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## Ofermod and Aristocratic Chivalry in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

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### ***Ofermod and Aristocratic Chivalry in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings***

As readers of J.R.R. Tolkien's literature are well-aware, his creative and scholarly talents are habitually merged in his writing. Perhaps his most influential essay, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" (1936), famously opens with an allegory to illustrate how scholars, in Tolkien's opinion, had been mishandling the Old English poem, missing the forest for the trees, so to speak, by focusing solely on its historical and linguistic elements while neglecting to take it seriously as a coherent piece of literature. In this allegory, an old tower represents *Beowulf*; the builder's friends and descendants, eager to mine the tower for archeological data and to make sense of the project, do not actually climb the tower before they destroy it in their enthusiasm, and therefore never learn that "from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea."<sup>1</sup>

In "On Fairy-Stories" (1947),<sup>2</sup> Tolkien again slips into the creative mode. In a passionate defense of Fantasy and of the act of "sub-creation" as a whole, he quotes part of his own poetic response to "a man who described myth and fairy-story as 'lies'; though to do him justice he was kind enough and confused enough to call fairy-story making 'Breathing a lie through Silver.'"<sup>3</sup> The result of their disagreement, Tolkien claims, was the poem "Mythopoeia," originally delivered to the unnamed man in a letter and quoted in excerpted form in "On Fairy-Stories." It turns out that the addressee of "Mythopoeia" was none other than C.S. Lewis.<sup>4</sup> However, Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (2008) note that, according to Christopher Tolkien, there is no evidence that the poem was delivered to Lewis via letter; it seems that this bit of the anecdote in "On Fairy-Stories" "was a device by which to include part of the poem in the essay."<sup>5</sup> Tolkien doesn't just like including his creative writing in his scholarship; he makes it fit.

Tolkien's 1953 *Essays and Studies* publication, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*, takes his propensity to merge scholarly and creative work to a new level. *Homecoming* is organized around a lengthy dramatic dialogue, which works in tandem with its scholarly bookends in order to perform a linguistic and literary analysis of the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*. In *Homecoming*, Tolkien focuses on the Old English word *ofermod*, which is included at what he believes to be a critical moment in the poem. Tolkien's ideas about *ofermod* and its connection to early medieval Germanic heroics will be the focus of this paper. My aim will be to explore, through analysis of Faramir and Denethor's interactions in *The Lord of the Rings*, how Tolkien's scholarly ideas about *ofermod*

<sup>1</sup> Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," 8.

<sup>2</sup> Originally delivered as an Andrew Lang lecture on March 8, 1939.

<sup>3</sup> Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 143.

<sup>4</sup> Flieger and Anderson, eds., *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, 113.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

manifest in his characters' motivations and decisions. I will also discuss how Denethor and Faramir's behaviors in *The Lord of the Rings* can help to flesh out Tolkien's professional ideas about *ofermod* and heroic excess, or "chivalry," which he believed were at the heart of *The Battle of Maldon* and which figure largely in *Homecoming*.

### I. Maldon, Ofermod, and Chivalry

The text of Tolkien's *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son* is divided into three parts. The first, "Beorhtnoth's Death," describes the historical Battle of Maldon (991 AD), introduces the Old English poem which commemorates the battle (*The Battle of Maldon*), and contextualizes the upcoming creative section. The second part, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," is a dramatic dialogue and sequel to the events depicted in *The Battle of Maldon*. The plot focuses on two servants, Torhthelm ("Totta") and Tidwald ("Tida"), who are sent to recover the body of the English ealdorman Beorhtnoth from the battlefield following the Vikings' victory. This is followed by the third and final section, "Ofermod," which is a scholarly essay on the meaning of the Old English word *ofermod* from line 89b of *The Battle of Maldon*. In the poem, Beorhtnoth chooses to yield land to the Vikings, allowing their safe passage across a narrow causeway linking the offshore island where the Vikings had landed to the English mainland. The poet declares that Beorhtnoth yields the land "for his ofermode"<sup>6</sup>: that is, because of his *ofermod*. Tolkien argues that the use of *ofermod*, which he interprets as a pejorative term meaning "overmastering pride,"<sup>7</sup> positions the poem as a critique of the rash heroics which motivated Beorhtnoth to give up the strategic advantage, leading to the defeat of the English by the Vikings.

Tom Shippey (1991)<sup>8</sup> notes that Tolkien's hybrid scholarly-creative text, despite its uncommon qualities, has nonetheless enjoyed a significant amount of influence on critical analysis of *The Battle of Maldon*, namely through its focus on *ofermod* and insistence that the Old English word is crucial to a correct reading of the poem.<sup>9</sup> Tolkien translates lines 89-90 of the poem as "then the earl in his overmastering pride actually yielded ground to the enemy, as he should not have done."<sup>10</sup> The disastrous decision, Tolkien argues, is linked by the *Maldon*-poet to Beorhtnoth's reckless adherence to a kind of aristocratic "chivalry": his desire to

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<sup>6</sup> Citations of *The Battle of Maldon* are based upon D.G. Scragg's 1981 edition.

<sup>7</sup> Tolkien, "Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," 143.

<sup>8</sup> I cite from the version of the 1991 essay "Tolkien and 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth'" reprinted in *Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien* (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Shippey argues that Tolkien's drawing attention to lines 89-90 of *Maldon* "is one of the main reasons for his very high secondary citation rate in the Humanities Index" ("Tolkien and 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth,'" 331).

<sup>10</sup> Tolkien, "Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," 143.

make “a ‘sporting fight’ on level terms; but at other people’s expense.”<sup>11</sup> Thus connecting *ofermod* to a prideful aristocratic tradition, Tolkien concludes that lines 89-90 of *The Battle of Maldon* represent “severe criticism”<sup>12</sup> of Beorhtnoth. This criticism is borne out in “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” through the words of the cynical Tídwald:

Alas, my friend, our lord was at fault,  
or so in Maldon this morning men were saying.  
Too proud, too princely! But his pride’s cheated,  
and his pryncedom has passed, so we’ll praise his valour.<sup>13</sup>

*Homecoming* thus merges Tolkien’s creative impulses with literary criticism; the dramatic dialogue spells out explicitly what Tolkien believes is implicitly expressed in *The Battle of Maldon* itself. As Michael D.C. Drout (2007) observes, *Homecoming* “was immensely successful in promoting Tolkien’s view of [*The Battle of Maldon*] for nearly forty years”; even more importantly, Drout argues, it “caused scholars to pay much more attention to the subtleties of the poem and the complexities of the cultures in which ‘Northern Courage’ developed.”<sup>14</sup>

In “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” Tolkien describes Northern Courage as a “theory of courage” which is represented in Old English and Old Norse literature and which is affiliated with pagan Germanic cultures.<sup>15</sup> For Tolkien, Northern Courage is “the creed of unyielding will” exemplified by the resolve of the Norse gods to fight in the face of inevitable defeat at Ragnarök.<sup>16</sup> While Tolkien represents this heroic resolve as admirable both in his criticism and in his fiction,<sup>17</sup> in *Homecoming* he focuses on the shortcomings of Northern Courage: its potential to give rise to “chivalric” behavior. That there is a real connection between Northern Courage and “chivalry” is one of Tolkien’s more idiosyncratic contentions in the “Ofermod” sequence of *Homecoming*; as Shippey points out, Tolkien commits an anachronism in connecting Beorhtnoth’s heroics to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>14</sup> Michael D.C. Drout, “J.R.R. Tolkien’s Medieval Scholarship and its Significance,” 143.

<sup>15</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” 20.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>17</sup> For example, once defeat seems inevitable at the Battle of Helm’s Deep, Théoden declares that he “will not end here, taken like an old badger in a trap” but will, rather, attempt to “cleave a road, or make such an end as will be worth a song – if any be left to sing of us hereafter” (Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 144-145). This display of Northern Courage is, however, accompanied by Tolkien’s characteristic *eucatastrophe*; Tolkien thus saves his protagonists (at least for the moment) from the “wages of heroism” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” 26) with the “sudden joyous ‘turn’” of the fairy-story (“On Fairy-Stories,” 153).

“an attitude for which there is no evidence in England for perhaps another 150 years.”<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, Tolkien fixes on this term as a way of expressing a code of behavior found among tenth-century English aristocrats; the aristocrat’s desire to prevent his or her name from being sullied through departure from this code, Tolkien argues, leads to behavior which is as unwise as it is unethical. Unwise and unethical, that is, from Tolkien’s point of view; despite his argument to the contrary in *Homecoming*, Tolkien’s contention that Beorhtnoth’s contemporaries would have believed that he was behaving in a questionable manner is vulnerable to criticism that it is “hypothesis or speculation...without evidence to support it,” as Shippey claims.<sup>19</sup> Northern Courage, after all, is recognizable as such because exploits like Beorhtnoth’s were consistently represented in early medieval poetry as courageous and appealing.<sup>20</sup> For Tolkien, however, the consequences which other, non-aristocratic characters must suffer in order for their leaders to enjoy these exploits is morally unacceptable; so unacceptable, in fact, that he cannot read *The Battle of Maldon* other than as a condemnation of Beorhtnoth’s decision.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, however, less powerful characters are given license to act in the rash manner which Tolkien condemns in their leaders. While Northern Courage is undermined as “never quite pure” and “of gold and an alloy,”<sup>22</sup> Tolkien argues that it appears in “(approximate) purity”<sup>23</sup> in what remain the two most famous lines of the *Battle of Maldon*, spoken by the retainer Beorhtwold as English defeat by the Vikings becomes inevitable: “Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, / mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað” (312-313) (“Heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose, / more proud the spirit as our power lessens”<sup>24</sup>). Northern Courage,

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<sup>18</sup> Shippey, “Tolkien and ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth,’” 332.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>20</sup> See Shippey’s “Boar and Badger: An Old English Heroic Antithesis” (1985), which, through analysis of heroic scenes in a selection of Old English texts, argues for a tension between two morally-neutral heroic styles: “badger” (marked by caution and exploitation of strategic advantages) and “boar” (marked by abandonment of strategic advantage in favor of emotion-driven exploits). Shippey demonstrates that these two styles are frequently represented in Old English stories in terms of their contrast, with heroes “poised between two necessities”: to stand firm in a safe position (to be a badger) and to satisfy the need to confront an opponent (to be a boar) (225).

<sup>21</sup> There have been many historical-biographical explanations posited for Tolkien’s reaction against Beorhtnoth’s expression of Northern Courage. Shippey (1991) suggests that Tolkien was responding to “the resurgence of self-consciously Nordic or Germanic attitudes in Nazi Germany. He felt that the heathen spirit of the Vikings and the berserks had come back in his own time, and had to be fought once more” (“Tolkien and ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth,’” 337). Daniel Timmons (1998) forwards the argument that “[a]fter living to see another horrible war in Europe, Tolkien may naturally have thought that any self-aggrandized act of a leader—in life or literature—was extremely suspect, if not condemnable” (“Mirror on Middle-earth: J.R.R. Tolkien and the Critical Perspectives,” 75).

<sup>22</sup> Tolkien, “Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” 144.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

Tolkien contends, is at its purist in this instance “precisely because it is put in the mouth of a subordinate, a man for whom the object of his will was decided by another, who had no responsibility downwards, only loyalty upwards. Personal pride was therefore in him at its lowest, and love and loyalty at their highest.”<sup>25</sup> It is pride, “the alloy of personal good name,”<sup>26</sup> which puts the powerful at particular risk, in Tolkien’s estimation, of *ofermod*: of being “chivalrous rather than strictly heroic.”<sup>27</sup> And that chivalry, further, emerges from an “aristocratic tradition,” and specifically from the tales and poetry enjoyed by the ruling class.<sup>28</sup>

It is through Tolkien’s focus on class and rank, I would argue, that we can find coherence in his use of the term *chivalry* to refer to Beorhtnoth’s idealistic exploits. Maurice Keen (1984) notes that while *chivalry* is a word whose meaning is quite difficult to pin down<sup>29</sup> (he observes that *chivalry* can variously refer to “a body of heavily armed horsemen,” “an order,” “an estate, a social class” or “a code of values apposite to this order or estate”<sup>30</sup>), “it cannot be divorced from aristocracy, because knights commonly were men of high lineage.”<sup>31</sup> Jennifer G. Wollock (2011) likewise draws out the connection between chivalry and social class: “[a]ccording to the aristocratic model, chivalry is in the blood. Gentlemen of ‘old lineage’ (as Malory would put it) believed themselves to possess an affinity for chivalric virtue that could never be acquired through imitation.”<sup>32</sup> It can be no coincidence that the quintessential chivalric spectacle, the tournament, began to insist “that participants demonstrate noble birth on both sides...at the same time that members of other classes were expressing an interest in chivalric literature and adopting the manners and values of the gentry.”<sup>33</sup> Bearing this class association in mind, along with the fact that *ofermod* is, in Tolkien’s mind, linked to leaders and not to their followers, we can make some sense of his use of *chivalry* in association with the more troubling aspects of Northern Courage. It is the privileged who get

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> The etymology of *chivalry* is not so elusive; as the OED shows, it derives from Old French *chevalerie*, itself based on the French *chevalier*, which refers to an armed horseman: in other words, a knight (see “chivalry, n.” and “cavalier, n. and adj.”). Here, too, the association with aristocracy cannot be escaped; Keen observes the English word *knight* (when it refers to an order tied to the medieval institution of *chivalry* – see “knight, n.” in the OED for the English term’s earlier meanings) “denotes a man of aristocratic standing and probably of noble ancestry, who is capable, if called upon, of equipping himself with a war horse and the arms of a heavy cavalryman, and who has been through certain rituals that make him what he is – who has been ‘dubbed’ to knighthood” (1-2).

<sup>30</sup> Keen, *Chivalry*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Wollock, *Rethinking Chivalry and Courtly Love*, 199.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 89-90.

to decide upon military strategies motivated by *ofermod*; it is left to their subordinates simply to follow these commands as best they can. Subordinates are not accountable for the reckless pride which motivated the strategy, and, for this reason, may also carry out the relatively pure kind of heroics which is more difficult for aristocrats like Beorhtnoth to achieve.

Ultimately, this paper is not concerned with supporting or undermining Tolkien's interpretation of *ofermod* or the importance he ascribes it in the *Battle of Maldon*; the question of *ofermod*'s meaning and significance is a point of contention which has drawn plenty of scholarly attention in its own right.<sup>34</sup> Rather, I wish to contribute to discussion of how Tolkien's scholarly conclusions about the Old English poem are borne out in his depiction and assessment of heroics in *The Lord of the Rings*. Much has been written regarding possible connections between Tolkien's scholarly-creative work on the *Battle of Maldon* and representations of heroism in Middle-earth. This is a particularly fruitful avenue of inquiry given the history of *Homecoming*'s composition, spanning approximately twenty years from the early 1930s to its 1953 publication.<sup>35</sup> Mary R. Bowman (2010) points out that this means the composition of *Homecoming* and *The Lord of the Rings* cover roughly the same span of time and argues that "the evolution of [Tolkien's] thinking about heroism took place on parallel tracks: in the critical writing and in the major fiction."<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, there are plenty of connections to find between the contents of *Homecoming* and Tolkien's fantasy classic, and many compelling readings locate in *The Lord of the Rings* proof of ongoing engagement with the theory of Northern Courage. Shippey goes so far as to read *Homecoming* as "an act of ceremonial sacrifice," a wholesale rejection of Northern Courage necessary before Tolkien can go on to reconcile "the heroic spirit and the Christian spirit" in *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>37</sup> In a similar vein, George Clark (2000) finds in *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly in Sam's humble, unconventional heroism, Tolkien's rejection of the *lof* and *dom*, "fame" and "good report,"<sup>38</sup> craved by Beorhtnoth. Sam, he argues, is "the true hero because he acts as a loyal subordinate serving his master, like the true heroes of *Maldon* who died to avenge their lord even though (in Tolkien's view) Byrhtnoth had blundered."<sup>39</sup> Aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* can thus be read as correctives to what Tolkien saw as the follies of Northern Courage. Janet

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<sup>34</sup> Helmut Gneuss's oft-cited "The Battle of Maldon 89: Byrhtnoð's *ofermod* Once Again" (1976) provides a helpful overview of scholarly discourse regarding *ofermod*'s meaning and importance in *The Battle of Maldon* as well as Gneuss's own reading of the word's meaning and significance in the poem.

<sup>35</sup> See Honegger (2007) for a detailed study of *Homecoming*'s composition history.

<sup>36</sup> Mary R. Bowman, "Refining the Gold," 91-92.

<sup>37</sup> Shippey, "Tolkien and 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth,'" 338.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, "Tolkien and the True Hero," 43.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

Brennan Croft (2004)<sup>40</sup> and Alexander M. Bruce (2007), for example, both find in Gandalf the qualities of an anti-Beorhtnoth, recognizing in his heroic last stand in Moria a striking analogue to *The Battle of Maldon*. Rather than yield the causeway – the bridge of Khazad-dûm – to the Balrog, Bruce observes that Gandalf recognizes his responsibilities “‘downward’ to the Fellowship” and “‘upward’ to the greater common good” during this episode, thereby avoiding Beorhtnoth’s blunder by preserving the lives of his companions and the Ring quest itself.<sup>41</sup>

Some scholars have drawn out a tension in Tolkien’s representation of heroics in *The Lord of the Rings* which suggests mixed and complex feelings about Northern Courage rather than a total rejection of it. Bowman locates in the behaviors of Tolkien’s protagonists, particularly Sam and Frodo, an attempt at (as her title puts it) “refining the gold” of Northern Courage. In Sam’s Book Four dilemma (how to proceed in the aftermath of Frodo’s apparent death), she argues, Tolkien carefully sifts out flawed impulses that can be linked to various choices represented in *The Battle of Maldon* – namely, those driven by the need to satisfy emotions – in order to get Sam to a point where he can make a purely heroic choice: embracing his duty to see the Ring quest finished, thereby rejecting the desires of the individual (himself) and embracing the needs of others.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Northern Courage is “reshaped...into an acceptable image of heroism,” as well as “reclaim[ed]” from and “redeem[ed]” of both its pagan origins and its association with the Nazis.<sup>43</sup> Peter Grybauskas (2011) goes even further, first questioning the frequent reading of *Homecoming*’s Tída as “right” and Totta as “wrong” in their attitudes toward war before analyzing the representation of war in *The Lord of the Rings* as similarly complex. Ultimately, Grybauskas argues that in the dramatic split between the painful, unromantic experiences of Frodo and Sam on the one hand (“Tída’s War”) and the traditional heroics of Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli on the other (“Totta’s War”), Tolkien “intended two distinct faces of war to be in tension – but largely unmingled – through his tale.”<sup>44</sup> The result, he contends, is “a muddy and seemingly self-contradictory vision of war, yet, in the end...an honest one.”<sup>45</sup>

This paper seeks to continue exploration of *The Lord of the Rings* in conversation with *Homecoming*. The initial question I pose is this: to what extent can Northern Courage – and, specifically, *ofermod* – be used to describe decisions made outside the immediate context of war or combat, but which can have a long-term impact on the safety and well-being of others? In Denethor’s harsh assessment of his son Faramir’s decisions, as well as in Denethor’s justification of his own

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<sup>40</sup> See Croft, *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 93-94.

<sup>41</sup> Bruce, “Maldon and Moria,” 155.

<sup>42</sup> Bowman, “Refining the Gold,” 101.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

<sup>44</sup> Grybauskas, “Dialogic War,” 48.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 55.



reckless choices, I read moments of intriguing commentary on “chivalry”-driven decision-making which can be tied neatly to Tolkien’s interpretation of and commentary on *ofermod*. Through analysis of the motivations and behaviors of Faramir and Denethor, which Tolkien draws into sharper focus by means of Boromir’s looming absence, I will explore how *ofermod* can manifest in Tolkien’s Middle-earth, how characters identify and talk about it, and how morally-heroic decision-making can be distinguished from mere acts of “chivalry” in *The Lord of the Rings*.

## II. Faramir and Denethor: Responsibilities “Downwards” and “Upwards”

Denethor’s uncharitable assessment of his son’s character and motivations emerges as a result of Faramir’s decision not to bring Frodo and Sam to Minas Tirith after “capturing” them in Ithilien, the region Faramir and his men are patrolling. Instead, he allows the hobbits to proceed on their quest. Faramir is not, strictly speaking, authorized to allow Frodo and Sam to go free after finding them. In fact, if he were following his orders closely, he would not have allowed Frodo and Sam to live at all after they had been detected; during his interrogation of Frodo, he tells them plainly that “...I am commanded to slay all whom I find in this land without the leave of the Lord of Gondor. But I do not slay man or beast needlessly, and not gladly even when it is needed.”<sup>46</sup> Faramir shares with his captives a second option open to him: “I should now take you back to Minas Tirith to answer there to Denethor, and my life will justly be forfeit, if I now choose a course that proves ill for my city.”<sup>47</sup> This second, more moderate option is also ultimately rejected at Frodo’s request. Instead, Frodo and Sam are given leave to walk free in Gondor, provided only that they present themselves in Minas Tirith within a year and a day. Faramir makes this decision with full knowledge that he will be required to answer for any negative consequences that arise from it.

Furthermore, Faramir understands that Frodo and Sam are not simple hobbits on an errand of little importance. He perceives that they bear an heirloom of significant power: power that could, perhaps, be used in the service of Minas Tirith during its ongoing conflict with Mordor. Nonetheless, he resolves to allow them to continue on their way; in fact, it is the great power of their heirloom which motivates this decision:

*Not if I found it on the highway would I take it* I said. Even if I were such a man as to desire this thing, and even though I knew not clearly what this thing was when I spoke, still I should take those words as a vow, and be held by them. But I am not such a man. Or I am wise

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<sup>46</sup> Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 273.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 276.

enough to know that there are some perils from which a man must flee.<sup>48</sup>

It is important to recognize that Faramir's decision is marked both by self-preservation and self-denial. Indeed, it is his own integrity, and the integrity of his city, which Faramir privileges over physical safety and even survival.

One might question, however, whether Faramir has any right to make – without any outside consultation – a decision with possibly disastrous consequences for the people of Gondor, regardless of how principled it is. And, in fact, Faramir's choice falls under immediate scrutiny upon his return to Minas Tirith. Denethor, Faramir's father and the Steward of Gondor, perceives in Faramir's decision nothing but prideful folly. Indeed, Denethor's bitter and wrathful assessment of his son's decision amounts to an accusation of *ofermod* as Tolkien defines it in *Homecoming*:

Ever your desire is to appear lordly and generous as a king of old, gracious, gentle. That may well befit one of high race, if he sits in power and peace. But in desperate hours gentleness may be repaid with death...But not with your death only, Lord Faramir: with the death also of your father, and of all your people, whom it is your part to protect now that Boromir is gone.<sup>49</sup>

It is immediately clear in this passage that Denethor believes that Faramir is motivated by an aristocratic ideal: his behavior is “chivalrous,” and therefore contemptible. From Denethor's point of view, “Lord” Faramir is attempting to resemble his betters, the true kings of Gondor “of old” (as opposed to the mere stewards who now rule in their place). This is stated both explicitly and implicitly through Tolkien's inclusion of several terms with a suggestive double-meaning.<sup>50</sup> The most transparent of these is the term *gentle*, which, in the context of this passage, I am reading in the archaic sense as “[h]aving the character appropriate to

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 289-90.

<sup>49</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 86.

<sup>50</sup> Of course, Tolkien himself presents both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* to his readers in terms of translation; he explains at the start of *The Hobbit* that he is telling “a story of long ago” and that “[a]t that time the languages and letters were quite different from ours today” (1). He develops this idea in the prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*, wherein he reveals that both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are taken from the Red Book of Westmarch (*Fellowship of the Ring*, 10). One assumes that he “translates” the original Westron of the Red Book in a manner which best preserves the sense of words from his “source text,” just as he selects Old English as the most appropriate language to express the thought of the Rohirrim, despite the fact that the Rohirrim are, in fact, speaking a different language altogether.

one of good birth; noble, generous, courteous.”<sup>51</sup> While the modern meaning of the term *gentle* also resonates in this passage, the older sense fits best (particularly given the number of words with similar obsolete meanings which accompany *gentle*). Denethor is suggesting that Faramir has been acting in unrealistically high-minded, “genteel” ways, particularly given the severity of Gondor’s plight. Accordingly, the other adjective paired with *gentle* in Denethor’s criticism, *gracious*, has a similar archaic significance. In the past, it could be used to refer to people of high or royal social status, and the OED further indicates that it could signify that a person was “kind, indulgent, or benevolent to others of lower (social) status.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, if we look at the adjective that Denethor pairs with *lordly*, *generous*, we find yet another adjective with an obsolete meaning relating to the ruling class. The OED gives the original meaning of *generous* as “[o]f noble or aristocratic lineage; high-born.”<sup>53</sup> Considering Tolkien’s philological training and professional expertise, this cannot be read as coincidental. Faramir’s failing, Denethor’s diction suggests, is that he is excessively prideful in his aristocratic lineage and the sorts of idealistic behaviors associated with it, and this leads him to perform a reckless act which he has no right to agree to.

This criticism is in line with Tolkien’s characterization of Beorhtnoth’s folly. The rash behavior of Beorhtnoth, he contends, is linked directly to the perceived need to protect one’s good name, and this, he further argues, is a moral failing promoted in “aristocratic tradition, enshrined in tales and verse of poets now lost save for echoes.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, he nods at the semantic pattern in the English language whereby words with positive connotations often allude to a privileged class or rank earlier in their history, saying of Beorhtnoth’s decision that “Beorhtnoth was wrong, and he died for his folly. But it was a noble error, or the error of a noble.”<sup>55</sup> This passing bit of wordplay is demonstrative of the ways in which Tolkien uses etymology in order to tease out complex associations between power, privilege, decision-making, and responsibility.<sup>56</sup>

To return to the scene above, we can locate in Denethor’s words insight into how the steward is assessing Faramir’s motivations and their connection to his decision-making process. From Denethor’s point of view, Sam and Frodo – and hobbits as a group – are of a humble social station. He lets his contempt for the

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<sup>51</sup> OED, “gentle, adj. and n.”

<sup>52</sup> OED, “gracious, adj. and adv.”

<sup>53</sup> OED, “generous, adj. and n.”

<sup>54</sup> Tolkien, “Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” 146.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 148.

<sup>56</sup> Indeed, I find it telling that in “Noblesse Oblige: Images of Class in Tolkien” (1994, reprinted 2007), Shippey chooses to tackle the representation of class in Tolkien’s Middle-earth through linguistic analysis. Through exploration of the etymology and representation of English terms like *gentle*, *noble*, and *athel* in Tolkien’s literature, he suggests that much of Tolkien’s commentary on class is embedded in the words he uses.

hobbits slip in his wrath, referring to Frodo as a “witless halfling”<sup>57</sup> particularly unfit (by virtue of being a halfling, it seems) for the task of bearing the Ring to Mt. Doom. Accordingly, he determines that Faramir, driven by a kind of ethical *ofermod*, has felt the need to act with largess and generosity toward these two rustic travelers in order to adhere to a code of aristocratic chivalry. By doing so, he has let down the nation he and his family are responsible for protecting. As far as Denethor can see, to throw away the Ring is to throw away Gondor.

Of course, the plot of *The Lord of the Rings* is centered on the premise that Denethor’s assessment of Faramir’s decision is a false one. We might start by noting that Tolkien self-identifies with Faramir in the draft of a 1956 letter: “[a]s far as any character is ‘like me’ it is Faramir – except that I lack what all my characters possess (let the psychoanalysts note!) *Courage*.”<sup>58</sup> It stands to reason that the character with whom Tolkien most identifies would share his views on chivalric excess. Indeed, Faramir is a character whom Tolkien carefully represents as a caring leader who has earned the trust and love of the men who follow him. As Steven Brett Carter (2012) demonstrates, Faramir is “a conscientious leader, minimizing the risk to his subordinates while maximizing their effectiveness in battle.”<sup>59</sup> Carter convincingly argues that Faramir’s twentieth-century approach to combat, with its reliance on camouflage, stealth, and ranged weapons, stands in stark contrast to his brother Boromir’s brash and risky battle tactics, which are themselves tied to a chivalric heroic tradition. In short, Faramir’s approach to military conflict could not be further from Beorhtnoth’s; it keeps his men as safe as possible from physical harm. For this reason, Denethor’s perilous – and, for many involved, fatal – assignment to Faramir following their disagreement is cruelly ironic, given Denethor’s accusations against his son. Few tactical undertakings in *The Lord of the Rings* resemble an *ofermod*-fueled disaster so much as Faramir and his men’s doomed attempt to hold Osgiliath against the invading enemy. Denethor compares Faramir to Boromir explicitly before sending him off on this dangerous task, recalling how Boromir had successfully defended Osgiliath and demanding of his living son the sorts of traditional heroics associated with his dead son. “Much must be risked in war”<sup>60</sup> is Denethor’s Beorhtnothian remark when the Prince of Dol Amroth tactfully attempts to dissuade him from this rash course of action. After Faramir is returned, gravely wounded, to Minas Tirith, Denethor admits that he “sent [his] son forth, unthanked, unblessed, out into needless peril.”<sup>61</sup> This “needless peril” is not of Faramir’s making, and runs entirely counter to his approach to conflict. Only a

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<sup>57</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 87.

<sup>58</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, 232.

<sup>59</sup> Steven Brett Carter, “Faramir and the Heroic Ideal,” 93.

<sup>60</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 90.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

direct order from his father could drive him to such a dangerous and foolhardy act; we might recall here Tolkien's argument that subordinates like *Maldon's* Beorhtwold are not held responsible for demonstrating "loyalty upwards" by following their leaders' rash orders. Denethor's implicit accusation of *ofermod* is, accordingly, rather flimsy from the start, if we are considering it in terms of the battle tactics associated with it in the *Battle of Maldon*.

In answer to the suggestion of a broader, ethics-based manifestation of *ofermod* (divorced from the *Battle of Maldon's* martial context), we might observe that for Faramir, throwing away the Ring is the only conceivable way to protect Gondor, since keeping it means destroying his home and his people. Before learning that Frodo bears the Ring, Faramir shares his suspicions, based on a visionary dream, that a powerful and sinister force is at work in the world and that it had ensnared his doomed brother, Boromir, whom Faramir describes as "proud and fearless, often rash, ever anxious for the victory of Minas Tirith (and his own glory therein)."<sup>62</sup> This difference in temperament between the brothers is perceived by other characters; Beregonde describes his beloved captain as "[l]ess reckless and eager than Boromir, but not less resolute."<sup>63</sup> Readers might at this point recall Boromir's insistence on blowing his war-horn when the Fellowship sets out from Rivendell, responding to Aragorn's warning with the observation that "always I have let my horn cry at setting forth, and though thereafter we may walk in the shadows, I will not go forth as a thief in the night."<sup>64</sup> This sounds dangerously close to a declaration that he will not face his enemies in anything short of the "sporting fight" that Tolkien associates with Beorhtnoth's battle tactics. Boromir, Tolkien suggests at many points in *The Lord of the Rings*, is inclined toward *ofermod*, "overmastering pride"; his desire for personal glory made him susceptible to the corrupting power of the Ring and led to his death.<sup>65</sup> Upon learning that Frodo bears the Ring with him, Faramir observes ironically that the presence of the Ring provides an opportunity for "Faramir, Captain of Gondor, to show his quality."<sup>66</sup> The inclusion of this high rank, "Captain of Gondor," alongside his name suggests that his decision is one with implications for his status: he is being forced to choose between glory and honor, just as Boromir had. Faramir, however, rejects the desire for heroics that ensnared Boromir, declaring, rather, that he would see Minas Tirith "beautiful as a queen among queens" and "not a mistress of many slaves." He loves his home for "her memory, her ancientry, her beauty, and her present wisdom."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 280.

<sup>63</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 39.

<sup>64</sup> Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 292.

<sup>65</sup> See Lynn Forest-Hill's "Boromir Byrhtnoth, and Bayard: Finding a Language for Grief in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" (2008) for an extended analysis of how Boromir's shortcomings can be read in terms of Tolkien's ideas about *ofermod*.

<sup>66</sup> Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 289.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 280.

Given that the Ring can only be used to dominate others, Faramir is wise enough to perceive unacceptable, irresponsible risk in possessing it: a risk which Boromir does not see clearly enough and Denethor does not take seriously enough to resist.

To avoid *ofermod*, then, is not to grasp at any means of achieving victory, especially when the means through which victory is achieved will endanger what one wishes to defend. In this case, preservation of integrity is elevated over mere survival. This resonates with Tolkien's remark in *Homecoming* that the flaws of Northern Courage are purged when a character faces death unflinching, "that is when death may help the achievement of some object of will, or when life can only be purchased by denial of what one stands for."<sup>68</sup> Implicit in the context of this statement is the judgment that Beorhtnoth's motivation for giving way to the Vikings is not ethically sufficient; in fact, Tolkien suggests, it has no ethical basis whatsoever. Mere chivalry, as Tolkien understands it, does not permit one to engage in this sort of heroic behavior, especially at the expense of others. Something utterly separate from a character's aristocratic lineage and associated codes of conduct needs to be evoked: something that speaks to a character as a function of his or her humanity – the humanity that he or she shares with others – and not lineage or rank. As Croft points out, in Tolkien's world true heroism "had to be about something more than the quest for fame or glory; it needed to be about the fulfillment of a worthwhile duty through morally acceptable means."<sup>69</sup> Given the diverse range of characters in *The Lord of the Rings* who share Faramir's assessment of the Ring's dangers (from Sam the gardener to Gandalf the Maia), his decision to allow Frodo and Sam to continue on their quest despite the risk this decision seems to pose to Gondor would appear to qualify as unalloyed heroic behavior.

Despite his accusations of *ofermod* against Faramir, Denethor represents the reality of how aristocratic pride can bring disaster to those people for whom the afflicted leader has responsibility "downwards." I would go so far as to suggest that Denethor's class- and rank-focused criticism of Faramir is, in truth, a rather neat bit of projection.<sup>70</sup> It becomes apparent during Faramir's candid discussion of his family's stewardship of Gondor that the question of their true authority is both a familiar topic of conversation and a sore spot for Boromir and, it later emerges, Denethor as well:

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<sup>68</sup> Tolkien, "Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," 144.

<sup>69</sup> Croft, *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 77.

<sup>70</sup> Croft notes that Denethor's initial reaction to Faramir's independent decision-making is contradictory; he at once suggests at Faramir should think for himself (rather than listening to Gandalf) and that he ought to do as Denethor desires (rather than thinking for himself) (*War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 99). The dissonance here, I think, is intentional and consistent with my argument that Denethor is not being entirely honest with himself in this scene, criticizing Faramir for an attitude which is really his own.

And this I remember of Boromir as a boy, when we together learned the tale of our sires and the history of our city, that always it displeased him that his father was not king. ‘How many hundreds of years needs it to make a steward of a king, if the king returns not?’ he asked. ‘Few years, maybe, in other places of less royalty,’ my father answered. ‘In Gondor ten thousand years would not suffice.’ Alas! poor Boromir. Does that not tell you something of him?<sup>71</sup>

Despite Boromir’s resentment of the traditions which had prevented his family from ascending to kingship, Frodo points out that Boromir nonetheless appeared to respect Aragorn’s claim to the title which would see the stewards once more sidelined from power in Gondor. Faramir, in reply, suggests that this respect would have been put to the test (and likely strained) in the event that Aragorn’s party had “reached Minas Tirith or become rivals in her wars.”<sup>72</sup>

Denethor’s later behavior confirms his son’s speculation. In his despair-fueled attempt to kill himself and his dying son, ostensibly in order to escape the indignities that would befall them at the hands of their enemies, Denethor reveals that it is not only the seemingly imminent victory of Mordor that he fears, but also the possibility of being forced to hand over control of Gondor to Aragorn:

But I say to thee, Gandalf Mithrandir, I will not be thy tool! I am Steward of the House of Anárion. I will not step down to be the dotard chamberlain of an upstart. Even were his claim proved to me, still he comes but of the line of Isildur. I will not bow to such a one, last of a ragged house long bereft of lordship and dignity...I would have things as they were in all the days of my life...and in the days of my longfathers before me: to be the Lord of this City in peace, and leave my chair to a son after me...But if doom denies this to me, then I will have *naught*: neither life diminished, nor love halved, nor honour abated.<sup>73</sup>

Denethor’s language here, as with Faramir during their conflict over the Ring, is revealing. He uses the pronoun *thou* in order to demean Gandalf, asserting his own mastery in Gondor and underscoring Gandalf’s comparative lack of power.<sup>74</sup> His mind is fixed on his rank and its power: what that power is in reality, and what he

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<sup>71</sup> Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 278.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 130.

<sup>74</sup> Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (2005) note that Tolkien himself comments on the demeaning nature of the pronouns Denethor chooses when addressing Gandalf in *The Peoples of Middle-earth* (*The Lord of the Rings: A Reader’s Companion*, 572).

believes it should be. He imagines his role in Aragorn's Gondor not as a steward, but as a chamberlain: a term with mixed meanings, potentially denoting stewardship, but also able to refer to (from Denethor's point of view) lesser responsibilities and privileges, including "[a] male personal attendant of a king or nobleman, who waits on him in his bedchamber."<sup>75</sup> Gondor, which he had described to young Boromir as possessing so much royalty that it could not permanently hand off power to a mere steward, is suddenly in danger of *losing* its royalty through that very principle. Denethor represents himself as the offspring of *longfathers*.<sup>76</sup> The OED indicates that *long*, as it relates to genealogy, denotes "many generations of (esp. identified or notable) individuals; capable of being traced back to the distant past."<sup>77</sup> In other words, Denethor's line of ancestors is both ancient and significant, and therefore noble. He desires to keep that noble line going: to make his long line longer, as it were, by passing his title on to a son (now an impossibility, from Denethor's point of view, given that Boromir is dead and Faramir is rapidly dying). Isildur's absentee line he slanders as "ragged"; rather than being long, as Denethor's is, it is "long bereft of lordship and dignity." Aragorn is written off as an "upstart" worthy to be served only by a "dotard chamberlain," not a Steward of the House of Anárion. Denethor's aristocratic pride forbids that he give up certain things, and honor, listed last and at the point of emphasis in the speech above, is chief among them. His decision to embrace ruin and death, and the consequent conquest and destruction of Gondor, rather than fight for a world in which his honor would be "abated" through Aragorn's return demonstrates what true *ofermod* looks like, and what its consequences are. Only Tolkien's signature eucatastrophe is capable of rescuing Gondor from a tragic end.

### III. Conclusions: *Ofermod* versus *Eucatastrophe*

Ultimately, Tolkien reveals important details about his understanding of *ofermod* through Denethor and Faramir's examples. If Boromir with his war-horn represents a traditional expression of battlefield "chivalry," Denethor represents a more subtle and innovative expression of aristocratic pride (chiefly communicated through Tolkien's attention to linguistic detail), and Faramir escapes it altogether. Through Denethor's unfounded accusations against Faramir, Tolkien demonstrates that in Middle-earth, *ofermod* can apply to exploits both on and off the battlefield, and to decisions which will affect both soldiers and civilians alike. These exploits need not be martial or strategic; they can also be ethical or moral in nature. In Faramir's case, his decision to allow Frodo and Sam to carry the Ring away from Minas Tirith

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<sup>75</sup> OED, "chamberlain, n."

<sup>76</sup> Hammond and Scull define *longfathers* as "[f]orefathers, ancestors" (The Lord of the Rings: *A Reader's Companion*, 575).

<sup>77</sup> OED, "long, adj.1 and n.1"



and into Mordor represents a moral exploit which will have non-immediate but long-reaching consequences for all the people of Gondor (and for Middle-earth as a whole). Were his decision truly an expression of aristocratic pride, as Denethor suggests it is, it would be a blameworthy one; however, Tolkien is careful to establish that Faramir's motivations stem not from pride in his lineage or a desire for personal glory, but from love of and a sense of responsibility toward Gondor.

Denethor, by contrast, represents the danger of a leader motivated by aristocratic pride. His expressions of *ofermod* are marked by a lofty indifference toward death: the deaths of others and of himself. He flirts with this indifference when he sends Faramir into the nearly fatal, unwinnable defense of Osgiliath; this scene shows Denethor at his most Beorhtnoth-like, making decisions at the expense of others. He cavalierly puts Faramir and his men in grave danger in order to ensure that he need not “yield the River and Pelennor unfought – not if there is a captain here who has still the courage to do his lord’s will.”<sup>78</sup> The lives of the men are to be spent in a futile gesture of defiance against the forces of Mordor, one which will preserve Denethor’s reputation as a stern adversary. Soon, Denethor will go so far as to attempt to “order the hour of [his] death,”<sup>79</sup> and that of his son. Intriguingly, Gandalf draws a parallel between Denethor’s self-destructive impulse and the behavior of “heathen kings” who “under the domination of the Dark Power, did thus, slaying themselves in pride and despair, murdering their kin to ease their own death.”<sup>80</sup> Tolkien’s use of the adjective “heathen” to describe these kings of Middle-earth draws to mind the connection he makes between Northern Courage and pagan beliefs in his scholarship. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (2005) note that Tolkien’s representation of suicide in “The Pyre of Denethor” reflects the stance of the Roman Catholic Church to which he belonged.<sup>81</sup> However, it is important to recognize that Tolkien’s focus here is specifically on murder-suicide: the one that Denethor is in the process of carrying out, and those of the “heathen kings” who, in “pride and despair,” slayed their kin as well as themselves. Here we find *ofermod*: an authority figure making decisions at the expense of, and without the consent of, others. To turn one’s back on hope – and, more importantly, to deny others hope by driving them into inescapably fatal situations – is associated with the dark side of Northern Courage in Tolkien’s literature.

The key distinction between Faramir and Denethor, in fact, is their attitude toward hope, both for themselves and for others. Although Faramir admits of Gondor that “[i]t is long since we had any hope,”<sup>82</sup> he does not behave as if its demise is inevitable. By contrast, Denethor, in his final embrace of “pride and

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<sup>78</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 90.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 129

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>81</sup> Hammond and Scull, *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader’s Companion*, 573.

<sup>82</sup> Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 286.

despair,” seeks to deny himself, his son, and all Minas Tirith the possibility of pursuing hope. “Go now, and die in what way seems best to you,”<sup>83</sup> is his parting advice to Pippin; having resolved to die, Denethor cannot imagine any other fate for the people he is meant to lead. Gandalf tries to awaken Denethor to the uncertainty of his situation and the possibilities inherent in that uncertainty: “...[Faramir] must seek healing on the threshold of death, and maybe find it not. Whereas your part is to go out to the battle of your City, where maybe death awaits you.”<sup>84</sup> Denethor, however, has rejected all possibilities but destruction; he takes the stance of one who “see[s] the end beyond all doubt.”<sup>85</sup> Gandalf is able to save Faramir from being consumed by his father’s wish for death over dishonor, but Denethor himself succumbs to it.

*Ofermod*, then, extends beyond pride and glory; for Tolkien, it is can also motivate leaders to abandon hope on behalf of others in the interest of satisfying pride or preserving their reputation. In the sequence of events leading to his death, Denethor increasingly uses his authority as Steward in order to compel others to “throw [their] li[ves] away rashly,”<sup>86</sup> to paraphrase Gandalf, in the interest of shielding Denethor from shame. Fittingly, Tolkien tends to express the opposite inclination to Denethor’s through his rustic and humble but truly heroic characters, the hobbits. “While there’s life there’s hope” is a phrase which features prominently in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Bilbo Baggins utters the line (taught to him by his father) in order to embolden the dwarves to venture down the mountain tunnel toward Smaug’s lair rather than despair and die in the passage where they’ve been trapped.<sup>87</sup> In *The Lord of the Rings*, this admirable sentiment is echoed by Samwise Gamgee (who learned it from his Gaffer) in order to encourage Frodo, who is becoming increasingly doubtful that the Ring quest will end happily.<sup>88</sup> Tolkien’s representation of the phrase in terms of an oral tradition, with hobbit parents passing the saying down to their children, suggests that this tendency toward hope rather than despair is not unique to Bilbo or Sam. It is a stance represented by the Shire as a whole. True heroism in Tolkien’s literature is divorced from grandiosity and the individual pursuit of glory; it is expressed through a willingness to hope for – and to strive toward – a life worth living, as well as through the recognition of one’s responsibility to pursue this goal on behalf of others. For Tolkien himself is seldom content to allow his beloved characters to succumb to despair and death; he rewards their stubborn hope with the literary

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<sup>83</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 99.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 128-29.

<sup>85</sup> Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 282.

<sup>86</sup> Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 90.

<sup>87</sup> Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 214.

<sup>88</sup> Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 309. Here the quotation is altered slightly: “while” is replaced with “where.”

miracle of the *eucatastrophe*, the sudden turn from sorrow to joy.<sup>89</sup> Much of the tragedy of Boromir and Denethor's *ofermod*-driven demises is that they do not witness the impossible: the defeat of Sauron and the overthrow of Mordor. Excessive pride and love of glory, Tolkien suggests, is the enemy of joy.

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<sup>89</sup> Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 153.

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