

2018

## "Few Have Gained Such a Victory:" A Defense of Boromir in *The Lord of the Rings*

Kayla Beebout

Asbury University, [kayla.beebout@asbury.edu](mailto:kayla.beebout@asbury.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Beebout, Kayla (2018) "'Few Have Gained Such a Victory:' A Defense of Boromir in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol6/iss2/7>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Library Services at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Tolkien Research by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at [scholar@valpo.edu](mailto:scholar@valpo.edu).

---

"Few Have Gained Such a Victory:" A Defense of Boromir in *The Lord of the Rings*

**Cover Page Footnote**

I would like to thank Dr. Devin Brown for his invaluable guidance through this process, the reviewers for their wonderful suggestions, and my family and friends for their support and encouragement as I pursue Tolkien Research.

## **“Few Have Gained Such a Victory:” A Defense of Boromir in *The Lord of the Rings***

J. R. R. Tolkien’s epic saga *The Lord of the Rings* is richly populated with characters: beyond the nine members of the Fellowship, we are presented with the seemingly countless inhabitants of Middle-earth, illustrating the complexities of the world that the Free Peoples are trying to save. With such a large and diverse cast, however, expedience requires that many of them are popularly identified by a single defining characteristic or incident. In the case of Boromir, he is often known as the character who attempts to steal the Ring from Frodo. This accusation is true, of course, but there is more to the Gondorian Steward’s heir than many casual readers, movie enthusiasts, and even some experts remark upon. Sherrylyn Branchaw (2015) in her article “Boromir: Breaker of the Fellowship?” refers to “a widespread belief among critics that Boromir brings about the breaking of the Fellowship of the Ring as a result of his misdeeds” (123), which reveals a focus on the negative aspects of Boromir’s character even within plot analysis. Len Sanford (1998), in his essay “Fanfare for the Common Man,” refers to the tendency to view Boromir merely as “a kind of blot on the perfection of the Company, whose death excites a certain *schadenfreude*” (49). If readers are in some way pleased by Boromir’s death and wish to view him in terms of his flaws, however, then they run the risk of ignoring the subsequent redemption that he experiences. He is certainly a proud man who yearns for power and glory, as Charles Nelson (2000) is quick to point out in “The Sins of Middle-earth,” where he uses Boromir as a characterization of the Deadly Sin of Pride, which he calls “the most ancient of evils” and the “worst” of them all (86). Boromir is indeed proud, but he is also brave, loyal, kind, slow to despair, and quick to hope. He is remembered fondly by many, including his younger brother Faramir, whom he would quite literally die to protect. And, though he briefly succumbs to the Ring’s lure, Boromir realizes his wrong, gives his all to redeem himself, and confesses his wrongdoing, all of which shows a moral strength readers may not always acknowledge when comparing him to the likes of kingly Aragorn or wise Gandalf. When looked at closely, Boromir is one of the most relatable characters of Tolkien’s epic: an ordinary man despite his lineage, who is faced with the conflicting desires of his heart and must fight a battle within himself to overcome temptation. His failure is no different from our own, and he proves that even the greatest treacheries can be redeemed and forgiven.

Boromir’s character first appears at the Council of Elrond, a gathering of leaders and messengers of the Free Peoples who are struggling against Sauron’s growing power. Boromir, one of the two representatives of humanity, is described as “a tall man with a fair and noble face... proud and stern of glance” (Tolkien, 1973a, 269). These are the most prominent aspects of his appearance and could suggest certain aspects of his character. Solemnity, nobility, and good looks can

be indicative of virtue—or they could mask a darker nature. We can begin a fuller sketch of Boromir’s personality only once he describes what brought him to Rivendell: his country’s desperate need of allies and a prophetic dream. In his account of the defense of the heavily contested city of Osgiliath, Boromir proves himself a mighty captain and true leader. He reports, “I was in the company that held the bridge, until it was cast down behind us” (Tolkien, 1973a, 275). As the eldest son of Denethor, he could have chosen not to brave such a dangerous mission: he is the heir apparent of the stewardship of Gondor, and as such could be excused for protecting his own life. Instead, he risks himself for the lives of his men and his people. He leads from the forefront, not from behind the forces under his command or inside the safety of sturdy walls. This style of leadership also plays into his arrival at the Council, because though he and his younger brother both received dreams summoning them to Imladris, it is Boromir who came. He explains, “my brother, seeing how desperate was our need, was eager to heed the dream and seek for Imladris; but since the way was full of doubt and danger, I took the journey upon myself” (Tolkien, 1973a, 276). This decision, of course, could be viewed in part as a sign of pride and desire for glory in Boromir, but it also shows a desire to spare his younger brother from a perilous journey. The Appendix to *The Return of the King* calls Boromir “the helper and protector of Faramir” (Tolkien, 1973b, 370), pointing to the sincerity of Boromir’s motivations as well as his confidence in his own abilities. Lynn Forest-Hill (2008) in her essay “Boromir, Byrhtnoth, and Bayard” describes this attitude as not evil in and of itself, for his pride “is not simply based on his high birth but on his experience and achievements” (78). Though pride in achievements plays a role Boromir’s downfall, it is not foolish pride; he has genuine prowess, and therefore has reason to think himself strong.

As the Council progresses, however, seeds of contention are sown between Boromir and Aragorn, the other prominent human and the rightful High King of Gondor. The pair verbally spar throughout, testing each other. Boromir specifically wishes to understand if he is really face-to-face with Isildur’s heir, who could save Gondor from destruction but who would also take the throne in Minas Tirith that currently sits empty. This would change the course of Boromir’s life, as he would have grown up expecting to guard that seat and rule in the King’s stead. So when Aragorn first reveals himself as the owner of the sword of Elendil, which cut the Ring from Sauron’s hand in the first great war against the Dark Lord, Boromir is unconvinced. He tells the Council, “I was not sent to beg any boon, but to seek only the meaning of a riddle.... Yet we are hard pressed, and 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” (Tolkien, 1973a, 277). These words hold skepticism and pride, it is true, but they also acknowledge the true need that Gondor faces. Though Boromir is not certain of Aragorn’s identity, claims, or intentions, he is not

too arrogant to admit that the power of the Sword of Elendil would be welcomed in the battles ahead.

It is natural and right for a leader in uncertain times to ascertain the validity of possible allies; Aragorn himself understands this, for he says to Boromir, “For my part I forgive your doubt.... Little do I resemble the figures of Elendil and Isildur” (Tolkien, 1973a, 278). Though others, including Aragorn’s friend Bilbo, are upset at Boromir’s seeming impertinence, Aragorn is also the leader of an embattled people. He himself recognizes the need of caution, which he demonstrates in his admonitions to the hobbits when they first meet in the Prancing Pony. However, in this first encounter, Boromir moves beyond simple caution to potential disrespect. While the Council is in session, he never acknowledges Aragorn as the rightful king of Gondor; he only refers to the use of the sword of Elendil in the defense of the land. This omission is telling. As Paul H. Kocher (1972) points out in *Master of Middle-Earth*, “It is hard to visualize a man so dedicated to power eventually surrendering his position of advantage” (143). We can never know with complete certainty what would have happened had the two men reached Minas Tirith and defended it successfully, but at this point in the story, the true king and the future Steward can be considered only superficial allies, which may not bode well for Boromir’s characterization. Tolkien provides further insights into Boromir’s character through his actions after joining the Company on its perilous quest.

On the journey to the falls of the Anduin, Boromir proves himself a loyal and useful member of the Fellowship even though he often disagrees with the group’s paths and decisions. He voices disapproval at the decision to enter Moria, saying it would be “hardly better than knocking at the gates of the Dark Tower itself” (Tolkien, 1973a, 333). Still, he follows the Company, though he could have chosen his own road, and helps them through the obstacles ahead. Even when they face the Balrog—a fire-demon strong enough to fight Gandalf—and Gandalf orders the Fellowship to flee for their own safety, Boromir does not obey the Wizard, but stands ready at the bridge, “side by side” with Aragorn (Tolkien, 1973a, 370). Boromir protested to this road from the first, but that fact does not stop him from acting as a true warrior and captain. He also does not let his potential difference of opinion with Aragorn stop him from standing with the Ranger. When Aragorn tells the Company they are heading to Lothlórien, Boromir once again protests that the land is not safe, but still tells Aragorn, “Then lead on!... But it is perilous” (Tolkien, 1973a, 379). Nelson describes this tendency of Boromir’s to verbally disagree with others as a manifestation of Complaint, an “attendant” of Pride in medieval allegorical literature (87). He goes on to use words such as “whined” and “complains” to describe Boromir’s warnings (87), which seems too negative a portrayal considering the captain’s actions after making his opinions known.

Boromir is not hesitant to say what he thinks, but he will follow the designated leader, even though he is accustomed to being the decision-maker himself.

Boromir is best known for two actions: his attempt to steal the Ring from Frodo and his defense of Merry and Pippin, culminating in his own death. Unfortunately, it can be easy for the enormity of his offense to blot out the recovery of his bravery and selflessness. He does attempt to steal the Ring, but a careful reading makes clear that his actual desires do not stem from a place of evil. He says to Frodo of the men of Minas Tirith, “we do not desire the power of wizard-lords, only strength to defend ourselves, strength in a just cause” (Tolkien, 1973a, 448). This statement matches his acts of defense towards other characters throughout the story, and therefore seems to state clearly his intentions for use of the Ring. The Ring itself, as an agent of evil, is quick to detect and twist good desires into desires for power. Kocher describes Boromir as a “man of prowess” and a “great captain, ambitious to be king” (126). Those qualities, though they lead him to great feats, become Boromir’s downfall as the Ring distorts them into something much darker: a desire for domination. As Tom Shippey (2000) rightly points out in *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Boromir’s speech “sends out all the signals which the twentieth century has learned to distrust, from the fascination with power... to the exaltation of ‘the fearless,’ and then immediately ‘the ruthless,’ as the means to victory” (177). These warning signs are the areas where the Ring has twisted Boromir’s good and proper desire to save his people and Middle-earth from destruction into something much darker.

Even Gandalf, one of the wisest characters in Tolkien’s epic, understands this tendency of the Ring, for he tells Frodo that the temptation to use the Ring’s power to help others would be “too strong” even for him (Tolkien, 1973a, 68). Galadriel, the queen of Lothlórien and keeper of one of the three Elven rings, faces the same truth. When Frodo offers her the Ring, she admits, “My heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer” (Tolkien, 1973a, 410). She also refuses the Ring, but her confession that she has thought of it often demonstrates the power the Ring wields over minds turned to doing good. The fact that Gandalf and Galadriel can be tempted by the Ring places Boromir in good company, and though the former two are self-aware enough to avoid what they know will overcome them, their admissions demonstrate that being tempted is not necessarily a sign of an inherently corrupt nature. Even Frodo, when in Mount Doom, falls under the Ring’s spell and claims it for his own. Yet because of his fortitude, his love for others, and the mercy he shows to Gollum, he is rightly considered a hero, one worthy of the songs of praise sung at the Field of Cormallen. Boromir was not under the same stress and pressure as Frodo was in the heart of Sauron’s realm, but the weight of leading his people through a desperate war weighed heavily on his shoulders, giving the Ring a place from which to gain a foothold in his heart. This alone does not excuse Boromir’s attack on Frodo, nor would anything else, but it does give us insight into

why he would be vulnerable to the Ring. To truly judge his character, though, we must also take into account his actions after his momentary capitulation to the Ring.

It would be easy to blame Boromir for his attack on Frodo and move on with the story, but the Gondorian's next actions are just as important, if not more so. Tolkien (2000a) himself addresses this issue when writing about Frodo's failure to destroy the Ring. He argues that people "tend to forget that strange element in the World that we call Pity or Mercy, which is also an absolute requirement in moral judgment (since it is present in the Divine Nature)" (326). When judging Boromir, then, we cannot consider only his failures. We must use mercy and look at the good he does as well. After being overcome by the Ring, the son of the Steward lays down his life to protect two of the hobbits, Merry and Pippin. Though his sacrifice is in vain in regards to the hobbits' safety, it proves invaluable to Boromir himself. Branchaw refers to "Tolkien's belief that the moral implications of one's choices are more important than outer events, which largely lie outside one's control" (132), meaning that although Boromir does not seem to have accomplished his goal to protect the hobbits, to Tolkien—and therefore to us—the importance of Boromir's action is in the morality of his choice to try. When Aragorn finds Boromir dying, the captain confesses, "I tried to take the Ring from Frodo.... I am sorry. I have paid" (Tolkien, 1973c, 4). Though the words are short and simple, they show that Boromir recognizes the evil of his actions and feels genuine remorse, an even greater point in his favor when we consider his pride. Those who are prideful find it difficult to state their faults, especially to potential rivals. In this confession, Boromir accomplishes a mighty feat: to have been ensnared so deeply by the Ring and then to overcome its power is unheard of through the whole of the Ring's long history. Aragorn realizes this and says as much when he tells Boromir, "You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory" (Tolkien, 1973c, 4). Such words coming from Aragorn, who never demonstrates a temptation for the Ring that we see in the story, underscore the importance of Boromir's redemption. Galadriel also gives an indirect confirmation of this return to integrity. When advising the Fellowship, she tells them, "your Quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail, to the ruin of all. Yet hope remains while all the Company is true" (Tolkien, 1973a, 400-401). Galadriel is not omniscient and cannot see the future in perfect detail, but she knows that hope for the Fellowship rests on the integrity of its members. There is hope while they are true to their purpose; hope fades when they are not. The Fellowship does ultimately succeed in saving Middle-earth, and so Boromir must have become loyal once more after his failing. Through his sacrifice, Boromir proves that his quality is higher than his mistakes would indicate, because he rises above them to give his all for the good of the Company.

Aragorn's assertion "You have conquered" is somewhat ambiguous (Tolkien, 1973c, 4). Tolkien never spells out for us exactly what or how Boromir has conquered, leaving us to decide for ourselves. It could be his pride, his longing

for glory, his desire for control, or all of these; no matter the specifics, Boromir has overcome the darkest part of himself, the part that the Ring sought to bring to the forefront. Forest-Hill discusses this while weighing whether the Steward's son suffered from an evil type of pride or whether he has just cause to think about himself the way he does. She says that Boromir's fall is "fearful as it confirms the corrupting power of the Ring and the flawed nature of Men" (82), which underscores the relatability of his response to temptation: we all possess a similar nature and would be vulnerable to the same mistakes. However, Forest-Hill's assessment does not stop there. Instead, she goes so far as to say that Boromir's fall is both "redemptive" and "salvific" (82). Boromir's attack on Frodo causes him to see the true depth of his own flaws, and instead of giving in to them or bemoaning his fate, he takes action to overcome them. Thus, his fall can be seen as the root of his redemption. And since the breaking of the Fellowship allows the members to have greater impact on Middle-earth by sending them to different regions in need of help, the consequences of Boromir's momentary failure and eventual repentant death save Middle-earth.

We also hear reports about Boromir's qualities, both good and ill, from other characters. Faramir, for one, speaks truthfully about his brother. Although he has potential to be biased because of his family ties, he would also have reason to know Boromir better than anyone, having grown up with him and fought by his side for years. The Appendices state that "between the brothers was great love.... No jealousy or rivalry had risen between them" (Tolkien, 1973b, 370), which beyond indicating goodness in Boromir's character means that Faramir can be expected to understand him; two people truly bonded by love tend to know more about each other than others know about either of them. Also, Gandalf says that the blood of the Kings of Numenor "runs nearly true" in Faramir (Tolkien, 1973b, 17), a quality giving him keener perception than most mortal men. He frankly describes his brother as "proud and fearless, often rash, ever anxious for the victory of Minas Tirith (and his own glory therein)" (Tolkien, 1973c, 314), which lays out Boromir's major flaws, but also the strengths that lie within them. He might have been guilty of pride and an excessive desire for glory, but he was not afraid to face foes and challenges, even at risk to himself. Faramir also explains that though Boromir knew that Aragorn would take the kingship of Gondor, "he would greatly reverence him" (Tolkien, 1973c, 312), meaning Boromir's pride is not so great that he could not recognize when someone else deserved honor and respect. This is demonstrated in Boromir's acceptance of Aragorn's leadership of the Fellowship when Gandalf is lost in Moria. Though the Steward's son still does not recognize Aragorn as his king, he does not contest the other man's authority as the primary decision-maker of the group. It is true that Boromir was not put to the true test by having to perform the Steward's duty of handing over the throne to the rightful king, and Faramir does not shy away from the fact that his brother wished his family

to be royal. He relates to Frodo and Sam that Boromir had asked how many hundreds of years it would take for the Stewards to become Kings, and that their father said, “Few years, maybe, in other places of less royalty.... In Gondor ten thousand years would not suffice” (Tolkien, 1973c, 312). Boromir’s question reveals his own desire to rule as a king. Denethor’s response indicates both Gondor’s dignity and importance and an admission that there is precedent for Stewards becoming Kings. Though Denethor himself thinks that Gondor is too noble a land to follow the customs of other kingdoms, Boromir seems to take pride in his Gondorian heritage without seeing the establishment of a new royal line as something below it.

Denethor, a shrewd leader, intelligent and wise, had more influence on his elder son than that one conversation. The high Westemessë blood that Gandalf says runs so truly in Faramir is in Denethor as well, though the Steward has ambition and cunning that his younger son lacks. Tolkien (2000b) writes that in Denethor’s struggle against Sauron his primary motivation was to “preserve the polity of Gondor... against another potentate, who had made himself stronger and was to be feared and opposed for that reason rather than because he was ruthless and wicked” (241). This political approach to conflict would cause him to stress the philosophy that ends justify means to his sons, which Boromir has seemed to internalize. Gandalf also says of Denethor’s relationship with Boromir that, “He loved him greatly: too much perhaps; and the more so because they were unlike” (Tolkien, 1973b, 11). While Boromir was bold and warlike, Denethor was more preoccupied with strategy and politics. Because of these differences, however, it would have been easy for the Steward to shape his heir in the way he would; Boromir would be less likely to question the motivations behind his father’s teachings than he would have been if he possessed Denethor or Faramir’s discernment. A proud leader who loved his heir greatly would want to teach pride in self, lineage, and land, all qualities that Boromir possessed. Though this does not excuse Boromir’s faults, it does in part explain where he would have learned some of his darker tendencies. When speaking of his eldest son, Denethor claims, “Boromir was loyal to me and no wizard’s pupil. He would have remembered his father’s need, and would not have squandered what fortune gave. He would have brought me a mighty gift” (Tolkien, 1973b, 80). This statement says much about Denethor and the way he raised his son. The Steward has absolute confidence that Boromir is loyal to him above all because the captain never listened to the wisdom and lore of Gandalf, who might have warned him about the dangers of artifacts like the Ring and curbed his warrior’s desire for it. Also, it reveals the overt comparisons Denethor makes between his sons. He valued Faramir the less because the younger son was more likely to pursue his own courses and to act as he thought best, rather than acquiescing to Denethor’s will. By comparison, it can be assumed that Boromir did what his father thought best, which would have been rewarded

with praise. Though none of this exonerates Boromir from his faults, it does shed light on how he would have been susceptible to the Ring's lure: he was told that he was worthy of greatness, and he was kept in ignorance of the dangers of power by his father, who wanted a loyal son over all else.

Each member of the Fellowship deserves to be included among the heroes of Middle-earth. Boromir, though perhaps the most dubious of the Company at first glance, is a man of many strengths and virtues that are at times overshadowed by his outward pride. Though this primary vice is his downfall, in the end he overcomes it and is redeemed, building a foundation for the Fellowship's success in the quest to destroy the Ring and save Middle-earth from the dominion of Sauron. Boromir used his strength, both physical and emotional, to aid the Fellowship in many times of peril, and spared his brother the dangerous journey to Rivendell, allowing Faramir to assist Frodo and Sam later in their journey when his wisdom and kindness were critical to the completion of the quest. Though some casual readers and viewers of the films may focus on Boromir's flaws, those are only part of his story, just as our own flaws are only a part of ours. In the end, it is important to understand both the light and the dark within a person so that we are not biased for or against anyone based on an incomplete picture. Discerning Boromir's strengths and virtues takes us one step closer to a proper character analysis. In the end, we should come to the same conclusion as Aragorn: Boromir conquered, achieving a victory unprecedented in Middle-earth and worthy of aspiring to in our own lives.

### References

- Branchaw, Sherrylyn. "Boromir: Breaker of the Fellowship?" *Tolkien Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2015, pp. 123–140. *Project Muse*, doi:10.1353/tks.2015.0006.
- Forest-Hill, Lynn. "Boromir, Byrhtnoth, and Bayard: Finding a Language for Grief in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*." *Tolkien Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2008, pp. 73–97., doi:10.1353/tks.0.0012.
- Kocher, Paul H. *Master of Middle-Earth*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.
- Nelson, Charles W. "The Sins of Middle-Earth: Tolkien's Use of Medieval Allegory." *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-Earth*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000, pp. 83–94.
- Sanford, Len. "Fanfare for the Common Man." *Mallorn*, vol. 36, Nov. 1998, pp. 43-50. Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton, IL.
- Shippey, Tom. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2000.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Del Rey, 1973a.
- . *The Return of the King*. New York: Del Rey, 1973b.
- . *The Two Towers*. New York: Del Rey, 1973c.

- . "From a Letter to Mrs Eileen Elgar (Drafts)." Received by Eileen Elgar, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, Sept. 2000a, pp. 325–333.
- . "Notes on W. H. Auden's Review of *The Return of the King*." Received by Unknown, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, Sept. 2000b, pp. 238-244.