

# PIUS SAMWISE: ROMAN HEROISM IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS

Zak Schmoll on Virgil and Tolkien's Chief  
Heroes

J.R.R. Tolkien received early training in the classics under Robert Cary Gilson when he studied at King Edward's, an independent secondary school in Birmingham. According to Tolkien's official biographer, Humphrey Carpenter,

Gilson also encouraged his pupils to make a detailed study of classical linguistics. This was entirely in keeping with Tolkien's inclinations; and, partly as a result of Gilson's teaching, he began to develop an interest in the general principles of language.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), Chap. 3, Digital Edition.

It was Greek specifically that caused Tolkien to become interested in inventing his own language. Tolkien scholar John Garth writes,

He was drawn to a different flavour in some of the names he encountered in history and mythology, writing later: "The fluidity of Greek, punctuated by hardness, and with its surface glitter, captivated me . . . and I tried to invent a language that would embody the Greekness of Greek . . ." That was before he even began learning Greek itself, at the age of ten.<sup>2</sup>

Although he would eventually become enamored with Germanic languages and Norse mythology and, in the words of Carpenter, become "bored with Latin and Greek authors," he received extensive training in the classics and the foundational texts in those languages.<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising, then, to find echoes of Aeneas, perhaps the greatest hero in classical literature, in *The Lord of the Rings*. The existence of these echoes does not suggest a direct allegorical connection between any character in Tolkien's work and Virgil's. Rather, it suggests that

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<sup>2</sup> John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005), 14-15, Digital Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, Chap. 5.

characteristics and virtues in the Roman epic influenced young Tolkien. Like the Northern myths and his Christianity that undeniably impacted Tolkien's work, these stories also formed a smaller yet significant part of his creative process. Tolkien's chief hero Samwise Gamgee specifically exhibits a level of devotion that brings to mind the devotion of Aeneas on his journey to establish the Roman Empire.

From the opening of the first book of the *Aeneid*, Virgil is quite clear about how he has chosen to present his chief hero. He asks the muse why Juno has become so mad at Aeneas. As translated by Robert Fagles, "Why did she force a man, so famous for his devotion, to brave such rounds of hardship, bear such trials? Can such rage inflame the immortals' hearts?"<sup>4</sup> Virgil's descriptor begs the question as to who or what possesses Aeneas's devotion. Bernard Knox elaborates in his introduction to Fagles's translation:

The word *pius* does indeed refer, like its English derivative, to devotion and duty to the Divine; this is the reason cited by Poseidon in the *Iliad* for saving Aeneas from death at the hand of Achilles. And in

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<sup>4</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2010), Book I, Line 11, Digital Edition.

the *Aeneid* he is always mindful of the gods, constant in prayer and thanks and dutiful in sacrifice. But the words *pius* and *pietas* have in Latin a wider meaning. Perhaps the best English equivalent is something like "dutiful," "mindful of one's duty"— not only to the gods but also to one's family and to one's country.<sup>5</sup>

Agnes Michels, a scholar of Roman religion, also points to a broader understanding of *pius*, the Latin term Aeneas uses to describe himself. She writes,

Of recent years, scholars have been recognizing that *pius*, and its abstraction *pietas*, have, in implication, little to do with their derivatives, 'pious' and 'piety', and that the words in the literature of the late Republic and early Empire refer far more often to a code of behavior between human beings than to an attitude towards the gods.<sup>6</sup>

When Aeneas declares his famous line, "sum pius Aeneas," he is not just expressing his attitude towards the divine, but he is also expressing his

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard Knox, "Introduction," in Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles.

<sup>6</sup> Agnes Kirsopp Michels, "The Many Faces of Aeneas," *Classical Journal* 92 (April 1997): 405, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3298410>.

commitment to his human mission.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps that is why Fagles translates the word *pious* as "duty-bound" to try and express this sentiment that includes and also extends beyond a commitment to the divine.<sup>8</sup>

To see this devotion to duty in Tolkien, consider Sam's invitation, for lack of a better word, to join Frodo on his quest. Sam had been eavesdropping outside of a house that he astutely points out has no eaves. Gandalf asks him if he heard that Frodo would be leaving, and he responds, "I did, sir. And that's why I choked: which you heard seemingly. I tried not to, sir, but it burst out of me: I was so upset."<sup>9</sup> Sam exhibits a high level of devotion at this very early point in their relationship. Initially, they are, for all intents and purposes, an employee and employer. Frodo's closest friends are named earlier in the story, but Sam is not listed among them; Merry, Pippin, Fatty Bolger, and Folco Boffin are the four friends mentioned by name.<sup>10</sup> Sam joins this adventure due to his devotion. He feels some

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<sup>7</sup> "Virgil's Aeneid in Latin," *Project Gutenberg*, April 3, 2008, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/227/227-h/227-h.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Virgil, trans. Robert Fagles, Book I, Line 457.

<sup>9</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 64, Digital Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 42.

obligation to accompany Frodo on this journey beyond Gandalf telling him to go. Notably, he does not resist and is actually quite excited to go with his employer.

In Carpenter's biography, Tolkien explicitly admits that Sam's character is inspired by men he had known in combat during World War I. He said, "My 'Sam Gamgee' is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognised as so far superior to myself."<sup>11</sup> Garth expands on the role of the batman,

Tolkien, who found it hard to warm to his fellow officers, developed a profound admiration for the batmen he knew. However, the batman was not primarily a servant but a private soldier who acted as a runner for officers in action. As such he had to be both fit and intelligent so that he did not garble the orders or reports.<sup>12</sup>

Like soldiers dedicated to their country, Sam is similarly committed to the cause of his master, Frodo. Sam exhibits a sense of sincere and strong devotion in the pursuit of a common mission, even

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<sup>11</sup> Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, chap. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*, 171.

though it does not seem that Sam is counted among Frodo's best friends at this stage of the story.

Sam's surprising call to adventure is comparable with how Aeneas learns he will go to Italy. During the battle of Troy, he valiantly defends his homeland, but the Trojans are numerically overwhelmed. After his wife Creusa is killed, he encounters her ghost on his flight from the city. She tells him,

"A long exile is your fate . . . the vast plains of the sea are yours to plow until you reach Hesperian land, where Lydian Tiber flows with its smooth march through rich and loamy fields, a land of hardy people. There great joy and a kingdom are yours to claim, and a queen to make your wife."<sup>13</sup>

His mission is assigned to him, much like Sam's, after a series of prior events. Aeneas originally had his heart set on killing Helen of Troy, whom he had perceived to be the cause of the war. His actions are interrupted by his mother, Venus, who tells him to blame the gods instead of Helen and rather to run to his father's house. After running through the fallen city, he finds his father, Anchises, unwilling to abandon his home. The gods intervene, providing

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<sup>13</sup> Virgil, trans. Robert Fagles, Book II, Lines 967-972.

signs that convince his father to come along with him. Ultimately charging him with his mission, Anchises says, "Troy rests in your power."<sup>14</sup> He does not know where he needs to go until he sees his wife's ghost, but his father has symbolically given him a charge. He is to lead the people of Troy. That was not a mission he was looking for; it was laid at his feet through a combination of divine agency and human activity. Venus sent him to his father's house, and his father consequently gave him a charge. If he had been left to his own devices, he would have killed Helen and probably died with everyone else in the city.

The parallels between Aeneas and Sam are indeed significant as they begin their respective adventures. Neither was necessarily looking for his adventure, but the adventure came through external intervention. Bradley Birzer puts it the following way,

Undoubtedly, Sam would rather stay at home and garden and farm than walk into the heart of Hell itself. But God has a different task for him, and Sam accepts his

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<sup>14</sup> Virgil, trans. Robert Fagles, Book II, Line 875.

duty, as all good men do. He follows Frodo with pure loyalty and without question.<sup>15</sup>

Birzer highlights Sam's decision to join in Frodo's quest, much like Aeneas decided to follow the words of his mother, father, and recently deceased wife to answer his call.

Second, the devotion to duty despite hardships shines through in the characters of Aeneas and Sam. After persevering through a great many hardships, Aeneas finally makes it to the Italian coastline. However, his destiny leads him to take a voyage to the underworld to visit his father's spirit. Before he can go on that voyage, the Sibyl informs him that he needs to find a golden branch, and if the branch breaks off easily, then his destiny is calling him to the underworld. The branch needed to be offered as a gift to Proserpina, the queen of the underworld, to grant admittance, so without it, he would be unable to visit his father's spirit. This task is not easily accomplished. Although he is leading his men, "the same anxiety keeps on churning in his heart as he scans the endless woods and prays by chance: 'If only that golden bough would gleam before us now

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<sup>15</sup> Bradley J. Birzer, *J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2003), Chap. 4, Digital Edition.

on a tree in this dark grove!"<sup>16</sup> In this moment of hopelessness and despair, what he describes as his "hour of doubt," a figurative light shines in the darkness.<sup>17</sup> Two doves bring him directly to the golden branch, and he can break it off easily. Even when he felt like there was no hope, something beyond his control brought him a sense of comfort.

Aeneas's experience compares favorably to Sam and Frodo, who found themselves not quite in the underworld, but in the dark and miserable land of Mordor, starving and exhausted. Sam begins to despair, naturally, but then something happens to him.

There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Virgil, trans. Robert Fagles, Book VI, Lines 222-223.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Line 232.

<sup>18</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 922.

Even in the darkness, even when all seems hopeless, a light shines through. Not only that, but it was an *unexpected* light that shone through. Much as Aeneas did not know the doves would help him find that golden branch, Sam did not expect a star to shine through the clouds and give him hope.

Immediately after finding this sign of hope, Aeneas proceeds to the underworld. After seeing the star, Sam relaxes, and he can fall "into a deep untroubled sleep."<sup>19</sup> They remained devoted to their missions, and they can continue forward because of the encouragement they receive along the journey. Either hero could have decided that the journey was too difficult. Aeneas could have decided that the golden branch was impossible to find, and Sam could have surrendered to the darkness of Mordor. While both characters were certainly the recipients of providential assistance in both of these specific situations, the determination and devotion to their respective missions stands out most clearly when faced with challenging circumstances.

The endings of each character's tales may seem to be incredibly dissimilar, but there is even a common thread of devotion running through their conclusions. Aeneas finds himself in a climactic

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<sup>19</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 922.

battle with his nemesis Turnus. Aeneas defeats him, and the latter begins to beg for mercy. Aeneas considers being merciful, but then he realizes that Turnus is still wearing the belt of Pallas, a young man Aeneas loved as a son, as a trophy. Aeneas falls into a vengeful rage, and he grants no mercy. He proclaims, "Decked in the spoils you stripped from one I loved — escape my clutches? Never — Pallas strikes this blow, Pallas sacrifices you now, makes you pay the price with your own guilty blood!"<sup>20</sup>

Virgil's violent final scene could not seem more different from Tolkien's beautiful ending to his saga. After tearfully watching Frodo depart to the West, Sam returns home to his wife and family.

But Sam turned to Bywater, and so came back up the Hill, as day was ending once more. And he went on, and there was yellow light, and fire within; and the evening meal was ready, and he was expected. And Rose drew him in, and set him in his chair, and put little Elanor upon his lap. He drew a deep breath. "Well, I'm back," he said.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Virgil, trans. Robert Fagles, Book XII, Lines 1105-1108

<sup>21</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1032.

The reader closes Tolkien's tale with peace and tranquility. The reader feels that everything is how it ought to be, and everyone lived happily ever after.

The chief similarity lies in their commitment to the place where they are. This entire journey for Aeneas has been about leading the people from Troy to what would become the heart of the Roman Empire. His destiny was to find a homeland, cultivate it, and make it great. Consider the final discussion between Jove and Juno. Jove says,

Mixed with Ausonian blood, one race will spring from them, and you will see them outstrip all men, outstrip all gods in reverence. No nation on earth will match the honors they shower down on you.<sup>22</sup>

Part of this reassurance is to appease Juno, who finally agrees to give up her attempts to foil Aeneas' fated triumph. However, another part of it is simply a reaffirmation of the destiny that Aeneas has known from the beginning. He will create a nation, and this nation will be the greatest in the history of the world. Of course, one cannot help but think about the political reasons that Virgil would have included such a narrative in his epic, but at the same time, it reaffirms the importance of place. The

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<sup>22</sup> Virgil, trans. Robert Fagles, Book XII, Lines 972-975.

Trojan wanderers were not to settle down just anywhere. With the death of Turnus, reminiscent of the death of Hector at the end of the *Iliad*, Aeneas' marriage to Lavinia can proceed, and the Roman people can begin to rise.

Sam was similarly given a charge not just to settle down anywhere but to remain in the Shire as well, the place of his destiny. Frodo reminds him,

I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. But you are my heir: all that I had and might have had I leave to you.<sup>23</sup>

The inheritance is similar, a place to be devoted to, and then notice a similar formula of reaffirmations much like Jove gave to Juno.

And also you have Rose, and Elanor; and Frodo-lad will come, and Rosie-lass, and Merry, and Goldilocks, and Pippin; and perhaps more that I cannot see. Your hands and your wits will be needed everywhere. You will be the Mayor, of course, as long as you want to be, and the most famous gardener in history; and you

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<sup>23</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1029.

will read things out of the Red Book, and keep alive the memory of the age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more. And that will keep you as busy and as happy as anyone can be, as long as your part of the Story goes on.<sup>24</sup>

Sam's devotion to his place causes not only him and his family, but all of the people to love their land all the more. These wonderful outcomes will arise because of his commitment to his hometown if he properly utilizes the inheritance he has been given from Frodo. Much like Aeneas was given a destiny to bring his story to an ultimate conclusion beyond the final lines of the text, a fate that he had no control over, Tolkien leaves Sam in a very similar spot, at the beginning of a great destiny. Consequently, while the tone of the books' final lines could hardly be more different, the sense of destiny, devotion to that destiny, and the glorious outcomes that are going to arise through that devotion parallel each other quite nicely.

While Tolkien was trained in the classics at an early age, his research interests moved on to other passions, which are much more greatly discussed. However, echoes of classical literature are spread

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<sup>24</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1029.

throughout his work. The objective virtues of heroism and devotion shine through both of these stories just like they shine through many of the other greatest stories ever told. The devotion of Aeneas to his destiny is comparable to the devotion of Sam to Frodo and his quest. They were both called to adventure in a way that they were not necessarily anticipating or seeking. While they were on their respective journeys, they faced many hardships, but they persevered. Not only that, but they maintained a sense of hope, partially due to signs that came from the world around them. Once they completed their respective journeys, through their devotion to particular places, they finally claimed their inheritances and destinies established from the beginning. Perhaps Sam, reflecting on his quest with Frodo, expresses this sense of *pietas* best and explains why this story might have stuck with Tolkien and with us when he says, "Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't . . . Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside,

or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 711-712

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