



Augustine, Shakespeare, and Tolkien on the Identification and Excellence of Humility in Politics

Michelle M. Kundmueller

American Studies, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Virginia, USA

ABSTRACT

As Aristotle and Augustine both noted, virtue constitutes a particularly difficult subject for political analysis. Limited to hearsay evidence of the state of the consciences of our fellows, we are severely limited in our capacity to use real-world experience as a gauge on the interaction between humility and politics. I have circumnavigated this obstacle by taking a literary perspective, asking what authors, in their privileged status as creators of their characters, can tell us about the relationship between humility and politics. In *King Lear* and *The Lord of the Rings* the authors offer similar solutions to the difficulty of identifying humility in politics: to see the humility of others, one must possess it oneself. The ability to perceive humility in political action, as Tolkien and Shakespeare further suggest, opens the door for the formation of critical political alliances.

In the Preface to *City of God*, Augustine of Hippo praises humility as a virtue possessing “an excellence which makes it soar above all the summits of this world, which sway in their temporal instability, overtopping them all with an eminence not arrogated by human pride, but granted by divine grace.”¹ Despite Augustine’s praise of humility, fundamental questions remain for the student of politics. Does this virtue—defined by Augustine as a correct ordering of the will in relation to God, and thus, a rejection of pride (XIV.13, 572)—have political utility? This question has resisted definitive resolution, at least in part, because of a difficult threshold question encountered by all scholars of the relationship between virtue and politics. If virtue is a matter of will and therefore resides in the interior of man, how can the observer of political action know if a political actor is actually humble? In other words, how is it possible to identify when humility is the motivating force behind human action? In the context of discussing the virtues in general, a diverse group—from Aristotle to modern behaviorists—has noted the difficulty of determining the motivations that drive human actions.² As Augustine concisely explained, we are limited to “hearsay” evidence of the consciences of others (I.26.37).

In this article I use works of imaginative literature to answer the hearsay problem posed above. Within the realm of fiction, authors know the hearts of the characters and can explain their true thoughts and motivations. Accordingly, rather than follow Augustine

in attempting to analyze historical examples of virtue, this article turns to two works of literature that deal with themes of pride and humility in political contexts. By examining the heroes of William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, we can determine how to identify humility at work and begin to explore the political advantages it provides.

Augustine and the Problem of Identifying Humility

Political scientists have, in recent years, taken a greater interest in the role that religion and morality play in politics.³ This has led to a corresponding increase in discussion of the importance of humility as well as debate about its meaning. Mary Keys has used a traditional Augustinian definition in defending its utility.⁴ Others, including Mark Button and Christian Rostboll, have redefined humility in efforts to champion the virtue as a helpful response to the tensions of pluralistic society.⁵ Like Keys, I maintain that it is not necessary to reconceive humility to demonstrate its potential to be politically salutary and, therefore, rely on an Augustinian rather than a contemporary or Kantian definition.

According to Augustine, humility both orients the human will in obedience to God and is, in itself, a form of worship due to God (VI. Preface, 225). Humility, which can also be understood as a will unshaken in its love for God, is giving God his proper worship; pride, by

definition, is the failure to do this and therefore a form of worship of the self (and sometimes also the worship of additional ends other than God). Because of the relationship of humility to obedience to and worship of God, an individual's degree of humility necessarily determines his or her individual orientation toward worldly power. The truly humble person prefers to worship rather than to be worshipped (XI.1, 429). The humble person has "delight" in the worship of God "rather than to be worshipped instead of God" (XI.1, 429).

Augustine's account of original sin and pride further elucidate his concept of humility. In his explanation of man's fall, the first sin was to refuse the proper worship due to God, thereby turning away from God and committing sin (XIII.13, 522). In disdaining to be God's obedient servants, Augustine argues, humans opted instead for a perverse exaltation of self: pride (XIV.13, 571). This "original evil" occurs because "[man] regards himself as his own light, and turns away from that light which would make man himself a light if he would set his heart upon it" (XIV.13, 573).

Because pride is the exaltation of self in the place of God, humility makes the mind "subject to God" (XIV.13, 572). Humility's importance as a virtue is perhaps best grasped by viewing it in relation to other virtues and the rejection of pride. When unshaken in its love for (and therefore, orientation toward) God, the human will follows God's will rather than its own pleasure (XIV.13, 572). Augustine sees this right ordering of the will toward God both as a necessary condition for all other virtues and as being incompatible with pride. He explains that only the humble man knows obedience, which is "the mother and guardian of all the other virtues in a rational creature" (XIV.12, 571–72). It is nothing short of "calamitous" for a rational creature to act according to his own will rather than the will of God (XIV.12, 571–72).

For Augustine, virtue is dependent on the will: if the will is directed toward God, virtue results. If it is directed away from God—toward one's own self or any end other than God—virtue does not motivate human action. And the orientation of the will itself is entirely an internal matter. While Augustine does set forth models of virtue and sin (particularly in his account of Roman history), by his own logic identifying virtue in human action is difficult, if not impossible.⁶ He readily admits that "to examine the secrets of men's hearts and to decide with clear judgment on the varying merits of human kingdoms—this would be a heavy task for us men, a task indeed far beyond our powers" (V.21, 215). Even judges "cannot see into the consciences of those men upon whom they pronounce judgment" (I.19; XIX.6, 859).

Although the debate continues about the degree to which Augustine argued that virtue and religion serve and are served by political life,⁷ he makes two points clear concerning the relationship between politics and humility. First, rather than guarantee earthly reward for virtue, God has "willed that these temporal goods and temporal evils should befall good and bad alike" (I.11, 13; see also V.23, 223; V.25, 221). In other words, humility cannot guarantee political success. Second, humility is *compatible* with political success. This can be gleaned from Augustine's praise of two Christian rulers, Constantine and Theodosius, whom he finds noteworthy for their rejection of pride and their worship of God (V.24–26). Theodosius receives particular commendation for his humility, of which Augustine claims "nothing could be more wonderful" (V.26, 223).

Augustine's attempts to show humility at work in politics often simply praise actions that appear to be rejections of pride without directly referencing the virtue. This might not, particularly in his discussion of non-Christians, indicate what Augustine would recognize as fully developed humility.⁸ But *any* virtuous choice and rejection of pride is, by the force of his definition, at least an alteration of the orientation of the will away from oneself and more toward God. Thus, the foundational nature of humility, combined with its definitional incompatibility with pride, permits an important inference: wherever Augustine praises virtue or condemns pride and the lust for power, he is thereby indicating the presence of humility.

The intimate and therefore difficult to discern nature of the will's orientation is presented in great magnification in Augustine's accounts of two historical events, the abduction of the Sabine women and the rape of Lucretia. The Sabine women were abducted, raped, and forced into marriage by the early Romans. After the initial violence, their fathers and brothers attacked their abductors (the new husbands). In the events that followed, Augustine praises these women for finding power rooted in their own weakness and victimhood: rather than asserting their pride in outrage, "the ravished brides rushed out, tearing their hair, and throwing themselves at their parents' feet, assuaged their righteous indignation not by victorious arms but by dutiful sublimation" (III.13, p. 102). Thus, peace was courageously, yet humbly, won by those least powerful—or so the Sabine women had seemed.⁹

The Sabine women in their humble yet effective political action contrast sharply to proud Lucretia. As Augustine understands her, Lucretia was unable to bear the shame that she thought her rape had brought upon her and responded with suicide, an assertion of honor and pride. Augustine, though sympathetic and respectful

to Lucretia as the victim of a terrible crime, accused her “as a Roman woman” of having been “excessively eager for honor” (I.19, 30). Unable to prove her chaste conscience to the world, she “blushed” to be thought an accomplice in the crime against her body and therefore punished herself in an attempt to “prove her state of mind” (I.19, 30).¹⁰ Though he pities her, Augustine does not believe that Lucretia can ultimately be excused for her choice of pride in personal honor over virtue.

In both accounts, Augustine demonstrates that serious political consequences flow from the choice between pride and humility. Yet even in these accounts, Augustine repeatedly articulates the theme that it is difficult—if not impossible—to determine when humility drives human action. Limited to “hearsay” accounts of the consciences of others, how can we say with certainty that the Sabine women or even Lucretia acted from the orientations of their wills that seemed evident in their acts? It seems as if Augustine, on the strength of his own arguments, must ultimately abandon hope of identifying humility and pride at work in human action and resign himself to the “wretched” epistemological blindness of the human condition.”¹¹ Given his argument as a whole, one can seriously question Augustine’s ability to identify the supposedly virtuous or vicious motivations of even his exemplars of pagan virtue (the Sabine women), pagan vice (Lucretia), and Christian leadership (e.g., Constantine and Theodosius). Be that as it may, the political significance of these actors should at least convince us of the political importance of the quest to identify humility in action. To that end, a turn to events in which the wills of the actors can be known—to fictitious characters—proves a source of insight.

Humility and Perception

In *King Lear* Shakespeare suggests that humility may be identified only by those who are themselves humble. Pride-motivated characters, such as King Lear (initially) and his elder daughters Goneril and Reagan, perceive pride as the motivating force behind the speeches and actions of virtuous Cordelia. Meanwhile, humble characters, including Cordelia and the Earl of Kent, perceive the pride of their enemies but are also able to recognize one another’s virtuous motives. Indeed, not only are they able to recognize the virtue in one another, but this recognition forms the basis for mutual respect and political alliance. As examination of the plot and characters shows, the coordinated efforts of Kent and Cordelia cannot avert a tragic outcome, but they do permit the temporary reunion of Lear and Cordelia and produce a better political outcome for England.

As the play opens, King Lear is in the midst of demanding that his daughters offer to him what Augustine would recognize as a form of worship. Goneril, the first to speak, claims to love her father more than her honor or her life (I.i.54–61).¹² Regan, speaking second, attempts to outdo her sister.

I am made of that self metal as my sister,
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
I find she names my very deed of love:
Only she comes too short, that I profess
Myself an enemy of all other joys
Which the precious square of sense possesses,
And find I alone am felicitate
In your dear Highness’ love.
(I.i.69–76)

In response to his eldest daughters’ speeches, Lear gives Regan and Goneril each a portion of his kingdom.

Then Lear turns to Cordelia, “our joy, / Although our last and least” and asks “what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters’? Speak” (I.i.82–86). Cordelia has already indicated in asides that, although she counts her love greater than her sisters, she will not partake in this contest. Rather than boast of her love to her father, she responds, “Nothing” (I.i.87). When her father pushes her for an explanation, she protests that she loves her father properly but not beyond the bounds of father-daughter love.

I love your Majesty,
According to my bond, no more nor less.
Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, lov’d me; I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all?
(I.i.92–103)

Cordelia is unwilling to place her love of her father above other higher duties. While some have interpreted Cordelia’s unwillingness to compete with her sisters as stemming from pride, reference to Augustine’s concept of humility sheds a different light on her reticence.¹³ In Augustinian terms, by refusing to bend to her father’s will by giving him more love than he is due, she refuses to worship her father. Indeed, she is so fundamentally humble that she is loath even to defend her own unwillingness to flatter. Far from taking pride in her public status, she is willing to be thought proud to preserve her humility.

During this first scene, Lear, Goneril, Regan, Kent, and France (Cordelia’s suitor) each respond differently to Cordelia’s refusal to flatter Lear. Lear, blind to the humility that kept Cordelia from offering him the undue praise that he had demanded, calls Cordelia proud

(I.i.129) and disinherits her. France takes her for his wife despite her new poverty. Goneril and Regan, unmoved by their sister's fate (I.i.276–79), turn to plotting against the father whom they had just claimed to love more than their lives, honors, and husbands (I.i.284–308).

In contrast to Regan and Goneril, Kent demonstrates humility toward Lear and recognition of Cordelia's virtue. Perceiving Lear's mistake about the true qualities of all three sisters, Kent intercedes on Cordelia's behalf (I.i.120, 144–54). While speaking most humbly of his loyalty to Lear, Kent describes Cordelia's virtue and recommends her to her father:

Answer my life my judgment,
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,
Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds
Reverb no hollowness.
(I.i.151–54)

Blind to Kent's loyalty and perceptiveness, Lear banishes Kent in a rage. Wishing Lear well and commending Cordelia to the gods, Kent leaves:

Fare thee well, King; sith thus thou wilt appear,
Freedom lives hence, and banishment is here,
[To Cordelia.] The gods to their dear shelter take thee,
maid,
That justly think'st and hast most rightly said!
(I.i.180–83)

Kent, unlike the rest of the court, has seen that Cordelia refused to flatter her father from a humble motive: unwillingness to promise to her father a degree of devotion that is owed to others. Kent thus provides the first indication of how to recognize humility in political action. Because he is himself humble, Kent is able to recognize the virtue motivating Cordelia's action.

After this initial scene, Lear's situation quickly becomes desperate. He is turned out of Regan's and Goneril's homes and then descends into madness. But throughout he is protected by Cordelia and his loyal subject/servant Kent.

Kent, once a prominent (if not proud) nobleman, determines that he will return to serve Lear in the guise of a humble servant, explaining to himself:

Now banish'd Kent,
If thou canst serve where thou dost stand condemn'd,
So may it come, thy master, whom thou lov'st,
Shall find thee full of labors.
(I.iv.4–7)

Thus Kent returns to his king's side without a hint of resentment over the humiliation that he has suffered at the king's hands. Even when he is placed in the stocks for his service to Lear, his objections are based on Lear's dignity rather than his own:

Call you not your stocks for me, I serve the King,
On whose employment I was sent to you.
You shall do small respects, show too bold malice
Against the grace and person of my master,
Stocking his messenger.
(II.ii.128–32)

As the plot progresses, Kent guides Lear to relative safety during a violent storm and coordinates Cordelia's return (III.i, iv).

Cordelia, who had left with her new fiancé France after the first scene, has heard of the outrages committed against her father and, in coordination with Kent, returns to rescue Lear. When Kent speaks to the messenger returning to him from Cordelia, the messenger's report provides further proof of Cordelia's selflessness and of her perception of the good qualities in Kent.

Faith, once or twice she heav'd the name of "father"
Pantingly forth, as if it pressed upon her heart;
Cried, "Sisters, sisters! Shame of ladies, sisters!
Kent! father! Sisters! What, i' th' storm? i' th' night?
Let pity not be believ'd!" There she shook
The holy water from her heavenly eyes,
And, clamor-moistened, then away she started
To deal with grief alone.
(IV.23–29)

In the next scene Cordelia attests that she has returned to protect her father from her sisters rather than from any personal ambition. As she explains her motivations:

No blown ambition doth our arms incite,
But love, dear love, and our ag'd father's right.
So may I hear and see him!
(IV.iv.23–29)

But her plans do not fare well. In the military events that follow, Lear and Cordelia are captured, and Kent surrenders to stay by Lear's side (V.iii). Lear and Cordelia both die: Cordelia is executed, and Lear, having been reconciled with Cordelia, dies broken with grief shortly thereafter. Kent, although alive as the play ends, feels that he too will die shortly from grief (V.iii.322–23).

The end of *King Lear* is not a resounding victory for humility. But throughout Shakespeare steadily demonstrates how humility can be identified: the proud do not see it, but the humble can. Hence, the initial blindness of Lear to the true humility of Kent and Cordelia. Hence also Cordelia's and Kent's abilities to perceive one another as potential allies with Lear's best interests at heart. Shakespeare shows us their recognition of one another's true motives through both their tender references to one another and through their political alliance.

Although Kent and Cordelia do not carry the day, Shakespeare indicates that these two characters, through their humble alliance, have brought about some political

good. The most immediate good brought about by their recognition of one another is the alliance itself. This alliance is key to the avoidance of a complete victory for the most malignant characters. Cordelia and Kent's coordination results in political and military resistance to Regan and Goneril. Because of this resistance, Regan, Cornwall (Regan's husband), and Goneril die. Their deaths leave Goneril's husband, the relatively benign Albany, as the ruler of England. Throughout the play Albany had been the most moderate of those allied against Lear. Shakespeare has laid the groundwork for this conclusion in many scenes: most notably, Albany is absent from the gruesome scene in which Gloucester is blinded, and he shows the most empathy for Lear in the face of Goneril's cruelty. Thus, after Cordelia's death, Albany is the best option left for the throne. Cordelia and Kent's humility and resulting alliance does not achieve the best possible outcome, but they do manage to avoid an England ruled by savage Goneril and Regan.

The second good brought about by Kent and Cordelia's alliance is less obviously political. Lear himself travels a path from pride to humility over the course of the play. At the beginning, he perceives Cordelia as proud and is blind to the humble nature of her refusal to flatter him. By the final scenes, having become humble, he sees Cordelia as a good and loving daughter and reaches a relative degree of peace through his reconciliation with her. I have not focused on Lear's descent from pride to humility here, because it is well chronicled in the literature¹⁴ and because its demonstration, due to the complicating factor of Lear's concurrent descent into madness, places it beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, it bears noting that Lear's ultimate reconciliation with Cordelia is made possible by the humility of Cordelia and Kent. Cordelia and Kent are not able to save Lear's life or sanity, but they do rescue enough of his sanity long enough for him to repent his folly and become—however briefly—a more virtuous man.

Humility and Power

To understand how humility works within *The Lord of the Rings*, one must start with the nature of the evil that the heroes face. The great foe is Sauron, whose defeat is made possible by the destruction of the Ring. In his correspondence, Tolkien described Sauron's motivations in terms that Augustine would recognize as fitting his own definition of pride.¹⁵ Sauron, according to Tolkien, is a "reincarnation of Evil, and thing lusting for Complete Power" (*Letters* 154).¹⁶ Sauron's making of the Ring was a "veiled assault" of pride upon the gods, for he was motivated by "an incitement to try to make a separate independent paradise" (*Letters* 152). Sauron has a history

of demanding literal worship (*Letters* 156), and his most learned foes (Gandalf, Elrond, and Galadriel) understand that his motivation and the power of the Ring are pride, dominion, and ultimately lust for worship.

These themes permeate the trilogy, though they are most explicitly explained by Elrond in the council at Rivendell. The Ring cannot be used without the user becoming like Sauron in pride and lust for dominion. Because of its corrupting influence, as Elrond explains, the Ring presents a great threat to those mighty enough to supplant Sauron. Perhaps it is Galadriel who conveys most dramatically that the Ring incites the powerful to establishment of themselves as powers to be worshiped. When she is offered the Ring by its bearer, Frodo, she conveys the worshipful, godlike position she would hold as wielder of the Ring.

"In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!"

She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful.... and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad.

"I pass the test," she said. "I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel" (*Fellowship* 381).¹⁷

Galadriel's refusal of the Ring echoes (and also retroactively illuminates) the emotion with which Gandalf had refused the Ring at the beginning of the story: "With that power I should have power too great and terrible.... Do not tempt me" (*Fellowship* 71). The vehemence of his refusal (like the drama of Galadriel's and the gravity of Elrond's) signifies that he does not merely fear corruption: he rejects the evil of attempting to place himself, as Sauron has done, in the role of a god to be worshipped.

If the evil to be avoided is a form of false worship equating to pride, it will make sense to those with Augustine in mind that the fundamental virtue of the heroes is humility. In refusing to wield the Ring, Gandalf and his allies pass two tests of humility: they refuse to set themselves up to be worshipped, and they know their own weakness (their own humble natures) well enough that they withstand the temptation to attempt to use the Ring out of generous impulses. They have the humility to recognize that they cannot resist the power of the Ring to pervert all that it touches. The one exception to this observation reinforces the point. Boromir is the only of the story's heroes who fails to appreciate the wisdom of destroying the Ring. He, the proud son of a proud family (*Fellowship* 253, 260, 373), succumbs to the temptation

to use the Ring. He ranks at least arguably among the story's heroes, for he is valiant in protection of his allies and those weaker than himself (*Fellowship* 289, 339–46). But his pride makes him vulnerable to the evil of the Ring and susceptible to the belief that the plan of destroying the ring is folly: “The only plan that is proposed to us that a Halfling should walk blindly into Mordor and offer the Enemy every chance of recapturing [the Ring] for himself” (*Fellowship* 414). Boromir, in his pride imagining that he will be able to use the Ring for good ends, forcibly attempts to take it from Frodo and thus betrays his humble allies.

Setting aside the borderline character of Boromir, several conclusions about the structure of the story are clear: Sauron suffers from pride, the Ring is unequivocally evil as a certain path to pride, and those who oppose Sauron and the Ring can only do so via a choice to be humble. After the decisions of Elrond, Galadrial, and Gandalf to forego use of the Ring, the humble nature of the hobbits is perhaps the most obvious example of humility in *The Lord of the Rings*.¹⁸ Their small stature and inferior—though not insignificant—wisdom and status as warriors is clear. As for their own sense of self-importance, though the hobbits Merry and Pippin may at times overstep their bounds (usually in youthful high spirits or out of curiosity), the humility of Frodo and his companion Sam run throughout the trilogy. Sam cannot open his mouth without “begging your pardon,” and Frodo is only too quick to remind himself and others of his relative weakness and insignificance (*Fellowship* 70–71, 239–40).

Given both the pronounced pride of the evil of Sauron and the humility of the story's heroes, it is clear that, as it unfolds, the story demonstrates Tolkien's view of the interplay between pride and humility. As in *King Lear*, the heroes, equipped with humility, are able to identify the humility in their allies. Thus, even with the evil nature of the Ring at work among them, they are able to trust one another's ability to refuse the Ring. This trust and ability to form political alliances is demonstrated by many of the characters. Despite the inherently divisive nature of the Ring, tempting each to claim power and worship for himself (and whispering that his friends will do so), the trust and friendship among the heroes are remarkable. That the story does not devolve into a war over the Ring by its heroes can only be attributed to their mutual perception of and trust in one another's humility.

It should be noted that a key weakness in these humble heroes is the perception of humility where it does not exist. In Boromir and also in the traitorous wizard Saruman, Gandalf and his allies rely on humility that does not exist. This leaves the heroes vulnerable. Boromir, although ultimately regretting his attempt to take the Ring by force from Frodo, turns violently upon his

companion (*Fellowship* 415–16). Likewise, though he had noted that the powerful and learned wizard Saruman's “pride has grown” with his knowledge (*Fellowship* 57), Gandalf had placed trust in Saruman's humble intentions. Gandalf's overestimation of Saruman's humility leads to his own capture and nearly leads to the capture of the Ring by Sauron's agents.

While Gandalf and his allies may be blind to the pride of those succumbing to the allure of the Ring, their humility proves essential to their ability to see the role of the hobbits in the war with Sauron. In other words, it is only through their own humility that they see allies rather than weakness in the hobbits. This is demonstrated most markedly (though it pervades Gandalf's relationship with the hobbits) by Gandalf's recommendation that Frodo bear the Ring and by his belief that Frodo is the appropriate hero to attempt its destruction.¹⁹ As only a very humble wizard could, he trusts this essential role to a humble volunteer. This seems to be based in part on his understanding of the toughness of hobbits [gleaned from his study of hobbits, a field of study too obscure for most of the wise (*Fellowship* 58)] and in part on his own acceptance of the limitations of even great men, elves, and wizards. Gandalf has great respect for the ability of hobbits to resist the Ring, as he explained to Frodo: “I think it likely that some [hobbits] would resist the Ring longer than most of the Wise would believe” (*Fellowship* 58). Both Elrond and the returning-king Aragorn are in accord with Gandalf on these points, agreeing that the destruction of the Ring is a task in which the role of the hobbits may well surpass that of great warriors or armies. Elrond counseled that the “road must be trod, but it will be very hard. And neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it. The quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong” (*Fellowship* 283). Aragorn too understands that in this task the power of the mighty will not be decisive. When the group deliberates on who shall proceed to Mordor, he argues, “That venture is desperate: as much for eight as for three or two, or one alone” (*Fellowship* 419).

Thus far, I have argued that humility is at work in the motives and trust among the allies in *The Lord of the Rings*. But this story moves beyond showing the ability of the humble to identify one another and form alliances: it suggests that humility may provide another political weapon—at least against a specific type of foe. Sauron, it is clear, suffers from a terrible pride, wishing to establish an empire that will literally worship him as a god. From this flows not only the evil that he has set loose upon the world but also a great weakness—a weakness that only a humble adversary could perceive and then use. To meet his own ends in making the Ring, Sauron “had been

obliged to let a great part of his own inherent power ... pass into the One Ring” (*Letter* 153). Conceiving all men to be corruptible (if not already corrupt), Sauron imagines that his own greatest weakness is that a “new possessor could (if sufficiently strong and heroic by nature) challenge [him], become master of all that he had learned and done since making the One Ring, and so overthrow him and usurp his place” (*Letter* 153). Indeed, the treachery of Saruman and Boromir indicates that this fear is well founded.

But the Ring presents “another weakness” that Sauron, in his pride “never contemplated or feared”: “if the One Ring was actually *unmade*, annihilated, then its power would be dissolved, Sauron’s own being would be diminished to vanishing point, and he would be reduced to a mere memory of malicious will” (*Letter* 153). Though he does not foresee any such attack on his power, an army of warriors, elves, and wizards, confident in the force of their arms, could never have managed to take the Ring safely to Mount Doom—the only fire capable of unmaking the Ring—in the heart of Mordor. His fortress and armies can repel such an attack with relative ease, as Gandalf attests: “For if he had used all his power to guard Mordor, so that none could enter, and bent all guile to the hunting of the Ring, then indeed hope would have faded: neither Ring nor bearer could long have eluded him” (*Towers* 100).²⁰ Fortunately, as Gandalf understands, Sauron cannot foresee any attempt to destroy the power of the Ring.

“He supposes that are all going to Minas Tirith; for that is what he would himself have done in our place. And according to his wisdom it would have been a heavy stroke against his power. Indeed he is in great fear, not knowing what one may suddenly appear, wielding the Ring, and assailing him with war, seeking to cast him down and take his place. *That we should wish to cast him down and have no one in his place is not a thought that occurs to his mind*” (*Towers* 100, emphasis added).

The seemingly hopeless quest of destroying the Ring is beyond both Sauron’s imagination and his defensive capacities. That two hobbits—the least of warriors—would actually dare to infiltrate his land? That anyone, let alone such humble characters, would attempt to unmake the Ring and its promise of worship? Thus, the hobbits, having the temerity to embrace humility over pride, are able by virtue of their own insignificance to sneak into and across Mordor to the Cracks of Doom to destroy the Ring.

This weakness of Sauron’s corresponds to the strength of Elrond, Gandalf, Galadriel, and Aragorn, who, through the power of their humility, have the wisdom to see that humble hobbits may prevail where they could not in this most dangerous task. Sauron is blind to the possibility that any opposition great enough to give him

pause could be humble. Indeed, he is likely too blind to see that such humility exists at all.

Conclusion

As Aristotle and Augustine both note, virtue constitutes a particularly difficult subject for political analysis. Limited to hearsay evidence of the state of the consciences of our fellows, we are severely limited in our capacity to use real-world experience as a gauge of the interaction between humility and politics. To circumnavigate this obstacle, I offer a literary perspective, exploring what authors, in their privileged status as creators of their characters, can tell us about the relationship between humility and politics.

In *King Lear* and *The Lord of the Rings* the authors provide a clue to identifying humility in politics: to see the humility of others, one must possess it oneself. Thus, where Lear, Goneril, and Regan see only pride and ambition, Cordelia and Kent can perceive one another’s fundamental humility and good will. Similarly, only those who are ruled by humility rather than pride—characters such as Gandalf, Elrond, and Galadriel—could see and trust one another’s humility, let alone grasp the potential power of the humility of Frodo and Sam. Their mutual trust is based on their perception that each of them has in humility turned away from the Ring and toward their good and common goals. And this trust—in *The Lord of the Rings* and in *King Lear*—opens the door for the formation of critical political alliances.

Thus Shakespeare and Tolkien respond to Augustine’s qualms about the ability to perceive humility in political action while illustrating how it can be politically advantageous. Augustine, Keys, Button, and Rostboll are not alone in asserting that pride may be a weakness and that humility wields a power. Augustine touches on this in the story of the abducted Sabine women, but the idea is more fully illustrated in *The Lord of the Rings*. For it is the very humility of the hobbits—and their allies—in attempting the seemingly impossible that finds the only weakness in the pride of Sauron. That weakness of Sauron, as Tolkien has now taught us to see in pride more generally, is blindness to the existence and power of humility.

Acknowledgment

The author thanks Mary Keys for thoughtful questions and comments that contributed greatly to this article.

Notes

1. Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1977), I.Preface, p. 5. I rely throughout on Bettenson’s translation.

2. Aristotle also observed that virtue has an inherently interior quality: “[A]cts done in conformity with the virtues are not done justly or temperately if they themselves are of a certain sort, but only if the agent also is in a certain state of mind when he does them: first he must act with knowledge; secondly he must deliberately choose the act, and choose it for its own sake; and thirdly the act must spring from a fixed and permanent disposition of character.” *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.iv.3. John Parrish described the inability to fully perceive the motivations of others as the “moral psychology of the ineliminable opacity ... of human motivation.” “Two Cities and Two Loves: Imitation in Augustine’s Moral Psychology and Political Theory,” *History of Political Thought* XXXVI (2005): 209–35, 234.
3. See, for example, Robert Kraynak and David Novak, both of whom use religion in their search for “a morally sound alternative to modern liberalism.” A. Arkush, “Conservative Political Theology and the Freedom of Religion: The Recent Work of Robert Kraynak and David Novak,” *Polity* 37 (2005): 82–107, 84.
4. Mary Keys contends that humility is a beneficial virtue that is complementary rather than opposed to magnanimity and should, therefore, be given greater appreciation in contemporary political theory. “Humility and Greatness of Soul,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 37, no. 4 (2008): 217–22.
5. Mark Button proposes to remake humility without any theistic component as a form of “civic attentiveness.” This new, liberal-democracy friendly form of humility is a relational quality that promotes understanding and sympathetic regard for others. “A Monkish Kind of Virtue? For and Against Humility,” *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 840–68, 841. Similarly, C. F. Rostboll draws on Kant for a concept of humility that lies in the “consciousness and feeling of the insignificance of one’s moral worth in comparison with the moral law” and calls for humility as a form of respect for the autonomy of others. “Autonomy, Respect, and Arrogance in the Danish Cartoon Controversy,” *Political Theory* 37 (2009): 623–48, 633.
6. For an excellent discussion of this aspect of Augustine, see E. J. Hundert, “Augustine and the Divided Self,” *Political Theory* 20 (1992): 86–104.
7. M. P. Foley, “The Other Happy Life: The Political Dimensions to St. Augustine’s Cassiciacum Dialogues,” *The Review of Politics* 65 (2003): 165–83; P. I. Kaufman, “Patience and/or Politics: Augustine and the Crisis at Calama,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 57 (2003): 22–35; J. Von Heyking, *Augustine and Politics as Longing in the World* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001); J. P. Burnell, “The Status of Politics in St. Augustine’s City of God,” *History of Political Theory* XIII (1992): 13–29; H. A. Deane, “Classical Christian Political Thought,” *Political Theory* 1 (1973): 415–25.
8. Augustine recognized that non-Christians can act virtuously. J. Wetzel, “Splendid Vices and Secular Virtues: Variations on Milbank’s Augustine,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 32 (2004): 271–300. However, he distinguished this from the civic good or virtue (in the sense of political benefit) that might be gained through the employment of vice to curb yet worse vices and temporal suffering. M. L. McLendon, “Tocqueville, Jansenism, and the Psychology of Freedom,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50 (2006): 664–75.
9. Some scholars critique praise women who are humble, submissive, and patient in the face of the crimes experienced by the Sabine women and Lucretia, arguing that such praise perpetuates victimhood. C. Belsey, “Tarquin Dispossessed: Expropriation and Consent in ‘The Rape of Lucrece,’” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52 (2001): 315–35; B. M. Kienzle and N. Nienhuis, “Battered Women and the Construction of Sanctity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17 (2001): 33–61. Yet Augustine was, by contemporary standards, revolutionarily compassionate to these victims. In either case, his discussion provides an Augustinian analysis of humility in politics.
10. Jan Blits argues that Lucretia’s suicide is specifically due to a quintessentially Roman rejection of the Augustinian conception of virtue as an internal matter. “Redeeming Lost Honor: Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece*,” *The Review of Politics* 71 (2009): 411–27. I draw on Augustine’s analysis to illustrate Augustine’s meaning and not for the purposes of determining Lucretia’s virtue.
11. See Parrish, 2005, 217 (Parrish is citing Augustine).
12. All references to *King Lear* are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blackmore Evans (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).
13. Cordelia is interpreted as proud in the following: R. Knowles, “Cordelia’s Return,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50 (1999): 33–50; J. Allgaier, “Is King Lear an Authoritarian Play?” *PMLA* 88 (1973): 1033–39; S. Snyder, “King Lear and Prodigal Son,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 17 (1966): 361–69.
14. J. Stern, “The Transference of the Kingdom,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 299–308; F. Bowers, “The Structure of King Lear,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 (1980): 7–20; T. N. Greenfield, “The Clothing Motif in King Lear,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5 (1954): 281–86.
15. Thomas Smith argues that Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* is “a work suffused with a religious vision of the world” in which “the artist illuminates and informs every dimension of his or her experience through the lens of belief.” “Tolkien’s Catholic Imagination: Mediation and Tradition,” *Religion & Literature* 38 (2006): 73–100, 75.
16. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000).
17. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, in *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).
18. Smith concurs on the humble nature of hobbits, calling them a “kind of touchstone for character” in the story. 2006, 88–89.
19. Having determined that they cannot use the Ring, the main characters determine to destroy it. This can only be done by finding the ‘Cracks of Doom ... and cast[ing] the Ring in there’ (*Fellowship* 70).
20. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, in *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

Copyright of Perspectives on Political Science is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.