Journal of Tolkien Research

Volume 19 | Issue 1 Article 9

2024

Germanic Heroes, Courage, and Fate: Northern Narratives of J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium (2024) by Richard Z. Gallant

Andrew Higgins
asthiggins@me.com

Germanic Heroes, Courage, and Fate: Northern Narratives of J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium, by Richard Z Gallant. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2024. xxvi, 258 pp. $24.30 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703498.

This welcome new volume from Walking Tree Press is by Dr. Richard Z Gallant, who earned his doctorate at the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena. This volume has already won the 2024 Inklings Prize in the category "best scholarly publication" of the Inklings-Gesellschaft, and I agree it is worthy of the prize. The overall focus of the volume is how Tolkien incorporated elements of heroic Germanic narrative into his legendarium. While there has certainly been a great deal of academic work done on Tolkien's study, teaching and passion of what Tom Shippey in the introduction to this volume characterises as "Germanic Heroic Literature", what Dr. Gallant uniquely explores in this volume is how Tolkien constructed the narrative of his fictional world to illustrate to his readers the different aspects, virtues and vices of the Germanic heroic code which serve as the framework for Germanic heroic literature. Gallant does this by using the medieval tradition of *exemplum* to show how Tolkien frames some key characters from his legendarium as either good or bad examples (*bonum exemplum* and *malum exemplum*) of the Germanic heroic ethos – from Fëanor in the First Age to Aragorn in the Third Age. Linked to this ethos is the role the Germanic concept of *wyrd* plays in these examples – how both fate and free will play a part in the choices these examples make. Finally another key theme Gallant explores throughout the volume is how Tolkien's historical narratives parallel (but do not overtly copy) the migration period against which the stories of the Germanic heroic literature is set – a time of great change, upheaval and coming together of various cultures and traditions.

The volume consists of a preface by Tom Shippey, an introduction by Professor Dr. Thomas Honegger (with whom Gallant studied) and then ten thematically linked (but as the author says independent) chapters, six of which have already been published in Tolkien-related journals and four new ones covering mainly the Second and Third Ages of the legendarium.

The first five chapters explore Tolkien's use of themes and patterns from Germanic Heroic Literature in the First Age of his legendarium. As a curtain raiser, Gallant offers an in-depth and well-developed exploration of some key themes in Germanic heroic literature such as examples of nobility and cruelty, virtue and vice, and human conflict situations which set up moral choices for the hero to make (e.g. does Hildebrand kill his "son" Hadubrand). The other key ingredient in Germanic heroic literature is the concept of "Northern Courage" which Shippey has called the greatest contribution of early Northern literature. That is: courage in the face of defeat as indicated in the heroic code of Old English poem "The Battle of Maldon"; especially in the lines "Hige sceal þē heardra/ heorte þē cēnre/mōd sceal þē māre/þē ūre mægen lytlað" which Tolkien translates as "Will shall be sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens" (61). It is these themes that Gallant uses as a critical

framework to explore how Tolkien encodes elements of Germanic heroic literature into the narrative framework of his legendarium.

Focusing on the First Age, Gallant explores how the main Noldorin Elvish houses – such as the House of Fëanor or The House of Fingolfin – resemble the closed fixed kin groups of the Germanic tribes of the migration period called either "Sippe" or the more Germanic term "Hausgemeinschaften". Gallant cogently argues that it is the character and tragic story of the Elf Fëanor that most exemplifies the *malum exemplum* of Germanic heroic ethos that Tolkien sought to bring into his legendarium. Fëanor's heroic condition and *wyrd* of freedom to choose not to surrender the Silmarils allows for the Germanic original sin of kin-slaying (i.e. – the Slaying at Alqualondë) as well as themes of oaths and oath breaking. I found Gallant's analysis of the character of Fëanor as the first Germanic hero of the legendarium quite compelling. With his role as artificer, Feanor resembles the Germanic tragic hero Weland the Smith who survives in the vestiges of English myth and legend that Tolkien was eager to discover. There is evidence in some of Tolkien's papers from his time as lexicographer on the Oxford English Dictionary that he thought about linking Fëanor and Weland as part of the story of the Wars of Melko with the Fairies (see *Parma Eldalamberon* 15, pp. 96-97). Gallant also explores how Fëanor exhibits traits shared with the monster Grendel in *Beowulf* in both the use of fire imagery and of irrational hate. Gallant argues persuasively that the character of Fëanor, the oath and the act of his sons allows the narrative to enter a heroic cycle of glorious victories and even more glorious defeats revolving around oaths and their breaking. Gallant also uses Feanor's tragic story to explore the bigger concept of *wyrd* as an act, or perhaps gift, of free choice and free will and both the good and bad results this brings about.

These contrasting *bonum/malum exempla* become the basis of the stories that the diegetic historians and chroniclers of this age tell. Gallant calls these historians and chroniclers by the Old English name of "wyrdwrīteras" (59) which according to Bosworth and Toller means one who writes accounts of events. Gallant contrasts the possessive and reckless *malum exemplum* of Fëanor with the heroic *bonum exemplum* of Fingolfin who in the account of the Battle of the Dagor Bragollach is depicted as personally assaulting Angband and challenging Morgoth to single combat. Gallant suggests that the heroic casting of Fingolfin and his "Northern Courage" – even though no one was really there to witness the actual duel with Morgoth – provides a historical contrast with the *malum exemplum* of the fateful selfishness of Fëanor.

Gallant also explores how Tolkien's narrative compares and contrasts the Elder Days of Tolkien's legendarium with real world history's migration period which lasted from c.376 CE to 568 CE, during which the confederation of barbarians was acculturated and assimilated into the dominant hegemony of Rome. Gallant suggests that Tolkien cast the First men, the Edain, in the role of the migration age barbarians who came into contact with the Noldor Elves (the Romans). Gallant uses the term "Noldorization" (79) which explores the growing relationship of the First Men with the Noldor elves as the Germanic

barbarians became more mixed with the Romans. Gallant convincingly argues that the "Noldorization" of the First Men consisted of vassal relationship, military support and buffer zones, the education of aristocratic youth in Noldorian royal courts and the language acquisition of Sindarin (the language of the Grey Elves). It was these early encounters that helped form the tribes of the First Men into the nation they would become in Númenor, enriched with the connection of Elvish culture.

The remaining five chapters explore how these themes and patterns of heroic Germanic literature carry over into the Second and Third Ages of Tolkien's legendarium. In exploring the narratives of the Second Age and the rise and fall of Númenor, Gallant suggests that the mood of the narratives shift from more mythological (especially with the Atlantis inspired themes of Númenor) than German heroic. He argues that the *Akallabêth* does not appear to be Germanic in the least but later concedes that underneath the surface of the narrative, some of the key themes of Germanic heroic literature – such as rejecting of traditions and conflicts between old and newly adopted tradition – still can be seen. Like with Fëanor, the themes of cupidity and possessiveness are still very prevalent in Second Age narrative – especially in the narrative of the downfall of Númenor.

The following two chapters suggests the restoration of the Germanic heroic narrative and Northern Courage can be seen in the characters of the Faithful who escape the fate of Númenor and their descendants the Dúnedain. Gallant starts this analysis with Isildur at the Last Alliance of Elves and Men when he refuses to destroy the One Ring and claims it with the Germanic heroic term "weregild" for the death of his father Elendil. Gallant makes the point that like the Germanic Fëanor, Isildur executes a freedom of choice with fateful after-effects. Gallant also brings in Fëanor again when he explores the *wyrd* of Third Age Galadriel as a *bonum exemplum* of someone who is put to a moral test (i.e. to take the Ring) and by her own choice passes – even knowing by doing so and supporting the destruction of the One Ring her *wyrd* is sealed.

This analysis culminates in the final chapter where Gallant explores the embodiment of the Germanic narrative and Northern Courage in the character of Aragorn which Gallant explores as a synthesis of a new heroic code of men. He explores how Aragorn is an archetype of the renewal king while at the same time carrying within him the tradition of the early Edain. Gallant interestingly cites as a model for this Charlamagne, who embodied a new form of heroism linked to the Northern Courage but also infused with a new hope and founded on a belief in greater things than merely fame and fortune. Therefore for Gallant Aragorn as King Elessar is a true *bonum exemplum* of Tolkien's legendarium or as Gallant calls him – Elessar Telcontar Magnus, Rex Pater Gondor, Restitutor Imperii – a long way from the *malum exemplum* of Fëanor!

Dr. Andrew Higgins
Balham, London