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**BINDING WITH ANCIENT LOGICS: THE IN/PER/SUB-VERSION OF FAËRIAN
DRAMA IN *THE CABIN IN THE WOODS***

JANET BRENNAN CROFT

“*[T]he very oldest stories are, sooner or later, about blood.*”
—Terry Pratchett, *Hogfather 1*

In his essay “On Fairy-stories,” J.R.R. Tolkien introduces the concept of *Faërian Drama*, which he describes as plays that the elves present to men, with a “realism and immediacy beyond the compass of any human mechanism,” where the viewer feels he is “bodily inside its Secondary World” but instead is “in a dream that some other mind is weaving” (63-64). Tolkien, unfortunately, offers no concrete specimens or definitions of what faërian drama is or does; these must be teased out of his hints, his sources, his theories about fantasy, and his own stories. *Smith of Wootton Major* is a good model of faërian drama in his own writing; other examples of the genre might include the medieval poem *Pearl*, Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, and the movie *Groundhog Day*. When we read or view a work containing an incident of faërian drama, we add a metafictional layer to the story: we are (or become) aware that the fictional character is experiencing the faërian drama, and part of our engagement as an audience rests in the tense anticipation of whether the character will realize they are in a faërian drama or not, how they will react to that knowledge, and what lasting effect the experience will have on their life. And there is an additional metafictional layer: when consuming a sufficiently immersive work, we too may share the experience of participating in a faërian drama, and it may also have a lasting effect on our own lives. In a series of previous papers, I have been working to develop a theoretical definition of what Tolkien meant by faërian drama, and how this definition can be used to analyze works that include elements of this trope complex.

In the movie *The Cabin in the Woods*, the faërian drama concept appears to be inverted as a group of human “puppeteers” create a recurring bloody sacrificial drama designed to ritually placate ancient god-like beings. Two of the intended youthful sacrifices discover the truth, turn on their tormentors, and in the end, in disgust at this endless sacrificial cycle, allow the Ancient Ones to destroy all of humanity. Through its multi-layered plot, *The Cabin in the Woods* can be read as problematizing the faërian drama trope by perverting and subverting who creates and performs it, who plays a part in it and the choices they make within the dramatic space, the intended effect of the drama on the god-audience, and our engagement as the actual movie audience. What we witness in *The Cabin in the Woods* is not in fact a pure faërian drama, but a complex collision of purposes and ethics: between

ritual drama and faërian drama, between horror and fantasy, between sacrifice and rebellion, and between catharsis and eucatastrophe.

RITUAL DRAMA

The Cabin in the Woods clearly draws on a primeval human tradition of ritual sacrificial drama; this tradition's age and ubiquity is underscored by the gory scenes depicted behind the opening credits. We all recognize this ancient pattern when we see it: in biblical and mythological stories, in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, in gladiatorial contests, and in its more recent incarnation in horror movies. *The Cabin in the Woods* intentionally both critiques and fulfils the desire of the audience to see the sacrificial rite enacted and transgression punished in a catharsis of blood. In the movie, this ritual lives on in its original form of human sacrifice: it has not changed in substance for millennia, just in technique (in contrast, for example, with the way in which the consecrated victim sacrificed to Sol Invictus at the winter solstice has evolved into a jolly fat man clothed in red bringing gifts to children¹). For the Ancient Ones, "blood is compulsory," as the Player notes in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (33).²

René Girard's theory of sacred violence as a deflection of the violence-vengeance cycle onto a sacrificial figure exposes the very heart of this ritual drama tradition.³ Girard begins his study of *Violence and the Sacred* by noting that the "sacrificial act" may be read as "a sacred obligation" or a "criminal activity" (1), depending on interpretation, and this is perhaps the core of the problem posed in *The Cabin in the Woods*: the puppeteers⁴ view what they do as a sacred obligation and feel no guilt and in fact take pride in their work, whereas those outside this system, when they become aware of it, view it as criminal. The puppeteers do serve the function of keeping the rest of society ignorant of the "knowledge of the violence inherent in themselves with which they have never come to terms" (Girard 82). They see themselves as heroic for taking on this burden of protecting humanity, carrying on the old ways, and choosing the victims, and compete with other groups of puppeteers around the world for the best record of success ("Japan has a perfect record." "And we're number two—we try harder" [*The Cabin in the Woods* (CitW) Scene 1]).

¹ For the evolution of the winter solstice sacrifice, see Siefker 41-42, 185-199, Matthews 15, 143-144, 150-151, and especially Pratchett 97-99, 273-275.

² See Parker 206-210 for an extensive unpacking of this contradiction.

³ I am indebted to MacDonald's excellent paper on sacred violence in *The Cabin in the Woods* for pointing me to Girard.

⁴ The group running the operation is not named in the film; various terms have been used in the critical literature, and in this paper I will use "puppeteers" as Marty does.

It is interesting to note that there is nothing which can be interpreted as a regular religious practice of ritual sacrifice in Tolkien's Middle-earth. His gods are civilized and demand no ceremonial payment or homage; while there is violence in human, elf, and dwarf society, it is not ritualized into repeating sacrificial patterns. The re-telling of violent stories of vengeance and war in song seems sufficient to fulfil the cathartic function of religious drama, without the need for a preliminary phase of actual sacrifice. This is why it is so shocking and repugnant when the inhabitants of Númenor turn to the crime of human sacrifice under the guileful influence of Sauron. In the temple he caused to be built, "with spilling of blood and torment and great wickedness, men made sacrifice to Melkor that he should release them from death" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 273).

In Girard's reading, violence is a terrible danger to any society because it begets a cycle of vengeance that, unchecked, may destroy all (and here we *can* read this into Tolkien, in the downfall and destruction of Númenor which was in part brought about by this slide into criminal ritualized violence). Fear of this all-encompassing maelstrom is a prime motivator behind ritual, taboo, and religion. Violence can, however, be deflected onto a sacrificial substitute—a marginalized being whose death will not call forth vengeance. In this way the cycle of violence can be short-circuited, deflected onto safe targets which have enough resemblance to the intended victims they replace to satisfy whatever fate or god might need to be appeased (11). Ritual can in fact turn this deflection into a preventive rather than reactive operation: the sacrifice is offered up to prevent future violence rather than atone for past violence (19). Sacrifice is therefore "primarily an act of violence without risk of vengeance" (13).

In *The Cabin in the Woods*, however, it is two of the potential "marginalized" victims themselves who turn on the puppeteers and gods alike and take vengeance. While they are isolated from the help of systems of law and justice that Girard sees as mostly replacing sacrificial substitution in modern societies (18-21 et seq.), Marty and Dana are not so marginalized that they cannot both reject their sacrificial role and seek revenge for their friends and themselves. The staged "transgressions" of these chosen individuals were meant to distract the gods from and stand in for the perceived transgressions of everyone else in the community. "If they don't transgress," Sitterson and Hadley explain, "they can't be punished" (*CitW* Scene 7). Through Marty and Dana's denial of responsibility for the sins of humanity for which they are intended scapegoats ("Punished for what?" Marty asks [Scene 23]), the plague (the metaphor for unchecked violence in Girard's terms, 76-79 et seq.), is turned back on the community at large. "Maybe that's the way it should be," as Marty says at the end. "Maybe it's time for a change" (Scene 23).

Another particularly useful model for understanding what is going on in *The Cabin in the Woods* is penal substitutionary atonement theory, which can be read as one specific version of Girard's substitutionary sacrifice theory; in this case, the

victim willingly offers him or herself (rather than being chosen from among its expendable members by the community) as a blood sacrifice to a justly angry god in order to obtain salvation and mercy for humanity. As J. Ryan Parker explains it, Whedon and Goddard “promote the destruction” of this theory, proclaiming that “it’s time to find a better atonement” (197). Under this particular construction, Christ was to be the “last scapegoat” (200) for the anger of God against his creation, in a ritual not recreated but still graphically recalled every year at Easter.⁵ These Ancient Ones seem not to have gotten the memo, continuing to demand their annual sacrifice and accepting no substitutions. As Parker elaborates, Dana and Marty “implicitly ask a host of important questions [including] What kind of gods [demand] such a sacrifice? What type of believers are they who so readily give it?” Tellingly, while the other young people have all been unaware and unwilling sacrifices, in the end Marty is given the chance to offer himself up in an act of free will. His resistance, and choice to die a different way, exposes “the brutality of the system” (205).

In her work on the archeology of cultic theatrical spaces, Inge Nielsen notes a development stretching from Minoan to Roman times (and surviving today in Passion plays and elsewhere) of a new form of temple arrangement in which seating “faced the centre of the sanctuary, as did the temple of the deity, so that both those seated and the deity too could watch the proceedings in the ‘orchestra’, where the altar was normally placed.” In this arrangement, the “audience” was “transformed from active worshippers into spectators” (9). The gods, of course, are also transformed in this way into observers rather than actors. In similar venues the author visited in Bali, she witnessed “re-enactments of the myths of the gods performed, as it were, in their presence” (10); this phenomenon is widespread. She defines ritual drama this way: it “designates a dramatic performance with a plot taken from the myth of the god in whose honour it was enacted as a ritual [...] often with the active participation of the worshippers” (12). Importantly, “the ritual performance communicates to all its participants the strength that lies in solidarity and collective existence” (Friedrich qtd. in Nielsen, 13). She goes on to note that “[t]he primary purpose of the ritual drama was, like other rituals and ceremonies, to appease the god and in that way ensure survival” (13). Ritual drama of this sort is thus essentially conservative, aimed at the preservation of society through regular propitiation of the gods.⁶

The “theatre-temple” (Nielsen 17) of *The Cabin in the Woods* is the combination of the isolated cabin site, accessed through a mountain tunnel, and the

⁵ My thanks to one of the reviewers of this paper for pointing out that this is a Protestant, and not Catholic, construction of Christ’s sacrifice, and certainly not universal among Protestants either. Tolkien would likely have considered it a fallacious argument.

⁶ Nielsen does discuss the influx of Oriental mystery religions and how they were enacted in similar but often more intimate ritual spaces (277 and elsewhere); see below for more on this.

underground operations center in the medial space between the surface and the gods in the depths; like some of the sites Nielsen discusses, the ritual setting in the mountain valley resembles a circular stepped theatre, incorporates a lake, and has set “stages” where action takes place, like the gas station on the road in, the dock, the living room, and the basement of the cottage (278, 280). In contrast to ritual drama as Nielsen describes it, however, the actual enactors of the myth—the teenagers—are not initially aware that they are participating in the story as its victims, and the gods must be kept ignorant that their choices are not made purely out of free will. But what is essential is “that the god in his temple could see what [is] going on” and “while the god could [...] observe the spectators, they could not see the god in his temple” (279). To draw again on Girard, “Ritual is nothing more than the regular exercise of ‘good’ violence. [...] [I]f sacrificial violence is to be effective it must resemble the nonsacrificial variety as closely as possible” (37) “We’re not the only ones watching” as Hadley says. The transgressions and the blood must be sufficiently real. As Sitterson continues, “Got to keep the customer satisfied” (Scene 13).

FAËRIAN DRAMA

It is clear that at many levels, *The Cabin in the Woods* is straightforwardly concerned with the survival of ritual sacrificial drama into the modern era and the critique of this human practice, especially in its most recent incarnation in horror films. Whedon explicitly decries “the devolution of the horror movie into torture porn” (Moore) and *The Cabin in the Woods* was directly conceived of as a response to the attitude that “this is the normal course of horror entertainment [...] this weird obsession with youth and sex, and at the same time this very puritanical desire to punish it” (*CitW Visual Companion* 42). More generally it critiques society’s willingness to sacrifice its most marginalized and vulnerable members rather than find a new way to deal with the violence-vengeance cycle, and leads us to recognize that this cycle is within us, not imposed by external monsters. But is it worth looking for elements of faërian drama here as well?

Faërian drama differs from the ritual drama in several very important ways. The most important, perhaps, is that the faërian drama experience is essentially an individual one, whereas, as Girard demonstrates, an important aspect of the ritual sacrificial drama is that it requires the unanimous participation of the entire community (99-101 et seq.). Faërian drama is also transformative; the aim is not to deflect violence through the sacrifice of the disposable participant and thus maintain society’s static balance, but for the participant to return to society with a boon that can change the community or at least his or her relationship to it. This parallels the way in which mystery religions are more intimately connected with the health and fate of the individual soul, rather than the fate of the *polis*, which is

the concern of civic or civil religions; for these practices, the sacrificial substitution and consequent control of unchecked violence in the community as a whole is of primary importance.⁷

Tolkien suggests that the faërian drama is, for humans, the experience of entering into a dream-world, which feels real when one is in it, and while in it, participating in a dramatic experience of some sort. For the elves who create it (read “elves” as one may), it is a form of pure artistic expression. To tie this to Tolkien’s definition of the broader goals of fantasy, the artistic aim of faërian drama, like that of the fairy tale itself, seems to be to attempt to awaken in the participant an openness to what Tolkien calls Fantasy, Escape, Recovery, Consolation, and the possibility of Eucatastrophe. The one essential goal within the experience is Recovery, the “regaining of a clear view” of reality and one’s place in it (OFS 67). There is almost always a specific moral teaching purpose that seems designed expressly for the chosen participant. The participant is typically in a liminal and receptive state at the beginning of the experience: troubled by something, or in need of intervention. The participant may, consciously or unconsciously, deliberately seek out the experience. The artistic goal is achieved through a variety of effects, the most basic of which is that the participant must believe fully in the reality of the experience while within it, and be an acting character in the drama. A dramaturge or guide may or may not be present. There is likely to be a sense that the dreamer has entered a pre-existing world, which will continue to exist after he or she leaves; a world which has its own very real inhabitants, experiencing dangers and delights which have nothing to do with the dreamer.

The experience of faërian drama cannot be dismissed as a mere dream; upon awakening, the participant must retain a sense that the events were real and “other,” with lasting consequences and moral effects, and not solely creations of his or her dreaming mind. The experience must also have addressed something that troubled or disturbed the dreamer. The moral purpose of the experience may or may not be revealed to the participant at the time; it may become clear only on awakening or after long reflection. This awakening or return to reality is essential: the faërian drama experience is *not* purgatorial, a way-station on the way to another life, but requires the dreamer to return to reality with a boon (an ending in common with the Campbellian hero journey).⁸

PERVERSIONS OF THE FAËRIAN DRAMA STRUCTURE

How does *The Cabin in the Woods* both fit and not fit this definition? It is necessary to look at the several layers of the story in order to sort this out.

⁷ See Johnson 98-99 for the characteristics of mystery cults and their relationships with civil or imperial cult religions.

⁸ This description distills the discussions in my three previous papers on the topic.

The aim of the puppeteers is simple, and completely antithetical to the pure, artistic, and individually tailored motive of faërian drama: their goal is survival for themselves and the majority of humanity, at any and all costs. At least one of the many sacrificial dramas playing out around the world must succeed in satisfying the Ancient Ones to the point where they will stay quiescent for another year. This goal is clearly in line with ancient ritual dramas of appeasement and the suppression of civic cycles of violence, as Girard describes them, rather than the individualized and transformative goals of faërian drama. The five sacrificial teens in the American ritual we follow are ciphers to the puppeteers; there is no intended goal for them other than their death (optional in the case of the “Virgin”), so whatever is done to them, it is certainly not with the intended goal of awakening them to fantasy, escape, recovery, or consolation. However, the two surviving teens—Marty and Dana—*do* end up regaining a clear view of the world, brief and terrifying though it is, and a certain consolation in its destruction. At the meta-level, what the audience experiences in sympathy with the teens is closer akin to an inversion of faërian drama: rather than fantasy, a stripping away of illusion; rather than escape, a feeling of being trapped; rather than recovery, terrible losses; rather than consolation, terror.

The receptivity of the various participants to the experience is the second criterion. We know little about the receptive state of the gods except that rituals seem to have to be done annually, and simultaneously around the world, to appease ancient local beings of enormous power and malice.⁹ We know for a fact, though, that the liminal and receptive state of the sacrificial teenagers is artificially induced. They have been manipulated into accepting the questionable gift of the camping trip experience, drugged through hair dye or adulterated marijuana, subjected to pheromone gasses, surveilled, stampeded, and scared out of their wits. They are not even properly archetypally aligned with the characters they are supposed to represent; rather than, as with faërian drama, the experience being tailored to the recipient, here the participants are tailored to the experience (“We work with what we have,” as the Director admits [*CitW* Scene 23]). As an audience, we have been “softened up” by the tension of knowing about the puppeteers from the start, then by the ever-building bloodbath. When the Director enters the scene with her utilitarian pragmatism, we may hope that it signals a beneficial resolution, but we find only a confirmation of corruption and terror.

Much of the focus (and a major source of the gruesome humor) of *The Cabin in the Woods* is on the techniques involved in making the experience as real as possible for both the Ancient Ones and the teenagers. The gods must believe that the sacrificial young people fit the archetypal roles, willingly make choices to transgress, and therefore deserve to be punished. The gods may or may not be aware

⁹ “DIRECTOR: In every country, for every culture, there is a god to appease. As long as one sleeps, they all do” (*Cabin in the Woods Visual Companion* 149; not included in the film as released).

of their priests; their attention is focused on the enactors of their rites. The teenagers must be kept too off-balance to realize that they are being manipulated, herded, and forced into situations and decisions where they have no control of the outcome; they must not question what is going on until it is too late to escape. When the cracks start to show, it becomes clear that corrupt motives (mere survival and capitulation at any cost) have led to the use of corrupt techniques. It is Marty's unexpected resistance to these techniques, his questioning of what he sees and the morality of it all, combined with the utter unpredictability of him as a Fool figure, that upends everything.

In faërian drama proper, there are consequences: the experience should have effected a lasting moral, emotional, or spiritual change. The intended effect of the puppeteer's drama on the gods is that they should be satisfied that they witnessed, and fed on, a properly executed ritual, and that their assuaged hunger will allow them to sleep again. In a Girardian reading, the paroxysm of the destruction of the sacrificial substitute clears the slate for a time.

The crux, though, of the corrupt motive of the puppeteers is that they are entirely "utilitarian" and never seek a "third alternative," treating the bargain with the Ancient Ones as a "closed system" (Parrish ¶ 2-3); they will gladly sacrifice children every year for millennia rather than question the system imposed by the gods; they may cut corners where they dare, place bets on the outcome, and celebrate afterwards, but they do not question the arrangement.¹⁰ Faërian drama has a sort of artistic purity to it: even if the aim is to cure a soul-sick human, the fate of the dramaturg is in no way affected by whether the treatment is successful not. In *The Cabin in the Woods*, the whole ritual drama construct is corrupt because it is transactional, not disinterested. The dramaturgs are in effect the whores, the role into which they try to force Jules.

If they instead had turned their manipulative skill on the gods, they might have been able to transform the system from within, effecting a change in the desires and appetites of the Ancient Ones. As Terry Pratchett theorizes about the midwinter sacrifice and its "blood on the snow, making the sun come up," "[S]ome bright spark thought, hey, looks like that damn sun comes up *anyway*, so how come we're giving those druids all this free grub?"—thus animal sacrifice eventually substitutes for human, symbolic sacrifice for animal, and we wind up with what was originally the sacrificial victim giving presents to all and sundry (*Hogfather* 98). Another model might be found in Scheherazade, who willingly put herself at risk to save her sister and the other young women of the region, gambling that her thousand and one tales would keep the Sultan satisfied while at the same time acting as a species of faërian drama—gradually introducing loyal, intelligent, and virtuous women into her stories in order to shift his attitude towards the female sex and

¹⁰ Indulging, perhaps, in the very vices for which the teens were punished; see Girard esp. 119-120 for festivals of license which accompany or culminate in the sacrificial event.

hence effecting a moral change in him (Warner 4-5). But the puppeteers of *The Cabin in the Woods* remain “hypnotized by the hard choices [and] stop looking for alternatives” (Bujold 183), unable to put the personal above the principle. They are “cautious and conservative”; they have determined a “regular sequential pattern” that works and, as good utilitarians, have no desire to mess with it (Girard 32; see also Parrish).

The teenaged participants, of course, are not expected to survive; their consequences end with their deaths in the scenario—except, of course, for the Virgin, whose death is optional but whose suffering is not. In “Final Girl” tradition, she might survive this ordeal by killing her tormentor, escaping, or being rescued, only to be killed in a sequel, become institutionalized, or become a killer herself; the Final Girl may escape for a time but not forever (“Final Girl”). In Girard’s construction, the final sacrificial victim is the “the being who submits to violence without provoking a reprisal” (86); the Final Girl’s sacrificial role will be fulfilled one way or another, either in ultimately submitting to unrevenged violence or in setting off a new round of violence. A weakness of the gods of *The Cabin in the Woods* is that they have no interest in the individual; both the gods and the puppeteers are concerned only with archetypes, discounting individuality as trivial. Thus when Dana upends the logic of the Final Girl, hesitating a moment too long to kill Marty to ensure her survival, saving him from the Director and Patience Buckner, and then agreeing with his assessment of the situation, they are able to bring the whole system down in the maelstrom of violence the ritual was intended to prevent in the first place.

At yet another level, we, as the audience, are equivalent to the gods in our desire to witness the sacrificial spectacle, and the “gods” are simply what Whedon characterizes as our own “unseemly and really, really creepy” human appetite for all-consuming violence and “torture porn” externalized (*CitW Visual Companion* 42). So in this reading, what needs the intervention is society as a whole.¹¹ If we experience the film in an immersive fashion, as a faërian drama, we have the opportunity to learn from and be changed by seeing the sacrificial teens as individuals worthy of life, and by witnessing, cheering on, and internalizing their ultimate rejection of a corrupt and cruel system.

For Marty and Dana, their “return with a boon” phase is not a true return, in the sense that they do not return to their original lives. It is also very sharply truncated, lasting just moments. But they *are* awakened to reality, and most importantly returned to a state of free will, where they can make their decisions with full agency based on what they have experienced. They have survived the

¹¹ This reading owes much to Tolkien’s own explication of the purpose of the faërian drama in *Smith of Wootton Major*: the “enlightenment and vivification” of a human society that had grown vulgar and self-satisfied and forgotten how to appreciate the fairy element in the world (“*Smith of Wootton Major* [Essay]” 99).

cabin, the underground, and the Director, and have a few moments to bring back their boon: “rebellion in the face of institutionalized murder” (McGovern). They sacrifice themselves, if not for the immediate good of humanity, for the moral good of humanity in the long run: “the death of all existence is surely better than the perpetuation of a belief system that so willingly pays such a high theological price” (Parker 205).

In spite of this universal destruction, the catastrophic resolution in the end *does* satisfy us at a certain level. Justice is done, and humanity released (though at fatal cost) from bondage to an ancient evil. It is an inverted eucatastrophe that leaves us just as satisfied, in a tragic sense, as the classic eucatastrophic grace of the happy ending. And “happy ending” is rather more simplistic than what Tolkien meant by *eucatastrophe*; recall that he defined the Resurrection of Christ as the eucatastrophe of the Incarnation (OFS 78), an event necessarily preceded by death, darkness, and the fear that all hope was gone.

CONCLUSIONS

Like another Whedon text, the Buffy episode “Normal Again,”¹² looked at from one angle, *The Cabin in the Woods* fits John Clute’s pattern (elaborated in “Fantastika in the World Storm”) for the horror story: the realization of a wrongness in the world, the thickening of the fog around the hero(s), revelation of the horrible truth, and aftermath of fatalistic acceptance (27-28)—but not quite. Because viewed the other way around, it also fits Clute’s paradigm for fantasy: the realization of a wrongness, a thinning into cacophony and useless action, recognition of the solution or key to the problem, and return to a renewed world (26)—but again, not quite. The horror/ritual drama plot crosses midway with the fantasy/faërian drama plot. Dana and Marty’s actions at the end may look like fatalistic acceptance but in fact constitute a deeply radical remaking of the world—not for them, and not for humanity, but the slate is cleaned and if any fragment of this planet survives, it will have the chance for a fresh start.

It is their return to a state of free will, through their descent into the puppeteer’s lair, the cathartic chaos of the system purge, and the final confrontation in the sanctum—in fact, seemingly on the very altar—that turns all of the preceding horrific experience into a species of faërian drama (if one designed by particularly sadistic elves) for Marty and Dana. They have had an experience that felt all-too-real (and in fact was) while they were in it; they were shown an awful truth about their world that frightened and disgusted them; they were returned to reality in a full state of free will and left to make a decision and take action that affected not just themselves, but the world. In breaking the cycle without setting anything else

¹² See my paper “‘What If I’m Still There? What If I Never Left That Clinic?’: Faërian Drama in *Buffy*’s ‘Normal Again.’”

in its place, Marty and Dana release vengeful violence that can only end in utter destruction, as Girard's theory would predict. But they lack the power to break the cycle in any other way. Their only power lies in refusal to cooperate any further with the unjust system.

Free will is the key here, and a major theme in the works of both Tolkien and Whedon. Ritual sacrificial drama is inherently against the concept of individual free will; this is particularly foregrounded in *The Cabin in the Woods* by the fact that the teenagers must *appear* to make free individual choices but are in fact circumscribed to only those limited choices the puppeteers allow and manipulate them towards. Faërian drama, however, *requires* that the participant exercise free will in both interpretation of¹³ and, later, action based on the experience. As humans, our attunement to the ancient pattern of ritual sacrifice is balanced by an instinctive rebellion against such systems of constraint and a deep desire to exercise our free will. Rebellion can be cathartic even when it fails, as Tolkien noted in relation to "Northern courage": "Mind shall not falter nor mood waver, though doom shall come and dark conquer" ("Homecoming" 141). It is here that we as the audience for *The Cabin in the Woods* experience a glimpse of an odd, tragic eucatastrophe in witnessing our heroes doing the right thing and defying a cycle of oppression, even when it ends in the destruction of all things.

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¹³ Tolkien emphatically rejects the way allegory forces a single 'right' interpretation of a text, preferring that the reader be free to determine the applicability of a text to his or her own experience ("Foreword" xxiv).

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