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## The *felix culpa* in Tolkien's Legendarium: A Catalyst for Character and Reader Transformation

Nathan C J Hood

*The University of Edinburgh*

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### The *felix culpa* in Tolkien's Legendarium: A Catalyst for Character and Reader Transformation

#### Abstract

Examines the role of the *felix culpa*, or 'happy fault', in J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium. The article argues that this motif, originating within the Christian theological tradition, was adapted by Tolkien into the guiding structure of Middle-earth's grand narrative. It shows the importance of the *felix culpa* in Tolkien's secondary world by analysing the trope's role in the *Ainulindale* and *The Silmarillion*. It then moves to consider the ways in which the presence of happy faults in *The Lord of the Rings* has a transformative impact upon the morality and spirituality of its characters and readers.

#### Additional Keywords

Felix Culpa; Happy Fault; Christian Theology; Felix culpa (Fortunate fall); Roman Catholic theology in J.R.R. Tolkien's works; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theology; Suicide



the *felix culpa* IN TOLKIEN'S  
LEGENDARIUM: A CATALYST FOR  
CHARACTER AND READER  
TRANSFORMATION

NATHAN C] HOOD

### INTRODUCTION

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROVIDENCE AND FREE WILL pervades J.R.R. Tolkien's *legendarium*. The presence of free choice is effervescent within the narratives, the Council of Elrond a prime example insofar as the characters gathered debate the course of action they must take to deal with the Ring of Power. The discussion culminates with Frodo's declaration: "I *will* take the Ring" to Mordor (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] II.2.270; emphasis added). Most dramatically, at the climax of the story Frodo decides to renege on his prior decision. Standing at the Crack of Doom, he declares "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!" (LotR VI.3.945; emphasis added). Verlyn Flieger has drawn attention to how Tolkien, with lexical precision, uses terms such as 'will,' 'shall,' and 'choose' to highlight the instrumental role that free choice plays in the narrative as the source of significant character actions ("The Music and the Task: Fate and Free Will in Middle-earth" ["Music"] 170). Consequently, in his theological and philosophical analysis Richard Sturch has suggested that each character is "portrayed as free to choose, well or ill, and as doing so" (79). Janet Brennan Croft goes further by exploring how "Free Will is the chiefest weapon in the arsenal of heaven" (146). Whereas evil powers, like Morgoth and Sauron, aim to destroy free will because they cannot subjugate or control it, the "side of Good in the War in Heaven" (134) utilizes disobedience arising from moral contemplation as a "right course of action against an authority that is ordering something questionable" and by their "harmony with the [...] way the world needs to be" (144): evil is defeated, in Tolkien's stories, by free (often virtuous) acts of disobedience.

By contrast, providence or fate is a more elusive feature of these tales. Thomas Hibbs has rightly cautioned that *The Lord of the Rings* is "not a philosophical treatise or even a philosophical dialogue," and as such "we will find very little direct evidence of the providential power at work in Middle-earth." Rather, the narrative provides "suggestions, clues, and hints that enliven and deepen our appreciation of the mysterious way in which all things seem to

work together for the good" (168). This may explain why a group of scholars, when writing on *The Silmarillion* and connected tales, have been quick to dismiss the role of fate within these stories. John Garth has suggested that though Tolkien's creation myth, the *Ainulindalë*, indicates that Elves and the Valar have no free will and are subjects of fate, Tolkien fails to show the implications of this reality in the following narratives (275). Thomas Fornet-Ponse goes so far as to say that the claims of Ilúvatar, the uttermost source of all in Middle-earth, that Elves are subject to fate while Men have free will "contradicts the whole structure of *The Silmarillion*" (183).

However, the consistent use of terms such as 'fate' and 'doom' in Tolkien's narratives, as well as the pronouncements of characters such as Gandalf and Elrond, suggest that there is a hidden agency directing the events of Tolkien's narratives (*LotR* I.2.55-56, II.2.242). Many of those who specialise in disciplines such as philosophy (Kreeft), theology (Rutledge), biography (Pearce) and cultural studies (Jensen) have recognised the role of providence in *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. Scholars have suggested that in Tolkien's legendarium freewill is subordinate to fate (Bullock; Deyo; Helms 46), while Hostetter has argued that free choice is only possible when there is a "fully aware purpose" enabling it (Hostetter 185). Flieger has provided the most thorough-going attempt to identify the ways in which fate and free-will coexist, cooperate, and interact in Tolkien's Secondary World ("Music"), while Whitt has elucidated the rich meanings 'fate' and 'doom' had in Germanic mythology and their consequent influence upon *The Silmarillion*. Kathleen Dubs has attempted to use Boethian philosophy as a hermeneutical framework for discussing the metaphysical relationship between providence and freewill in Tolkien's legendarium.

While these and other studies are valiant attempts to identify how providence or fate directs the events of Middle-earth, there has been little comment on the way in which the history of Arda is governed by this power. Croft has noted that for readers of *The Lord of the Rings*, "it can be difficult to not see any particular act of disobedience contributing in some way to a later moment of eucatastrophe" (141). Observing similar patterns of the events in *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*, Croft concludes that "Disobedience resulting in eucatastrophe is part of the very fabric of Eru's universe from the beginning" (146). Croft's comments indicate that by discerning and exploring the recurring narrative sequences within and between Tolkien's tales, a reader can identify the directionality with which the governing power guides Middle-earth and, by extension, glean something of its purposes for the world. In turn, such study makes more fully present to the reader the spiritual, moral, and creative contexts within which characters make their free choices.

A considerable influence on Tolkien's construction of a providentially ordered Secondary World is that of the *felix culpa*. Meaning 'happy fault,' the term originates within Christian theological reflection upon the Fall of Adam. Liturgies and theologians have considered the Fall, the entrance of sin, suffering, and death into the human condition and the world more broadly, as on balance a positive good. Though in itself a tragedy, the Fall is a necessary precondition for the Incarnation and Atonement, the redemption of humanity by Jesus Christ. Since the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, as the means of salvation, are a good that far outweigh in value the sin caused by the Fall, by implication Adam's Original Sin was a happy fault, an evil which God has used to bring into being an even greater good into the world.

Flieger has briefly noted that the rebellion of Melkor in the *Ainulindalë* is comparable to the theme of the "Fortunate Fall" given that it is the inciting incident for Ilúvatar's creation of Elves and Men, who will "correct the harm done to the world by Melkor" ("Music" 175). Moreover, Flieger suggests that though Tolkien believed humans are unable to experience the world directly due to the mediating and refracting power of language following the Fall of Adam, he also saw "the possibilities for beauty that derived from the *felix peccatum Adae*, the fortunate sin of Adam" (*Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* [Splintered Light] 95). Beyond these two points, there is no explicit reference to the concept of *felix culpa* in Flieger's work. Yet, Flieger identifies tropes within Tolkien's narratives which manifest this idea. Discussing the character of Thingol, she observes that though "Deaths and disasters follow in the wake of his obsession with the Silmaril," it is "through him that Silmaril is recovered to shine upon Middle-earth" (140). In challenging Beren to retrieve a Silmaril in exchange for Lúthien, Thingol is inadvertently "instrumental in helping Men toward the light" (145). Thus, his "darkness" is a means by which greater good is achieved, a happy fault. Flieger implies that Thingol's arc is typical of "Tolkien's world, as in our own," that it is "only through darkness that one may come to the light" (146).

Despite its apparent importance, no extensive treatment has been undertaken to uncover the ways in which Tolkien adapted and transformed the concept of *felix culpa* within his development of Middle-earth's history. In turn, this has left underexamined the relationship between providence or fate and free will in Tolkien's legendarium. Therefore, this article fills this *lacuna* by exploring how Tolkien's Middle-earth stories utilise and transmute the *felix culpa* narrative trope. It suggests that his tales, particularly those in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, contain sequences of events which present an evil action as a precondition or instrument for the occurrence of a much greater good and, crucially, that such patterns of history were intended by a providential power. The exploration begins with a brief consideration of the

origins and development of the *felix culpa* in Christian theology and piety, before turning to Tolkien's adaptation of this trope in the grand narrative of the *Quenta Silmarillion*. Then, the essay will consider the importance of the happy fault in the narrative climax of *The Lord of the Rings*. It will interrogate this episode to show how Tolkien uses the *felix culpa* trope to challenge characters and readers to broaden their ways of thinking about, and reflect upon their responses to, the role of evil in the course of events.

#### THE FELIX CULPA IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

It is well known that Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic. Such faith, Tolkien wrote in a letter, had first "unconsciously," and then "consciously in the revision," informed *The Lord of the Rings*. He went on to say that he had "consciously planned very little" of the "religious element" in the story. Rather, the Catholic character of the text was an outworking of "having been brought up (since I was eight) in a Faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little I know" (*Letters* 172, #142). From his childhood into his adult years, Tolkien would have attended the Easter Vigil, the Roman Catholic celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Beginning between sunset on Holy Saturday and Sunrise on Easter Sunday outside the church, the Paschal candle is lit, symbolic of the resurrected Christ who is the light of the world. It is carried by a Deacon into the church, who then chants the *Exsultet*, also known as the *Praeconium Paschale*, 'the Easter Proclamation.' First inviting the congregation to praise, the *Exsultet* moves to adulation at Christ's victory over death. In its midst, the Deacon will chant: "*O certe necessarium Adæ peccatum, quod Christi morte delatum est! O felix culpa, quæ talem ac tantum méruit habére Redemptórem!*" These words translate: "O truly necessary sin of Adam, destroyed completely by the Death of Christ! O happy fault that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!" (Ostrowski). In these phrases Tolkien would have heard that the Fall of Adam was "necessary" and a "happy fault."

The inclusion of this phrase in the Roman liturgy, dating at least to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, was informed by earlier pronouncements by influential theologians upon the Fall. 'The Fall' refers to the original sin of Adam, whereby the first man took and ate fruit from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in so doing breaking God's commandment. Henceforth, he and his wife Eve were banished from Edenic paradise into a world of suffering and death. Adam's decision to rebel against God's will introduced evil into the world, and as such is both the Fall of Adam and of Creation from the Divine plan. Commenting upon this tragedy in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Ambrose of Milan had claimed that the Fall "has brought more benefit to us than harm," for God "knew that Adam would fall, in order that he might be redeemed by Christ." Arthur Lovejoy has suggested that the language of the *Exsultet* and Ambrose closely parallel one another,

suggesting that the writings of Ambrose may be the primary source for the idea of the "*Felix ruina*" (Lovejoy 171-172). Gregory the Great later developed this notion more fully when he exclaimed:

What greater fault than that by which we all die? And what greater goodness than that by which we are freed from death? And certainly, unless Adam had sinned, it would not have behooved our Redeemer to take on our flesh. Almightly God saw beforehand that from that evil because of which men were to die, He would bring about a good which would overcome that evil. How wonderfully the good surpasses the evil, what faithful believer can fail to see? Great, indeed, are the evils we deservedly suffer in consequence of the first sin; but who of the elect would not willingly endure still worse evils, rather than not have so great a Redeemer? (qtd. in Lovejoy 172-173)

Lovejoy has shown that early modern writers, such as John Milton, inherited the *felix culpa* interpretation of the Fall. In *Paradise Lost*, in response to the Archangel Michael's prophecies, Adam reinterprets his Original Sin as follows:

O Goodness infinite, Goodness immense,  
That all this good of evil shall produce,  
And evil turn to good—more wonderful  
Than that which by creation first brought forth (473)  
Light out of darkness! Full of doubt I stand,  
Whether I should repent me now of sin  
By me done or occasioned, or rejoice  
Much more that much more good thereof shall spring—  
To God more glory, more good will to men (478)  
From God—and over wrath grace shall abound.  
(qtd. in Lovejoy 161-162)

More recently, the philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga has made the case for interpreting the Fall as a happy fault, stating with exemplary clarity what was expressed by Ambrose, Gregory, and Milton. Plantinga argues that when creating the world, God chose to create one in which there was Incarnation, God the Son taking on a human nature as the person of Jesus Christ, and Atonement, the overcoming of human sin through the crucifixion of Jesus. He did so because, Plantinga believes, "any world with incarnation and atonement is a better world than any without it" (10). He holds that the Incarnation of God the Son as Jesus Christ and the redemption of humanity via the cross and resurrection are, for God, an end in themselves, and as ends they are of unsurpassable goodness. By implication, as this world is one in which there is an Incarnation and Atonement, it must also contain evil. This is because

the Atonement is God's means for saving creatures from the consequences of their sin (death and damnation), and so "if there were no evil, there would be sin, no consequences of sin to be saved from, and hence no atonement." Thus, sin and evil are a "necessary condition" of the atonement (Plantinga 12). As the Fall provides the occasion which enables the Incarnation and Atonement, ends in themselves, it becomes the instrument by which, in the words of Milton's Adam, "much more good therof shall spring" (qtd. in Lovejoy 162).

However, there is a distinction that ought to be made between the interpretation of the happy fault offered by Plantinga and the older theological tradition, as it is relevant to interpreting Tolkien. Plantinga takes a supralapsarian approach to the *felix culpa*. He believes that God's decree of election and reprobation logically precedes the Fall of Adam and, as such, God always intended or planned to use the Fall as a means by which the Incarnation and Atonement could be achieved (Plantinga 12-13). By contrast, infralapsarians believe that God's decree of election and reprobation logically follow the Original Sin. God did not intend for there to be a Fall but, given Adam's rebellion, has providentially ordered history so that from this evil a greater good will come in the form of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Though Ambrose affirmed that God "knew that Adam would Fall, *in order that* he might be redeemed by Christ," and likewise Gregory claimed that God "saw beforehand that from that evil because of which men were to die, He would bring about a good which would overcome that evil," neither makes a clear statement as to whether they hold God *intended* for Adam to Fall or whether the Original Sin demanded from God an adjusted plan, namely that of redemption through Jesus Christ (qtd. in Lovejoy 171-173). Whether supralapsarian or infralapsarian, they affirm with Plantinga that the Fall was the precondition for the Incarnation and Atonement and so God used it as an instrument for bringing greater good into the world.

#### MELKOR'S 'HAPPY FAULT'

Turning now to the adaptation and transformation of the *felix culpa* trope in Tolkien's Secondary World, the most appropriate place to start is the *Ainulindalë*, the creation myth of Middle-earth. It begins with Eru, the One, also called Ilúvatar, the All-Father. He makes the Ainur, who are the "offspring of his thought," who exist with Ilúvatar before anything else was created. The Ainur were music makers, each apportioned their own individual songs to sing, given that each Ainur "comprehended only that part of the mind of Ilúvatar from which he came." In time, Eru gathered the Ainur together and propounded to them a "mighty theme," the first of three. He commanded the Ainur, "Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music" so that "ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme,



each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will." The voices of the Ainur rose to their task, producing a sound of "endless interchanging melodies woven in harmony that passed beyond hearing into the depths and into the heights and the places of the dwelling of Ilúvatar," and in the music "there were no flaws" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 15-16).

However, such perfection in music and cosmos was not to last. Melkor, who had been given "the greatest gifts of power and knowledge," attempted to "interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar." When Melkor's thoughts were introduced into the Great Music, "straightway discord arose about him, and many that sang nigh him grew despondent, and their thought was disturbed and their music faltered." Some of the Ainur even joined the music of Melkor, and the Great Music "foundered in a sea of turbulent sound [...] a raging storm, as of dark waters that made war one upon another in an endless wrath that would not be assuaged." At this point, Ilúvatar propounds a second music, "like and yet unlike to the former theme, and it gathered power and had new beauty." It was met with the "discord of Melkor," and there was a "war of sound more violent," resulting in the "mastery" of Melkor over the Ainur. Eru brought forth a third and final theme, unlike the other two. It was "at first soft and sweet, a mere rippling of gentle sounds in delicate melodies; but it could not be quenched, and it took to itself power and profundity." The clamour of Melkor continued, so that it seemed "at last that there were two musics progressing at one time before the seat of Ilúvatar, and they were utterly at variance." Eru ends the contest in a final chord, "deeper than the Abyss, higher than the Firmament, piercing as the light of the eye of Ilúvatar, the Music ceased" (*Silmarillion* 16-17).

Following their conflict, Eru addressed the Ainur. He promised to show the Ainur "those things that ye have sung" so that they "may know [...] that I am Ilúvatar." Turning to address his apparent adversary, Ilúvatar declares that "thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined." He then showed the Ainur a vision of what they had sung, "a new World made visible before them [...] this World began to unfold its history, and it seemed to them it lived and grew." Eru explained to the Ainur again, "This is your minstrelsy; and each of you shall find contained herein, amid the design I set before you, all those things which it may seem that he himself devised or added. And thou, Melkor, wilt discover all the secret thoughts of thy mind, and wilt perceive that they are but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory" (*Silmarillion* 17-18).

In these passages, Ilúvatar interprets the rebellion of Melkor as a happy fault. Melkor's rebellious music brought discord into the perfect harmony, and

in so doing introduced evil and suffering into the history of the world. Though such wrongdoing is in itself to be lamented, Ilúvatar promises that Melkor's evil will "prove mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful." Eru shall use the Fall of Melkor as the means by which a greater good can be achieved in Middle-earth, akin to God's using the original sin to bring about the Incarnation and Atonement. That Melkor's Fall is a necessary condition of a greater good is reflected in the third theme, a music "deep and wide and beautiful [...] slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow." It appeared that the "most triumphant notes" of Melkor's "loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated [...] clamorous unison" were "taken by the other and woven into its own solemn pattern" (*Silmarillion* 17). The discord of Melkor is a constituent part of Eru's third theme, and as such is a "tributary to its [the whole's] glory." By extension, his evil deeds will be integral to the directionality of Ilúvatar's guidance of Middle-earth's history.

Moreover, the words of Eru suggest that Melkor's rebellion was always a feature of his musical design. During the war of music, it seems to the Ainur that they can alter the music of Eru. To those who decorated and adorned his themes, it looks as if they are the origin of those "thoughts and devices" they have "devised or added." The Ainur can, it appears, develop the music of Eru in ways he had not conceived. Moreover, on the face of it the Ainur can create their own music in opposition to the compositions of Eru. Melkor's clamour and Ilúvatar's third theme "seemed" to be "two musics progressing at one time" in conflict with one another, Melkor's seeking to drown out Eru's tune by "the violence of its voice" (*Silmarillion* 17). The ugliness and shrillness of Melkor's melody, in contrast to the beauty of Ilúvatar's, seems to indicate that the rebellious Ainur's tune could not, have proceeded from Eru's imagination. By implication, it seems as if the Ainur can behave in ways which circumvent the will of Eru and are beyond his control.

However, the apparent competition between Eru and Melkor is illusory. Following their conflict, Eru claims that the music of Melkor, though seemingly a rival to his own compositions, cannot "alter the music in my despite." Such is the case because "no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me." The music of the Ainur, including Melkor's, was first imagined by Ilúvatar. This is because the Ainur were "the offspring of his thought," the imaginings of Eru brought to life by "the Flame Imperishable." The character of each is determined by "that part of the mind of Ilúvatar from which he came," and initially they are only able to make music in accordance with that aspect of Ilúvatar's thinking from which they proceeded. Consequently, though "it may seem" (emphasis added) to the Ainur that they themselves "devised or added" to the music of Eru their own "thoughts and devices," Ilúvatar implies that every Ainur's embellishments emerge from

natures that were first conceived of in his mind. Tolkien's commentary on the place of free will in the *Ainulindalë* appears to support this reading: "So in this myth, it is 'feigned' (legitimately whether that is a feature of the real world or not) that He gave special 'sub-creative' powers to certain of His highest created beings: that is a guarantee that what they devised and made should be given the reality of Creation" (*Letters* 195, #153). It is reasonable to conclude that Eru imagined and created the Ainur as beings that would, of their own volition, think and act in ways that he had intended in response to his declaration of a Great Music, thereby performing his three themes. This includes Melkor's cacophony, which is the execution of one melody within Ilúvatar's third theme.

Eru's words indicate that he always intended to create a world within which Melkor fell. He did so because the rebellion of Melkor would provide a means by which he could bring into being some greater good that required, as a necessary condition, the presence of evil and suffering in Middle-earth. Yet, even if this supralapsarian reading of the *Ainulindalë* is deemed by some readers to be too strong, the text is clear that Ilúvatar intends to use the fall of Melkor as a part of his providential design for Middle-earth's history. Eru will turn it into a happy fault, a precondition and occasion for greater good and a more glorious whole.

The greater good Eru seeks to bring about by using the Fall of Melkor as a *felix culpa* is open to a variety of interconnected interpretations centring upon the Children of Ilúvatar. In the *Quenta Silmarillion*, it is recorded that Ilúvatar gives to Men the gift of free will, to "have a virtue to shape their life, amid the powers and chances of the world, beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is as fate to all things else." Though Men, being set "amid the turmoils of the powers of the world," "will stray often," in time their misdemeanors shall, Eru promised, "find that all they do redounds at the end only to the glory of my work." The narrator notably adds that through the "operation" of Men's free will "everything should be, in form and deed, completed, and the world fulfilled unto the last and smallest" (*Silmarillion* 41-42). Just as the Fall of Melkor will be a happy fault used to bring about a greater good, so the misdeeds of Men will be the instrument through which creation will be renewed by Eru. The fulfilment of the world is, it is implied in the *Ainulindalë*, the Second Great Music of Ilúvatar. Though the first music of Eru consisted in perfect harmony, it is prophesied that a "greater still shall be made before Ilúvatar after the choirs of the Ainur and the Children of Ilúvatar [Elves and Men] after the end of days" (*Silmarillion* 15). The agency of Men will, by implication, be used by Eru to not only redress the discord of Melkor, but also to create an even greater music than there was before.

Further support for this reading can be found in the *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*. Engaged in debate, the woman Andreth informs the elf Finrod that some of the race of Men believe “that our errand here was to heal the Marring of Arda.” According to this view, the marring of Arda, brought about by Melkor’s Fall, is the happy fault which is the necessary condition for Eru’s creation of Men, for they are brought into being as his instrument for redeeming the world. Moreover, Men will not only make “Arda Unmarred,” but rather “a third thing and a greater”: “Arda Healed” or “Arda Remade” (Tolkien, *Morgoth’s Ring* 351; Flieger, “Music” 174).<sup>1</sup> Passages in *Parma Eldalamberon* 17, “Words, Phrases & Passages in *The Lord of the Rings*,” corroborate and develop Andreth’s claims. In the section headed “The knowledge of the Valar, or Elvish ideas and theories concerned with them,” Tolkien suggests that Elves and Men, the Children of Ilúvatar, were an “addition made by Eru Himself after the Revelation to the primal spirits of the Great Design.” In part, this was in order “to complete the Design by ‘healing’ the hurts which it suffered, and so ultimately not to recover ‘Arda Unmarred’ (that is the world as it would have been if Evil had never appeared) but the far greater thing ‘Arda Healed’” (177-178; Flieger, “Music” 174).

From these passages, Flieger infers that it was Eru’s intention to “correct the harm done by Melkor” through the actions of Elves and Men, and thereby “complete the design” of Ilúvatar (“Music” 175). That Eru added the creation of his Children in the third theme, and as such only after the rebellion of Melkor, implies that his fall was a necessary condition for the creation of Elves and Men. If the rogue Ainur had not rebelled, there would have been no need to create Elves and Men because there would be no need to heal the evil and suffering caused by Melkor’s Fall. Moreover, a world saved by Elves and Men is a greater good than the initial “unmarred” creation, “the far greater thing” of a new world within which the Second Great Music will be sung. Melkor’s fall is, therefore, a happy fault because it a) it is a precondition for the redemption of Middle-earth by the Children of Ilúvatar and b) it is therefore a necessary condition for the existence of “Arda Remade,” which can only be brought into being through the redemption of the fallen world by the Children of Ilúvatar.

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<sup>1</sup> Andreth also suggests that Men underwent their own Fall, which will occasion Ilúvatar to “enter into Arda, and heal Men and all the Marring from the beginning to the end.” Commenting on the passage, Tolkien writes that Finrod had “guessed that the redemptive function was originally specially assigned to Men, he probably proceeded to the expectation that ‘the coming of [Ilúvatar],’ if it took place, would be specially and primarily concerned with Men: [...] [Ilúvatar] would come incarnated in human form” (*Morgoth’s Ring* 335, 351-352; Coutras 111-112). Another *felix culpa* is at play: the Fall of Man precipitates the Incarnation of Ilúvatar and his enactment of redemption. This happy fault parallels closely the Christian story.

Though the creation of Arda Remade lies beyond the corpus of Tolkien's legendarium, the narrative of the *Quenta Silmarillion* can be read as a story within which the Children of Ilúvatar heal the evil and suffering caused by Melkor. The Marring of Arda is manifested in the "Darkening of Valinor" when Morgoth and Ungoliant destroyed the Trees of Light and stole the Silmarils. These malicious acts lead to the rash oath of Fëanor and the Doom of Mandos, leading to the horrific tragedies of the Noldor in Middle-earth. However, victory over the tyranny of Morgoth is achieved by Eärendil. Descended from both a Man and an Elf, he lost all hope in the future of Middle-earth when Maedhros and Maglor attacked the exiles of Gondolin in pursuit of the Silmaril possessed by Elwing, Eärendil's wife. In desperation, he and his wife sailed for Valinor, and by the power of the Silmaril he was able to become the first mortal to cross the seas and walk in the holy land. He presented himself on behalf of the "Two Kindreds," Elves and Men, asking for "pity" upon the Noldor for their "great sorrows," and "mercy upon Men and Elves and succour in their need" (*Silmarillion* 249). Manwë granted his request, and the forces of the Valar went forth to do battle with Morgoth. Finally, it is through Eärendil that victory is achieved. In his ship Vingilot, which sails through the sky adorned with the Silmaril, he killed Ancalagon the Black, breaking the towers of Thangorodrim.

Taken together, the *Ainulindalë* and climax of the *Quenta Silmarillion* are, as a unified narrative, comparable to the *felix culpa* of Christianity. Melkor, like Adam, falls, introducing evil and suffering into the world. After many generations Eärendil, half man half elf, is the instrument of redemption, just as the incarnate Christ, who has a Divine and human nature, is the means of salvation. As a man, Christ represents humankind before God in the holy of holies, and through his death offers a sacrifice to God which washes away the punishment of sin. Similarly, Eärendil enters the holy realm and, as a Man and an Elf, can represent the Children of Ilúvatar before the Valar, including the Noldor who have been cursed by Mandos. His petitions, moved by love for his kindred, sate the wrath of the Valar and lead them to overthrow evil. In reference to a prophecy from the book of Genesis, the atonement and resurrection are symbolically presented as Jesus slaying a serpent, the snake or dragon representing the devil.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Eärendil assures victory by slaying the great dragon. Through Eärendil, the Children of Ilúvatar redress the wrongs of Melkor. In turn, they pave the way for the remaking of Middle-earth. The world "was changed," such that "the northern regions of the western world were rent asunder, and the sea roared in through many chasms [...] and rivers perished

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:15. See, for example, Lucas Cranach the Elder, "Law and Gospel" (approx. 1529) and Hieronymus Wierix, "The Passion of Christ" (circa. 1619).

or found new paths, and the valleys were upheaved and the hills trod down; and Sirion was no more" (*Silmarillion* 252). The results of Eärendil's victory are analogous to that of Christ's, which will, in the end of days, mean that "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low."<sup>3</sup>

Flieger is right to caution that the parallels are not one-for-one. She notes that in Tolkien's mythos, it is Melkor, an angelic being, who falls. Humans are not those responsible for the original sin, but rather are created in such a world ("Music" 174). The *Ainulindalë* is more akin to Satan's fall in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, though, as Tolkien notes, the fall of Satan did not affect the world essentially, whereas Melkor's discord does corrupt creation (like Adam's) (*Letters* 286-287, #212). In the Chalcedonian Christology of Roman Catholicism, Christ is not part man and part God, but rather a person with two distinct, unmixed natures, one Divine, one human. This contrasts with Eärendil, who is half Elf and half Man. Moreover, whereas Christ has no male parent and is born of a virgin, Eärendil is descended from a human father and elven mother. Though Eärendil and Christ represent their people before God, Eärendil is neither crucified nor resurrected, and he receives help in conquering Morgoth (formerly Melkor). The *Quenta Silmarillion* is not an allegory of the Christian *felix culpa*. If it were, Tolkien's stories would not be able to support the weight of meaning and expectation it would incur being so closely associated with the biblical narrative.

Nevertheless, the similarity of narrative structures between the Christian happy fault and the story of Eärendil suggest that Tolkien, consciously or unconsciously, adapted and transformed the *felix culpa* trope as the grand narrative of the First Age of Arda. Melkor's rebellion is the necessary condition for Eärendil's voyage, intercession, and conquest of Morgoth, thus making the discord of the Ainur a happy fault. Set within the context of the promise of Arda Remade, Eärendil's exploits represents the initial redemption of Middle-earth by the Children of Ilúvatar, a decisive step towards the Second Music. In fact, Eärendil's victory and the geographical reshaping of Middle-earth are a symbolic representation, a 'type,' of the forthcoming final victory over evil in the Last Battle at the end of history and the subsequent creation of Arda Remade.

### **BROADENING HORIZONS**

That the *felix culpa* motif recurs throughout the history of Middle-earth challenges the attitudes and behavior characters and readers have in response to evil. At the outset of *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf has a conversation with Frodo explaining the peril that the hobbit is in by virtue of his possession of the Ring of Power. He informs Frodo that Gollum was found by the forces of Sauron

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 40:4. Kings James Version.

and from him they learned that the One Ring is in the possession of a Baggins from the Shire. In a state of panic, Frodo exclaims, "But this is terrible [...] Far worse than the worst that I imagined from your hints and warnings. O Gandalf, best of friends, what am I to do? For now I am really afraid. What am I to do? What a pity that Bilbo did not stab the vile creature, when he had a chance!" In response, Gandalf cautions Frodo against rash judgement: "Pity? It was Pity that stayed his [Bilbo's] hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need." Frodo apologises, saying that he was frightened and unable to pity Gollum. Indeed, he goes on to declare that Gollum, given "all those horrible deeds" he had committed, was "as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy." Consequently, "He deserves death" (*LotR* I.2.59).

Gandalf turns the conversation by introducing Frodo, in an elusive way, to the happy fault.

Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. *For even the very wise cannot see all ends.* I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. *My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end;* and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many – yours not least. (*LotR* I.2.59; emphasis added).

Gandalf is situating the question of whether to execute Gollum within the context of that providential power that, as he referred to earlier in the discussion, "meant" for Bilbo and Frodo to receive the Ring (*LotR* I.2.56). It may seem clear to Frodo that Gollum should die, both for his wicked acts and for the threat he poses to the hobbit, but Gandalf reminds him that Gollum is, as are all creatures, part of a providential design. Characters and readers do not know, in the midst of the story, all the ends that Eru has for preserving a villain like Gollum: it may be for good, in which case Gollum's evil deeds will be used to create a *felix culpa*. As neither Gandalf, Frodo, nor the reader know how Eru will use Gollum at this point in the story, they are better extending mercy towards him where possible. The events that bring about the destruction of the Ring teach Frodo the truth of Gandalf's advice.

At the Crack of Doom, Frodo has the chance to destroy the Ring and defeat Sauron. At the moment of decision he speaks with a clear voice, saying, "I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" (*LotR* VI.3.945). All seems lost, as the one hope of the free peoples, the destruction of the Ring, has been taken away by Frodo's 'failure' of will (*Letters* 325-326, #246). In his letters Tolkien does not admonish the protagonist. Frodo "spent every drop of his power of will and body, and that was just sufficient to

bring him to the destined point, and no further. Few others, possibly no others of his time, would have got so far" (*Letters* 253, #192). Yet, in the heart of Mordor it was "quite impossible for him to surrender the Ring, in act or will," indeed for anyone to have surrendered the Ring, for all would be beaten by a stronger spiritual force, akin to being defeated by a more powerful foe in physical combat (*Letters* 251, #191). Frodo's failure, then, is representative of Tolkien's notion that "There exists the possibility of being placed in positions beyond one's power [...]. The power of evil in the world is *not* finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however 'good'" (*Letters* 252, #191). He is "doomed to failure, doomed to fall to temptation or be broken by pressure against his 'will'" (*Letters* 233, #181).

In terms of the narrative of *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo's submission to the lure of the Ring is a moment of complete and utter disaster. The destruction of the Ring is the only means by which the free peoples can defeat Sauron, for only by casting it into the heart of Mount Doom can it be unmade. If Sauron should regain the Ring, all will be defeated and enslaved by the Dark Lord. When Frodo stands above the lava, he is in the incredibly unlikely (given the obstacles he has had to overcome) position that he can end Sauron's reign of terror and quest for domination once and for all. Thus, Frodo's refusal to destroy the Ring is both an abrogation of the duty to which he was called and a moment where fortune has been reversed. The one way of defeating Sauron seems to be gone for good, and it will only be a matter of time before he reclaims the Ring from Frodo. Sauron will, thus, rule Middle-earth. The failure of Frodo is particularly grave given that simultaneously the remnants of Aragon's host are surrounded by orcs at the Black Gate, offering their lives as a distraction to buy Frodo time to destroy the Ring unhindered. Without its destruction, they will all surely be killed. Consequently, Frodo's fall at the climax of the narrative is a moment of apparent despair, as it signals the complete victory of evil and the death of all that is good in Middle-earth.

However, Frodo's failure is redressed by a *felix culpa*. Gollum, possessed by unquenchable lust for the Ring, attacks Frodo. Biting off Frodo's finger, he takes the Ring in blind ecstasy. Gollum's attack on Frodo was particularly evil given that he had sworn an oath to "serve the master of the Precious" (*LotR* IV.1.618). Attempting to take the Ring for himself, he broke his vow (or at least the spirit of his promise, which was to serve Frodo) and Frodo's prophecy as to the penalty for doing so is somewhat fulfilled: "If I, wearing it, were to command you, you would obey, even if it were to leap from a precipice or to cast yourself into the fire" (*LotR* IV.3.640). For, in his elation at reclaiming the Ring, Gollum "stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell" (*LotR* VI.3.946). The Ring is destroyed, and Sauron



is defeated. Consequently, Gollum's disobedience brings about a greater good, the victory of the free peoples of Middle-earth. It is a *felix culpa*.<sup>4</sup>

Though it is not explicit within the narrative, Eru was the agent who used Gollum's betrayal to destroy the Ring. In a letter to Amy Roland, Tolkien suggested that the intervention of Gollum and his fall into the fires below were the result of divine providence. When Frodo failed, "The Other Power then took over: the Writer of the Story (by which I do not mean myself)" (*Letters* 253, #192). He implied that at the moment of crisis Ilúvatar's providential design rescued victory from the jaws of defeat. Just as he had used the wickedness of Melkor as an "instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined" (*Silmarillion* 17-18), so too Eru transformed the treachery of Gollum into his instrument for destroying the Ring. As Stratford Caldecott puts it,

Thus in the end it is not Frodo who saves Middle-earth at all, though he bore the Ring to the Mountain, nor Gollum, who took the Ring into the Fire. It can only be God [Eru] himself, working through the love and freedom of his creatures, using even our mistakes and the designs of the Enemy [...] to bring about our good. (Caldecott 36)

Moreover, given that Gollum's wickedness was an instrument of Eru's providence, a reader can infer that his disobedience was also a significant part of the plan to remake Arda. Sauron was an important servant of Morgoth's and, when the latter was defeated at the end of the First Age, rose to replace him as the Dark Lord of Middle-earth. As such, his evil extends the marring of the world that his master began. Thus, the evil of Sauron, like that of Melkor's, will

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<sup>4</sup> Croft's article suggests that throughout Tolkien's legendarium disobedience is a catalyst for eucatastrophe. Two types of disobedience are distinguished as to their intention: those which, like Melkor's, arise from a "lust for destruction and the domination of others" and those out "of love and subcreative desire," the latter exemplified in Aulë's creation of the dwarves (145). Croft explores how both acts of disobedience motivated by malice, such as Boromir's and Gollum's attempts to take the Ring from Frodo, and those like Beregon'd's defiance of Denethor's orders arising from a rejection of an unjust command, are brought into harmony with Eru's providential design, becoming the instrument through which a eucatastrophe is delivered (141-143). Those acts of disobedience which proceed from evil intentions are 'happy faults,' as are those which unintentionally go against the apparent will of Eru (such as Aulë's), for that which defies Eru is evil in itself. Thus, these kinds of action constitute evils that are necessary for or the means by which a greater good is achieved. However, when characters like Beregon'd disobey their masters in the service of a higher good, they are not performing a *felix culpa* insofar as their actions are neither intentionally nor unintentionally evil. Rather, their disobedience consists of a good deed that conflicts with and overcomes an evil order or rule.

be healed by the Children of Ilúvatar as they are used by Eru to remake Arda. As Hobbits are a “relative of ours [of Men],” they too can be the instrument by which Eru redresses the presence of evil in the world (*LotR* “Prologue” 2). Thus, Sméagol, a hobbit, is used by Eru to heal Arda, his malicious disobedience to Frodo fulfilling Ilúvatar’s claim that even when Men go astray, they will find that “all they do redounds at the end only to the glory of my work” (*Silmarillion* 42).

Gollum’s *felix culpa* at the Crack of Doom taught Frodo the value of mercy. In conversation with Sam after the destruction of the Ring, he asked his companion “do you remember Gandalf’s words: *Even Gollum may have something yet to do?* But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end. So let us forgive him! For the Quest is achieved, and now all is over” (*LotR* VI.3.947). Referring to Gandalf’s advice, Frodo acknowledged that his initial judgement that Gollum should be executed was wrong. Rather, it was the wizard’s guidance, which had led Frodo to show mercy towards Smeagol, that had been vindicated. Gandalf’s insight was shown to be morally and practically right insofar as Frodo’s choice to spare Gollum was that which enabled the destruction of the Ring: though Gollum did “betray him [Frodo] and could rob him in the end,” his mercy had “produced a situation in which the object of his quest could be achieved” (*Letters* 234, #181; *Letters* 326, #246). Thus, when returned to a Shire tyrannized by ruffians, Frodo, once “eager to deal out death in judgement” (*LotR* I.2.59), urges the rebelling Hobbits to restrain from killing their foes if possible. Moreover, though Sharkey attempts to kill Frodo, the hobbit shows mercy towards his would-be murderer and stops Sam from executing the villain (*LotR* VI.8.1019). Gollum’s happy fault has taught Frodo to forgive his enemies.

In turn, the failure of Frodo and the evil of Gollum contribute to a narrative that enables characters and readers to experience profound joy. In his lecture *On Fairy-stories*, Tolkien argued that the “highest function” of the fairy-tale or fantasy work is that they provide “the Consolation of the Happy Ending.” He suggested that such stories revolve around a “*Eucatastrophe*” or “good catastrophe,” a “sudden joyous turn [...] a sudden and miraculous grace never to be counted on to recur.” The eucatastrophic tale presupposes the “existence of *dyscatastrophe*,” the moment of utter despair when all seems lost. For it is the sudden overturning of overwhelming evil by an unexpected grace which arouses in the reader a “fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief,” catching “the breath,” “lifting the heart” with delight and relief (“*On Fairy-Stories*” 153-4; Holloway 187-188). Hibbs has drawn attention to passages in *The Lord of the Rings* showing the reader that they should feel such emotions in eucatastrophic moments through identification with character reactions (176-177). The free peoples are moved to “great joy” and

"wonder" at the arrival of Aragorn and his army at the Pelennor Fields when all seems lost (*LotR* V.6.847), while the return of Gandalf the White, having been "sent back" (*LotR* III.5.502) following his mortal combat with the Balrog, moves Aragorn to exclaim "Beyond all hope you return to us in our need!" (*LotR* III.5.495).

The destruction of the Ring has a eucatastrophic narrative arc. Frodo's willpower was finally defeated by the Ring and, taking it as his own, it seems to the reader that all hope of victory is lost. However, the betrayal of Gollum and his slip into the fires below constitute an unexpected and wonderful grace, insofar as they are the unlikely means that Eru used to destroy the Ring and defeat Sauron. The failure of Frodo, though initially cause for despair, is the dyscatastrophe "necessary to the joy of deliverance" achieved by a eucatastrophe, the prospect of "universal final defeat" essential for the joyous "turn" (the sudden and miraculous *felix culpa* of Gollum) that evokes "consolation," the "joy of the happy ending" ("On Fairy-stories" 153). As such, it too is a *felix culpa* as a necessary condition of the poignant joy felt by characters and readers alike following the destruction of the Ring. For example, seeing his master "saved" and the "burden gone," Sam "felt only joy, great joy" (*LotR* VI.3.947). Moreover, at the Field of Cormallen the gathered host listen to the tale of "Frodo of the Nine Fingers and the Ring of Doom." The ballad moved their hearts so that "their joy was like swords, and they passed in thought out to regions where pain and delight flowed together and tears are the very wine of blessedness" (*LotR* VI.4.954).

## CONCLUSION

This article has assessed the role of the *felix culpa* or 'happy fault' motif in Tolkien's legendarium. Analysing *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, it has shown that Tolkien used this trope, adapted from Roman Catholic theology, in his stories. It appears as a structuring device in the grand narrative of Middle-earth's history. Acts of evil are happy faults insofar as they produce greater goods. They fall into two categories: they are either a necessary condition (the discord of Melkor, the failure of Frodo) for the redemption of Middle-earth or they are instruments (the errors of Men, Gollum's betrayal) by which Arda will be remade by Ilúvatar. In using this trope to construct his stories, Tolkien challenges characters and readers to reassess the ways they think about and respond to evil. For example, Frodo is transformed from a judgemental to a forgiving character who understands the value of mercy. Moreover, the story of the Ring's destruction allows the characters to experience the unique and significant feeling of joy associated with the eucatastrophe. In turn, *The Lord of the Rings* invites the reader to participate in the uplifting happiness felt by the characters by virtue of its narrative structure. The same is true of the events laid

out in *The Silmarillion*: the eucatastrophic character of Eärendil's victory over Morgoth provides material which enables characters and readers to experience great happiness. Thus, Tolkien used the *felix culpa* as a catalyst for moral and spiritual transformation within his legendarium.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**NATHAN CJ HOOD** is an independent scholar based in Berwick-upon-Tweed in the North of England. He received a PhD in the History of Christianity from the University of Edinburgh in August 2020. He has produced essays and is writing a monograph on the relationship between theology, piety, and emotion in post-Reformation Scotland. His research also focuses on the philosophical ideas that find expression in nineteenth and early twentieth century fantasy and science fiction works.



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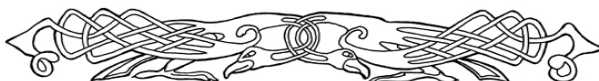
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