

Music as Prophecy in *The Hobbit*

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In *The Hobbit*, many characters sing at various points throughout the novel. Their songs reflect their plans, desires, and perspectives about the world, and they are often sung at moments when the characters are feeling triumphant regarding current circumstances or hopeful that the future will go well. While the songs often describe something that turns out to happen, more times than not this happens in a way that is quite different from what the characters singing them expect. The dwarves, hopeful and rested in Lake-town, sing that “the king beneath the mountain / shall come into his own” (Tolkien 182), which is later fulfilled by Dain rather than Thorin. The goblins, gleeful that they are apparently minutes away from killing the dwarves, sing “funny little birds, they had no wings! / O what shall we do with the funny little things?” (98) before the dwarves do fly away by way of the eagles. The wood-elves, drunk and in good spirits as they send barrels down the stream, sing “leave the halls and caverns deep, / leave the northern mountains steep”, not realizing they are helping the dwarves do this against their king’s will. In some sense, these songs act as prophecies and reveal a sort of divine providence operating in the novel. Each group of characters has a certain fate in the novel, and the songs they sing often reveal this fate even without the characters realizing.

The dwarves’ songs reveal their connection to their past and their longing for its restoration at any cost. At the beginning of the novel at Bilbo’s house, they sing four times that they “must away, ere break of day” to reclaim their “long-forgotten gold” from Smaug (15). They have an urgency to return to their homeland and retake their family inheritance, and they use songs to clarify this goal and unite themselves toward it. However, their songs also echo their greed and the closeness with which they cling to their treasure. After Smaug has died, when they are barricading themselves in the mountain against the men and elves, they sing that “*the king is come unto his hall / Under the Mountain dark and tall. / The Worm of Dread is slain and dead, /*

*And ever so our foes shall fall!”* (240). Their foe had been Smaug, but because of his dragon-sickness, Thorin has expanded his definition of foe to include the men and elves because of their requests on the wealth in the mountain, even though these requests are more justified than Smaug’s theft. Because Thorin believes he has all the power, he is completely unwilling to compromise with reasonable people who happen to be in need. What Thorin does not realize is that an army of his true foes, goblins and wargs, are on the way to fight everyone gathered at the mountain. The song acts as prophecy in this case: the foes of the dwarves do fall, but it is the goblins rather than the men, and the king does come unto his hall, but it is Thorin’s cousin Dain rather than Thorin. Because of their greed, Thorin, Kili, and Fili have the same end as the wind that *“passed the lonely Mountain bare / and swept above the dragon’s lair / [...] left the world and took its flight / over the wide seas of the night”* (119). Had the dwarves been more reasonable, it is possible they could have coordinated better with the men and elves against the goblins with fewer casualties, meaning the song would have come to pass more in the way they expected. However, the song and the events that follow fulfill the dwarves’ fate to hold onto their past too tightly and experience great loss because of it.

The goblins also sing when they have captured the dwarves, and their songs echo their arc in the novel to be victorious for a time before being defeated. When they find the dwarves, they sing *“Down down to Goblin-town / You go, my lad! [...] / While Goblins quaff, and Goblins laugh / Round and round far underground / Below, my lad!”* (58). The dwarves do go down to Goblin-town, but they go round and round far underground to escape the goblins and do so successfully. When the dwarves are in the trees in the Wargs’ meeting spot, the goblins mockingly describe the company as *“fifteen birds in five fir trees, / their feathers were fanned in a fiery breeze! / But, funny little birds, they had no wings!”* (98) as they are seemingly about to be

burned alive. However, the dwarves really do fly away when the eagles take them, once again fulfilling the song in a way the singers did not expect. The goblins feel triumphant and belittle the dwarves, only for divine providence to favor the dwarves and allow them to escape. This parallels the Battle of Five Armies, where the goblins are winning for a time but are eventually defeated once the eagles and Beorn arrive. The goblins' arc is a common (and biblical) trope of evil being allowed to triumph for a time before eventually being overcome.

Bilbo is perhaps the character who is most in touch and aware of his fate to be a small part of the dwarves' quest for the fight against evil. The last song in the novel is when he is returning to Hobbiton and sings "*Roads go ever ever on / Under cloud and under star, / Yet feet that wandering have gone / Turn at last to home afar / Eyes that fire and sword have seen / And horror in the halls of stone / Look at last on meadows green / And trees and hills they long have known*" (273). He has been longing throughout the novel to return to his hobbit-hole, and as his journey ends this desire is finally fulfilled. His song acknowledges that it is time to return to his home where he is comfortable, but that life will not be quite the same after the journey. Like the dwarves, he goes "*back to lands [he] once did know*" (169), but it can never be the same. Though he does not know this when singing, his possessions are being sold and he will soon lose much of his reputation, meaning his life will be different than before, but he ultimately lives happily after the adventure regardless. This is because his world has been expanded by selflessly helping his new friends restore the world to justice, and because he recognizes his role better than the dwarves or goblins, his song comes true in the way he expects. At the end of the novel, Bilbo says to Gandalf "then the prophecies of the old songs have turned out to be true, after a fashion!", and Gandalf responds "Of course! [...] You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? [...] You are only

quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!” (276). Bilbo then responds “Thank goodness!” (276). His humility and groundedness give him wisdom and foresight in a way the other characters do not have, and thus his fate is ultimately the happiest. In these and other cases, music reflects the characters’ perspectives and desires, and the songs often reveal more about the fates of the characters than they themselves realize.

Works Cited

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit, or, There and Back Again*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2007.

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