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"'And Númenor went down into the Sea': Tolkien, Beowulf, and the Masochistic Jouissance of Westernesse"

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"'And Númenor went down into the Sea': Tolkien, *Beowulf*, and the Masochistic Jouissance of Westernesse"

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> In masochistic experience, every bit of flesh comes alive in an agony of trembling ecstasy. All is sensitized almost beyond endurance. How can it *not* be sexual? How can it *not* be religious? One is taken out of oneself and beyond all law and duty and custom, and yet utterly reduced, pressed down, made small. It is a defeat and a glory.[1]

The *Beowulf* poem renders conspicuous both the dependency of heroic Anglo-Saxon male subjectivity on experiences of masochistic desire and the desire to be unburdened of great expectation and responsibility.[2] Its narrative is constituted through a masochistic desire and ego-dissolution stemming from a perverse dynamic of domination and submission and an eroticization of power disparities.

The attraction to psychic annihilation is both heroic and Christian. In *Inner Experience*, Georges Bataille argues that scenes of physical torture provide Christians with the agony to which they are necessarily drawn:

> Christ is the totality of being, and yet he is, like the "lover," personal, like the "lover," desirable: and suddenly torture, agony, death. The follower of Christ is led to torture. Has led himself to torture: not to some insignificant torture, but to divine agony. He not only

[1] Lyn Cowan, *Masochism, A Jungian View* (Dallas: Spring Publications. 1982; Reprint 1985), 113.
[2] This is a burden, admittedly, many less privileged individuals only dream of having. For a more detailed argument see Christopher Vaccaro, *Sadomasochistic Beowulf : Queer Narratives of Desire and Dissolution in Old English Literature*. New Queer Medievalisms. DeGruyter Press, 2025, forthcoming.

> has the means of attaining torture, but could not avoid it, and it is the torture of more than himself, of God himself, who, God, is not less man and torturable than him.[3]

A "masochistic unpleasure" (from the impeding of the ego's impulses) is of course central to a Christian worldview. In "Unpleasures of the Flesh," Sara Salih speaks of unpleasures when examining the perverse pleasures some medieval women experienced despite their restricted marital lives.[4] More broadly such perverse pleasures are central to the renunciatory impulse of Christian piety. It is to say nothing new to acknowledge the importance of suffering and agony at the heart of Christianity. This emphasis on suffering stems from humanity's fall. Tolkien mentions as much in his letter 131 to Milton Waldman that a fall is a requirement to a good story. He submits to this reality in his narratives:

> In the cosmogony there is a fall: a fall of Angels we should say. Though quite different in form, of course, to that of Christian myth. . . . There cannot be any 'story' without a fall – all stories are ultimately about the fall – at least not for human minds as we know them and have them.[5]

And in letter 43 to his son Michael, Tolkien points out that it is not from enjoyment that humanity will regain its stature: "The essence of a *fallen* world is that the best cannot be attained by free enjoyment . . . but by denial and suffering."[6] In his typical fashion, Tolkien amplified the pleasurable paradox of this idea by establishing death as the "gift of Ilúvatar." As such suffering and dying possess something beautiful, something to relish. My goal here is to relate this masochistic attitude to the fall of the kingdom of Númenor.

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[3] Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 56.
[4] Sarah Salih, "Unpleasures of the Flesh: Medieval Marriage, Masochism and the History of Heterosexuality," *Studies in the age of Chaucer* 33 (2011): 125-147.
[5] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 147.
[6] Tolkien, *Letters*, 51.

In 1955, Tolkien addressed a reoccurring personal dream in letter 163 to W.H. Auden, in which he describes "the Great Wave, towering up, and coming in ineluctably over the trees and green fields."[7] In letter 257 to Christopher Bretherton, Tolkien writes: "In sleep I had the dreadful dream of the ineluctable wave, either coming out of the quiet sea, or coming in towering over the green inlands. It still occurs occasionally, though, now exorcized by writing about it. It always ends by surrender, and I awake gasping out of deep water."[8] This dream inevitably ends with Tolkien's surrender and the catastrophic tsunamic wave brings about the complete destruction of the island kingdom of Númenor.

In Tolkien's mythology, this wave is a punishment. Since the reign of Tar-Ancalimon, the men in support of the king began to openly express their envy of Elvish immortality and their doubt of Ilúvatar's generosity when bestowing death as a gift. When Sauron was captured and brought to Númenor by King Ar-Pharazôn, he further corrupted the hearts of the Númenórean court and even convinced the king that he was entitled and powerful enough to make war against the Valar. And so his fleet sailed to Valinor:

> For a wind arose in the east and it wafted them away; and they broke the Ban of the Valar, and sailed into forbidden seas, going up with war against the Deathless, to wrest from them everlasting life within the circles of the World. . . . and at last [Ar-Parazôn] left his ship and strode upon the shore, claiming the land for his own, if none should do battle for it. And a host of the Númenóreans encamped in might about Túna, whence all the Eldar had fled.[9]

[7] Tolkien, *Letters*, 213.
[8] Tolkien, *Letters*, 347.
[9] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fall of Númenor, and Other Tales from the Second Age of Middle-earth*, ed. Brian Sibley (New York: Harcourt, 2022), 187.

And so Ilúvatar himself is brought to wrath at the offenses of his mortal children, and in his anger he rends apart the world, condemning and punishing the Númenóreans and submerging both land and people under stone and sea. I will make the case that Tolkien's close relationship to the *Beowulf* poem primed the pump of his literary artistry when it came to stories of erotico-spiritual submission such as the Fall of Númenor, allowing for the author and readers alike to experience the erotic thrill of the All-Father's punishments.[10]

Tolkien worked very closely with *Beowulf*. He did so very early on in his academic career as he attended classes taught by Kenneth Sisam and A. S. Napier, and as it was included in the set of texts for his 1915 college exams. When teaching at Leeds, Tolkien frequently offered the poem. In January of 1923, Tolkien published in *The Gryphon* (n.s. 4, no. 4) his "Iumonna Gold Galdre Bewunden," based on line 3052 of *Beowulf*. Around 1924 Tolkien attempted to translate the poem in alliterative verse.[11] Manuscript A (29/1 fols 1-56) "Beowulf: Early attempts at alliterative translation" is dated by Christopher Tolkien to his father's time at Leeds.[12] In 1940, J. R. R. Tolkien published his essay "On Translating *Beowulf*" as well as lines 210-228 of his unpublished alliterative verse translation in his *Prefatory Remarks* to C. L. Wrenn's revised edition of the J. R. Clark Hall translation.[13] Tolkien completed his prose translation of *Beowulf* in 1926.[14]

[10] In doing so, I do not fail to note that while parental-type punishments have frequently been eroticized and a part of consensual erotic play, there exists a sizeable deal of trauma for some around such issues that this reading in no ways seeks to erase or minimize.

[11] Hammond and Scull, *Chronology*, 1924-25, 124. I was able to directly examine this unfinished alliterative translation of *Beowulf* at the Bodleian/Weston Library's Tolkien archives. Bodleian/Weston Library, Tolkien Archives, Box 1: VERSE: A 29/1 fols 1-56 "Beowulf: Early attempts at alliterative translation."

[12] CRT writes: "This work belongs to my father's time at Leeds University and is closely associated with his alliterative poem 'The Lay of the Children of Húrin' (published in The Lays of Beleriand, 1985), of the same time." Special thanks to Yvette Kisor for her assistance with this material.

[13] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: a Translation and a Commentary*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014), 9.

[14] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf*, vii , also 2: Christopher Tolkien writes: "The translation had been completed by the end of April 1926, as is seen from a letter in the archive of Oxford University Press from my father to Kenneth Sisam: 'I have all *Beowulf* translated, but in much hardly to my liking . . .'" See 26 April 1926 entry in *The J.R.R. Tolkien*

In 1937, Tolkien published a revised version of his *Iúmonna Gold Galdre Bewunden* in *Oxford Magazine* 55. Published that same year, *The Hobbit* has very direct borrowings. The dragon Smaug is woken by the stealing of a cup from the hoard much the same as the waking of Beowulf's dragon. The dragon slayer Bard emerges from the water when all fear he is dead just as Beowulf does: "And in the very midst of their talk a tall figure stepped from the shadows. He was drenched with water, his black hair hung wet over his face and shoulders, and a fierce light was in his eyes."[15] From 1925-45, Tolkien regularly met his obligation as Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon, giving lectures on *Beowulf* and the story of Finn and Hengest at Oxford University.[16] In his 1938 letter to the editor of the *Observer* in regards to *The Hobbit*, Tolkien admitted that *Beowulf* was, "among my most valued sources; though it was not consciously present to the mind in the process of writing, in which the episode of theft arose naturally (and almost inevitably) from the circumstances."[17] That same year, Tolkien gave a talk on *Beowulf* for the BBC radio series "Poetry Will Out."[18] Tolkien went on to republish his *Iúmonna Gold* poem *as The Hoard* in 1962 in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, which was then republished in Douglas Anderson's *The Annotated Hobbit* (1988) and in Michael C. Drout's *Beowulf and the Critics* (2002). Additionally many of Tolkien's 1963 lectures focused on Finn and Hengest (published by A.J. Bliss in 1982). Tolkien's most significant scholarship on *Beowulf* came first in the form of a lecture, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," which he delivered on 25th November 1936 for the Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture at the British Academy. His lecture argues many significant points, perhaps the most important of which concerns the

Companion and Guide: Chronology, ed. Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond (Houghton Mifflin: Boston and New York, 2006).

[15] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 263.

[16] Alan Bliss, ed. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Finn and Hengest* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), v.

[17] Tolkien, *Letters*, 30.

[18] Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond , *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Reader's Guide* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 85.

central theme of *Beowulf*, one that the legendarium shares: "an ancient theme: that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die. A theme that no Christian need despise."[19]

It is a theme significant to Tolkien's works, especially those emerging out of this period. Tolkien wrote of it in the *Fall of Númenor*, written in 1936, and in *The Lost Road*, written in 1937. And as our esteemed colleague Richard West astutely argued, it is central to the tragic elements of Tolkien's romances.[20] Perhaps *Beowulf* seems a less obvious influence on the Númenor material than other narratives, since though the sea is central to the nascence and success of the eponymous hero and his homo-social pursuits, there is no deluge, no ineluctable wave, no immediately recognizable (watery) punishment for Beowulf's failings. But actually, its link to the Fall of Númenor lies in the deep waters of the psyche, in the shared psychology of the two narratives. As Tom Shippey eloquently argues, Tolkien felt an intimate identification with the *Beowulf* poet, "who he believed passionately to have sprung from the same soil and talked the same (ancestral) language as himself."[21] In "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien authoritatively outlines "the mood of the author, the essential cast of his imaginative apprehension of the world."[22] And it is to a shared psychology that I will now turn.[23]

My argument here fits within a well-established focus on Freudian theory in *Beowulf* and on Tolkien studies. To name just a few arguments, Paul Acker employs a Kristevan perspective

[19] Tolkien, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," in *The Beowulf Poet: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Donald Fry, 8-56 (Engelwood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Inc, 1968), 28.
[20] Richard West, "'Her Choice Was Made and Her Doom Appointed': Tragedy and Divine Comedy in the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen," in *The Lord of the Rings, 1954-2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwelder*, ed. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, pp. 317-29 (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2006), 326-27.
[21] Tom Shippey, "Tolkien and the *Beowulf*-Poet," in *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien by Tom Shippey*, 1-18 (Walking Tree, 2007), 5.
[22] Tolkien, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," 25.
[23] Anne C. Petty argues that "the passage in the 'Akallabêth' that describes the coming of the first Númenóreans to their new land contains some of Tolkien's most inspired saga-style language, conjuring images of dragon ships and seascapes straight out of such Old English poems as *The Seafarer*." (Petty, *Tolkien in the Land of Heroes: Discovering the Human Spirit* (Cold Spring Harbor: NY: Cold Spring Press, 2003), 82.

on abjection and the maternal in his look at Grendel's Mother. Janet Thormann explores the poem's psychological draw towards violence. John Hill probes "the psyche of the heroic world." Gillian Rose Overing investigates the psychological and semiotic formulations of gender.[24]

Tolkien deliberately created an elaborate mythology, and so it behooves us to read his legendarium through the kaleidoscopic lens that the many schools of psychology form today. In doing so we are in good company. Appropriately, Tolkien scholars have employed concepts by Carl Jung, Julia Kristeva, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, among others. Timothy O'Neill's "The Individuated Hobbit" (1979) examines the legendarium through Jung's theories of cultural archetypes. And prominent scholars such as Sara Brown, Gergely Nagy, Valerie Rohy, and John Rosegrant have each utilized the psychological premises of Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Žižek to scaffold their arguments on subjectivity and gender.[25] While scholars have rightly investigated dreams and archetypes, complexes, traumas, and theories of sexuality, the use of theories around sadomasochism in Tolkien Studies has gone relatively unexamined despite its centrality to human sexuality and its prominent place historically within the field of psychology. Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Magnus Hirschfeld, Signum Freud, Jacques Lacan, Wilhelm Stekel, Theodore Roethke, Gilles Deleuze, Kaja Silverman, and Leo Bersani all give sadomasochism an important if not central place in their considerations of the formations of consciousness. My goal at this point is to offer for consideration the sadomasochistic psychology of Númenor's Downfall before tying this to the psychology of *Beowulf*.

[24] Paul Acker, "Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*," PMLA 121.3 (2006): 702-16; Janet Thormann, "*Beowulf* and the Enjoyment of Violence," Literature and Psychology 43.1-2 (1997): 65-76; John Hill, "The Psychological World in *Beowulf*," in *Cultural World in Be*owulf, 108- 40 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, Gillian Rose Overing, "Men in Trouble: Warrior Angst in *Beowulf*," Rivalrous Masculinities: New directions in medieval gender studies, ed. Ann Marie Rasmussen, 27-41 (Notre Dame Press, 2019).

[25] See Sara Brown, "Restless and uneasy . . . thin and stretched": The Ring, The Ringbearers, and the Bodies in Psychological Crisis in Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings." *Journal of Tolkien Research* (forthcoming), Gergely Nagy, " The 'Lost' Subject of Middle-earth," *Tolkien Studies* 3 (2006): 57-79, and Valerie Rohy, "On Fairy Stories," *Modern Fiction Studies* 50.4 (Winter 2004): 927-48.

In *Tolkien, Enchantment and Loss*, John Rosengrant avers that Tolkien wrote of the destruction of Númenor in order to release a personal emotional complex.[26] And in his essay on the ineluctable wave of Númenor's destruction, Rosegrant employs the concept of "transitional experience" (of experiencing oneself as "me" or as "not-me") proposed by psychologist D.W. Winnicott. Reading through Tolkien's letters for glimpses into the author's construction of selfhood, Rosengrant is convinced that the "Wave complex" symbolized a complete submission to power, a "passive surrender to overwhelming impersonal force."[27] Those memories render an image of a man often feeling alone. The one figure that loomed large in his mind, however, was his father: "the memories of his father and of the voyage all concern the time of separation from his father. This cluster of memories indicates that Tolkien's loss of his father was a major organizer of his emotions."[28] Kristine Larsen further contributes to our attempts at understanding the Wave Complex, reminding readers that: "dreaming of a tsunami means you are dealing with overwhelming feelings in your life that you are trying to keep bottled up, either consciously or subconsciously."[29] I agree with Rosengrant's assessments. However, I would add to Tolkien's need to narrativize his personal trauma, another related catalyst for story, his Christianity's own beautiful manifestation of masochism.[30]

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[26] John Rosegrant, *Tolkien, Enchantment, and Loss: Steps on the Developmental Journey* (Kent State University Press, 2021), 118-20.

> "The element of a small group of Númenoreans . . . . by moving his dream of the inelectable wave into a transitional space . . . the dream appears to have been only the conscious visible aspect of a conflict over hubris that was inhibiting Tolkien in writing and publishing . . . If we take a close look at the history of writing the "Downfall," we can see how Tolkien used it to release his complex" (Ibid).

[27] John Rosengrant, "From the Ineluctable Wave to the Realization of Imagined Wonder: Tolkien's Transformation of Psychic Pain into Art," *Mythlore* 35. 2 (130) (Spring/Summer 2017): 133-152; here at 139.

[28] Rosegrant, "From the Ineluctable Wave," 148.

[29] Kristine Larsen, "Númenor and the Devouring Wave," *Journal of Tolkien Research* 11.2 (2021), 7.

[30] Tolkien, Letter 180 to Mr Thompson [draft]: "I spoke of the time between the Elder Days and the Dominion of Men. Out of that came the 'missing link': the 'Down Fall of Númenor,' releasing some hidden 'complex.' For when Faramir speaks of his private vision of the Great Wave, he speaks for me" (*Letters*, 232).

Christian Masochism

In their compendious assessment of the Fall, Hammond and Scull provide Tolkien's letter to Amy Ronlad (15 December 1956) in which Tolkien spells out his view on failure: "Actually I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect "history" to be anything but a "long defeat" – though it contains (and legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory."[31] In his edition of *The Fall of Númenor*, Brian Sibley aptly describes the influence of, "the Judeo-Christian narrative of the frailty and fallibility of mankind" upon Tolkien's writing.[32] Fallibility of course leads not only to transgression but to punishment. As a Catholic, Tolkien lived within the rich tradition of *agonistic* piety, where pain and suffering were understood to bring about greater understanding and spiritual fortitude.

Christianity is laden with examples of masochism in the martyrologies, and in the *vitae* and *passiones* of its saints and its central figure, Christ. The event of Christ's crucifixion is, potentially of course, a moment of ecstatic submission for Christians. Those who imitate Christ's path recognize suffering as a vehicle towards spiritual advancement. Images of de Miranda's *Saint Sebastian* and Bernini's sculpture *Saint Teresa of Avila* can elicit pangs of ecstatic love and submission in the viewer. And as Kent Brintnall avers the male-body-in-pain is perhaps the most significant motif, as Christians remind themselves of and attempt to imitate the suffering of Christ and his ultimate submission to the Father.[33] The Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood* famously depicts the suffering of Christ and his cross in ways that allow for vicarious suffering by the reader. In that dream vision, hope is ultimately renewed by Christ's experience

[31] Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull, *The J. R. R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Reader's Guide* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 281, quoting *Letters*, 255.
[32] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fall of Númenor, and Other Tales from the Second Age of Middle-earth*, ed. Brian Sibley (New York: Harcourt, 2022), xxii.
[33] See Kent Brintnall, *Ecce Homo, the Male Body in Pain as Redemptive Figure*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 2014.

on the gallows, and -as a hero typical of the period- he eagerly and actively submits to the torture. The suffering of the cross as stand in for Christ and the compunction of the dreamer signify an ego-annihilating jouissance.

Such a masochistic tradition welcomes an ecstatic dissolution of the self, what Sigmund Freud would call Primary Masochism and Georges Bataille would describe as a human need to return to a greater "continuity." According to Bataille,

> [w]e are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. ... Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is.[34]

Bataille argues that ruptures in our discontinuous (meaning separate and discrete) lives create stirrings within. Such stirrings, "are simply a sign to remind us constantly that death, the rupture of the discontinuous individualities to which we cleave in terror, stands there before us more real than life itself."[35] Death is, "the pathway into unknowable and incomprehensible continuity."[36]

This is perhaps most the case in a situation of ritualized and solemnized death. Bataille contemplates the power of the sacrifice to those who witness it, the opportunity for viewers to vicariously be linked through the violent death to a greater continuity of being:

> The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the element of sacredness. This sacredness is the revelation of continuity through the death of a dis- continuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite. A

[34] Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 95.
[35] Bataille, *Erotism*, 19.
[36] Bataille, *Erotism*, 24.

> violent death disrupts the creature's discontinuity; what remains ... is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one.[37]

In this area of study, while texts by Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Kaja Silverman are truly inspirational, Freud comes to mind first when it comes to the Death Drive's place within human psychology.

As Freud argues in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: "the aim of all life is death." Freud theorized that each organism seeks "an ancient goal . . . an old state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads."[38]

Theorists likewise suggest that as members of western culture, we are in some way aroused by displays of power and power disparities, and we eroticize submission to power, our submission, someone else's, both. Freud argues that there are three phases that seem to bring some individuals to this sadomasochistic fantasy. And my first caveat is that the imagery employed is clearly more severe than we would accept today in regards to the disciplining of children. Secondly, I in no way wish to equate healthy masochistic fantasies of discipline and punishment and BDSM impact scenes with the traumatic nonconsensual brutality suffered by those as lived experience.

In the first phase of Freud's study, a father (or a representative of fatherly authority) spanks his child. His other child- whose fantasy this is- witnesses or imagines the sibling being disciplined, taking it to mean that he or she is loved more than the punished sibling with whom they have some rivalry. This love is erotically charged as the viewer experiences some pleasure:

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[37] Bataille, *Erotism*, 82.
[38] Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York and London: Norton & Company, 1989), pp. 594-626; here 612, 613.

"my father is beating the child whom I hate." In the second phase, the spectator child pleasurably fantasizes that he or she is receiving this attention: "I am being beaten by my father." Through a pre-genital libidinal position, feelings of guilt over incestuous feelings and regression steer the initial sadistic pleasure inward back toward the self. Freud called this, "secondary masochism." Freud acknowledges that at this stage, "[h]ere for the first time we have the essence of masochism."[39] The third and final phase then is a sexually-charged awareness of the libidinal fantasy of watching others being punished. Though seemingly sadistic, the pleasure fits a masochistic pleasure as the fantasizing child experiences vicariously what the punished child feels and fulfills an Oedipal (read sexual) urge as they imagine being spanked. The fantasy emerges through the sense of the authority figure punishing or humiliating the child or its surrogate. The implication of Freud's study is as clear as it is fascinating: some of us eroticize the scene whereby the symbolic Father figure punishes us or punishes others. Today, we might not so quickly locate power solely in the male, but certainly this is the sadomasochistic framework for the patriarchal Abrahamic religions. Modern day sexual communities find substitutes for physical punishments in mere hints of violence or in a performative scene. In other words, even a performative threat of violence can be a turn on.

Masochism is, as Lyn Cowan argues, closely tied to the submission and surrender experienced at moments of religious ecstasy. Most religious experiences align with forms of masochistic surrender:

> A masochistic posture strips down and exposes the ego- its defenses, ambitions, failures, and successes. It is a psychological *posture* in which we are humiliated, brought down,

[39] Sigmund Freud, "'A Child is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversion," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, 24 Vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953-74; Vol. 17. 175-204), here 185, 189.

> made defenseless, made aware that we must die. Through masochism we can sometimes contact the deeper meaning in the suffering, the depth of its pain and pleasure.[40]

The authors of the text *Different Loving* concur:

> Submission is a turning away from the social and a penetration into a sacrosanct internal space. This may be why many submissives compare their erotic experience to a religious or spiritual surrender. The surrender is a means of achieving a kind of freedom from ego, a condition where one is completely trusting and undefensive.[41]

In his essay on homoerotic pleasures between medieval knights, Richard Zeikowitz considers that a reader may do something similar to the child in Freud's essay, manifesting sadomasochistic pleasures through such an emotional investment by seeing or imagining the violence between the characters in a medieval romance. Zeikowitz argues that, "the reader identifying now with the beater derives masochistic pleasure by also identifying with the one being beaten." Zeikowitz summarizes his argument succinctly:

> "Phase 1: Knight A is beating Knight B [whom the reader hates].
>
> Phase 2: The reader fantasizes of being beaten by Knight A.
>
> Phase 3: Knights A and B are beating each other, which the reader is observing."[42]

In such a way (and this is key to my argument here) a sadomasochistic pleasure may manifest through the reading of scenes of battle and punishment.

Masochistic readers might imagine the scene, and unconsciously experience the shudder of the punishment and identify with perhaps both of the participants or solely the one being punished. Furthermore, once punished, a masochist desires to give up control to the highest

[40] Lyn, *Masochism*, 41.
[41] *Different Loving*, 74.
[42] Richard Zeikowitz, *Homoeroticism and Chivalry*, pp. 79-80.

authority, the "Father," so that we can be taken care of and guided. Of course this behavior in individuals in subaltern subject positions, of less social agency and personal will, would be very problematic if left unexamined.[44] And yet, sadomasochism is said by the likes of Judith Butler to offer potential avenues of scrutiny and resistance to hegemonic systems of power dispensation.[45] This entire process is part of a masochistic process of self-dissolution that is erotic. To what degree is this useful to reading Tolkien? Before making that connection, I want to return to *Beowulf* in order to trace the deep psychological resonances.

BEOWULF

Masochistic pleasure is not alien to the *Beowulf* poem; in fact, there are a number of situations in which such erotic pleasures are accentuated if one reads queerly between the lines. In *Language, Sign, and Gender,* Gillian Overing maintains that *Beowulf* "seems to be a poem about death: how to die, how to seek out death, how to meet it head on,"[46] and the poem exposes the proximity of death and dying to the discourse of heroism, how one may come to accept perhaps even welcome with a restless readiness and agitation the coming of death. *Beowulf* is also very much about emotional interactions between men. There is a deeply-rooted affection, at times linked with social expectations and obligations. And there is aggression, submission and domination, erotic to varying degrees- located in the court, in the public and domestic spaces, and on the battlefield – itself a space accommodating a range of sadomasochistic pleasures.

[44] For a glimpse into the relation between race and S/M see Catherine Scott, *Thinking Kink: The Collision of BDSM, Feminism and Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015), and Kirin Wachter-Grene, ed., "At the Limits of Desire: Black Radical Pleasure," *The Black Scholar* 50.2 (Summer 2020), https://www.theblackscholar.org/now-available-50-2-at-the-limits-of-desire-black-radical-pleasure/.
[45] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1989).
[46] Gillian Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 69-70.

As Tolkien himself argues in "The Monsters and the Critics," *Beowulf* is a tragedy and, in ways, a lament. Humankind continues to fight, displaying its indomitable will, but failure is inevitable but not acknowledged or acquiesced to: "Beowulf is not, then, the hero of an heroic lay, precisely. He has no enmeshed loyalties, nor hapless love. He is a man, and that for his and many is sufficient tragedy."[47] *Beowulf* expresses humanity's constant fight against mortality, against forces more powerful, and its ultimate defeat. Tolkien writes: "it is in *Beowulf* that a poet has devoted a whole poem to the theme [defeat inevitable yet unacknowledged], and has drawn the struggle in different proportions, so that we may see man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time."[48] To be human is not only to fail, but to ultimately surrender to divine power. This failure may be part of our greater tragedy as Tolkien suggests, but this does not mean that there is not something satisfying about this reality, a type of joy in losing. In fact there is something in the humility and in the submission to the divine that (*pace* Freud and Bataille) provides a deeply psychological and spiritual masochistic pleasure.

As I argue elsewhere via the work of Bataille, we can see the culture of *Beowulf* as constituted through a yearning for experiences of a continuity of being, for ruptures to singularity, and this yearning is the very fabric of masochistic jouissance.[49] As Gillian Overing argues, the men of *Beowulf* are locked in a perpetual engagement with death; they live alongside it, even embrace it. Numerous scenes in the poem allow the audience to experience the eroticization of power disarities, the capture of the beloved, and the sweet thrill of defeat. *Beowulf* articulates the jouissance of losing and the gaze of the child viewing punishment by the symbolic Father.

[47] Tolkien, "Monsters and the Critics," 23.
[48] Tolkien, "Monsters and the Critics," 22.
[49] Vaccaro, "My Warlike Grip Broke His Beating Heart," in *Painful Pleasures*, ed. Vaccaro, 325-46 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

Three scenes in particular serve to illustrate my point. The first is that in which Beowulf defeats the monster Grendel:

> Līcsār gebād
> atol æglæca. Him on eaxle wearð
> syndolh sweotol, seonowe onsprungon,
> burston bānlocan. Bēowulf wearð
> gūðhrēð gyfeþe. (ll. 815b-819a).
>
> The terrible creature felt a great pain in his body; a gaping wound opened in his shoulder. His sinews sprang apart, his bone-joints burst. Beowulf was given glory in battle.

Grendel's defeat is inevitable as he faces off with a far superior adversary. He is in some ways sacrificed in the story, sacrificed to the plot and to Beowulf's necessary heroic amplification. His punishment and defeat fit within the model of Freud's study on the eroticization of punishments thusly:

> Phase 1: Beowulf is punishing Grendel (whom the reader hates).
>
> Phase 2: Beowulf is punishing me (the reader).
>
> Phase 3: Beowulf is punishing Grendel, which brings me, the reader, a sadomasochistic pleasure.

Beowulf's masochistic readers might vicariously feel Grendel's sweet failure, satisfying the "Death Instinct" found in everyone.

Secondly, in King Hroðgar's homiletic speeches we have a relevant moment in which the poet displays a readiness if not a rush towards the psychic oblivion that death represents, referring to something very similar -as I will argue- to Ilúvatar's punishment of Númenor:

eft sōna bið,

þæt þec ādl oððe ecg eafoþes getwæfeð,

oððe fyres feng, *oððe flōdes wylm*,

. . . . . semninga bið,

þæt ðec, dryhtguma, dēað oferswyðeð. (Emphasis mine; ll. 1762b-68)

In the field standard translation given by Roy Liuzza we have the following:

too soon it will be

that sickness or the sword will shatter your strength,

or the grip of fire, *or the surging flood*,

. . . . . ; in one fell swoop

death, oh warrior, will overwhelm you.[50]

And Tolkien translates this in the follow way:

> But soon shall it be that sickness or the sword rob thee of thy might, or fire's embrace, *or water's wave* . . . ; very soon twill come that thee, proud knight, shall death lay low. (Emphasis mine; ll. 1477-81).

Hroðgar's speech here might have reminded Tolkien himself, that the "surging flood" (*flōdes wylm*)-which he translates as "water's wave" is a potential way in which death (in the "Akallabêth," divine rather than accidental) will come for us. The verb "oferswyðeð" ("overwhelm") suggests a dominant power, one to which we must all submit. The *Bosworth Toller Dictionary* gives as its definition: "To prove stronger than or superior to another, to overcome, overpower, conquer, surpass."[51] Howell Chickering makes perhaps the most eloquent summarization of the poem's masochistic jouissance when describing this scene:

[50] Roy Liuzza, trans. *Beowulf: Facing Page Translation* (Toronto: Broadview, 2000), 158-59.
[51] "oferswyðeð, v." *The Bosworth Toller Anglo-Saxon dictionary, Online*, https://bosworthtoller.com/24248

> The organ tone – all stops pulled out – in which Hrothgar thunders home his point about the inescapability of death is rhetorical, not dramatic. It invites a pleasant shudder. . . . Yes, death *is* inevitable and will level us all, even the hero. Why, look at old Hrothgar himself – why, look even at me![52]

The shudder of the pleasurable paradox is here. The "pleasant shudder," to which all must submit is the erotic valence that runs through both *Beowulf* and Tolkien's "Akallabêth."

Lastly, we see this homoerotic and masochistic pleasure in Beowulf's last moments of life. Even warriors such as he submit to death, embracing their kinsmen as a result.

> Ealle wyrd fors[w]ēo[p]
> mīne māgas tō metodsceafte,
> eorlas on elne; ic him æfter sceal. (2814b-2816)

I translate the old English thusly:

> Wyrd has coaxed all my kinsmen to their final destiny, earls in their courage. I must follow them.[53] (ll. 2814b-2816)

And Tolkien gives his own prose translation of this moment and likewise recognizes the prominence of Necessity in their spirituality:

> "All hath fate swept away of my kinsfolk to their appointed doom, good men of valour – I must follow them!"[54]

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[52] Howell D. Chickering Jr., *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977; rprt 2006), 346.
[53] The manuscript actually has, "forspeos[t]," which might be linked to "forspeon," a participle of "forspanan," "to seduce." I therefore think the term "coaxed" is accurate. Most editors emend this to "forsweop" assuming the "p" was meant to be a "wynn" rune, which looks similar.
[54] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 95.

To the Anglo-Saxon warrior death is simultaneously imposed with certainty from on high. Mortals have no choice but to submit and surrender to this power. Such is what readers encounter in Tolkien's *The Fall of Númenor*.

Conclusion: A Kingdom is Being Punished

In *Splintered Light*, Verlyn Flieger remarks that Middle-earth, "must be seen as a place of defeat and disappointment, and man must be seen as born to trouble."[55] The "Akallabeth" ("The Downfallen") is a composition testifying to humanity's fall from grace. In it we can perceive the psychological potential for our own ecstatic surrender to divine punishments. My point is that the scene creates (*pace* Chickering) a Beowulfian shudder and thrill to all who are subject to such divine wrath. The power of the father is conspicuous even when Tolkien uses passive voice with the effect of distancing Ilúvatar from the destruction of Númenor. If we insert the subject back to its active position in the sentence (as indicated by the italics) we can more easily recognize the Father as the agent of the punishment.:

> But Ilúvatar showed forth his power, and he changed the fashion of the world; and a great chasm he opened in the sea between Númenor and the Deathless Lands, and the waters flowed down into it, and the noise and smoke of the cataracts went up to heaven, and the world was shaken (*by Ilúvatar*). And all the fleets of the Númenóreans were drawn down into the abyss (*by Ilúvatar*), and they were drowned and swallowed up for ever (*by Ilúvatar)* . . . . Númenor . . . was utterly destroyed (*by Ilúvatar*). For it was nigh to the

[55] Verlyn Flieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (Kent State University Press, 2002), 4.

> east of the great rift, and its foundations were overturned (*by Ilúvatar*), and it fell and went down into darkness and is no more.[56]

And much like the second child in Freud's punishment scenario, readers are placed as spectators to this "hands-on" attention from the Father. In this way we can outline the three phases of Freud's case study to fit the destruction of Númenor thusly:

> Phase 1: Ilúvatar is punishing Ar-Pharazon's Númenor (whom the reader hates).
>
> Phase 2: Ilúvatar is punishing me (the reader).
>
> Phase 3: Ilúvatar is punishing Númenor, which the reader is observing with sadomasochistic pleasure.

And so some might be drawn to place themselves either as the punisher or the punished within the scene and eroticize the disparity of power. In either case, as David Halperin argues, "[w]ithin the horizons of the male world . . . hierarchy itself is hot: it is indissociably bound up with at least the potential for erotic signification."[57]

The narrative's theme (one also located in *Beowulf*) is the inevitable fall back into paganism, into a fear of death due to "ignorance." Like the men in Tolkien's *Beowulf*, the men of Númenor fight against evil, with "unyielding will," and ironically become base and evil themselves over time. Like Grendel, the Númenóreans have become "adversaries of God," "offspring of Cain," and "inmates of Hell," practicing human sacrifice and possible cannibalism. In this way, they become the monsters of the text. They become those who take on the

[56] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 278-79.

[57] David Halperin, "How to do the History of Male Homosexuality," in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, ed. Donald E. Hall, Anna Marie Jagose, Andrea Bebell, and Susan Potter , 262-86 (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 270.

monstrosity of humanity. And the Faithful few take on the mantle of hero, struggling at times with their own pride and faith, but largely capable of remaining devout and courageous.

Submission to power in the *Fall of Númenor*, as in *Beowulf*, is accompanied by an agonistic pleasure, a psychologically satisfying humbling of the self, an ego-shattering jouissance whereby pleasure is derived through a recognition of and submission to parental power and the pull towards a greater continuity. As with Beowulf's punishment of Grendel, the Akallabêth depicts a juridical reaction, where punishment is meted out to fit the transgression, the greatest of crimes, that of pride. The Downfall of Númenor evinces not only a sorrow and a fear of God the Father but also a trembling and a queer pleasure one could accurately label masochistic. This masochistic shudder is something both the *Beowulf* poet and Tolkien utilize to great effect.

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