-placed trust gives Aragorn immense referent power. This constant coming alongside by a multitude of Tolkien’s characters is key both in the fictional battle against Sauron and in demonstrating the immense value of community. Aragorn is the leader of the Fellowship, but without the allegiance of the other members, the cause would certainly have been lost.

The positive dynamic between Aragorn and King Théoden is one which clearly demonstrates Tolkien’s emphasis on teamwork. Each character possesses legitimate and referent power and yet, each seems to know precisely when it is the other’s place to lead. They perform this intricate dance around each other, exerting their influence on others and one another in seemingly perfect synchronization. Aragorn effortlessly captures the hearts of the people; Legolas says that ““all those who come to know him come to love him after their own fashion”” (*Return* 184). King Théoden is so loved and respected that his people stand behind him even when he is under the dark influence of Wormtongue. Gandalf explains, ““A man may love you and yet not love Wormtongue or his counsels”” (*Two Towers* 153). With all of this influence at their disposals, these two kings manage to serve and lead side by side. When charging into battle at Helm’s Deep, their joint authority is clear: ““And with that shout the king came. [Théoden’s] horse was white as snow, golden was his shield, and his spear was long. At his right hand was Aragorn, Elendil’s heir”” (*Two Towers* 185). They are leading the Rohirrim—Théoden’s mounted army. It is not necessary for Théoden to give Aragorn such a prestigious position in his ranks, but he respects Aragorn and perceives his integrity and reliability. They both understand that to win this war there cannot be petty rivalries between them. So in humility and mutual respect, they become a unified force, fully backed by the love and undying loyalty of their people.

Aragorn possesses both referent and legitimate power, but he does not use them in the same ways or in the same circumstances. Rather, he becomes very wise in intuiting which power base would be most relevant and effective in a given situation. When Gimli and Legolas decide to follow Aragorn on the Paths of the Dead, their first consideration is not the fact that he is the king. Rather, they are coming to the aid of a respected friend, wanting to follow in the footsteps of his bravery. Aragorn’s referent power gets the company to its destination, but once there, Aragorn relies on his legitimate power. The undead soldiers will not follow Aragorn’s command simply out of respect. In this instant, it is imperative

for Aragorn not to be Strider, but to be the heir of Isildur coming to ask the dead to fulfill their vows of service, saying “‘Oathbreakers, why have ye come?’ And a voice was heard out of the night that answered him, as if from far away: ‘To fulfill our oath and have peace.’ Then Aragorn said: ‘The hour is come at last. . . I will hold the oath fulfilled, and ye shall have peace and depart forever. For I am Elessar, Isildur’s heir of Gondor’” (*Return* 74). Aragorn’s strong and noble character allows him to navigate successfully the complicated task of leading well. He wields his influence with wisdom, humility, and integrity.

Encouragement from friends, coupled with successes such as at Helm’s Deep, contributes to Aragorn’s confidence as he steps into full authority and executes his power. Even then, Aragorn’s leadership is questioned and his resolve tested. The Lieutenant of the Tower of Barad Dûr confronts him at the Black Gate the very day that Frodo destroys the Ring and Sauron is defeated, saying: “‘Is there anyone in this rout with authority to treat with me?’ he asked. ‘Or indeed with wit to understand me? Not thou at least!’ he mocked, turning to Aragorn with scorn. ‘It needs more to make a king than a piece of elvish glass, or a rabble such as this. Why, any brigand of the hills can show as good a following!’” (*Return* 202). By this point, Aragorn has developed the inner security and self-awareness necessary to successfully exert command. Aragorn has no trouble responding and demonstrating the power that he has: “Aragorn said naught in answer, but he took the other’s eye and held it, and for a moment they strove thus; but soon, though Aragorn did not stir nor move hand to weapon, the other quailed and gave back as if menaced with a blow” (*Return* 202). It is obvious that Aragorn has truly embraced his role and has no qualms displaying and defending rightful and deserved authority and the power that comes with it.

### Conclusion

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien weaves together characters who long for power and those who reject it; he tells of those who abuse it and those who use it with great wisdom and understanding. It is this stunning picture of human character that Tolkien fills with his rich insights on the dynamics of human interaction and, thus, leadership. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien successfully demonstrates each of French and Raven’s bases of social power—the figures of Théoden, Sauron, the One Ring, Galadriel, Gandalf, Éowyn, and Aragorn successfully tell the tale of just how effective their respective power bases can be. Some power is abused, some is unrealized, and some is used with integrity and to its full potential.

While Sauron has absolute control over his forces, those who would oppose him never claim that ultimate power. Rather, these leaders strive to work as a cohesive force, allowing for an ebb and flow of command that serves to benefit their cause. Self-awareness is key to this unique give and take of the exertion of power, and Tolkien creates characters in *The Lord of the Rings* who grow to understand when and where their power is most useful. Leaders with

legitimate or referent powers recognize the time and place where they should refrain from employing their power. People like King Théoden and Aragorn, each with a considerable amount of power, ask for Gandalf's expertise. Whenever Gandalf joins the Company, Aragorn willingly hands the leadership over to him, acknowledging his vast experience. Théoden defaults to Gandalf's advice when unsure of what his next move or tactic should be: "Nonetheless I miss now both my counselors, the old and the new. But in this need we have no better choice than to go on, as Gandalf said" (*Two Towers* 170).

The fact remains that each of these characters possesses great power regardless of his or her abilities or desires to wield it. The legitimate, information, expert, and referent powers of Aragorn, Éowyn, Théoden, and Gandalf prove that power can be used for good. The interplay between characters from the West and the ultimate control of Sauron demonstrates the need for accountability and control: "There is nothing individualist to be found anywhere in Tolkien. He places communal life at the very center of the Rings epic. The Nine Walkers constitute an *ecclesial* company in the precise meaning of the adjective: they are *ekklesia*—called out—for a common mission that could not be accomplished individually" (Wood 320). Tolkien's constant emphasis on teamwork and community in *The Lord of the Rings* perhaps points to how he thought influence is most effectively wielded. Authority, and the power that ensues from it, should not serve to enslave or drive people into fearful submission. Leadership should be used for the good of the whole, not for personal gain. In *The Lord of the Rings*, then, one can find in J.R.R. Tolkien's beautifully crafted saga a set of heroes who demonstrate, in the context of community, this elusive blend of humility, wisdom, and power.

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