THE KNIGHT'S PROGRESS AND VIRTUAL REALITIES: THE MEDIEVAL

ADVENTURE FROM *BEOWULF* TO *READY PLAYER ONE*

by

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DEDICATION

To Tara, who is more patient and kind than I deserve. This was not possible without you. I love you.

To my parents, who taught me to read, though they may now regret it. You both started this path.

To Zeke and Kenji, who don't know any better. Thank you for the companionship.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ernest Cline's 2011 novel *Ready Player One*, which is set in a dystopian America in the year 2045, would seem to fit neatly within the genre of science fiction, and yet—like many of the pop culture references and video games its story features—the novel is shot through with imagery from the medieval adventure tale. Wade Watts, the main character of *Ready Player One*, imagines himself as an Arthurian knight questing for a sacred treasure, even going so far as to assume Parzival as the name of his avatar. The medieval themes and values appear important to Wade, and their presence within the novel indicates an attempt on the part of the author to engage with the medieval quest romance tradition. But if *Ready Player One* attempts to insert itself into this lineage, it does so through a very different setting. It eschews the countryside location so often seen in Arthurian literature, whether pastoral or wild, and instead uses a futuristic dystopia, in which humanity is starving and miserable. The novel consciously inserts itself into a modern tradition of imagining a bleak or dark future that must be saved by the novel's hero, when the modern knight Wade receives a quest inspired by the Atari 2600 game *Adventure*.

This old Atari game presents a rather simple form of interactive adventure, setting a model for an adventure genre. There are three levels of difficulty and complexity, but the narrative gameplay of Level 1 provides a basic formula for the adventure tale, and thus serves as a good example. As the game begins, the player, represented by a small square, discovers a key near his or her home, the gold castle. This key, when used on the

nearby gate, allows the player entrance to the castle, wherein a sword is found. The player may then use this sword to defeat a dragon which guards a black key and another dragon encountered on the way to the black castle, which is located on the other side of a nearby labyrinth. The player, having successfully navigated the labyrinth and having unlocked the gate, may enter the black castle, and discover a chalice hidden within. Then, the player must retrace his or her steps and return to the gold castle while carrying the chalice. Once the player has safely entered the gold castle, he or she has completed the adventure, signaled by strobing lights and triumphant fanfare to celebrate the victory.

My analysis here may reflects the intentions behind the work of earlier scholars such as Joseph Campbell or Vladimir Propp, who desired to classify or otherwise categorize the texts they studied. In this way, the game *Adventure* provides a general structure for adventure as a literary genre or subgenre. First, the adventurer sets forth from home and begins a journey. On this journey, which may be or may become a quest, the adventurer faces and overcomes obstacles, which can be both physical, such as traversing demanding terrain and defeating monsters, and intellectual, such as solving puzzles and riddles. Through these experiences, the adventurer gains knowledge, which in turn serves him or her well in subsequent trials. And finally, the adventurer returns, either with a new object such as a chalice or grail (to use the iconic figure from Arthurian legend), having rid the world of some great danger (as with the slaying of a monster),or at the least with a different viewpoint or perspective. Areas of safety, like the screens in *Adventure* that are without both enemies and puzzles (such as the interior of the gold castle or the blank screen adjacent to one containing a dragon), provide an opportunity for the adventuring hero to pause, reflect on the journey thus far, and make plans, which

may lead to a change in strategy or thinking for the adventurer. These basic elements, already on display in the easiest level of the *Adventure* game, are enough to sketch the broad outlines of the medieval-inspired, fantasy adventure narrative that has become such a prominent format for novels, films, and games in recent years.

Despite its relatively simplistic narrative, *Adventure* matches what some prominent literary scholars have to say about the adventure genre. For example, Martin Green says that "The protagonist's character may be said to 'generate' or at least characterize his adventures, which form the stuff of his book" (*Seven* 21). Hence, the adventure the protagonist undergoes reflects his or her concerns and desires, and the reader witnesses "different kinds of excitement and different views of life" depending on the perspective of the adventurer. Because Wade is so concerned with medievalism, medievalism colors the entire novel in *Ready Player One*. The medieval becomes the mode of *Ready Player One* through the way Wade characterizes and carries out his own adventure, even if the world in which the novel is set more closely resembles the dystopian future of post-Orwellian science fiction than the pastoral or romantic past normally associated with medievalist fantasy. As I discuss at greater length in Chapter 4, Wade's interest in the medieval adventure is in part a self-consciously escapist activity, allowing him to remove himself from the dystopian "real world" and immerse himself in a virtual reality that is programmed to resemble recognizable fantasy worlds.

The adventure genre involves a distinct change of scene, a movement away from the familiar and homey into the exotic and dangerous. Green defines the genre of adventure as,

a series of events, partly but not wholly accidental, in settings remote from the domestic and probably from the civilized (at least in the psychological sense of remote), which constitute a challenge to the central character. In meeting this challenge, he/she performs a series of exploits which make him/her a hero, eminent in virtues such as courage, fortitude, cunning, strength, leadership, and persistence. (*Dreams* 23)

Green's definition looks at the hero primarily, and especially the traits of the hero, whose character is formed through his or her experiences. Although it is not exactly a *Bildungsroman* in a technical sense, in an adventure tale the hero's education, maturation, or formation is crucial to the narrative. In this way, the medieval adventure and its modern counterpart may also form an expanding of awareness, an education by which the hero grows up, becoming capable of overcoming the challenges in front of him or her. The fantastic and medieval adventure thus becomes a model for the development of character in the real world.

In this thesis, I examine this tradition of the medieval quest adventure. I start with examples from the medieval period itself (the *Exeter Book*, *Beowulf*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), then move on to a single exemplary text of medieval adventure from the modernist period (*The Lord of the Rings*), and finally, I will return to Wade and *Ready Player One* as a representation of medieval adventure in contemporary popular fiction. In looking at these different texts and periods, I also want to suggest an outline of the adventure narrative based on three stages, broadly understood: the adventurer's departure from home and experience in the outer world, his or her moments of rest and

reflection that make possible practical learning and moral development, and his or her

return "home," which is necessarily different from before.

Chapter II will discuss the adventure motif in both the Early and High Middle

Ages, looking specifically at *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I examine

how the adventurer strives to clarify the ambiguous problems presented in these

adventures. When the adventurer confronts a problem and removes the entity which

defies classification, he or she behaves in a manner similar to Beowulf and Sir Gawain. I

explore the difficulties of the Old English word *aglæca* in *Beowulf*, especially as it relates

to both Grendel's Mother and Beowulf, both of whom complicate the idea of a destroyer.

Beowulf provides physical challenges for the titular hero to overcome, and *Sir Gawain*

and the Green Knight presents ambiguity within the chivalric tradition of courtesy. Here,

I analyze how Sir Gawain attempts to navigate the problems within courtesy as presented

by the Lady Bertilak and the Green Knight. These three styles of testing (that is,

intellectual, physical, and moral) reveal the limitations of their possible solutions,

suggesting that, though order and clarity may bring temporary relief from chaos and

ambiguity, the chaotic forces will rise again.

In Chapter III, I move from medieval to medievalism, examining J. R. R.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* as a text that emphasizes the importance of places in

addition to characters. Here, I analyze many of the distinctive places in the novel, which,

I argue, can be divided into three categories: Utopia and Dystopia, Sites of Stillness and

Preparation, and Sites of Danger and Testing. The Shire and Mordor, as utopia and

dystopia respectively, motivate the adventuring hobbits. The idyllic nature of the Shire

provides the hobbits with something to protect (and later, to restore), while Mordor

presents a malignant landscape which may be a possible fate for the rest of Middle-earth

if the hobbits fail in their adventure. Rivendell and Lothlórien, as Places of Rest and

Learning, fulfill a different narrative function. Instead of motivating, these places provide

opportunities to learn lore and prepare the Fellowship for the coming challenges. As the

adventurers reach these places, they share stories and learn more about Middle-earth,

helping them along their journey. Finally, I discuss the Old Forest and Fangorn Forest as

the places in which some of those challenges take place. Here, the obstacles provide a test

that requires the protagonists to use both the motivations from the Shire and Mordor as

well as the learning and preparation from Rivendell and Lothlórien.

Finally, in Chapter IV, I will discuss Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* and the

adventure story, especially as it relates to the end of the adventure and the hero's return.

The dystopian physical world of the novel contrasts with the seemingly-utopian virtual

reality, the OASIS. The OASIS, then, becomes a source of temptation to the hero, Wade

Watts. The actual world suffers from neglect because so many people indulge in the

escapism offered by the OASIS. Wade, under his pseudonym Parzival, experiences

adventures in the OASIS that would not be possible within the real-world reality in which

he resides, but he also learns that the actual world offers things not available in the virtual

world, thus teaching him the importance of the world outside the OASIS. Wade's return

to the physical world after the completion of his adventure in the OASIS mirrors the final

part of his quest, and demonstrates a fundamental change in his thinking. The hero's

return shows how he is altered by his experiences while adventuring, and Wade chooses

to turn his concerns to the real world.

Wade's quest, like most adventures, contains obstacles and challenges to overcome, just like the player in *Adventure*. The successful completion of these difficulties comes primarily through sense-making systems Wade must develop over the course of his adventure. These changes in Wade's outlook alter how he perceives the world. Wade's videogame-like experience of the medieval quest characterizes his adventure. Because Wade embodies a medieval hero persona, it is appropriate to begin with medieval texts, which establish many of the theme that still resonate in modern adventure narratives across various media.

CHAPTER II

THE ADVENTURER SETS FORTH: MEDIEVAL CLARITY IN *BEOWULF* AND

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Medieval literature abounds in adventures. These adventures provide structure and shape to otherwise chaotic forces by establishing a conventional narrative trajectory that helps to make sense of the world in which the adventures take place. Prominent medieval adventure stories, such as *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* provide frameworks for the audience to explore the unknown within safe parameters by moving characters purposively along a path from innocence or naivety to experience. These medieval adventures ultimately provide a way to bring figurative order to apparently chaotic forces, and to provide meaning through a process of clarifying that which had been deemed ambiguous; however, all adventure tales also suffer from their own limitations, which in turn allow for a return of chaos and ambiguity in their imaginary realms. In this chapter I will demonstrate the ways that riddling and other tests of the adventurer help to shape the narrative framework of the adventure tale, as the hero gains experience and knowledge while overcoming challenges. Using these two texts, I explore how the adventurers' intellectual, physical, and moral development occurs through various tests of character, which in their totality help to provide structure or order to the universe represented in the narrative.

Gaining Experience in *Beowulf*

The adventure in *Beowulf* presents an explicit narrative of a hero's journey and exploration. The overall plot is fairly straightforward. When Grendel, a descendent of the biblical Cain, attacks King Hrothgar and the kingdom of the Danes, the titular hero comes to their defense. Beowulf defeats Grendel in hand-to-hand combat, then fights and overcomes Grendel's Mother after she attempts revenge. Following a flash-forward, Beowulf has returned to his homeland to become king of the Geats. He is a good, strong king, and the Geatish people thrive under his rule, but after fifty years of peace, a dragon rampages across the kingdom. King Beowulf, now old, leads a company of his retainers against the dragon. All but one of his men retreat, and Beowulf is forced to fight the dragon with the help of only his faithful retainer Wiglaf. Beowulf defeats the dragon and is mortally wounded in the process. Since he has no heirs, Beowulf gives his kingdom to Wiglaf. The adventure closes with Beowulf's funeral, at which the people of Geatland mourn, fearing that the long period of peace may die alongside Beowulf. From a narratological perspective, the adventures within *Beowulf* are told using a technique called interlace, which often includes what modern readers understand as flash-forwards, flashbacks, and retellings of tales already told. J. R. R. Tolkien suggested in his 1936 essay "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" that "the monsters are not an inexplicable blunder of taste" and should not be neglected in scholarly examinations of the text ("Monsters" 115). With this in mind, I begin my examination of *Beowulf*'s adventure with the monsters.

Perhaps the most complicated and interesting character in *Beowulf* is Grendel's

mother, due to the narrative's ambiguity in her description and actions. James Paz

recognizes that "Grendel's mother refuses to be named, identified, and objectified" and

"is linked to the elusive or riddle-like nature of a 'thing' that exists on the margins of a

human community" (232). Paz also observes that "Grendel's mother hovers on the

threshold between human and animal" (237), and one might say that Grendel's mother

herself sits astride these boundaries. In the text, she is described by the kenning *aglæcwif*

(l. 1259), which McGillivray glosses as "fierce, attacking woman." Any attempts to

classify her as either wholly *aglæca*, "fierce fighter," or *wif*, "woman, wife," would be an

attempt to solve the riddle she presents. The solution to her riddle becomes an assertion

of authority over her, an act that demonstrates mastery over her both as a combatant and a

marginalized being. Beowulf solves this riddle through combat. By following her to her

mere and killing her, he places her existence in his authority. Her death solves the riddle

by rendering the entire question moot; it no longer matters whether she is a fierce fighter

or a woman. Beowulf's reward for this feat is lavish gifts from Hrothgar, who declares

Beowulf fit to be king of the Geats. The social elevation of Beowulf exemplifies the

conclusion of this part of the adventure, which has functioned in a way similar to the rite

of passage, since the adventurer now emerges at a higher or more advanced level after

having gone through it.

This conflicting image of humanity and monstrosity is not unique to Grendel's

mother. Grendel himself is also called a "*feond on helle*" (l. 101) and "*grimma gæst*" (l.

102), which McGillivray glosses as "fiend of hell" and "grim demon" respectively.

However, just a few lines later, Grendel is called "*Caines cynne*" (l. 107), Cain's kin.

Again, we see an entity refusing to be neatly categorized into a stable semantic location. He is a fiend and demon, while simultaneously retaining human characteristics as a descendent of Cain. Grendel's mother is called a "*brimwylf*" (l. 1599), a sea-wolf, and, presumably, is also numbered among Cain's progeny. The Grendelkin, then, are simultaneously human and nonhuman, somewhat like the objects that appear in the riddles throughout the *Exeter Book*. Their nature as liminal entities—that is, being who occupy a space in between designated zones of meaning in their worlds—provides Beowulf with the experiences in which he can achieve the social promotion necessary to propel the narrative forward, leading to his eventual kingship. While both Grendel and Grendel's mother are referred to by some form of the Old English "*aglæca*," so too is Beowulf, thus subverting his own humanity. Perhaps he, too, is a liminal entity for others to overcome, providing a riddle for us to answer.

When Beowulf initially arrives at Heorot and is received by Hrothgar, he is challenged by Unferth, who seems to take umbrage at the glory given to the Geat prince. Unferth, in an attempt to undermine Beowulf, describes one of Beowulf's early adventures, saying

> Are you the Beowulf who strove with Breca
>
> in a swimming contest on the open sea,
>
> where in your pride you tried the waves
>
> and for a foolish boast risked your life
>
> in the deep water? (Liuzza ll. 506-510)

Unferth's speech continues, describing a failed attempt to outswim Breca, who Unferth describes as having "more strength" (Liuzza l. 518) than Beowulf. Unferth, whose name

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may be translated as "Un-peace," appears to sow chaos and discord, rather than resolve

the conflict within Hrothgar's hall. This conflict provides the necessary lessons that

Beowulf must learn in order to eventually become a worthy king. For example, he must

learn how to deal with difficult people who attempt to undermine or marginalize him to

their own benefit. Beowulf corrects Unferth's interpretation of the events and asserts his

own authority over both this story from his past and, eventually, the attackers on Heorot

hall. After defeating Grendel and in his search for Grendel's mother, Beowulf is

recognized by Unferth as the superior warrior when Unferth loans Beowulf a sword,

which Leonard Neidorf calls "a gesture of reconciliation" (440). We are told that he "did

not remember what he had said before" (Liuzza l. 1466), when Unferth previously

attempted to humiliate Beowulf before Hrothgar and the men of Heorot. Now, the

humiliation is Unferth's, as he is forced to recognize his own cowardice and

incompetence, while asserting the superiority of Beowulf.

When Unferth tries to undermine Beowulf, the story he tells is one of Beowulf's

first adventures, the swimming contest. Beowulf claims that this is told from Breca's

"*siðe*" (l. 532), meaning "journey; fate; destiny; time, occasion" (McGillivray). R. M.

Liuzza translates this as Breca's "adventures" (Liuzza l. 532), which asserts ownership of

that version onto Breca. Instead, Beowulf commits to telling his rendition of the contest,

taking ownership of his own adventure. The contest between Beowulf and Breca

becomes fraught with chaos: according to Beowulf, while it was initially a struggle

against the sea, it becomes a battle against a "*feondscaða*" (l. 554) or fiend-enemy. Nine

of these "sea-monsters" (Liuzza l. 575) appeared, according to Beowulf's retelling of his

adventure, and all nine perish by his sword. This adventure ends with Beowulf returning

to Geatland, gaining the experience of monster-fighting, and protecting the shores of his homeland. As Liuzza translates, "since that day / they never hindered the passage of any / sea-voyager" (Liuzza ll. 567-569). Beowulf restores order to the seas when he kills the sea-monsters, which operated as agents of chaos. This adventure that Beowulf relates is his first stop on a journey of experience, which will ultimately pass through his fights against both Grendel and Grendel's mother before ending with his death whilst battling the dragon.

This struggle to create order from chaos in the Daneland sets Beowulf against Grendel. After Hrothgar pacifies the surrounding nations, he builds Heorot, a golden hall, to commemorate his victories. Grendel, who "wretchedly suffered […] / for every day he heard the joyful din / loud in the hall" (Liuzza l. 87-89), wages war on Heorot. He sneaks into Heorot in the middle of the night and abducts thirty thanes, or retainers, and devours them. Grendel continues this fight against "right" (Liuzza l. 144) for "twelve long winters" (Liuzza l. 147). The word *rihte* (l. 144) may be translated numerous ways. McGillivray glosses it as "a right, duty, obligation; what is right, justice, truth; law, rule". Most of these ideas center on order and structure. The fiend who fights or resists *rihte* should be considered a force of evil and chaos.

Grendel's inherent association with the chaotic also exhibits itself through his character's ambiguity. For instance, though the narrator claims that Grendel is numbered "among Cain's race" (Liuzza l. 107), J. R. R. Tolkien observes that the characters within the poem possess no knowledge of Grendel's origin. Instead, "Hrothgar denies all knowledge of the ancestry of Grendel" ("Monsters" 118). In a poem which provides detailed lineages for its kingly characters, and even parentage for minor characters such

as Unferth, the unknown nature of Grendel's family may provide unease for the cast. Grendel and his mother become in this sense unknowable. Moreover, even if Hrothgar and Beowulf did know of Grendel's descent from Cain, they still lack the ability to integrate him into the framework of their own society, which heavily relies on kinship and connections among families as means of achieving and maintaining peace. Without a clear lineage as a sort of genetic map indicating their place in Beowulf's world, Grendel and his family is all the more monstrous.

If kinship and familial relations build order and peace, then Grendel, untethered to any known lineage (that is, discounting an unnamed mother and an unclear relationship to the mythical Cain), represents a threat. He is simultaneously ambiguous and chaotic. Beowulf's solution is to remove this chaos. He engages in violence to kill Grendel and restore peace to Heorot, and this heroic act stabilizes the world while also providing the adventurer Beowulf with greater experience of that world.

Beowulf and his opponents are called *aglæca* multiple times throughout the poem. *Aglæca* has been one of the trickiest words for scholars to translate, leading to attempts like "horrible creature" (Liuzza l. 1000), "guilt-fouled fiend" (Heaney l. 1000), "monster" (Bradley 438), "monstrous beast" (Liuzza l. 425), and "fierce creature" (Liuzza l. 893). As Liuzza recognizes in his footnote to l. 739, "the [Old English] word [*aglæca*], which literally means 'awesome one' or 'terror,' is elsewhere applied to the dragon-slaying Sigemund […] and to Beowulf himself" (Liuzza p. 71). This ambiguous word seems applicable to both monster and hero alike, as the narrator in *Beowulf* uses it to describe not only Grendel, Grendel's Mother, and the dragon, but also Beowulf himself. Later, one of Hrothgar's unnamed thanes tells the story of Sigemund, using the word *aglæca*.

Beowulf's comparison to Sigemund is a positive one: Sigemund is presented as an exemplary king that Beowulf may equal, if he continues to be a strong leader and vanquisher of monsters. On the other hand, Beowulf's enemies are so often referred to as *aglæca* that the word is often translated as *monster*. To clarify the complexities of this word, it is worth analyzing the two seemingly disparate groups it is used to describe. It appears that the *aglæca* of Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon are associated with chaos and death, while *aglæca* like Sigemund and Beowulf seem to achieve this recognition by defeating the opposing *aglæca* and restoring order. Beowulf, both *aglæca* and adventurer, strives to provide peace and orderliness through combat.

Unfortunately, his accomplished orderliness is short-lived, since his own death represents an end of his order. The dragon, then, may be interpreted as the ultimate victory of chaos over order. Tolkien recognizes that the dragon is "a personification of malice, greed, and destruction" (114). Indeed, the dragon sleeps on an amassed treasure until a thief steals a bejeweled cup. After the theft, the dragon rampages, destroying everything in its path and forcing the aging Beowulf to protect his people. Tolkien, paraphrasing and building off the argument of W. P. Ker, calls "the monsters", that is, the Grendelkin and the dragon, "Chaos and Unreason" (117). Beowulf, as a king, has a duty to his people to provide peace and order, which he had done successfully for fifty years. The rampaging dragon, though, threatens the order of Geatland, and Beowulf must intercede.

The dragon's awakening leads to a growth in chaos and a removal of the forces of order. Even though Beowulf slays the dragon, he succumbs to the serpent's poison and perishes. At his funeral, the mourners fear the coming turmoil:

> […] with heavy spirits
>
> they mourned their despair, the death of their lord;
>
> and a sorrowful song sang the Geatish woman,
>
> with hair bound up, for Beowulf the king,
>
> with sad cares, earnestly said
>
> that she dreaded the hard days ahead,
>
> the times of slaughter, the host's terror,
>
> harm and captivity. Heaven swallowed the smoke. (Liuzza ll. 3148-3155)

The dragon becomes both a symbol of and agent for chaos, and even in its own destruction the dragon foreshadows a continuation and escalation of chaos after the close of the poem. Although they have their new king Wiglaf, Beowulf's only loyal retainer, the mourners worry that the world will grow more chaotic without Beowulf to provide structure and stability. Neighboring clans may sense a power vacuum without a strong king, and wage war on the Geats during their period of weakness. Their vulnerability to chaotic forces suggests a need for a new adventurer to emerge and to provide order, just as Beowulf had done for the Danish kingdom so many years ago.

The adventure narrative of *Beowulf* is punctuated by the key moments in which the hero crosses a threshold and gains experience that allows him, and the adventure story in general, to make greater sense of the world. That is, in these liminal moments, the space of the adventure tale becomes orderly, if only for a time, and the order is dramatized in the epic through the vanquishing of the monsters—Grendel, Grendel's Mother, and the dragon—who are positioned as representatives of chaos and uncertainty. In this way, both the form and content of the narrative establish an adventure in which a

stable world is imagined and sustained through the adventurer's liminal experiences or movement from relative innocence to experience. Beowulf resolves the chaos represented in the monsters by killing them, but peace may be temporary, and a new adventurer may need to take up the cause to protect the Geatish people from resurgent chaos.

<center>Courtesy Put to the Test in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*</center>

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight also discloses the adventure story's familiar narrative structure, with a heroic individual's journey beset with challenges to overcome, leading to the personal development from innocence or naivety to experience and greater knowledge. The liminality of the adventure is on display in the way that the hero comes to terms with a new, more mature sense of the world. Moreover, the adventure gives structure to that world, this time by providing a moral framework to supplement and complete the intellectual and physical aspects of the hero's person. With *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the adventurer's riddle-solving wits and monster-vanquishing strength are made complete through an ordeal of ethics which will test the character of the adventurer and his world.

Arthur, a young and merry king, celebrates Christmas at Camelot. He has adopted a peculiar custom, refusing to eat until someone has related to him a "strange story or stirring adventure" (*Gawain* 26). Instead of hearing a story, Arthur witnesses one, as a giant man, with green skin and clothes, barges into the hall, carrying a holly branch and a giant axe. This Green Knight proposes a game: he will allow anyone present to hit him with the axe, as long as the participant will submit to an equal blow in one year's time.

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No one answer's the Green Knight's challenge, causing the formidable knight to doubt the courage and honor of Arthur's court, humiliating the king. Eventually, Sir Gawain, Arthur's nephew, enters into the game to prevent Arthur's humiliation. With a single blow, Gawain decapitates the Green Knight, who proceeds to pick up his head, remind Gawain of his obligation to seek out the Green Knight's home in one year's time, and receive a reciprocal blow. The Green Knight rides off, carrying his own head, leaving Camelot stunned.

Gawain spends months adventuring, searching for the Green Chapel where the mysterious knight lives. Finally, with only a few days to spare, Gawain arrives at the castle of Sir Bertilak de Hautdesert, who tells Gawain that the chapel is nearby. Bertilak encourages Gawain to stay at his castle and play another game, and on the appointed day, Bertilak will escort Gawain to his destination. Gawain agrees, and promises that each of the three days he stays in the castle, the two knights will trade the trophies they win. Every day, Bertilak's wife attempts to seduce Gawain, who demonstrates chivalry and loyalty as he rebuffs her. On the first day, she gives him a kiss, and on the second day, two kisses. At the end of each day, Gawain kisses Bertilak as promised, and receives the spoils from Bertilak's hunts. On the third day, however, Lady Bertilak demands Gawain take her magical green girdle, which she promises will protect him from harm. Gawain, knowing that the Green Knight will cut off his head on the next day, accepts, hoping to save his own life. Instead of exchanging the girdle for the fox that Bertilak has hunted, he keeps the prize, and instead gives Bertilak three kisses.

The next day, Gawain goes to the Green Chapel, wearing the magic girdle. After reuniting with the Green Knight, Gawain submits to receive a blow to his neck. The

Green Knight swings and Gawain flinches, so the Green Knight mocks his bravery. The Green Knight again swings, but stops before making contact with Gawain's exposed neck. Gawain grows angry and demands for the mysterious knight to strike. The Green Knight swings a third time, nicking Gawain's neck, and fails to deliver a serious wound. Gawain declares the game is over, and the Green Knight reveals himself to be Gawain's host, Sir Bertilak, transformed by the magic of Morgan le Fay, Arthur's sister. Bertilak knew of Gawain's deception, but also recognizes Gawain's good nature, and says that is why Gawain has received the strike he did. Upon Gawain's return to Camelot, he still feels guilty for his dishonesty, but his fellow Knights of the Round Table comfort him, and they all will wear a green sash to commemorate his adventure.

Each of the adventures discussed here are built around a series of tests. The medieval riddles pose a test of mental acuity, and the monsters of *Beowulf* provide a test of physical strength and prowess in warfare. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the tests are of virtue and courtly behavior. This theme is made apparent when the Green Knight remarks, after crashing Camelot's Christmas festivities, on the reputation of Arthur and his court:

> But since thy praises, prince, so proud are uplifted,
>
> And thy castle and courtiers are accounted the best,
>
> The stoutest in steel-gear that on steeds may ride,
>
> Most eager and honorable of the earth's people,
>
> Valiant to vie with in other virtuous sports,
>
> And here is knighthood renowned, as is noised in my ears. (*Gawain* 33)

After this recognition of the court's reputation, the Green Knight issues the challenge to play his game. By mentioning the fame of Arthur and then calling for a participant in his beheading game, the Green Knight has made the connection that Arthur, and therefore Camelot, do not deserve the lofty reputation they have if the Knights of the Round Table refuse to participate in the challenge. The stakes of the beheading game move beyond mere life-and-death and into the perceptions of honor and virtue.

This theme of honor and virtue continues through the end of the beheading game. Lawrence Warner observes that, later in the poem, "the hero's survival at the Green Chapel depends entirely on his behavior in the castle [i.e., Bertilak's home]" (Warner 339). Gawain's faithfulness and honesty form the measures by which he is judged in the game, which is complicated by the situation in which Gawain finds himself: "a deadly game of seduction" (Pearsall 248) that Gawain must navigate with courteous behavior. Conor McCarthy claims that the central conflict between Gawain and the Lady Bertilak is "the question of what courteous behaviour should be" (158). Courtesy is used to navigate these potentially difficult situations, and as such, creates structure, stability, and order. Without courtesy to guide his behavior, Gawain would have been more likely to fail the Green Knight's test. However, this poem tries to find the areas in which courtesy breaks down, effectively revealing the ambiguity that may remain in the sense-making system of courtesy. Any successful attempts to navigate these breakdowns offer guidance on how the chivalric traditions of courtesy and knightly honor can be improved and employed in future situations of potential chaos or disorder.

This chaos is also exhibited through the setting of the poem. The narrative starts in the civilized castle of Camelot, which traces its lineage through many notable

civilizations, going from when "the siege and the assault had ceased at Troy" to "Æneas the noble," then "royal Romulus to Rome his road had taken," and finally "Felix Brutus / on many a broad bank and brae Britain established" (*Gawain* 23). However, Gawain leaves civilization and goes far afield into the countryside, searching for the Green Chapel. When he discovers Sir Bertilak's castle, it is found "in the forest" (*Gawain* 52). Verlyn Flieger observes that "The wood as a place of mystery and otherness has been a standard *topos* for English writers from the Middle Ages to the present," which is illustrated "in the character of the Green Knight himself" ("Green" 89). The wilderness of the forest represents chaos and the unknown, which is absent in the predictable orderliness of civilized Camelot. The Green Knight, who invokes the green man tradition of medieval England, acts at least symbolically as an avatar of the forest. He introduces this chaotic element into the relative stability of Camelot, thus inaugurating the adventure itself. Arthurian order seeks mastery over the untamed lands, because "The tame, by its very desire for order, will edge out the wilderness" ("Green" 96), and thus the chivalry represented by Sir Gawain pushes against the wildness of the Green Knight's apparently monstrous character. When Gawain survives the beheading game, and receives Sir Bertilak's blessing, the supremacy of the chivalric order is acknowledged. However, while chaos and disorder may be marginalized by this domesticating order, it can never be completely eradicated, which is the lesson taught by Morgan Le Fay's and the Green Knight's elaborate ruse.

Bertilak, as the Green Knight, becomes the arbiter of Gawain's success. Flieger asserts that "his specific function in the plot is to test the hero's Christian virtues" ("Green" 90). Bertilak issues judgment on Gawain by administering the axe blow. While

he does find fault in Gawain for withholding the magic girdle, he does not consider it a capital offense. Instead, Bertilak scars Gawain's neck, explaining that the two "feints" (*Gawain* 114) did not make contact because, on the first two days, Gawain was loyal in his commitment to Bertilak. Gawain's error, and the reason for his wound, comes despite his strength of character. Bertilak explains that,

> As a pearl than white pease is prized more highly,
>
> so is Gawain, in good faith, than other gallant knights.
>
> But in this you lacked, sir, a little, and of loyalty came short.
>
> But that was for no artful wickedness, not for wooing either,
>
> but because you loved your own life: the less do I blame you. (*Gawain* 115)

Even though the Green Knight admits Gawain's superiority over other gallant knights, he also knows that Gawain is not without fault. However, this fault is adjudicated as a minor one; Gawain only broke his vow to protect his own life from certain death in the beheading game.

While courtesy is used as a sense-making system, its ultimate failure to protect Gawain from sinning indicates its inability to completely overcome the forces of chaos. Alice Blackwell asserts that the "Gawain's confusion and turmoil […] validates contemporary concerns that those who profess chivalry might not be able to keep its requirements—or themselves—in perspective" (70). Gawain's "obsession with his score card of chivalric value undermines his ability to practice it fully" (Blackwell 72), and the Knight of the Round Table with the strongest "reputation for courtesy" in medieval romances fails a test of chivalry (Moll 794). Gawain's confusion and the end of the tale reveals this ambiguity within courtly virtues; he does not understand precisely why he

failed the test, nor does he understand why both Bertilak and Arthur's court forgive him for his sin. This speaks to a limitation of chivalry, then, as the most exemplary form of chivalry cannot rely upon its formalities as a foolproof structure to create and ensure order. If chivalric courtesy is not enough, then chaos or ambiguity may return, as in *Beowulf*.

The medieval adventure story simultaneously dramatizes and represents structures intended to create order and meaning from the vast array of chaotic forces besetting their audiences. The formal structure of an adventure already gives meaningful shape to the world by providing a sensible trajectory or path. That is, with its heroic movement from naivety or ignorance to experience and knowledge, accomplished especially through the facing and overcoming of obstacles (be they riddles, monsters, or moral challenges) in a sort of liminal ordeal, the medieval adventure attempts to dispel the uncertain, ambiguous, or chaotic elements of one's world. However, ambiguities persist, which require that the adventure begin again, be retold, or be refashioned for new situations. The popularity of the form of the medieval romance in modern literature—especially, but not limited to, the fantasy genre—is thus telling. In the next chapter, I will discuss the ways in which these aspects of medieval adventure are taken up and refined in *The Lord of the Rings*, perhaps the most influential work of modern fantasy.

CHAPTER III

THE ADVENTURER PAUSES: SITES OF INSPIRATION, STILLNESS, AND CHALLENGE IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien returns to descriptions of the landscape, as well as discrete places and the overall geography. In this novel, and in the other tales which take place in Middle-earth, he highlights the importance of both setting and location. Readers have a clear picture of what the Shire looks like, with its gently rolling hills and farmlands, along with the peculiar houses, frequently comfortable "holes" in the ground with large round doors, of the Shire's eccentric inhabitants, thus making more real the fantastic setting of the narrative. Similarly, fantastic spaces like the Mines of Moria, with its grand underground chambers and menacing darkness, or Lothlórien, with its elves dwelling upon elaborate "flets" among the towering trees, become especially memorable given the detail in which the narrator describes them. In *The Road to Middle-earth*, T. A. Shippey has asserted that *The Lord of the Rings* involves a "cartographic plot" (100), and one could argue that the characteristics of the various locations in the novel are as important to Tolkien as the tale of Frodo and the other adventurers questing to destroy a ring. In this chapter, I explore how discrete places in Tolkien's epic adventure tale function as ways in which to motivate, prepare, and test heroes during the course of their adventure.

The Lord of the Rings, among many other things, tells the story of a Hobbit named Frodo Baggins and the ring he inherits from his eccentric cousin, Bilbo. Gandalf, a wizard, discovers that this ring is a magical artifact of great power, the Ruling Ring

forged by the evil Sauron centuries before in an attempt to gain control over the peoples of Middle-earth. Sauron seeks to recover the ring and reclaim its power for himself, as Gandalf warns Frodo. Later it is revealed that Sauron's terrifying emissaries (the Ringwraiths, formerly human but now undead creatures who serve as Sauron's lieutenants) are already on their way to the Shire. Frodo must escape and prevent the ring from being recaptured, and so, after waiting far too long, he takes his leave of Hobbiton with only his servant Samwise Gamgee, thus launching off on his adventure, some 78 years after Bilbo's own adventures that were recounted in *The Hobbit*. While still in the Shire, Frodo and Sam are joined by Frodo's cousins Meriadoc Brandybuck and Peregrin Took, and the four Hobbit companions face a number of scary trials before reaching Bree, a town just outside the Shire. There, just nine chapters into Tolkien's massive novel, Frodo discovers that his adventures have only just begun.

The Lord of the Rings is far too complex to facilitate neat summary, but Frodo's own extensive trajectory takes him through multiple travails from Bree to Rivendell, "the last Homely House east of the Sea" (*Fellowship* 272), the hidden redoubt of the great elvish loremaster named Elrond. The wise elf convenes a Council, attended by representatives of different races and cultures, to discuss the best way to defend Middle-earth from the might of Sauron. The Council of Elrond decides to destroy the Ring in the fires of Mount Doom, the place in which the Ring was originally forged, and the only place in which it can be unmade. A Fellowship of nine people, the four Hobbits, plus Gandalf, Aragorn (a Man who guided the Hobbits from Bree), Boromir (another human, from the land of Gondor to the Southeast), Gimli (a Dwarf from Erebor), and Legolas (an Elf of Mirkwood), is formed. The Fellowship of the Ring is tasked with escorting the

Ring as far as possible to Mount Doom, located in the heart of Mordor, Sauron's realm. In the course of their adventures, the members of the Fellowship experience a variety of hardships, trials, battles, and other threats, and the Fellowship itself is broken which leads to different adventures befalling various characters in disparate places at the same time. In the end, but largely due to unforeseen circumstances and aid, Frodo ultimately succeeds in destroying the Ring and defeating Sauron at great personal sacrifice.

The narrative itself is presented to the reader using the conceit that it is translated from an ancient book called the Red Book of Westmarch, whose author is Bilbo himself, with supplementary input from Frodo and later Sam. *The Lord of the Rings* includes a prologue and multiple appendices, as well as an index, which must have seemed strange considering that the work was supposed to be a sequel to a simple children's book. Tolkien, a philologist who specialized in Anglo-Saxon, was inspired by his academic studies and personal passions for the material to create entire fictive languages and cultures for his imaginary world of Middle-earth, often referring back to medieval Northern European culture and literature. The novel includes several maps, originally sketched by Tolkien himself (and finalized by his son Christopher), allowing the reader to track Frodo and the Fellowship as they travel across different lands of Middle-earth in their attempt to destroy the Ring. These maps emphasize the importance of space and place in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The adventure of *The Lord of the Rings* both begins and ends in the Shire. The Prologue and the first chapter, "A Long-Expected Party," establish the Shire as an idyllic land, mostly unknown or forgotten by the great powers elsewhere in Middle-earth, and the home of several members of the Fellowship. The final chapters of the novel relate the return of the heroic Hobbits, showing how they restore peace to the Shire after it fell into disarray during their absence, and detailing the reactions of these heroes after returning to their homeland from their long adventure. The Shire, as both the starting point and endpoint of the adventure, fulfills a unique role within the narrative of the novel. It is an origin, a destination, something to repair, and something to fight for.

The Shire is in some ways a paradise, at least to the Hobbits, who seem to prefer being isolated from the other realms and peoples of Middle-earth. This isolation keeps it from being a prominent player in the politics of Middle-earth, allowing the Hobbits to "[pass] once more out of the history of Men and of Elves" (*Fellowship* 23) until their dramatic reemergence towards the end of the Third Age. Some of this isolation is made possible by the protection provided by the Rangers, a group of humans who protect the lands around the Shire, while going unrecognized by the Hobbits. The cultural isolation of the Shire allows its inhabitants to reside in what Shippey calls "an old-fashioned and idealised England" (102). The other cultures of Middle-earth are constantly in conflict with one another, but the Shire's removal from this conflict helps foster its ideal isolation (from the perspective of its somewhat xenophobic residents, at least). In the end, whether we attribute the primary cause of this isolation to the Rangers' protection or the

peculiarities of Hobbit culture, the effect is the same: the Shire is an oft-forgotten spot on the road between the Grey Havens and the Misty Mountains with no special political significance to the great powers in other regions.

The Shire is a paradise where "peace and plenty were the rule," its citizens are "accustomed to plenty," and "The land was rich and kindly" (*Fellowship* 24). However, the fragility of the Shire's social stability is demonstrated through its conquest by Saruman and others near the end of *Return of the King*, which requires the heroes to "scour" the land. A character named Hob notes that the previous plenty has been taken by gatherers and sharers, and "we never see most of the stuff again" (*Return* 311), and while the Shire previously had minimal "Rules (as [the Hobbits] said), both ancient and just" (*Fellowship* 29), the once-free paradise becomes mired in restrictions, until "everything except Rules got shorter and shorter" (*Return* 326). A coup had taken place, and the new leadership effectively hoards all the food and resources produced in the Shire. Ultimately, the formerly-peaceful Shire becomes a scene of violence, as a battle is waged to restore the previous order to this unusual land.

The idyllic, peaceful nature of the Shire makes it simultaneously precious to those who have seen it and vulnerable to outside interference. Some Hobbits may feel a protectiveness and desire to preserve the Shire due to its vulnerability. Samwise, during his stay in Lothlórien, looks through Galadriel's mirror, and has a vision of what he calls "'some devilry at work in the Shire'" (*Fellowship* 428). An alien "large red-brick building" in the vision represents the disturbing and unwanted industrialization of the resolutely pre-industrial Shire, which in part causes such alarm for Sam (*Fellowship* 428). The vision includes the destruction of nature in addition to industrialization, which

disturbs the peaceful agrarian society that the Shire has been since its colonization by the

Hobbits many centuries before. Under the malign influence of Saruman, the traitorous

wizard, the Shire becomes more like his own city, Isengard, which itself is "only a little

copy" (*Two Towers* 189) of industrialized Mordor, Sauron's bleak land whose central

fortress appeared as "wall upon wall, battlement upon battlement, black, immeasurably

strong, mountain of iron, gate of steel, tower of adamant" (*Fellowship* 472).

The Shire, instead, is nearly untouched before Saruman's temporary rule, and

often described in pastoral terms.[1] The connection between the Shire and nature is even

evident in the preferred architectural style, buildings that are long and low, and that avoid

interrupting the scenery, often so low that they are underground entirely. At the end of

Return of the King, Sam's vision has come true: the vulnerable nature of the Shire is laid

bare in its need for scouring, when it is governed through restrictive "new rules" (*Return*

314) and threats of "beat[ings]" (*Return* 314) from "ruffians" (*Return* 316), while the

former plenty has turned into such severe hoarding of food and other commodities that

the general population "never see[s] most of that stuff" (*Return* 311). The preciousness of

the Shire highlights the fragility of the rest of Middle-earth: if even the oft-forgotten

Shire can be destroyed, then there is no hope of hiding from the Sauron and other

enemies.

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[1] Scholars will recognize that the Shire is an anachronism in the mythic world of Middle-earth. Tolkien described the Shire as being based on the West Midlands of England in the late nineteenth-century, "more or less a Warwickshire village of about the period of the Diamond Jubilee" (*Letters* 178). Saruman's industrialization is all the more jarring in the medieval Middle-earth, but is also the fate of the rural countryside that Tolkien used to model the Shire.

Mordor, however, is a dark reflection of the Shire's paradisiacal nature. Instead of a rustic paradise, Mordor is the hellish land, even covered in "cloud and smoke now lit again beneath with a sullen glow of red" (*Return* 192). Stefan Ekman claims Mordor "reflects the evil of its ruler through highly unpleasant living conditions" (176). Even though some "parts of Mordor, farther away from the Dark Tower and the volcano, are comparatively fertile" (Ekman 182), the vegetation still seems to be affected. Sauron's evil "may only stunt or corrupt" the plantlife, which are occasionally "portrayed as turning to evil, like the brambles of Mordor, with their long, piercing thorns and hooked, sharp barbs" (Ekman 183). The idea of a landscape reflecting its evil ruler is apparent in earlier fantasy literature as well. Ekman recognizes that Grendel's mere in *Beowulf* is called a "dygel lond" (l. 1357), which Ekman glosses as "secret, mysterious, or dark land" (Ekman 177). The dramatic landscape of Mordor inserts itself into this long tradition of associating the geography and ecology of a place with the moral condition of its inhabitants. Tolkien, true to his Anglo-Saxon studies, uses a similar method of denotation in naming Mordor: the appendix in *The Silmarillion* glosses the word *mor* as "dark" (*Silmarillion* 453) and *dôr* as "land" (*Silmarillion* 448). Still, this hellish domain inverts the Shire's land-of-plenty motif; Mordor is a land-of-suffering, a place where laughter "had not been heard […] since Sauron came to Middle-earth" (*Two Towers* 379). Mordor, as the seat of Middle-earth's embodiment of evil, is diametrically opposed to the other political entities of the world. This political opposition manifests itself in the very landscape itself, generating the mountainous and volcanic formations Mordor's geography is known for.

The Shire forms a model society for the Hobbits, inspiring them during their adventures across Middle-earth. Before leaving, Frodo states that he "should like to save the Shire, if I could" (*Fellowship* 88), and he continues, "I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable; I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold, even if my feet cannot stand there again" (88-89). By the end of the tale, Frodo remarks that he "tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me" (*Return* 345). Though Frodo desires to save the Shire, and ultimately succeeds, he recognizes that the adventure has irrevocably changed him, and he can no longer enjoy the world he protected. Later, the Shire provides more direct motivations to adventure when the Hobbits must restore peace and remove Sharkey (i.e., Saruman) and the villains who corrupted the society there. The occupied Shire is a reflection of the dystopian landscape that Pippin and Merry witness at Isengard and Frodo and Sam witness in Mordor, which is also inspiring, but in a negative way, as a cautionary example to be avoided. The example of Mordor and the subjugated Shire inspires heroic resistance to outside political and economic interference rather than relying upon the merely protectionist policies of isolation as in the past. With these motivations, the Hobbits begin their adventures, but additional preparation is needed to overcome the obstacles they will face.

Sites of Stillness and Preparation: Rivendell and Lothlórien

After Frodo and his traveling companions leave Bree, they are attacked by the Ringwraiths on Weathertop, a hill overlooking the Great East Road. They are forced to

flee, pursued by their enemy, toward the elvish enclave of Rivendell, where they hope to reunite with Gandalf and meet Elrond. Although it is hidden and thus protected, Rivendell is perhaps the most open of the elven realms and does accept visitors from other races, hosting the Rangers of the North among other wayfaring travelers in need of assistance. Rivendell also made an appearance in *The Hobbit*, as a place of rest and of knowledge (as Elrond translated the runes inscribed on Thorin's map), thus helping the adventurers prepare for the trials to come. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Rivendell retains this function. When the Hobbits arrive with their guide, the ranger Strider (soon revealed to be Aragorn, heir to the throne of Gondor), they discover that others have journeyed to Rivendell with quests of their own. As luck or fate would have it, all these quests are related to the growing influence of Sauron and the search for the Ring. The Council of Elrond convenes as a way for these characters to discuss the problems they face. The Council, guided by the wisdom of Elrond and Gandalf, decides to destroy the Ring.

Rivendell is often associated with stories and learning, as exemplified in the tales told during the Council of Elrond and in the Hall of Fire, a place for singing and storytelling in Elrond's house. The adventurers learn much about the geopolitics of Middle-earth during their stay, and this improved knowledge assists in their planning of the adventures to come. The city is well-protected by Elrond and elven magic, but has always been associated with lore instead of commerce or war. Because of this association, Rivendell was a great location for Bilbo to retire to after taking his leave of the Shire. The book Bilbo worked on during his stay at Rivendell forms the basis of the Red Book of Westmarch, which means that much of the text of *The Lord of the Rings*

was written by Bilbo at Rivendell. Hence the connection between Rivendell and lore is so deep, it even sneaks into the metafiction of the novel.

After his sudden disappearance from the Shire in the first chapter of the novel, Bilbo Baggins makes his way to Rivendell, where he resides for almost the entirety of the adventure. Besides working on his book, he also writes songs and other lore, which include the "Song of Eärendil" that Bilbo sings during Frodo's stay at Rivendell. In his analysis of the complexities of this song, Shippey suggests "The overall effect of the song in Rivendell is perhaps to show Bilbo approaching a body of lore and of poetry higher than the normal hobbitic vein, higher indeed than mortals can normally comprehend" (194). This effect is not limited to Bilbo alone; it seems as though many, if not all, the visitors to Rivendell feel an increased appreciation of storytelling and learning. A footnote in Tolkien's letter to Milton Waldman states that "Elrond symbolises throughout the ancient wisdom, and his House [Rivendell] represents Lore—the preservation in reverent memory of all tradition concerning the good, wise, and beautiful" (*Letters* 153). Rivendell's embodiment of lore and learning serves to teach the assembled characters as they make sense of the geopolitical events in Middle-earth.

During of the Council of Elrond, many of those gathered there relate their individual stories in turn: Gandalf describes his capture and escape from Saruman, Boromir tells of his dream-vision, Aragorn discusses his efforts to track down and ultimately capture Gollum, Legolas reveals how Gollum escaped from the Elves' custody, and, perhaps most importantly, Bilbo discloses the true story of his acquiring the Ring, to mention a few. The sharing of these tales creates awareness among the listeners, who teach their experiences while they learn from others. These lessons illustrate the

importance of the adventure to come (i.e., the destruction of the Ring), and provide the characters with the knowledge necessary to undertake the adventure. After the Council of Elrond, the various assembled visitors of Rivendell determine the exact membership of the Fellowship of the Ring, and the company begins its new adventure. The virtue of Rivendell in *The Lord of the Rings* may come from its ability to foster learning. In a letter, when describing a conversation between Arwen and Frodo in Minas Tirith, after the Ring had been destroyed, Tolkien noted that Frodo was confused, but says that "at Rivendell he [Frodo] came to understand things more clearly" (*Letters* 329). This understanding comes from the realm's focus on lore and learning, and provides clarity and direction to those who are struggling with ambiguity and aimlessness.

This narrative positioning allows Rivendell to function as a respite from danger. Tolkien calls it "not a scene of *action* but of *reflection*. Thus it is a place to be visited on the way to all deeds, or 'adventures' […] So necessarily in *The Lord of the Rings*, having escaped to Elrond from the imminent pursuit of present evil, the hero departs in a wholly new direction: to go and face it at its source" (*Letters* 153). Frodo seeks safety in Rivendell, which provides healing and shelter from the action found most everywhere else in Middle-earth. A turning point in the narrative arrives occurs during Frodo's stay in Rivendell: danger spurs him onto his initial adventure, but after Rivendell, Frodo heads toward the danger. The narrative surrounds Rivendell with action, but only stillness is within; as Gandalf says, "You are in Rivendell, and you need not worry about anything for the present" (*Fellowship* 270).

The change in situation, in which Frodo changes from moving away from danger to moving toward danger, represents a larger change in the narrative of the novel. The

driving impetus of *The Lord of the Rings*, by which I mean the destruction of the Ring, does not come until long after Frodo's arrival at Rivendell. Shippey discusses the struggles that Frodo had in starting his adventure, writing:

> It is for one thing remarkable that Frodo has to be dug out of no less than five 'Homely Houses' before his quest is properly launched: first Bag End, then the little house at Crickhollow with its redundant guardian Fredegar Bolger, then the house of Tom Bombadil, then the *Prancing Pony*, and finally Rivendell with its 'last Homely House east of the Sea'. (104)

Frodo's desire to rest comfortably at a home-like environment is, in part, what gives the Shire its motivational power. In this way, the comforts of Rivendell are Frodo's last chance to indulge in the simple contentment to which the Hobbits are accustomed. Rivendell, as a homely house, is welcoming, and embraces its assorted visitors. Elrond is learned in healing lore, and offers his services to Frodo (and presumably other travelers). The Hobbits stay in Rivendell for two months, as do the other guests of Elrond. The Fellowship's delay in leaving indicates just how inviting and homely the House of Elrond is, and how dreadful and forbidding the adventure beyond will be.

Rivendell is also the site of mental challenges. Boromir suggest that "The might of Elrond is in wisdom not in weapons, it is said" (*Fellowship* 296). In addition to learning and arming themselves with information, the Council of Elrond must solve problems. When confronted with one of these problems, Erestor, one of the elves in attendance, summarizes by saying "there are but two courses, as Glorfindel already has declared: to hide the Ring for ever; or to unmake it. But both are beyond our power. Who will read this riddle for us?" (*Fellowship* 320). The unusual word choice in Erestor's

question merits further investigation. Erestor's use of the word *read* invokes an Anglo-Saxon tradition of counseling and control. Nicholas Howe traces the Old English word *rædan* through its etymological roots and suggest that it has "the principal meanings of 'to give advise or counsel,' to exercise control over something,' and 'to explain something obscure,' such as a riddle" before evolving into the Modern English *read* (4-5). Reading riddles, to use Erestor's words, involves learning and critical thinking, as well as sharing with a community because "giving advice and solving riddles depend on a shared set of beliefs and body of knowledge" (Howe 5). The Council of Elrond—and Rivendell as a whole—establishes a shared set of beliefs (Sauron must be defeated) and body of knowledge (hence the telling of tales) in order to communally "read" the riddle of the Ring. The communal acts of learning and reading are vital to Sauron's eventual defeat, and the pause at Rivendell provides opportunity for these educational communities to develop.

Perhaps in part because this sharing of lore is so important to the fight against Sauron, Elrond seeks to protect it. Tolkien states that "The devotion to 'learning', as such and without reference to one's own repute, is a high and even in a sense spiritual vocation" (*Letters* 337). Elrond and Gandalf, as high and spiritual beings, would probably value learning for its own sake. Tolkien himself seems to fear the loss of knowledge, and Elrond's preoccupation with the gathering and recording of knowledge reflects Tolkien's perspective. Tolkien describes this attitude as "the preservation in reverent memory of all tradition concerning the good, wise, and beautiful" (*Letters* 153). This preservation of lore leads to the stillness within Rivendell: the preoccupation with learning over action leads to stasis, a common condition among Elvenkind.

This theme of preservation is also present in Lothlórien, the elven kingdom ruled by Galadriel and her husband Celeborn. The Fellowship arrives in the mystical woods of Lothlórien after their trials in Moria. They seek rest with the elves in the forests of Lothlórien, called the Golden Wood due to the beautiful trees that grow there. Over the course of the Third Age, Lothlórien has become more withdrawn, isolated, and impenetrable, and even Legolas the elf does not know much about his distant kin there, saying

> It is long since any of my own folk journeyed hither back to the land whence we
>
> wandered in ages long ago […] but we hear that Lórien is not yet deserted, for
>
> there is a secret power here that holds evil from the land. Nevertheless its folk are
>
> seldom seen, and maybe the dwell now deep in the woods and far from the
>
> northern border. (*Fellowship* 400)

Despite the secretive and withdrawn nature of the Elves, the now Gandalf-less Fellowship makes contact with the Elves of Lothlórien and are welcomed into the kingdom, though the Elves are reluctant to admit the Dwarf Gimli, since a great mistrust has arisen between Dwarves and Elves and persisted through the ages. The Fellowship spends a month in Lothlórien, and all of them are especially impressed by the queen, Galadriel.

Galadriel, like Elrond, is preoccupied by preservation. She, however, preserves the forest of Lothlórien instead of the more abstract Lore. Galadriel accomplishes this by using one of the three Rings of Power given to the elf-lords and holding the forest in a magical stasis. For the Fellowship, this creates a confusion of time: "In Lothlórien we can see Tolkien exploiting, for instance, variant ideas about the elves and time" (Shippey 59).

The stillness enforced by Galadriel and her Ring baffles the Fellowship as they exit the forest and resume their adventure: Frodo watches Galadriel as the Fellowship sails away, and he observes that "She seemed no longer perilous or terrible, nor filled with hidden power. Already she seemed to him, as by men of later days Elves still at times are seen: present and yet remote, a living vision of that which has already been left far behind by the flowing streams of Time" (*Fellowship* 440). She seems like a part of the past even as he still lays eyes on her, creating a disassociation in time. But Verlyn Flieger recognizes that Tolkien "decided to have no time difference between [Lothlórien] and the rest of the world" (*Question* 101), so this disassociation is not a break in time as much as it may be a layering of time, the present on top of the past, and perhaps the future, as well. When Sam expresses confusion about how much time they had spent in the enchanted wood, seemingly for a few days only, Aragorn explains they were actually there for a whole month: "There time flowed swiftly by us, as for the Elves. The old moon passed, and a new moon waxed and waned in the world outside, while we tarried there" (*Fellowship* 458). This apparent magic affecting the realm itself is somewhat like the ambiguities of Galadriel's mirror, which provides visions of "things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be," according to Galadriel herself, who then cautions "But which it is that he sees, even the very wise cannot always tell" (427).

After observing that the moon is just as full upon their exit from Lothlórien as it was upon their entrance, Sam says he "'can remember three nights there for certain, and I seem to remember several more, but I would take my oath it was never a whole month. Anyone would think that time did not count in there!'" (*Fellowship* 457). Frodo responds that "'perhaps that was the way of it […] In that land, maybe we were in a time that has

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elsewhere long gone by'" (*Fellowship* 457-458). Flieger remarks that "the sensations experienced by the Company at their departure from [Lothlórien] emphasize the atmosphere of 'pastness' and contrast this with their sense of a return to the present and of an actual physical progress into the future" (*Question* 93). The dissonance in time— Lothlórien in the past and the rest of Middle-earth in the present—preserves the forest and its inhabitants from attacking orcs and the armies of Sauron (along with, it should be noted, foreboding elvish armies), removing them from harm, but also causes the elven community to become inwardly-focused.

However, the stillness in time does afford some advantages to the Fellowship. While they recover from the traumatic experience in Moria, they also spend their time learning. Galadriel offers Sam and Frodo the opportunity to look into her Mirror, which grants them visions of possible presents and futures. Sam witnesses "some devilry at work in the Shire" (*Fellowship* 428) and Frodo has multiple visions, which include the return of Gandalf and the Eye of Sauron. Galadriel warns Frodo that "You may learn something, and whether what you see be fair or evil, that may be profitable, and yet it may not. Seeing is both good and perilous" (*Fellowship* 429). Learning may be valuable, but it is also risky; Sam desires to return home, and Frodo feels horror upon seeing the Eye. Even though the viewer may see "profitable" (*Fellowship* 427) things in the Mirror, Galadriel does remark that "The Mirror is dangerous as a guide of deeds" (*Fellowship* 428).

As the scene continues, Frodo recognizes that Galadriel wears a Ring of Power, one of the three magical artifacts given to the Elves. Again, there is an example of risky learning: when Frodo discovers that Galadriel wields a Ring of Power, he knows how

both his success and defeat mean the end of Lothlórien, but his knowledge also increases the risk that Lothlórien bears. As the Fellowship sails along the Great River, Frodo mentions "Caras Galadon, where Galadriel wields the Elven-ring," and is shushed by Aragorn, who says: "That should not have been said outside Lórien" (*Fellowship* 458). It is easier for Sauron to discover that Galadriel holds the ring if more people know of its location. Frodo's knowledge of her ring, as well as his visions of things that are and that may be, might prove useful as his adventure progresses.

In addition, Legolas and Gimli "had now become fast friends" after their stay in Lothlórien (*Fellowship* 439). This is a peculiar friendship, since Elves and Dwarves have long distrusted each other. Their friendship may be unusual, but it illustrates the important bond that the Fellowship develops through their traveling. Much like how the relationships began in the stillness in Rivendell, they are now strengthened in Lothlórien. These moments of pause and respite are important for the Fellowship to grow closer, since their friendship may power them through moments in the adventure in which they lose hope. The strengthened relationships of the Fellowship members, as well as a better understanding of what may be at stake, makes the Company more emotionally prepared to continue their adventure.

The culmination of the lessons learned at Rivendell and the foresight brought by the Fellowship's stay in Lothlórien prepares them for tests that they face over the course of their adventure. Additionally, the bonds that started in Rivendell are solidified by the time they leave Lothlórien, culminating in unlikely friendships. These connections provide support during the most challenging moments of their adventures together, and the Fellowship's companionship is vital to passing the coming tests.

Sites of Danger and Testing: The Old Forest and Fangorn

As Frodo and his travelling companions set out from the Shire, they must pass through the Hedge, which helps form the border of their settlement. As Corinne Zemmour describes, the Hedge "unclimbed and unclimbable […] symbolizes the demarcation between a given society and a universe so alien that it is quite simply an 'unreal country' (160)" (Zemmour 137). This barrier separates the pastoral, idyllic world of the Shire from a world of aggressive, resistant nature in the Old Wood, but "The frontier line of the hedge does not, however, merely separate two worlds: it will act as a conduit between them" (Zemmour 140). The Hedge provides a border which marks a zone of contact between the Shire and the Old Forest, such that passing beyond it constitutes leaving home for theH. As Merry remarks when he escorts everyone through the Hedge's gate, "You have left the Shire, and are now outside, and on the edge of the Old Forest" (*Fellowship* 144). The words he uses are primarily concerned with boundaries: left, outside, and edge. If the Hedge is the internal boundary of the Shire, then, the Old Forest is the edge of the rest of Middle-earth to the east.

By passing through the gate, the Hobbits move "from the inner to the outer stage, from the world of the hobbits to the other world" (Zemmour 141). This transition leads to a change in their understanding of Middle-earth. The Old Forest, as their first introduction to the rest of Middle-earth, creates its own space of education. The forest does not make this lesson an easy one; instead, it holds "ambivalence" towards the questing hobbits, a "scene of conflict and transgression" (Zemmour 142). Some denizens

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of the Old Forest, though, take it a step further: Old Man Willow, for example, is not ambivalent regarding their presence, but rather outwardly hostile. He moves from transgression to aggression, going from the merely making the travelers unwelcome to preemptively striking against the four Hobbits before they commit any acts of violence against the Old Forest itself.

Tom Bombadil, a peculiar being who lives in the Old Forest, saves the Hobbits from Old Man Willow. Tolkien asserts that Tom is "intentionally" one of multiple "enigmas" present in the novel (*Letters* 174). As a *genius loci*, he represents the frivolous and unconcerned spirit of the Old Forest. When the Council of Elrond considers sending Tom the Ring, Gandalf remarks that "Such things have no hold on his mind. He would be a most unsafe guardian" (*Fellowship* 318). Though Tom represents the Old Forest, he does not hold dominion over it: "He is *master* in a peculiar way: he has no fear, and no desire of possession or domination at all. He merely knows and understands about such things as concern him in his natural little realm. He hardly even judges, and as far as can be seen makes no effort to reform or remove even the Willow" (*Letters* 192). In this way, Tom's control over the forest is not used to tame, but only to occasionally intercede. When Tom rescues the Hobbits, he shelters them in his home, but his inability to remember things which he deems unimportant shows that the Old Forest also cares little for the world outside.

The Old Forest is not alone in its antagonistic forestry. The woods of Fangorn are also a space of adventure and danger, in which Merry and Pippin become lost and then take part in a new adventure. As Weronika Łaszkiewicz notes, "a journey into the wild woods becomes a symbolic representation of a journey into one's self, which can uncover

the secrets and desires locked in a person's mind" (41). After escaping from the orc raiding party, the Hobbits are forced to seek shelter in Fangorn, where a moment of reflection is interrupted by the forest's namesake (or perhaps the namesake is the other way around), Treebeard. The initial meeting holds potential for conflict and misunderstanding, but ultimately Treebeard decides not to kill Merry and Pippin, since they are apparently not orcs, and instead decides they must be something new, and previously unknown in Fangorn. This site of conflict, this threshold, eventually gives way to a mutual dislike of Saruman, the industrializing wizard who ordered the Hobbits kidnapped and has been systematically destroying the forest under Treebeard's protection. These two parties eventually decide on an alliance: as Pippin says, "I should like to see the White Hand overthrown" (*Two Towers* 91).

The independence and decisiveness of these two younger Hobbits characterize their new friendship with Treebeard and the Ents. Their reflection within the woods demonstrates the power of the nature of their experience here. Łaszkiewicz calls this "[t]he liminal nature of [a] journey into the green depth" (41), and we can see the changed perspective through the actions taken by Merry and Pippin. The two are the youngest of the four Hobbits, with Pippin not yet of age and Merry only just. At the forming of the Fellowship, Elrond wants to send the two home, especially Pippin, saying "My heart is against his going" (*Fellowship* 331) with the Fellowship, and Gandalf must intercede on their behalf for the two Hobbits to be granted a place within the Nine. In Fangorn, however, they engage in politics in their own right by marching with Treebeard and the Ents on Isengard, and enact political action through their own will, without intercession from others. Later, Merry and Pippin fight against the forces of Mordor in

Rohan and Gondor. The experiences with the Ents at Isengard prepare the two Hobbits for this combat, as well as the later Scouring of the Shire and the Battle of Bywater. While there may have been concerns initially about their readiness to join the Fellowship, this signals a maturity in their development. This activity demonstrates the beginning of a continuous political involvement: Merry becomes a Rider of the Mark, serving King Éomer, and later becomes the Master of Buckland, an inherited position of authority over part of the Shire. Pippin is knighted by Aragorn after fighting as a soldier of Gondor and becomes the Thain of the Shire, the traditional military leader of the Shire. All of this political engagement has roots in their conversations with Treebeard, the figure who promotes this involvement within the young Hobbits.

The locations of *The Lord of the Rings* provide important insight into the characters of the novel. The motivations of the hobbits are often rooted in their homeland, and their desire to protect (or later, to restore) the Shire appears frequently in the adventure. Motivations, however, are not enough to ensure the successful completion of an adventure, and the restful locations give the adventurers an opportunity to prepare for coming challenges, whether through the gaining of knowledge or friendships. With both motivation and preparation behind them, the adventurers are ready to undertake challenges, though some tests may still be failed. With the adventurers ready to complete their adventure, I look to the end of the adventure, its denouement, and outcomes.

CHAPTER IV

THE ADVENTURE RETURNS: THE END OF ADVENTURE IN *READY PLAYER ONE*

The adventure tale seems to necessitate a journey forth, but also a return back home. Because it appears during the *dénouement* of the tale, after the climax of the tale and the resolution of the primary drama, such a return might be overlooked by the impatient reader.

The word *adventure* itself suggests the importance of the end. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *adventure* is related to *advene*, "To arrive, to come" ("Adventure"). Robert T. Tally Jr. suggests that "If we were to characterize the adventure *story* as a distinctive literary genre, we might conclude that the adventure is only accomplished at this point, with the return (or advent) of the wandering hero" (Tally 22). It appears that the return of the hero is essential to the tale's classification as an adventure. With this in mind, in this chapter, I look to a more recent text, Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One*, in order to analyze the importance of the return in these new forms of adventure stories. The adventure functions as a series of lessons in *Ready Player One*, and the hero's return is a culmination of the lessons learned throughout the adventure, illustrating how the hero's perspective has been altered by the journey.

"Home" represents a complicated idea to Wade Watts, the protagonist of *Ready Player One*. As the novel begins, it is clear that Wade has a miserable home life, set in a dystopian United States in the 2040s amid a "bleak landscape of overcrowded cities, endemic food shortages, and social malaise" (Nordstrom 242). He lives in the slums of Oklahoma City with his aunt and thirteen other people, including an abusive step-uncle in a double-wide trailer, within a residential complex called The Stacks, so named because the trailers are placed one on top of the other, reaching some twenty units high. At first, this is basically the only world he knows. For example, when Wade programs his first game on an old Atari 2600 system, he patterns it after his neighborhood, and the player must "navigate through a vertical maze of trailers, collecting junk computers, snagging food-voucher power-ups, and avoiding meth addicts and pedophiles on your way to school," but he readily acknowledges that "My game was a lot more fun than the real thing" (Cline 22-23). Wade seeks to escape this terrible homelife through the digital world of the OASIS, a vast, virtual reality that offers relief from the global economic crises and harsh living conditions.

The OASIS provides a surrogate home for Wade, as well as the setting for most of his adventure. The "Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation," or the OASIS, started as a video game consisting of hundreds of planets for the players to explore (Cline 48). Over time, the OASIS expanded its userbase and the planets on which the users play, eventually even licensing the worlds from popular science fiction and fantasy texts, including "Middle Earth [sic]. Vulcan. Pern. Arrakis. Magrathea.

Discworld, Mid-World, Riverworld, Ringworld. Worlds upon worlds" (Cline 49).[2] These

worlds become planets within the OASIS, and "Users could now teleport back and forth

between their favorite fictional worlds" (Cline 49). Over time, the video game aspects of

the OASIS became less important to the majority of the OASIS users, who wouldn't

"bother with the gaming aspects of the simulation at all. They only used the OASIS for

entertainment, business, shopping, and hanging out with their friends" (Cline 50).

However, for those still interested in the gaming aspects of the OASIS, "Completing

quest, fighting NPCs [non-player characters], and gathering treasure" were all worthy

pastimes. Additionally, the OASIS seems to have a near-complete library of books,

movies, music, video games, and other sources of entertainment to partake in. By

entering the OASIS, the user has access to countless diversions.

When the mysterious and reclusive creator of the OASIS, James Halliday, dies,

the main adventure story of the novel is set in motion. In his video will, he bequeaths the

ownership of the OASIS, as well as his vast fortune, to whoever can find the "Easter egg"

he has hidden somewhere within the game.[3] The novel thus combines the escapist fantasy

of the video game adventure with a real-world quest for fame, wealth, and power.

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[2] As Tolkien scholars would point out, "Middle Earth" is incorrect as a designation and as a fantasy world. The proper name is "Middle-earth," which Tolkien insisted "is not the name of a never-ever land" separate from "the world we live in," but rather derives from "the Middle English *middel-erde*" or "the name for the inhabited lands of Men 'between the seas.'" Hence, For Tolkien, "this 'history' [i.e., *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*] is supposed to take place in a period of the actual Old World of this planet" (*Letters* 220).
[3] As video game aficionados recognize, an "Easter egg" is a secret feature hidden in a video game, a bonus intended to reward especially thorough, curious, and adventurous players. Less well known, perhaps, is that this device was pioneered by the programmer of the early Atari 2600 game called *Adventure*, first released in 1979-1980. Hence, the very idea of the video game "Easter egg" is connected in more than one way to the adventure genre.

In *Ready Player One*, gunters—a name derived from a shorthand for "egg hunters"—take up the call to arms, and scour through the details of Halliday's life and through the vast geography of the OASIS virtual world for clues to the Easter egg's whereabouts (Cline 8). Wade becomes a gunter and joins the Hunt for the Easter egg, adopting the name Parzival "after the knight of Arthurian legend who had found the Holy Grail," which demonstrates his own sense of being part of a heroic quest narrative, though his friends usually just call him "Z" (Aronstein and Thompson 56). Over the course of the novel (and his adventure), Wade must come to realize the perils involved when this escapist fantasy of a video game actually becomes his lived reality. Language referring to "real" versus "virtual" worlds presents difficulties here, as these are so easily blurred in the world of *Ready Player One*. While the OASIS is a near-limitless virtual universe, it does exist in many of the same ways that the actual reality does. With specialized equipment, users within the OASIS can experience touch just like they can outside the OASIS. Additionally, relationships and communication may be as valid inside the OASIS as outside it. However, the novel does make distinction between the two, and as such, I will refer to the reality outside the OASIS as the actual or physical, and as the adjective-less "reality" as the novel does to differentiate the two (Cline 364).

The most pressing of these perils come from Innovative Online Industries (IOI), a "global communications conglomerate" (Cline 33) interested in finding Halliday's Easter egg and controlling the future of the OASIS. IOI attempts to coerce Parzival into assisting their investigation. Parzival declines, and IOI reveals they know his true identity as Wade Watts before triggering an explosion in his trailer. Wade left his home earlier, and therefore he was not harmed in the attack. However, with his home destroyed, Wade

decides to leave Oklahoma and find some way to bring IOI and its head of operations, Nolan Sorrento, to justice.

Hiding from IOI, Wade sets up temporary living quarters in Columbus, Ohio, where he "made a silent vow not to go outside until I had completed my quest. I would abandon the real world altogether until I found the egg" (Cline 166). This new home was basically a single room; Wade notes that "The room itself wasn't much to look at, which was fine, because I spent as little time looking at it as possible" (Cline 191). The apartment contained only items needed to sustain him while playing the game, and Wade even had his food automatically delivered to him. The spartan furnishings illustrate how little commitment he has to his real-world existence. He does not keep any food or decorate the apartment, which reflects his upbringing in a dystopian world as well as his commitment to remain in the fantasy world of the gunter's adventure in the OASIS.

Instead of attempting to improve or personalize his apartment, he focuses his attention and his earnings on "my OASIS immersion rig. I'd invested every spare cent I had in it. Newer faster, or more versatile components were always being released, so I was constantly spending large chunks of my meager income on upgrades" (191). The immersion rig he describes is the only furniture Wade has in his new apartment, featuring mainly just a haptic chair capable of "transforming from a bed back into its chair configuration" (190). His other modifications to the apartment are limited to the entry, which has been made significantly more secure to protect him from any potential physical-world attacks. In essence, Wade's apartment in Columbus is nothing more than a box built to protect and sustain his life while he continues to explore the universe of the OASIS.

The isolated and utilitarian apartment reinforces Wade's reliance on the OASIS system. As Nordstrom observes, Wade looks to the OASIS for "refuge from emotional pain and the hardships of everyday life" (245). There is nothing of comfort in Wade's apartment besides the OASIS: he lacks companionship, home-cooked food, cozy furniture, and diversified hobbies outside of the OASIS. Aronstein and Thompson assert that "Eating, sleeping, and exercising are all done grudgingly, and only to prepare Wade's body for Parzival's life in the OASIS" (61). Wade's entire existence is structured around maximizing his time and abilities within the OASIS. The destruction of Wade's home and the murder of his aunt and fellow tenants of the Stacks have encouraged his removal from human contact and his retreat into escapist fantasy.

If Wade's apartment in the real world was underfurnished at best, Parzival's residence in the OASIS demonstrates his focus on the virtual reality. Parzival's command center is on "[his] own private asteroid" complete with an underground stronghold (Cline 200). Parzival states that "My stronghold was my home inside the OASIS. My avatar's sanctuary" (201). This stronghold houses Parzival's "impressive collection of weapons, magic items, and vehicles" (203). Even though Wade cannot even be bothered to keep food or other essentials in his apartment, Parzival appears to be a digital packrat, collecting any mildly-useful object he can find to assist in his quest for the egg.

These items provide a videogame-like sequence of outfitting a character for questing. Parzival describes an arming sequence, saying:

> I put on my gleaming +10 Hale Mail powered armor, then strapped on my
> favorite set of blaster pistols and slung a pump-action pistol-grip shotgun across
> my back, along with a +5 Vorpal Bastard Sword. I also grabbed a few other

essential items. An extra pair of antigrav boots. A Ring of Magic Resistance. An

Amulet of Protection. Some Gauntlets of Giant Strength. I hated the idea of

needing something and not having it with me, so I usually ended up carrying

enough equipment for three gunters. When I ran out of room on my avatar's body,

I stored additional gear in my Backpack of Holding. (213)

Parzival goes on to describe his spaceship and, later, his car. Wade/Parzival is

materialistic, but this trait is only exhibited within the OASIS. In the actual world, the

dystopian neglect invades his apartment, but Parzival is obsessed with having the best of

everything so that he may be prepared.

The dystopian real-world reality contrasts with the virtual world of the OASIS.

Wade neglects his reality in order to be better outfitted in the virtual. This preparation

serves Parzival well throughout the adventure, in which he quests for Halliday's Easter

egg.

Virtual Adventure

When Halliday had set up the quest for the Easter egg in his will, he had

explained the framework on which the quest is built. Halliday, in his OASIS persona

Anorak, recites the following rhyme:

> *Three hidden keys open three secret gates*
>
> *Wherein the errant will be tested for worthy traits*
>
> *And those with the skill to survive these straits*
>
> *Will reach The End where the prize awaits*. (Cline 6)

Halliday's quest comes in three parts, hearkening back to the three-part structure of the

adventure in *Beowulf* and the hunting game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, not to

mention the famous poem beginning "Three rings for the Elven-kings" that is ominously

recited in *The Lord of the Rings*. The gunters must find three keys made of copper, jade,

and crystal, respectively, then locate the gate that corresponds to each key, and afterwards

overcome the challenge presented within the gate to be given a riddle, reminiscent of the

medieval tradition as exemplified by the *Exeter Book*, that when solved will provide

information about the location of the next key. In the five years since Halliday's death, no

one has yet discovered even the first key. Wade, as Parzival, realizes that the Copper Key

has been hidden near his school in the OASIS and becomes the first person to

successfully retrieve it after winning a game of *Joust*, an old arcade game whose

gameplay and imagery continue the medievalist fantasy themes of the novel.

As Parzival attempts to exit the Copper Key's hiding-place, he runs into Art3mis,

a gunter and blogger who was "something of a celebrity" in the hunt for Halliday's egg,

and on whom Parzival has a crush, although they have never met in person (Cline 35).

Art3mis, whose name suggests her preoccupation with the hunt in much the same way

that Parzival's does the quest, admits that she discovered this location three weeks earlier,

but has been unable to win the game of *Joust* to obtain the key.[4] The nearly-equal skills

of Parzival and Art3mis sets up a friendly rivalry between the two, and the pace of the

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[4] Despite Art3mis's female appearance in the OASIS, virtual appearances are completely customizable. The body fluidity in the OASIS presents some concern between Parzival and his friends that Art3mis may not be female in the real world, or indeed anything like her OASIS-persona at all. Ultimately, Wade finds out that Art3mis is female in the real world, and this particular tension does not play into any possible romance between the two.

adventure escalates. Art3mis retrieves the Copper Key for herself shortly after Parzival, and then Parzival's best friend, Aech (pronounced like the letter "H"), obtains it. Shortly thereafter, two Japanese gunters, Daito and Shoto, follow suit and these five gunters represent the leaders in the race to find Halliday's Easter egg.

In order to find Halliday's egg, IOI employs a team of gunters identical to each other, as well as a team of researchers who can feed information to the gunters. Other gunters employ a similar strategy of teamwork similar to IOI's, and formed "gunter clans," built around sharing information and "working together to find the egg" (Cline 34). Teamwork may provide advantages, but "solo" players like Parzival, Aech, and Art3mis refuse to join (Cline 34). Parzival says this is because "If you were a solo, you didn't want or need help, from anyone. Gunters who wanted help joined a clan, and Aech and I both agreed that clans were for suck-asses and poseurs" (Cline 39). Art3mis seems to agree since she is another solo, and though Daito and Shoto play with each other, they resist help from others. The independence of the "High Five"—that is, Parzival, Art3mis, Aech, Daito, and Shoto—suggests the image of the knight-errant, out adventuring and away from the fellowship and support of the medieval court. Later in the novel, when Halliday's former business partner Ogden Morrow approaches the High Five in their virtual hideout and offers help, they collectively "exchanged nervous looks" and show their "skepticism" (314). Morrow explains "I'm not going to give you any clues, or provide you with any information to help you reach the egg. That would ruin all the fun, wouldn't it?" (314). The fun found in a mental challenge hearkens back to the riddle that started the quest, which refers to those who pursue the Easter egg as "*the errant*" (6). Self-reliance is an ideal for each member the High Five (if one makes an allowance for

the partnership between Daito and Shoto), and they are determined to succeed through their own ability.

However, the individualism of each of the members of the High Five does not sustain them through the entire adventure. In fact, it shows signs of breaking down early on in the quest. In their initial meeting, Parzival gives Art3mis a hint on how to win the *Joust* match, telling her to "try playing on the left side," advice which pays off for her (99). In fact, Parzival admits that "I have Aech here to thank for my jousting prowess" because they frequently played against each other (155). Daito admits that Parzival unintentionally led him to the location of the Copper Key because Parzival was known to attend a virtual school nearby the key's location. The High Five considers a formal "alliance," but eventually rejects the proposal because, despite the successes they have from working together, they still prize their independence (157).

However, this independence does not preclude helping each other in an informal manner. The High Five continues to provide each other hints and begins occasionally questing together. Aech sends Parzival a hint as to the location of the Jade Key. Parzival "teamed up" with Daito and Shoto to complete a quest (204). When Parzival offers the quest's reward to Daito and Shoto, the pair is thankful, and they all "part as friends, if not necessarily allies" (206). Though the High Five never officially forms a clan with a formalized membership, structure, and information-sharing like other gunters, they do cooperate, share some information, and become reliant on each other to protect the OASIS from IOI.

Wade/Parzival frequently exhibits a lack of concern for the physical world that is not shared by all his fellow gunters. Though many undoubtedly engage in the adventure

specifically for the escapism it provides, others suggest that the power granted by finding the egg could be used to remedy the problems of the physical world. Art3mis expresses a desire to "tackle world hunger," "fix the environment, and solve the energy crisis," but Parzival says that if he were to win he would rather purchase a spacecraft and

> stock it with a lifetime supply of food and water, a self-sustaining biosphere, and a supercomputer loaded with every movie, book, song, videogame, and piece of artwork that human civilization has ever created, along with a stand-alone copy of the OASIS. Then I'd invite a few of my closest friends to come aboard, along with a team of doctors and scientists, and we'd all get the hell out of Dodge. Leave the solar system and start looking for an extrasolar Earthlike planet. (Cline 98)

When faced with the possibility of becoming the richest person alive, Art3mis dreams of solving problems in the real world, but Wade dreams of escaping Earth physically as well as virtually. Art3mis demonstrates more self-awareness than Wade through the first two thirds of the novel, admitting that she "lives" inside the virtual world of the OASIS, although she does have concerns for the physical world. When rejecting his advances, Art3mis tells him: "You don't live in the real world, Z. From what you've told me, I don't think you ever have. You're like me. You live inside this illusion" (186). Though Art3mis claims she lives inside the OASIS, she appears to show more interest in the affairs of the physical world than Wade does. This "censure to Parzival's masturbatory embrace of the OASIS" provides the reader with the first indication that there is fault to be found in escapism (Aronstein and Thompson 59). Later, Wade starts to change his outlook, and he begins to "revise his earlier escapist longings" (Nordstrom 246). He

longs for physical contact and a real connection with Art3mis, and shows concern for others rather than indulge in selfish fantasies.

Wade's growing appreciation for reality suggests a change in desire for escapism. The allure of the perfect-but-artificial OASIS wanes as Wade understands the importance of reality. In the end, "Parzival may only win the contest when he understands the dangerous illusive calibre of the OASIS, flips up his 3-D visor, relinquishes this form of cultural capital, and, unmediated, engages with the human condition" (Aronstein and Thompson 59). Wade must learn to appreciate the actual reality and prioritize involvement over escapism in order to successfully complete his quest. This appreciation comes from the Hunt for the Easter egg. The adventure repeatedly demonstrates that reality offers things that the virtual cannot, such as love and happiness. As Wade comes to understand the limits of the OASIS, he becomes better at playing the game and completing the adventure.

Halliday's quest involves not only video game challenges and puzzles, but also a good deal of knowledge about its inventor. Thus Halliday encourages the gunters to explore his thoughts, which may turn one adventurer into his intellectual heir in addition to his legal heir. As Megan Amber Condis asserts, "Halliday uses his egg-hunting challenge as a series of pedagogical exercises, walking gunters through tests designed to get them to interact with his 'syllabus' using a particular reading strategy" (11). These texts were selected to push gunters towards understanding the genealogy and inspiration of the OASIS and teaching them about what Halliday found important in gamer culture.

Gunters call Halliday's assigned literature "the canon," which is a common pop culture term to refer to any works generally accepted as the official material within a

fictional universe. The term has medieval and academic origins: "canon" may evoke

religion, referring originally to the books deemed worthy of inclusion in the Holy Bible,

as well as the scholarly concept of a Western canon, which uses the biblical metaphor to

identify a recommended reading list of great works of literature. The gunters treat their

canon—that is to say, the body of knowledge about Halliday's life, ideas, and works, as

well as those he deemed important in his own upbringing—with near-religious reverence,

but any critical thought appears focused on Halliday himself; as Condis claims, Halliday

"does not ask his students to adopt a critical theoretical stance as a professor of literature

might" but rather, he attempts to "foster audience identification with the texts in

question" (11). In *Ready Player One*, the gunters use the word *canon* to refer to "any

movie, book, game, song, or TV show of which Halliday was known to have been a fan,"

for example (Cline 40). This canon, when supplemented by Halliday's semi-

autobiographical guidebook, *Anorak's Almanac*, encourages the gunters to personally

identify with Halliday himself. Halliday "asks his fans to re-live his youth via his favorite

fiction, movies, television shows, comics, and video games in the hopes that these

experiences will shape their perspectives on gamer culture into something that more or

less resembles his own" (Condis 6). *Ready Player One* operates as a gamer-focused

Bildungsroman, and Wade increasingly identifies with Halliday as he learns the

foundational experiences that helped guide Halliday's youth.

The Hero's Return

A dramatic final confrontation occurs at the site of the third gate. IOI has murdered Daito. Wade finds a video depicting how "three large men in black ski masks," employed by IOI, "rushed in, yanked him [Daito/Toshiro] out of his haptic chair, and threw him off the balcony," "plummeting to his death" (Cline 293). The remaining members of the High Five, as well as hundreds of IOI operatives, all have obtained the Crystal Key, but IOI has erected a forcefield around the gate, preventing any other gunters from approaching. Despite this, IOI has not been able to discover the solution to entering the gate: "Simply inserting the Crystal Key into the keyhole had no effect" (291). Stymied, IOI continues its attempts to open the Crystal Gate to no avail.

The solution, as it turns out, lies in the spirit of play. Because of IOI's corporate-minded focus on finding the egg, they lose sight of the fun of the Hunt. Parzival, on the other hand, remembers the hunt should be delightful and whimsical. Shortly after IOI finds the Crystal Key, Parzival also finds the key, which takes the form of a guitar embedded in rock behind a waterfall, mashing up imagery from the third movement of *Rush*'s rock opera *2112*, in which the hero finds a guitar behind a waterfall, and the film *Excalibur*, in which Arthur retrieves Excalibur from the stone. Parzival, remembering the necessity of fun in the Hunt, uses the guitar to play "Discovery," which reveals an additional riddle on the wall of the cave. IOI did not discover this riddle, which reveals that the third gate "*cannot be unlocked alone*" (263). Parzival later suggests to the remaining members of the High Five that this might be because Halliday "wanted to force us to work together," and demonstrate both enjoyment of the quest to receive the

hint, and then genuine teamwork to open the gate (308). This working together differs

from cooperation within a gunter clan, which, like IOI, "was perverting the entire spirit"

of the adventure by bonding together. The gunter clans fail to accomplish anything

despite their purported teamwork, leading the reader to question the motives of individual

members, who may be relying on others to perform the difficult tasks. Instead of taking a

more passive role like the clans, Wade, Aech, Art3mis, and Shoto embrace a more

proactive teamwork and gather together in the real world to plan and orchestrate an attack

against IOI's defenses.

Using his new appreciation for the real world, Parzival devises a complex plan to

infiltrate IOI's real-world headquarters to gain control of one of IOI's virtual-world

robots within the forcefield to destroy the forcefield's power source. IOI becomes

vulnerable to attack, and a gunter army—consisting of all the numerous gunter clans—

battles IOI's forces at the entrance to the gate. Parzival, Aech, and Art3mis successfully

open the gate by turning their keys at the same time, but before they can enter, Aech and

Art3mis are defeated, rendering them unable to assist in the virtual reality of the OASIS,

but able to communicate with Parzival through his headset as he works his way through

the challenges presented within the gate. Art3mis, Aech, and Shoto provide advice, hints,

and updates on IOI's progress as Parzival focuses on completing the tasks ahead of him.

In the final obstacle, Parzival plays the old Atari 2600 *Adventure*, which contains the

original Easter egg in the form of a hidden "dot" that can be equipped and used to find a

secret room. As he explains,

> I picked it up and carried it back across the tiny 8-bit kingdom, then used it to
>
> pass through the magic barrier and enter the Secret Room. But unlike the original

Atari game, this Secret Room didn't contain the name of Warren Robinett,

Adventure's [sic] original programmer. Instead, at the very center of the screen,

there was a large white oval with pixelated edges. An egg. (362)

Parzival's final act in the adventure hearkens back to Halliday's original inspiration in the

quest. By once again reenacting the role of the knight-errant of fantasy literature, Parzival

demonstrates what he has learned, completes the quest, and gets the prize.

After Parzival recovers the Easter egg, he finally meets a digitally-recreated

Halliday, who provides one last piece of wisdom:

I need to tell you one last thing before I go. Something I didn't figure out for

myself until it was already too late […]. I created the OASIS because I never felt

at home in the real world I didn't know how to connect with the people there. I

was afraid, for all of my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. That was when

I realized, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place where

you can find true happiness. Because reality is *real*. (Cline 364)

This lesson, so important that Halliday feels the need to deliver it from beyond the grave

to someone he has tried to mold into himself, has a heavy implication: "the OASIS is

false" (Aronstein and Thompson 63). Parzival confirms to Halliday's digital ghost that he

understands the importance of reality. Aronstein and Thompson claim that "Cline offers

his readers the Grail—the ultimate Easter egg, arguing that true meaning, true *areté*, lies

outside of the world of the game, in the meta-level of genuine human exchange" (63).

Wade understands that, while the game of the OASIS may be escapist and fun, and useful

in important learning life lessons, he ultimately must use those lessons to preform actions

in the real world.

Wade's acceptance of Halliday's advice suggests a change in his perspective. He is no longer consumed with escapist fantasies, and instead recognizes the importance of the real world. Like Rivendell in *The Lord of the Rings*, the OASIS becomes a place of learning, preparing Wade for future challenges outside the virtual world. Nordstrom states that "While Halliday and Wade initially view the OASIS with optimism, even reverence, Cline also presents a perspective of the OASIS not as a haven but as a corrupting influence, nurturing isolation and global indifference" (245). The potential corruption in the OASIS comes from an overindulgence in its escapist possibilities. On the other hand, the OASIS can provide benefits, such as lessons capable of being applied in the real world. In this way, Wade/Parzival must use the OASIS to learn without succumbing to the temptation of living solely within it.

After completing the quest and collecting the Easter egg, Wade exits the OASIS. He was unable to meet Art3mis face-to-face before the battle, but now, as the triumphant adventurer, he can meet her in person. She has logged out and awaits Wade in the center of the hedge maze in the garden. Wade "entered the maze and wandered around in circles for a few minutes, confused. Eventually, I realized that the maze's layout was identical to the labyrinth in Adventure" (370). The real-world homage to *Adventure*'s importance in the OASIS partially blurs the two realities together and makes the digital victory tangible in the physical world. In the OASIS, the maze held what Parzival prized above all else in the virtual world: Halliday's Easter egg. Now, in the real world, the maze holds what Wade truly wants: real-world contact with Samantha, Art3mis's physical-world identity. This reflection between the virtual and the physical illustrates a change in Wade from the beginning of the novel: "Wade's motivation, at the novel's conclusion, is to suspend

gaming in favor of real-world relationships and engagement" (Nordstrom 253). Wade navigates the maze, performing moves in the physical world he performed minutes before in the virtual world, only now he seeks a real-world relationship instead of a virtual object.

Wade and Samantha finally meet in the center of the maze. When Samantha asks Wade what they will do next, Wade answers that "We're going to use all of the moolah we just won to feed everyone on the planet. We're going to make the world a better place, right?" (371). Though Samantha asks him if he still wants to escape the planet on a spaceship "full of videogames," and Wade admits that he's "up for that, too," he later states he has "no desire to log back into the OASIS" (371, 372). Wade has played and beaten the ultimate video game, the OASIS, which gave him an interest in things outside the virtual world. Samantha, who has demonstrated concern about the real world through most of the novel, inspires similar feelings in Wade. Because Wade loves Samantha, has achieved the greatest possible video game victory, and understands the importance of the real world, he will likely follow her plan to the benefit of the real world.

As Aronstein and Thompson observe, this is "a happy ending," and they claim the novel suggests that Wade and Samantha "will harness their economic resources and personal talents to improve the condition of those around them, to make the world— however hackneyed the sentiment may seem—a better place" (63). Art3mis inspires Wade with her concern for the real world, and Parzival's hunt for Halliday's egg becomes a journey of self-discovery for Wade. Wade realizes that "the seemingly idealized world of the OASIS is actually perilous and the apocalyptic conventional world

is one worth saving, even celebrating" (Nordstrom 254). With this understanding, Wade is prepared to help improve the physical world, the world in which he and his friends live.

The two realities of the actual and virtual provide a complex struggle throughout the novel. Despite the initial descriptions, in which the physical reality appears dystopian and the OASIS provides a utopic escape, the more important of these two realities is the actual, since it is the only reality capable of providing "true happiness" (Cline 364). Through his search for the Easter egg, Wade comes to accept the limitation of the OASIS and the utopia it represents, and begins to prioritize the physical reality instead. At the conclusion of his adventure, Wade decides that he must fight for the improvement of the physical world. Because, after all, "reality is *real*" (Cline 364). Much like Sir Gawain, who returns to Camelot, and Frodo Baggins, who returns to the Shire, Wade's return to the actual reality of *Ready Player One* signals the end of his adventure, while also making apparent the changes that he has undergone over the course of the tale. Wade has an altered outlook, and he perceives the world differently after finding Halliday's egg in a manner which contrasts with the perspective of Frodo. While Frodo seems damaged and hurt at the completion of his quest, Wade may be reinvigorated; Frodo sails away from Middle-earth to be healed in Valinor, but Wade no longer feels the need to escape into the OASIS.

The dystopian reality of Wade's world seems bleak, but it is the only place in which he can find real happiness, according to Halliday. The OASIS is exciting and adventurous, but also potentially hazardous in that it provides escapism that can lead to neglect of the actual world. Wade's adventure in the OASIS leads to a newfound appreciation of the "real" and the potential problems and limitations of the virtual (Cline

364). His new understanding aids him in completing the adventure, demonstrating the virtual world's ability to teach and instruct. Wade chooses to place emphasis on reality instead of the OASIS at the end of the novel, which suggests that he will use his new fortune for the betterment of the actual world.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Although published in 2011 and set in a dystopian future, *Ready Player One* inserts itself into a tradition of medieval adventure stories. The protagonist Wade, in the guise of Parzival, carries out his own version of the history of the questing knight-errant. As in the Atari 2600 game *Adventure* which inspired it, the novel's structure establishes the framework in which Wade faces challenges, overcomes obstacles, and learns lessons. Wade's altered perception enables him to re-engage with the "real" world, as he vows to improve the dismal society in which he lives. The medieval character of the adventure carries on the basic formula of previous texts in this tradition.

Like *Ready Player One*, the adventures in *The Lord of the Rings* resemble a medieval quest narrative, though here, the locations of Middle-earth provide important narratological functions. The Shire and Mordor provide inspiration for the hobbits, the former as a positive place that needs protection and the latter as a place to be resisted and avoided. Later in the adventure, Rivendell and Lothlórien represent places of rest and lore. In these locations, the heroes learn more about information relevant to their quest, which allows them the time and opportunity to make plans for future obstacles on their journey. Places like the Old Forest and Fangorn Forest present dire challenges, which the heroes successfully navigate once armed with their inspiration and preparation. These various sites represent critical spaces in which the adventurer develops the experience and character needed to address and solve later problems.

The roots of these traditions, such as the questing knight-errant who fights

fantastic beasts and solves puzzles using morality and intellect, go back to the medieval

quest stories like *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which the hero must

face major physical, intellectual, and more challenges. *Beowulf* provides the hero with an

adventure of violence and physicality, *Sir Gawain* presents an adventure in courtesy, and

the riddles are an intellectual obstacle for the reader to overcome. All of these elements,

in various ways, are also present in modern adventures.

Because of the importance of video games and digital texts to *Ready Player One*,

a future examination of medievalism in gaming can further enhance understanding of the

novel. Games like *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, in which adventurers band together to save a

somewhat Tolkienian world, or *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, the story of a peasant in

fifteenth-century Bohemia who gets embroiled in efforts to restore the king, provide a

fruitful ground to explore the way video games are today revisiting, developing, and

extending the adventure story.

Like the old Atari standard *Adventure*, games continue to feature the structure

seen in *Ready Player One* and other modern versions of medievalist quest stories. All

these heroes, whether an Arthurian Knight of the Round Table, a hobbit from an

anachronistic nineteenth-century English county in a fictional history of the world, or a

boy from a dystopian future who just wants to play video games, participate in an

adventure, which may then be seen as a model for practical personal development in the

real world.

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