Sons of Gondor! Of Rohan! My brothers. I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me. A day may come when the courage of Men fails, when we forsake our friends and break all bonds of fellowship, but it is not this day. An hour of wolves and shattered shields when the Age of Men comes crashing down, but it is not this day! This day we fight! By all that you hold dear on this good earth, I bid you stand, Men of the West!

To Tolkien lovers, fantasy fans and movie goers in general, Aragorn Elessar’s speech beneath the Black Gate is-dare I say it-as memorable as Martin Luther King’s “I have a Dream Speech” or Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address.” You might shake your head and call it a sad case, but the comparison remains. What makes Aragorn’s speech so powerful that it not only sticks in the fans’ heads, but also moves nations to attack an indomitable foe, a demigod lacking a corporeal body, ruling an infinite supply of treacherous minions with an inconceivable unbridled hate that drives those minions and gives them strength beyond that of natural beings? Yes, Aragorn is fictional and the true creator of such intense rhetoric is not Aragorn in reality, but JRR Tolkien. But does it make the speech any less impressive? The lack of a realistic setting certainly does not change the rhetoric so for the purposes of this essay, I will refer to Aragorn as the rhetor through the voice of Vigo Mortenson, the actor who played Aragorn in Peter Jackson’s screenplay version of The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. Aragorn’s
speech is one of inspiration, motivation, and persuasion. In his battle cry and call to arms at the Black Gate, Aragorn uses rhetorical appeals and an understanding of kairos to bolster the strength of the free peoples of Middle Earth and convince them to charge against the onslaught of the dark lord, Sauron.

As heir to the throne of Gondor, you would think Aragorn has all the ethos he needs to lead a mismatch battalion, but to see the type of ethical appeal he needs, one must know the background information to this event. In the preceding battle in which Sauron’s armies attacked the nation of Gondor at their largest city, Minas Tirith, Aragorn arrived late to the many-day battle returning from a mission that would change the face of the war and the history of Middle Earth. Aragorn shows up on a boat with two other heroic characters leading an army of thousands of undead soldiers. The battle had been going in favor of Sauron (remember the infinite supply of treacherous minions) against the free peoples, but Aragorn’s army of undead, who he alone in the world could bring to peace due to his heritage, turns the tides. To the people of Gondor who had never seen Aragorn before, his actions in this battle make him above human. In the first line of his speech, Aragorn yells to the people, “Sons of Gondor! Of Rohan! My brothers. I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me.” Here, Aragorn states two very important phrases. First he says “My Brothers.” By this he means to connect the people to himself and each other. Not only is he human like all of them, but they are all brothers sharing a single bond, stronger together than apart. He states “I see in your eyes the same fear that would take the heart of me,” by which the people know Aragorn feels the same way they all do: not super human, not royal, just a mere mortal like them. They find strength in the fact that Aragorn’s prowess in battle is attainable. He is not as special as they thought so rather than
following him out of fear and awe, they may follow him because they share a common cause. To remind the people of that cause, Aragorn speaks out about the rise and fall of mankind next.

The people gather for many reasons. Some fight for glory, knowing they will die. Others fight for vengeance of the comrades and family lost. Some have compulsions leading them which they do not understand. Every soldier who marches to fight at the black gate is a volunteer, empowered by the freedom of their respective nations and creeds. What logic does Aragorn give for fighting an impossible battle? He does not water down the truth or pretend men will dominate the world forever. Instead he concedes, “A day may come when the courage of Men fails, when we forsake our friends and break all bonds of fellowship, but it is not this day. An hour of wolves and shattered shields when the Age of Men comes crashing down, but it is not this day!” This statement conceals a lot of information. The implication and thought running through everyone’s head is if no one fights, everyone dies. Sauron will attack mercilessly regardless of whether or not the free people rise to challenge him. The logical appeal in Aragorn’s words, then, is that they must fight or succumb to slaughter. By gathering an army and standing as brothers in what may end up being a final hour, they stand a better chance than being picked off one village, city, or kingdom at a time by Sauron’s evil. Also, by attacking the front gate of Sauron’s realm, they risk less of their own people: women, children, injured, care givers who may fall victim of battle on any other soil.

After Aragorn establishes his voice as a speaker and the reasoning for an attack at the current time and place, all that remains is the emotion needed to rile up the troops to fight. When the rohirrim arrive at Minas Tirith to aid Gondor, they simply shout “Death!” repeatedly recognizing their own impending doom, but also that of the orcs on the fields below them. Aragorn elaborates a little more in his conclusion: “This day we fight! By all that you hold dear
on this good earth, I bid you stand, Men of the West!” At this point, Aragorn is yelling at the top of his lungs, the men are cheering and they begin to run in all directions toward the enormous enemy line which by then surrounds them. Aragorn calls them to think of all they hold dear because each has his own reason to fight. He also says “good earth” to establish the earth, nature, sides with them against evil yearning for freedom from the oppressive hate of Sauron. Finally, he bids them stand, a call to hold that good earth and reiterate the fact that they all fight for different reasons, but a common cause.

That cause is no more relevant than in the weeks proceeding the battle at Minas Tirith where hundreds of thousands of creatures fight for good or for evil. Aragorn considers the kairos of his invasion plan before marching on Mordor. The move is important and timely, directly related to every life in Middle Earth. The attack must come shortly after the battle at Minas Tirith not only because the free people want to attack before Sauron retaliates on his own time, but also because they need to provide a distraction for the dark lord. As the battle rages, two hobbits, Frodo and Sam, venture through the dark lord’s land to destroy The One Ring, the only act that can defeat the dark lord. If Aragorn were to wait, the fate of the nations may be altered, Sam and Frodo captured, the free peoples enslaved and killed and Sauron would rule the Middle Earth. Aragorn has no contact with Frodo and Sam and therefore must predict from what he knows of their location and pace the right time to attack. Aragon must choose soon enough so that Frodo and Sam have clear access to Sauron’s lands, but also late enough such that Aragorn’s small army of heroes is not vanquished prior to the destruction of The One Ring in the fires of Mount Doom.

After Aragon has lowered his status and thereby increased his credibility as a speaker given circumstances, he reasons why the people should attack the Black Gate and builds on the
passion of the situation, shedding away the fear rampant in his troops and replacing it with words of glory and proud hope. The timing could not be better, giving Frodo and Sam the gap in time they need to hike across Mordor and up Mount Doom. Aragorn combines the power of ethos, logos, pathos and kairos to fuel the free people of Middle Earth with the desire to fight and vanquish the armies of the dark lord, Sauron.

Bibliography

