'We don't need another hero' – Problematic Heroes and their Function in Some of Tolkien's Works

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"We don't need another hero."[1] To start a discussion of Tolkien's heroes[2] with a line from a late 1980s pop-song[3] may seem a bit strange. And yet we can very well imagine Bilbo saying: 'We don't want any heroes here, thank you! Nasty disturbing uncomfortable people! May get you killed before dinner!' And not only the hobbits, whose late Third Age Shire represents an affluent pastoral and utterly unheroic society, harbour a deep-seated mistrust against some types of heroes. The surviving people of Dor-lómin, after Túrin's disastrous visit to his former homestead and Brodda's hall, seem to share such a view and bid him farewell with the following words:

> 'Farewell now, Lord of Dor-lómin,' said Asgon. 'But do not forget us. We shall be hunted men now; and the Wolf-folk will be crueller because of your coming. Therefore go, and do not return, unless you come with strength to deliver us. Farewell!' (*Children of Húrin* 191)

Asgon's words, though phrased politely, are in agreement with Bilbo's imagined sentiment, and point towards the potentially problematic nature of certain forms of heroism and their representatives. The problem of how to contain and deal with the more aggressive forms of military prowess when its energies are not currently employed on the battlefield or in fighting an adversary such as a dragon or giant is nothing new. The historical rise of the new military class of the cavalry and its transformation into a social, military and chivalric elite has been investigated, e.g. by C. Stephen Jaeger in his *The Origins of Courtliness*. The domestication, 'taming' and civilizing of the originally ferocious warriors is mirrored in and accompanied by secular texts that influenced and propagated the new heroic and later chivalric ideals. Already the Old English epic *Beowulf* puts great stress on and gives ample space to the description of what has to be called 'courtly manners' and ceremony. However, the harmonious fusion of physical strength, valour, courage and courtliness, as exemplified in Beowulf, is not always the norm

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 5th International Conference *J.R.R. Tolkien: Individual, Community, Society* (Budapest, 3-4 September 2015).

[2] Tom Shippey, in an email to me (20 March 2016), writes: "On heroes, though, what strikes me is Tolkien's reluctance to use the word! If my computer is correct, the morpheme 'hero' is NEVER used in *The Silmarillion*, only 5 times in *The Hobbit* and 6 in *LotR* [Blackwelder's *Thesaurus* lists only 3, but then he did not have an electronic text available back then]. The word as used also shows the semantic downgrading of it laid out in the *OED*. But it is once again NEVER used without some sort of qualification or distancing." These philological findings are in harmony with my general observations as presented in this paper yet would profit from an in-depth discussion in another context.

[3] Tina Turner for the movie *Mad Max: Beyond the Thunderdome* (1988) – maybe echoing Pink Floyd's 'We don't need no education' from the song 'Another brick in the wall' from the album The *Wall* (1979).

and we have numerous medieval texts that present a more disturbing picture of martial prowess and heroism. Tolkien was well aware of the heterogeneous characteristics and sometimes unpleasant aspects of heroism, and Tom Shippey (2007a) has discussed some aspects of Tolkien's life-long exploration of and struggle with the problems posed by heroic behaviour. In the following, I would like to take up the thread and investigate some of Tolkien's problematic heroes and the underlying heroic concepts.[4]

Richard West, in his paper on Túrin's *ofermod*,[5] makes two important observations. First, he places Túrin's behaviour within the context of the *ofermod* discussion as initiated by Tolkien's comments on the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* and, to some extent, also on *Beowulf*. West, like Shippey, uses Tolkien's scholarly publications and lecture-notes to explore his works of fiction and to contextualize Tolkien's literary publications within a larger context of medieval (mostly Germanic) literature. The story of Túrin in particular is shown to be a character study of the origins, forms and, finally, consequences of *ofermod*. The second point in West's essay concerns the development of the depiction of some of Túrin's deeds. West, by means of comparing the different versions describing Túrin's visit to his family's former home and his appearance in Brodda's hall, notices that Tolkien continued to add more and more elements that highlight the socially devastating consequences of Túrin's acts of aggression.[6]

> The early version in "Turambar" does not have this wholesale slaughter (only Brodda himself and one defender are killed) (II, 90-91), nor Aerin's self-immolation (rather she gets her nephew safely away), nor faithful old Sador (instead it is a stranger who directs Túrin to the hall), […]. Tolkien has gradually added all of that, the better to exemplify Túrin's pride and wrath, and honor, and their consequences.
> (West 2000: 243)

The textual evidence speaks a clear language indeed, and I would like to complement West's analysis by specifying 'the consequences' as, in this case, predominantly *social* consequences, i.e. as having reverberations for the people of Dor-lómin rather than for Túrin himself. I think it necessary to qualify West's statement since, to my mind, there lies the major problem with Túrin's behaviour. As Lady Aerin puts it, he is too rash and therefore does not

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[4] This paper is to some extent a companion piece to my 'Splintered Heroes – Heroic Variety and its Function in *The Lord of the Rings*' (Honegger 2018).

[5] See West (2000) and also West (2014).

[6] Neidhardt (2014: 19f) makes a similar point for the increasingly negative development of Túrin's character by comparing the different versions of the Saeros incident.

take into consideration the wider effects of his actions. Contrasting Túrin's homecoming with that of, for example, Odysseus shows this clearly. There are sufficient structural resemblances and incidental parallels to evoke an association between these two homecomers, such as the fact that both are recognized first by an old servant but not by anyone else. The similarities sharpen the contrast between Odysseus, who successfully wins back the dominion over his lands and people after slaughtering the suitors, and Túrin, who also spills a considerable amount of blood, yet fails to re-establish his rule. Túrin's 'homecoming' does not end in the permanent liberation of his people from the yoke of the Easterlings, but merely aggravates the conflict with and oppression by the invaders. His admittedly heroic vengeance against Brodda and his men is as ill-advised as it is rash since it is, as Tolkien wrote concerning Beorhtnoth's behaviour, "at other people's expense" (Tolkien 1988: 146).

Although the individual situations of Beorhtnoth and Túrin differ widely – the one is an *ealdorman* and official leader of an Anglo-Saxon army, the other treated as a homeless vagabond and exile – the problematic consequences of their actions are comparable and justify, in my opinion, the comparison of the two figures in one central aspect: their (at least temporary) disregard of the wider devastating social consequences of their deeds. Tolkien is quite outspoken in the judgment of the two men, though in different ways. In his essay-cum-dramatic-dialogue 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth', he refers explicitly to the Anglo-Saxon leader's moral failure when putting his personal ideas of glory first: "It was wholly unfitting that he should treat a desperate battle with this sole real object [i.e. to destroy or hold off the invaders] as a sporting match, to the ruin of his purpose and duty" (Tolkien 1988: 146). With Túrin, however, Tolkien refrains from explicitly criticizing his deeds. In the Dor-lómin episode, for example, he uses two other protagonists, Lady Aerin and Asgon, to comment on Túrin's appearance in Brodda's hall and the killing of its owner. While the former accuses Túrin of "[r]ash […] deeds […] as if you were still but the child that I knew" (*Children* 189), the latter is less direct but equally critical by pointing out that "[m]any a man of arms misreads patience and quiet. She [Lady Aerin] did much good among us at much cost. Her heart was not faint, and patience will break at the last" (*Children* 190). Asgon's request to Túrin "[to] go, and […] not return, unless you come with strength to deliver us" (*Children* 191), drives home the message: heroes do have a social obligation and are not free to go about and do (presumably) heroic deeds as they please.

Yet while there are, as West (2000) has shown, obvious parallels between the *ofermod* of the 10th century Anglo-Saxon *ealdorman* and the mindset that can be discerned as responsible for many of Túrin's fateful decisions, e.g. his refusal to take down the stone bridge over the Narog in spite of the warnings he received from various sides, they do not turn Túrin into a First Age Beorhtnoth. First of all, there is a structural difference in the position of the *ofermod*-motivated deeds of the two men. While Beorhtnoth's blunder (if we want to call it thus) comes at the end of his heroic career (and life) and is, according to Tolkien, presented by the poet of *The Battle of Maldon* as the crucial flaw in his character, *ofermod* is not always the motivating force behind Túrin's behaviour and deeds. He is, as chief counsellor of the king and military leader, to blame for the general strategy that led to the sack of Nargothrond, and his strategic decisions can be seen as at least partially motivated by *ofermod*.

Yet, on the other side, his actions can also be interpreted as having been originally founded on military (human) wisdom. Furthermore, Túrin seems able to develop and learn from his mistakes – especially when he finds a new home with the Men of Brethil and is re-integrated into society by means of his marriage to Níniel. His heroic energy is channelled and restrained through his love for his wife, so that when he sets out once more to confront the enemy, it is in direct response to Dorlas's request to defend his new home and his new people:[7] "Did you not ask to be counted one of our people, and no stranger? Is this peril not yours also?" (*Children* 222). Yet this time he is aware of the supreme threat posed by the dragon and is keen to avoid repeating the mistake made at Nargothrond. His preparations for the confrontation with Glaurung show every sign of strategic circumspection and social responsibility. He is aware that he cannot kill the dragon in open battle and thus opts for the 'Sigurd manœuvre'. Before leaving, he gives clear instructions to his people, who remain behind, what to do in case he cannot stop the advance of the worm. In this he contrasts with Beowulf who, in a similar situation, chooses a head-on confrontation with the dragon and does not seem to spend much thought on protective measures for his people.[8] Túrin, furthermore, makes a point of asking for and taking along companions, so that the deflection of the threat to the people of Brethil does not rest solely on his shoulders. This way the attempt to kill Glaurung becomes a communal effort, incorporating

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[7] Túrin, changing his name to Turambar, "dwelt among the woodmen, and was loved by them, and he charged them to forget his name of old, and to count him as one born in Brethil" (*Children* 196).

[8] Beowulf's dragon, of course, poses a special challenge since he is airborne and thus not that easily evaded or waylaid and ambushed as are the earthbound Fafnir and Glaurung.

representatives from the different groups of the men of Brethil. Lastly, Túrin does not make Beorhtnoth's (alleged) mistake of letting the enemy cross unopposed over to the side where his people are but he exploits, as the *ealdorman* could, and maybe should have done, the strategic advantage offered by topography. Unfortunately, circumstances and bad luck (if we want to call it thus) conspire against Túrin and his companions, and he finds himself facing the dragon on his own. In the end it is only due to his circumspect choice of the place for his attack that he is able to kill his antagonist. And yet, immediately after his martial success, fate takes its course and his heroic triumph is overshadowed by his personal tragedy.[9]

The narrative is not very clear as to what degree Melkor's curse influences or even determines the outcome of Túrin's actions,[10] and the reader knows little more than Túrin himself, who, after Beleg's death,[11] has been bereft of a wise counsellor figure, let alone divine assistance. Old Norse heroes such as Sigurd often profit from divine intercession at key moments of their career,[12] and model epic heroes such as Aragorn seem to have access to, and the humility and wisdom to accept, the good advice of wise old men such as Gandalf on a more permanent basis – which seems to make all the difference for the quality of their heroic careers.[13] Aragorn, as the most prominent example of a responsible and well-advised hero, is aware that he is as much influenced by what happens as he is shaping the outcome of events. He also knows that he has been able to achieve his aims solely because he has been helped by other people. This becomes especially clear in his relationship with the members of the Fellowship and, at his coronation ceremony, he gracefully acknowledges his indebtedness to his friends and supporters. He proclaims that by "the labour and valour of many I have come into my

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[9] Comparing a work of pure fiction such as *The Children of Húrin* with a fictionalised account of a historical event, as we have it in *The Battle of Maldon*, can be problematic. However, in Tolkien's case this is not only permissible but, as Tom Shippey and Michael Drout and other medievalists have shown time and again, even recommendable since Tolkien himself used fiction as an approach to explore problems of historical scholarship.

[10] Mitchell (2010) discusses this aspect in some depth. See also West (2000: 242).

[11] The importance of Beleg as friend and counsellor has been made explicit by Túrin himself: "From you [i.e. Beleg] I will take whatever you give, even rebuke. Henceforward, you shall counsel me in all ways, save the road to Doriath only" (*Children* 140).

[12] Thus Odin, in *The Saga of the Volsungs* (Byock 1990: 63), gives the young Sigurd the helpful advice to dig several ditches (and not just one) in order to avoid drowning in Fafnir's blood when killing the dragon, yet disappears from Sigurd's life as quickly as he has appeared, and fate takes its course.

[13] See Croft's (2011) illuminating comparison of Túrin and Aragorn. See also Stephen (2012: 167-170).

inheritance" (*LotR* 967) and calls Gandalf "the mover of all that has been accomplished, and this is his victory" (*LotR* 968).[14]

Aragorn is also painfully aware of his limited insight into the larger pattern and the potentially disastrous consequences of a wrong choice.[15] Yet the mere awareness that there is a larger pattern[16] and that his deeds contribute to and influence its development, changes the perception of individual accomplishments or failures and puts them into a broader perspective. As Dickerson has shown, *The Lord of the Rings* avoids explicit mentions of religion yet clearly follows a providential scheme. This does not mean that the outcome of everything is predetermined, or that Free Will is disregarded, or that the actions of the protagonists are of no significance. Rather it means that a benevolent force supports those actions and protagonists that work towards the greater good and the fulfilment of an implicit divine plan. We as readers may not sit in a high place and are thus not able to perceive everything, but the narrator's/narrators' somewhat privileged view of things[17] results in a feeling of coherence, meaningfulness and consolation.

Compared to this, the reading of *The Children of Húrin* leaves us disturbed or, if we are lucky, purged by the catharsis of the tragic catastrophe, yet without consolation.[18] This is mainly because our point of view is limited and the narrative voice does not even attempt to put the events into a wider and more meaningful context. We are, to use St. Augustine's simile from *De Ordine* I.2, like an extremely myopic person who has to get very close to a mosaic in order to see anything. What we then behold from up close is a seemingly random arrangement of little coloured pieces and we fail to perceive the beauty and harmony of the entire mosaic. The result of such an impaired view in the case of the story of Túrin is an almost claustrophobic narrative whose main protagonist unwittingly hastens towards his doom. This is also at least partially due to the fact that Túrin is a mortal man without even

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[14] On the other side, he is very well able to act independently and asserts his status and position when, for example, questioned by Gimli about the use of the *palantír* (see *LotR* 780).

[15] See his "And now may I make a right choice, and change the evil fate of this unhappy day! […] My heart speaks clearly at last […]" (*LotR* 967).

[16] See 'The Music of the Ainur' in *The Silmarillion* for an account of the creation and purpose of the universe.

[17] It is difficult to identify clearly the identity of the narrator/narrators in spite of the conceit of the Red Book, which simply won't fit the deixis of the narrative. The narrator's temporary closeness to Gandalf may play an important role in the positive interpretation of events. See also Thomas (2000).

[18] See Eilmann (2020) for a discussion of the relationship between *The Children of Húrin* and the Aristotelian theory of tragedy.

Aragorn's longevity,[19] and it takes an elvish perspective to come to a more positive re-interpretation of his career.[20] Furthermore, within *The Children of Húrin* the workings of greater powers (mostly malevolent ones, though) are alluded to, but no coherent picture emerges and the effect is not the invocation of eucatastrophe and consolation, as in *The Lord of the Rings*, but of loss and frustration.

The Children of Húrin and *The Lord of the Rings* could be seen as presenting two contrasting approaches to heroic narratives: on the one hand we are confronted with a stark, harsh and grim heroic world where people have to flee from their homes into exile, where families are torn apart, and where returns do not end with the restoration of former normality (minus a few silver spoons) – it is rather a bleak version of a 'there' without the 'and back again' bit. Frodo, it may be argued, cannot go 'back again' either, since the traumatic experiences during his quest have changed him too much. However, his sacrifice has contributed to a lasting restoration of peace and general prosperity, and his personal loss is given dignity and meaning by becoming part of the larger pattern supported by divine providence. Frodo cannot go back to his former life, but he can go on to the Undying Lands. He thus contrasts with the unhappy Túrin who, within the confines of the narrative, despairs and perishes by his own hands. His posthumous fame and participation in the apocalyptic eucatastrophe announced in the Second Prophecy of Mandos are of little consolation since, for him and the readers, his tale has come to an end. It takes someone like Sam to realise that "the great tales never end" (*LotR* 712) and that they go "on past the happiness and into grief and beyond it" (*LotR* 712). The tale of Túrin, as told in *The Children of Húrin*, ends with the 'into grief' and lacks the 'beyond it'.

The difference in outlook also reflects the development of Tolkien's approach to Middle-earth and heroism. *The Children of Húrin* represent an earlier, heathen view of the world that is largely inspired by the *Kalevala*,[21] whereas *The Lord of the Rings* possesses the characteristics of a proto-Christian fairy story as outlined in his 1939 lecture 'On Fairy-stories'. As a consequence, the two works have a different feel even though the world

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[19] The contrasting and to some extent opposing views due to the difference in lifespan can be seen most clearly in Túrin and Gwindor's debate about the most appropriate strategy to counter Morgoth's threat (*Children* 161-163).

[20] Elrond, for example, mentions him as one of "the mighty elf-friends of old, Hador, and Húrin, and Túrin, and Beren" (*LotR* 270-271), and in the Second Prophecy of Mandos, Túrin shall be "coming from the halls of Mandos; and the black sword of Túrin shall deal unto Morgoth his death and final end" (Tolkien 1992: 333).

[21] See West (2000: 237-238) and Tolkien (2015).

outside the Shire is no less wild than many of the lands Túrin visits, nor are late-Third-Age heroes less heroic. A closer look at *The Lord of the Rings* can shed some light onto the way Tolkien redeems even the heathen and potentially problematic forms of heroism in his epic and incorporates the pre-Christian concepts of *wyrd*/fate into an emerging proto-Christian framework.

The (northern) Germanic pre-Christian heroic attitude, as, for example, expressed by Beowulf,[22] hints vaguely at the workings of *wyrd*/fate: *wyrd oft nereð // unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah* (*Beowulf* 572b-573).[23] *Wyrd* in *The Lord of the Rings*, however, is clearly the result of the hidden interaction between divine Providence and Free Will. This constitutes, as Dickerson (2003) and others have shown, the underlying structural pattern. It is therefore not so much the typical Germanic heroic resistance against or stoic acceptance[24] of an (often) nihilistic *wyrd* that is in the foreground, though *The Lord of the Rings* has its 'Germanic' heroic moments. Tolkien, as almost always when adapting motifs from medieval literature, does not simply copy his model but alters them slightly to make his point. This can be seen clearly in Éomer's last stand which Tolkien exploits to create a moment of pure northern heroic spirit of a leader – a moment otherwise not available in this unalloyed form within the corpus of surviving Germanic poetry.[25]

The situation is as follows: the Rohirrim, after the initial success of their surprise attack, have not only lost their King Théoden, but are now also cut off from Prince Imrahil's forces and in danger of being overpowered by the sheer numeric predominance of the enemy. Éomer, having inherited the kingship after his uncle's death in battle, has taken over the command of the Rohirrim and orders them to rally around his banner. When he notices the black ships of the Corsairs of Umbar, he believes the battle of the Pelennor lost, and therefore

> thought to make a great shield-wall[26] at the last, and stand, and fight there on foot till all fell, and do deeds of song on the fields of Pelennor, though no man should be left in the West to remember the last King of

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[22] Beowulf uses this maxim in his account of his fight against the dangers of the sea during the swimming-contest against Breca.

[23] Tolkien (2014: 29) gives the following translation: "Fate oft saveth a man not doomed to die, when his valour fails not." He adds a substantial comment to this enigmatic line (Tolkien 2014: 256-260).

[24] See, for example, Beowulf's concluding *Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel* (*Beowulf* 455b), which Tolkien (2014: 26) renders as: "Fate goeth ever as she must."

[25] Tolkien (1988: 144) argues: "For this 'northern heroic spirit' is never quite pure; it is of gold and an alloy […] of personal good name […]."

[26] See Honegger (2011a) for an in-depth discussion of the Anglo-Saxon elements in the Rohirrim.

the Mark. So he rode to a green hillock and there set his banner, and the White Horse ran rippling in the wind.

> *Out of doubt, out of dark to the day's rising*
> *I came singing in the sun, sword unsheathing.*
> *To hope's end I rode and to heart's breaking:*
> *Now for wrath, now for ruin and a red nightfall!*

These staves he spoke, yet he laughed as he said them. For once more lust of battle was on him; and he was still unscathed, and he was young, and he was king: the lord of a fell people. And lo! Even as he laughed at despair he looked out again on the black ships, and he lifted up his sword to defy them. (*LotR* 847)

The moment is, however, transformed by the eucatastrophic revelation of the true identity of the naval force when the flagship unfurls Aragorn's banner.

I have quoted this passage at length since it gives, to my mind, an unprecedented emotive access to the heroic pagan mindset and, at the same time, can be read as a typological comment on Christ's resurrection (see below). Please note that Éomer is not after *lof* (afterfame) in the usual meaning of the word. He is aware that the (very likely) annihilation of his men on the battlefield not only means the end of the Rohirrim, but the end of all the Free Peoples in Middle-earth – and thus the breaking of the 'chain of songs' that has so far preserved the memory of their heroes and linked the generations to each other. As a consequence, Éomer's defiance of defeat and despair can be seen as Tolkien's answer to Beorhtwold's famous staves in *The Battle of Maldon*:

> *Hige sceal þe heardra,   heorte þe cenre,*
> *mod sceal þe mare   þe ure maegen lytlað.*

'Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens.' (Tolkien 1988: 124)

As Tolkien writes, Beorhtwold's words "have been held to be the finest expression of the northern heroic spirit, Norse or English" (Tolkien 1988: 143) – and this all the more, or rather especially so, since they were spoken and acted upon by a retainer and not a leader eager for fame and glory. Éomer, by contrast, is a leader, and Tolkien is careful to place him within a framework where martial heroism does not stand in opposition to his duties to allies, people or kin, so that the gold of northern heroic courage shines in all its purity, purged of any alloy of personal fame. This way Tolkien implicitly alludes, on the one hand, to Beorhtwold's admirable courage and posthumous

loyalty and, on the other, compares Éomer favourably to Denethor, who gives in to despair and ends his life in suicidal madness.[27]

As Tom Shippey (2007a) has pointed out, Tolkien felt uneasy about the nature of many of the pagan heroes he encountered in the texts he studied and taught as part of his syllabus at Oxford. His professional liking for and admiration of these heroes stood in opposition to his moral-religious reservations about their often cruel and immoral behaviour. Tolkien's solution to this problem was to re-create in his own fiction pagan heroes who are *naturaliter christiani* in the manner of the Old Testament *iusti*, i.e. without the revelation of the Christian truth. He would intentionally create parallels and similarities between exemplary figures of the European Middle Ages and his own protagonists and thus connect them with the medieval project of interpreting history as a meaningful and coherent progression towards the Second Coming and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.[28] Aragron, for example, shares many characteristics with Arthur and, as *renovator imperii*, also with Charlemagne,[29] and is thus connected implicitly with the so-called Nine Worthies. First attested in the 13th century, this idea unites nine legendary, historical and scriptural characters in groups of three. Thus we have the three good pagans Hector of Troy, Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar; the three good Jewish heroes Joshua, King David, and Judas Maccabeus; and the three good Christian heroes Arthur, Charlemagne, and Godfrey of Bouillon. The important lesson taught by the Nine Worthies is that chivalric excellence and knightly virtue are to be found throughout history and among different cultures and religions. Aragorn would fit in nicely as a Fourth Age proto-worthy and thus foreshadows the actual worthies of the Middle Ages[30] – which brings us to Tolkien's second strategy of appropriating the past: the typological interpretation of figures and events. This interpretative technique was originally developed to link the Old to the New Testament. Events and figures in the Old Testament are interpreted as foreshadowing

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[27] There are, of course, the widely differing biographical circumstances to be taken into account. Most prominently, Éomer has a young man's resilience and has been, most likely, not yet been confronted with his natural mortality (vs. potential death in battle).

[28] Most important are the concepts of the *translatio imperii* and the *sex aetates mundi* (see Honegger 2011b).

[29] See Finn (2005) and Hall (2012) on the parallels between Aragorn and Arthur, and Honegger (2011b: 90-96) and Gallant (2020) for those between Aragorn and Charlemagne. Tolkien would, of course, be conscious of these parallels and exploit them for his construction of Aragorn as the archetypal epic hero (on archetypes in Tolkien, see O'Neill 1979). See also Risden (2015: 106-113) for a discussion of Arthur, Aragorn and the monomyth pattern.

[30] The nine walkers of the Fellowship in their diversity could be seen as a tongue-in-cheek foreshadowing of the Nine Worthies.

analogous events and persons in the Gospels. Thus Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his only son Isaac is considered to prophetically mirror Christ's ascent to the hill of Golgotha. Since the biblical typological interpretation is often associative and vague and does not rely on a close one-to-one correspondence of elements and patterns, it is closer to applicability than to allegory[31] – and literary scholars may also recognize parallels between the typological interpretation and the structuralist approach. Furthermore, the typological way of thinking and perceiving patterns would not only be familiar to Tolkien, but also constitute a highly attractive method for linking his fictional works to the revealed truth of the Gospels without having to recur to blatant anachronisms or to violate the precepts of his Christian faith. And lastly, it would give him the means to redeem his pagan heroes by placing them within a pre-Christian framework that is nevertheless ruled by divine Providence. How then, does this apply to the events on the Pelennor fields?[32] To start, the cockcrow heralding daybreak and, coincidentally, the coming of the Rohirrim, echoes the crowing of the cock in the Gospels (e.g. Mark 14:72). More significantly, the date of the Battle of the Pelennor Fields (15 March 3019 TA) places it within or at least the vicinity of the general timeframe of the Easter week with the central events of Christ's death on the cross, his descent into the underworld and, finally, his triumphant resurrection on Easter Monday. Aragorn's descent into the Underworld ('The Paths of the Dead') and his triumphant emergence not only participate in the archetypical pattern found in numerous myths and legends,[33] but continue the Easter theme by foreshadowing Christ's death, resurrection and triumphant return to Heaven – *the* eucatastrophic event in the history of mankind, as Tolkien argues in the 'Epilogue' to his lecture 'On Fairy-stories'. Set against this background we can see how Éomer's northern heroic courage is hallowed and redeemed since, in opposition to Denethor's despair, it gives Providence the necessary leverage to work its redemptive magic. It would be probably too much to go on and see the laughter of the Rohirrim as alluding to the *risus paschalis*, the Easter Laughter expressing the joy and exhilaration about Christ's tricking and defeating of both Death and the Devil.

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[31] I use Tolkien's terminology, though his understanding of allegory (cf. *LotR* xxiv) is somewhat narrow. The actual allegorising of e.g. medieval exegetes is much more associative and free ranging than theoretical studies usually suggest.

[32] Such a reading does not mean that the allegorical domination of the author is simply substituted by a typological straitjacket – however loosely fitting this might be. Tolkien's approach is subtle and indirect, and he works more by means of suggestions and allusions than by establishing clear patterns. My own reading will therefore remain equally allusive.

[33] See Stevens (2020) for an in-depth discussion of the 'underworld journey' (*katabasis*) in Tolkien's work.

Let us, to conclude, return once more to Túrin and the question of how his brand of heroism differs from that of, for example, Éomer. The answer is, in my opinion, to be found in the divergent views on the relationship between fate, Providence, and courage that constitute the ideological frameworks for their deeds. Éomer's motivation is not explicitly given, but we can infer from the songs of Rohan that, like his maternal uncle and predecessor Théoden, it was the oaths taken that made him act as he did.[34] The young king of Rohan simply tries to honour the obligations of solidarity and friendship with Gondor in the idiom of his people – without questioning the deeper meaning and import of current events on a meta-historical level.[35] He does the deed at hand, so to speak, implicitly trusting in the ultimate meaningfulness of the universe. Túrin, on the other side, bases his behaviour on a sort of heroic existentialism, as becomes evident from his long speech in the council of Orodreth in Nargothrond:

> 'The Valar!' said Túrin. 'They have forsaken you, and they hold Men in scorn. […] There is but one Vala with whom we have to do, and that is Morgoth; and if in the end we cannot overcome him, at least we can hurt him and hinder him.[36] For victory is victory, however small, nor is its worth only from what follows from it. […]' (*Children* 161)

The elf Gwindor, opposing Túrin in the council, points out that such a view is too limited and that the Eldar have

> a prophecy […] that one day a messenger from Middle-earth will come through the shadows to Valinor, and Manwë will hear, and Mandos relent. For that time shall we not attempt to preserve the seed of the Noldor, and of the Edain also? […] You think of yourself and of your own glory, and bid us do likewise; but we must think of others beside ourselves, for not all can fight and fall, and those we must keep from war and ruin, while we can. (*Children* 162)

It is, as we know, only after the fall of Nargothrond that Túrin has learnt his lesson and starts to think of others – but by then it seems too late for him to attain personal salvation in this age, and it is no coincidence that both Túrin

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[34] See the lines in the songs of Rohan praising Théoden: "*Fealty kept he; / oaths he had taken, all fulfilled them*" (*LotR* 803).

[35] Éomer's words at the council after the battle of the Pelennor Fields support such an interpretation: "I have little knowledge of these deep matters; but I need it not. This I know, and it is enough, that as my friend Aragorn succoured me and my people, so I will aid him when he calls. I will go" (*LotR* 880).

[36] Compare this, for example, to Aragorn's march on the Black Gate, which may look to Sauron a bit like Túrin's idea of heroism, but actually serves a higher purpose.

and Denethor commit suicide. Túrin is, structurally speaking, closer to Denethor than to Éomer. The latter, by doing the deed at hand, provides Providence with the opportunity to intercede on behalf of Men – as much as Gwindor hopes to do by preserving the seed of the Noldor and Edain. Yet it would be cynical to interpret Túrin's tragedy as being merely a problem of finding the correct approach to events – which is probably why Tolkien, by means of the elvish re-evaluation of Túrin's deeds, provides an alternative view.

The value of Túrin as a problematic hero is exactly his being 'problematic' – at least within the confines of the extant narrative as given in *The Children of Húrin*. It highlights the necessity of a redeeming framework in which a plurality of different types of heroes collaborate towards the greater good and the fulfilment of the Divine Will by means of creating opportunities for the benevolent intercession of Providence. This also means that heroes need no longer be of the high mimetic (or higher) type but that even low mimetic hobbits can contribute their share,[37] and that with these new types of heroes the chances of getting invited for tea are actually greater than those of getting killed before dinner.

List of Abbreviations

Children   Tolkien, John R.R. 2007. *The Children of Húrin*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins.

LotR   Tolkien, John R.R. 2004. *The Lord of the Rings*. 50th anniversary one-volume edition. Originally published in three volumes 1954-55. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin.

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[37] See also Honegger (2018).

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