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Spring 2018

"THAT NOBLE NORTHERN SPIRIT": J.R.R. TOLKIEN, THE GREAT WAR, AND THE GERMANIC HEROIC TRADITION

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"THAT NOBLE NORTHERN SPIRIT":
J.R.R. TOLKIEN, THE GREAT WAR, AND THE GERMANIC HEROIC TRADITION

An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Gregory L. Rabbitt
2018

The essay of Gregory Louis Rabbitt is hereby accepted:

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As the progenitor of epic fantasy, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* has come to define a certain model of heroic, neo-epic literature since it was first published between 1954 and 1955. For many readers, the characters and events of the novel have come to embody a heroic code, one that has now become its own tradition and trope in the genre. However, behind what may now seem an ensconced mode of heroism, we can perceive Tolkien attempting to come to terms with his own ambivalences and complications regarding heroic norms both ancient and modern. Far from being a fantastical work separated from the concerns of the "real" world, Tolkien's epic is attempting to make sense of both archaic modes of heroism found in the medieval works he was so fond of, and the modern breed of hero birthed in the trenches and killing fields of the world wars.

The fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien has often been relegated to the genre of "fantasy." This classification is usually dismissive, intended to shunt such fiction into a category along with fairy-tales and other "less serious" forms of fiction. Whereas fairy-tale may be grudgingly given a folkloric and anthropological significance, fantasy literature as a product of the modern era is not afforded such a luxury. This dismissal of fantasy comes right down to the point that for many critics and casual readers alike, the genre – filled with dragons and wizards and the stuff of "make-believe" – is hopelessly divorced from the "real world," and thus cannot engage with it. Of course, Tolkien famously argued for the positive power and elevation of fairy-story and fantasy:

> I do not assent to the depreciative tone [of the term "fantasy"]. That images [contained in the genre] are not in the primary world…is a virtue, not a vice.

Fantasy (in this sense) is, I think, not a lower but a higher form of Art, indeed the

most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent. ("FS" 69)[1]

Given that Tolkien is often considered the grandfather of this very genre, it is not

surprising to see him arguing for fantasy's significance. One would expect him to come

to the defense of the mode that his own works so thoroughly fit into and in some ways

helped to create. However, beyond this, Tolkien was in a position to be keenly aware of

just what processes went into the writing of "fantasy literature" (or, as he would prefer,

"fairy-story"). Rather than seeing such literature as being detached from the "real" world

around it, he saw these works as directly engaging with it, despite charges of flight and

escapism.[2]

In considering the "place" of Tolkien and his works in the world and their

engagement with it, we must consider their historical context. That context is both the

preceding literary tradition that Tolkien was drawing from (for however much modern

readers want to acknowledge him as the "father" of the fantasy genre, he was himself

pulling from very ancient antecedents) and the contemporary milieu in which Tolkien

was writing. Tolkien was a scholar of medieval texts serving as an instructor in medieval

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[1] The following frequently-referenced works will be cited by the abbreviated forms given in
parentheses:
Carpenter, Humphrey ed. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (*Letter* [cited by number]); Shippey, T.A.
J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century (*Author*); Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* (*Road*);
Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorthelm's Son* (*Homecoming*); Tolkien, *The
Fellowship of the Ring* (*FR*); Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," ("FS"); Tolkien, *The Return of the
King* (*RK*); Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (*TT*).

[2] This too Tolkien was aware of, and countered. He did not argue that fantasy was absent
escapism as a central element of the genre, but that this escapism was misconstrued and mis-
valued: "the critics have chosen the wrong word, and what is more, they are confusing, not
always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter." See "FS" 79.

literature at Leeds and Oxford, and of particular interest for him were the Germanic texts of England's Anglo-Saxon heritage and their Norse cousins. As has been identified frequently enough, Tolkien took serious inspiration from these texts in creating both the particulars and the general "atmosphere" of his legendarium (*Road* 29, *Author* xvi).

As for his immediate historical context, Tolkien was writing in the midst of arguably the greatest upheavals in Western civilization since the fall of Rome: the World Wars. This fact seems to have been largely taken for granted in consideration of Tolkien's work. That Tolkien's place as a post-war writer has often been overlooked seems a serious oversight. Tolkien was a soldier himself, and more than that, a part of the larger European cultural generation that was traumatized by the experience of the world wars. He lost three of his closest friends during World War I, and himself fought in one of the its bloodiest battles, the Somme: a battle that has since become infamous for its "criminal negligence" and near-suicidal squandering of thousands of lives (Jones 27). Tolkien first began piecing together the languages that would become Elvish while recovering from trench fever in November of 1916 (Garth 212). Considering the time frame in which Tolkien wrote and published his major works – *The Hobbit* in 1936 and *The Lord of the Rings*, written between 1936 and 1949 – it would be a grave oversight not to consider these writings in the context of the wars which inflamed Europe. Tolkien was notoriously critical of an attempt to read his works as "mere" allegories of the wars. In his Foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien states, "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence" (*FR* xv). As to potential allusions to the World Wars, he contends, "[a]s for any inner meaning or 'message,' it has in the intention of the author

none…The real war does not resemble the legendary war in either its process or its conclusion" (xiv). Yet in acknowledging that "[a]n author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience" Tolkien does bring up the wars, and his experience of World War I:

> One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead. (xv)

In an argument attempting to steer the reader *away* from "reading" the war into the text, this is a curious inclusion.

Indeed, despite his insistence against conscious allegory as part of his writing process, Tolkien also acknowledged the deep and unconscious wells of experience that a writer draws from. Tolkien hinted at some of the internal processes that contribute to writing, and himself admitted that a writer cannot entirely separate or remove themselves from the contexts, events, and sources that may influence their creation (consciously or not). In a later remark, he would say, with some psychological astuteness, that

> [o]ne writes such a story out of the leaf mould of the mind…the source of ideas is of jumbled and uncertain origins. It is nutrient-rich with the broken-down matter of the past. All previous work and every real-life episode is drawn into the writer's compost heap" to be pulled out when the author writes. (qtd. in Martin 186)

Again, in his preface to *The Lord of the Rings,* he states, "An author cannot remain wholly unaffected by his experience" and "I think that many accuse 'applicability' with

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'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author" (*FR* xv).   It is not, then, too much of a disservice to Tolkien's own wishes to examine that "leaf mould" of which he makes mention, and its "applicability" to the World Wars.

This "leaf mould" consists of not only Tolkien's wartime experience, but his deep and intimate knowledge of the Germanic heroic tradition, based on his scholarly experience. In crafting *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was writing an original story which drew on ancient traditions and yet which also addressed the concerns of his modern world. He did this by blending genres and modes, giving birth to a new genre in the process. T.A. Shippey has already noted extensively that Tolkien's works serve as a blend of ancient epic, medieval romance, and modern novel (*Road* 209, *Author* xxix). Shippey has attributed this to a desire to revivify "fairy-story" and myth for a modern audience, and, of course, a natural inclination on Tolkien's part to work with the medieval materials he so loved and was so intimately familiar with. However, what has not always been so thoroughly addressed is Tolkien's potential purpose in using these materials to make sense of his own modern world. The World Wars were a deeply traumatic experience for European culture at large, to say nothing of the individuals who ultimately served on the battlefield. In a letter dated 6 May 1944, sent to his son Christopher during his own service in World War II, Tolkien expresses his need to exorcise his thoughts in the face of war: "I sense amongst all your pains (some merely physical) the desire to express your *feeling* about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering. In my case it generated Morgoth and the

history of the Gnomes" (*Letters* 66). Here, Tolkien attributes the genesis of his vast history of Middle-Earth at least in part to his need to make sense of the war.

World War I and its sequel served as an abrupt and shattering induction into the modern era. Old codes and modes of being were called into question. The former behaviors and ways of life, their moral constituents, no longer made sense: "World War I had the effect of seeming to annihilate past history and the old styles of history" (Gandal 24). For Tolkien, steeped in ancient traditions as he was, this may have been a particularly jarring experience. Of particular significance were the roles of violence, heroism, bravery, and the hero itself, central concerns in the epic and romantic tradition Tolkien was familiar with. The Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic literature that Tolkien studied thoroughly present worlds of endemic warfare in which heroic figures are concerned with bravery, reputation, and honor as a path to immortality. In a world of such death and violence, where a heavenly afterlife was not an assured reward, the longevity of one's good name may have been the only sure way to attain some kind of lasting legacy or similitude of immortality. This starkly fatalistic worldview and conception of bravery and heroism would take on new meaning in light of the World Wars. Tolkien may already have been wrestling with the contradictions, complications, and ambivalences present in this heroic ethos before channeling this code into his fiction. His scholarly work certainly addresses problems with so bleak a worldview that favors prideful glory-seeking as a path to teleological meaning (see *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* and Tolkien's *Beowulf* commentary, discussed below). The experience of total war may only have exacerbated these doubts.

With its epic charges, valiant speeches, warrior-kings, and self-sacrificing protagonists, *The Lord of the Rings,* the central piece of Tolkien's Middle-Earth legendarium, is replete with heroic behaviors and characters. Drawn from antecedents in myth, romance, and epic and written in the form of modern novel in the midst of the greatest crisis of the twentieth century, we cannot take for granted the mixing of medieval and modern in these works. More to the point, we see Tolkien as a mediator between medieval modes of heroism and the modern world of twentieth-century warfare. Indeed, by melding these two disparate elements together, Tolkien is attempting to make sense both of the ambivalences and complications of the medieval Germanic heroic code, and of the trauma of war.

In considering the place and role of heroism, we must also consider the role of religion and spirituality. For Tolkien, as I will argue, heroism and bravery, by their very function, operate in a certain moral framework. That framework was one of devout Catholicism. Tolkien's fiction cannot be extricated from this Catholic worldview, and Tolkien himself admits as much, declaring *The Lord of the Rings* to be "fundamentally Catholic" (*Letters* 142). This issue of faith further complicates the way that Tolkien deals with heroism and bravery, casting these values in the light of hope, providence, and religious history. In the end, Tolkien cannot wholly embrace the fatalistic heroism of the Germanic code, even as he acknowledges a certain grim nobility in it. For Tolkien, this kind of heroism is erroneously based on an internal self-focus that admits to a paradoxical *mélange* of pride and despair. This is the kind of heroism that flings itself headlong out of the trenches and into the teeth of withering machine-gun fire. Yet bravery and self-sacrifice are not entirely insignificant or obsolete values; indeed, Tolkien wants us to

acknowledge the eternal power of heroism in the human spirit. However, that heroism is one that is tempered by a purer form of sacrifice, one that is based on external love, not of the self but of the world, and that looks beyond despair for a hope of ultimate grace and salvation. In Tolkien's legendarium, these two heroic models are best represented by Théoden, King of Rohan, and Frodo, Tolkien's central protagonist and hero. Théoden, hoping for a glorious death and memorialization in song, embodies this Germanic code of fatalistic bravery that is centered on a kind of self-aggrandizement. On the other side of the spectrum, Frodo's heroism is almost Christ-like in its resignation to duty, but it is a resignation that is moderated by love and the hope that whatever may become of him personally, goodness and virtue will win the day.

Tolkien does not just create these two characters and their embodiments of heroism out of his own pure imagination, however prodigious it may have been. They are rooted in Tolkien's own interpretations of precedents in Old English literature, reflections of their original anonymous authors grappling with the very heroic code Tolkien himself seeks to elaborate. While Théoden is drawn from epic poetry such as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, Frodo finds inspiration from *The Dream of the Rood* and its amalgamation of Germanic warrior ethos and Christian self-sacrifice. These medieval works are reevaluated in light of the modern experience of war, and the needs of post-war literature to make sense of past ideals that seemed obsolete, if not ridiculous. While he may seem wildly at odds with the general trend of post-war literature and modernism, in his own idiosyncratic way, Tolkien was part of this same process of reconfiguration that marked responses to the war.

Shadows of the Past

In order to understand what J.R.R. Tolkien was doing in his reconfiguration of heroic models after the war, it is necessary to gain some perspective on past interpretations of Tolkien's work and on the nature of post-war literature in general. Past critical work on Tolkien and evaluations of post-war literature have tended not to intersect; they have missed each other like two ships passing in the night. Part of this is a not-unfounded perception that post-war literature dispensed with the outmoded forms of the past, of which epic and romance may have been the most completely defunct. By this view, Tolkien is a woefully decrepit representative of a distinctly anti-modern past. This is not a completely unfair response, but seems to miss the forest for the trees. Tolkien's proud, mail-clad, sword-brandishing warriors certainly appear to be representatives of an antiquated literary model, quite far from the mud, bombs, and automatic gunfire of the trenches, and the psychological malaise that exemplified response to wartime experience. He was however part of a larger post-war response, one that was attempting to consider where old spiritual and heroic values fit into the modern picture. That many writers decided to dispense with these values, while Tolkien decided to try to hold onto some remnant of them, does not negate Tolkien's place as a post-war respondent.

Tolkien's process of heroic reconfiguration requires an understanding of where evaluations of him and his place among "wartime literature" currently stands. Approaches to Tolkien have generally not regarded him much as a "post-war" or wartime writer. Tolkien has been left peculiarly outside of larger trends of literary development, even by those who treat his work with academic seriousness and do not simply treat him with critical hostility (*Author* 305). Most scholars are concerned with Tolkien as re-

packager of myth, or as a recuperator of fairy-story to the level of serious literature. As a Christian or Catholic writer, Tolkien has garnered some measure of attention, with particular focus paid to Tolkien's use of hope and providence and his theories regarding "secondary creation" (see Coulombe, Pearce, Gunton). There appears to have been a revival in regarding Tolkien as a fundamentally Catholic writer, whose faith plays an integral role in his work. However, this role of faith is largely left unapplied to other concerns in Tolkien's work, such as its relation to the medieval and mythic past and to the Great War.

As we will see, it is important to take into account Tolkien's voluminous project of recovering mythic and historical material, a project he was employed in throughout his fiction (and much of his scholarly work). However, evaluations of this creative process have often stopped short. Of the academic and scholarly approaches to Tolkien, many of them have taken the form of source studies, focusing on the various myths and ancient and medieval sources which he used to build his legendarium (see Jones, Shippey). While helpful for understanding Tolkien's process and giving insight into the deep wells of materials he was drawing from, such studies fail to place Tolkien in the immediate context of early- and mid-twentieth century literature. Approaching Tolkien as the progenitor of modern fantasy literature, these studies again handle Tolkien and his writings as though they were insular entities divorced from the larger world around them. Or, more precisely, they focus on Tolkien as a revivalist of past literary modes and models, addressing how he recycled and reclaimed mythological, epic, and romantic tropes in building his stories. Ultimately they give the impression of Tolkien as some

antiquarian who had his head stuck in the sand, or who was always turning to view the past and throwing up blinders to the modern world about him.

Larger studies on literature and World War I have been altogether silent when it comes to Tolkien, even when they address subjects of medievalism and mythological revival in the face of the Great War. Paul Fussell asserts that, paradoxically, a major trend of thought in reaction to the Great War was "towards myth…and the universally significant" (131). The trauma of onrushing modernity, ushered in with such horror and bloodshed, caused a turning away from that modern realism and provoked a search for solace in sacramental, ritualistic, mythic, even fantastical forms. This is picked up by Shippey, who contends that the dominant literary mode of the twentieth century should be seen as the fantastic (*Author* viii). While Fussell traces responses to the war in the form of "throwbacks…to Renaissance and medieval modes of thought and feeling," he entirely neglects to consider Tolkien in his discussion (115). Stefan Goebel, in *The Great War and Medieval Memory*, traces how soldiers and civilians sought comfort and security in revived medieval forms, attempting to build a sense of continuity in a world that appeared to have lost all meaning. While he addresses Germanic ideas embodied in myths of Valhalla, Ragnarök, and their recapitulation in Christianized forms of heroic remembrance, he fails to consider Tolkien's part in this process (284-285).

John Garth's *Tolkien and the Great War* is perhaps the most thorough study of the relationship between J.R.R. Tolkien, his writing, and the wartime experiences that shaped them. However, Garth's study leans more towards biography in the vein of Humphrey Carpenter. Garth certainly makes an argument that we should view Tolkien as part of that "band of brothers" of authors who were reacting to the war along with such

acknowledged writers as Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Wilfred Owen; the fact that Tolkien was turning to past models of literature and reviving them rather than blazing ahead into modernist experimentation does not negate this (288). An argument could even be made that Tolkien's revival of mythological material fits into the mold of modernist trends, along with works such as Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Wasteland*. Indeed, Eliot himself would claim that the "mythic mode" would prove to be the hallmark of modern literature (Eliot 478). However, in taking a primarily biographical approach, Garth is concerned with the germination of Tolkien's mythology in the trenches of the Somme, rather than its maturation and blossoming in the years afterwards. He focuses on Tolkien's earliest poems and fragments of story, the tales that would eventually come to form materials later published as *The Silmarillion* and *The Book of Lost Tales*. Garth traces Tolkien's experience more as an artistic coming-of-age, a watershed moment that gave birth to one of the richest imaginative sagas of modern literature. He does not consider later writings such as *The Lord of the Rings*, the culmination of years of work and reflection in which Tolkien may have been developing responses and reactions that had been forming since his time in the trenches.

T.A. Shippey has become the great proponent of Tolkien as a serious artist, and the primary instigator of scholarly research on Tolkien and his work. Shippey has published two book-length studies of Tolkien, *The Road to Middle-Earth* and *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century.* The former traces the development of Tolkien's writing from his earliest fiction to his posthumous publications such as *The Silmarillion,* in particular looking at Tolkien's relationship to language, and the act of creation and "sub-creation." Shippey addresses Tolkien's faith as well, and introduces Tolkien's precarious

balance in weaving between Christian and pagan materials particularly in constructing

the culture of the Rohirrim. (202). While *Road to Middle-Earth,* by Shippey's own

admission, deals primarily with Tolkien and the past, *Author of the Century* attempts to

situate Tolkien as "*an* author of the [twentieth] century" (xxvi-xxvii). In both works,

Shippey addresses the place of myth and religion in Tolkien's writing, noting that

Tolkien's non-Christian (indeed, pre-Christian) characters preconfigure Christian notions

of grace and salvation. Of especial importance is the notion of *eucatastrophe*, the "happy

accident," which is in fact a manifestation of divine providence (*Road* 174-176, *Author*

206-212). This places Tolkien's work in a larger spiritual framework, arguing for

Tolkien's seriousness of thought and the complexity of his vision. However, these

spiritual matters are primarily related to Tolkien's personal faith and how this is

expressed in his fiction. Despite making an argument for Tolkien's acceptance as a

significant author with literary merit for the modern world, Shippey only cursorily

connects Tolkien to the war and reactions to it. He regards Tolkien's work as a larger

reaction to modernity, in which the Shire is placed as idyllic, idealized Englishness and

Sauron, Saruman, and Mordor are all the frightening, catastrophic forces of the new

century come to rape and ravage the good traditions of the past.

These evaluations are not perhaps an altogether inaccurate picture of Tolkien and

his thoughts and opinions on modernity. Certainly many a reader of *The Lord of the*

Rings can pick out the stark juxtaposition between Bag End and the Party Tree, on the

one hand, and the slag heaps of Mordor, on the other hand, or the very real and physical

confrontation between nature and technology embodied in the conflict between Fangorn

and Isengard. However, Tolkien's struggle with modernity and its relationship to the past

is more complex than a simple dichotomy of approval of old, traditional values and a disapproval of newer, more progressive ones. As a scholar, a medievalist, and a mythographer, Tolkien was intimately familiar with the past and its various ethics and ideals. He had both an academic passion and a personal fondness for the Germanic materials of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse literature, and the heroic tradition they contained. However, as a soldier and as a writer of the twentieth century who began his literary venture in the midst of one war and continued it through another, Tolkien was dealing with the immediate questions of modernity: how to make sense of the past, how to find meaning, how to perceive tradition in light of events that seemed to shatter all tradition, defy meaning, and uproot the past.

This interplay between past and present, medieval and modern is perhaps most dynamically expressed in how Tolkien handles heroism in his epic. In his work, Tolkien wrestles with the problems of the Germanic heroic tradition, issues already extant in the medieval texts themselves. This heroic tradition is further complicated by the new light cast onto heroism and bravery by the world wars. As a mythographer, Tolkien was not simply pulling out the motifs and tropes of myth and epic and repackaging them in a new form; he was integrally re-examining the cultures and values of the past and attempting to make sense of them in light of current circumstances. In doing so, he was also using his modern perspective to evaluate the larger implications of these past cultural modes and ethical values, to alleviate their potential shortcomings, and to make them relevant to the modern world. It is a mark of Tolkien's particular creative spirit and peculiar kind of genius that he is able to use the past to make sense of the present, and vice versa.

The Germanic Ideal

The post-war writers were attempting to wrestle with codes old and new. On the one hand, they were trying to find a continuity and stability to provide reassurance that not everything had been demolished by the war. On the other hand, they were painfully aware that the old manner of doing and thinking was obsolete, if not completely dead. Heroism was just one of these codes and concepts that required re-evaluation. Given the very nature of warfare – the theater in which heroism is perhaps most blatantly exhibited – this heroic code took on powerful significance for the wartime generation. Violence and warfare were nothing new. However, in a war which saw over 57,000 British casualties on the first day of just one battle (Sheffield 69) – a war marked by such impersonal and inhuman means of killing as mustard gas and machine guns, where victory was measured by yards gained instead of miles – the meaning of courage and bravery took on new significance.

Taken at face value, Tolkien's turn to an archaic model of bravery based on the medieval past seems old-fashioned, antiquated, even reactionarily obstinate. Indeed, part of the criticism Tolkien has received in scholarly circles is based on just this sort of view (Garth 289). In building a world of warrior-kings and chivalric heroes, proponents of this view contend, Tolkien is behaving like an ostrich with its head in the sand, blatantly ignoring modernity and the call for new perspectives of understanding. Worse, he is perpetuating dangerously outmoded models of soldierly behavior that are not just out-of-fashion but responsible for the slaughter of thousands in a senseless conflict that seemed to resolve nothing.

This gets the matter wrong on at least two counts. One, it minimizes the serious attempts Tolkien and many others were making to try to fit the war into an understandable framework of the past. Fussell highlights the fact that the turn to medievalism in the wake of the Great War was an attempt to assert a historical stability. Soldiers and wartime writers wanted to establish that the bloodshed and violence of the war were part of a train that went back into antiquity, that, in effect, this was "business as usual." It was an attempt to alleviate the trauma by claiming that it was not, in fact, quite so different from what had gone on in the past. Furthermore, in relating themselves to Roman legionaries, Anglo-Saxon warriors, and medieval knights, the soldiers were attempting to establish the solidarity of a community of brothers in arms that stretched through the ages (146-150).

Tolkien's work may be part of this process, but it is also something more. The criticisms against Tolkien as antiquarian blindly assume that he was only digging up the discarded articles of the past, brushing them off, and trying to reassemble them for his plot. They do not take into account the ways in which Tolkien is dynamically reconfiguring his material. His work is not just using references to past conflicts, heroic codes, or models of soldiery and warrior-hood as a method of creating historical continuity or communal belonging. It is an attempt to make sense of medieval material in light of the experience of modern war and thus to transform both that original material and the modern experience.

Of utmost importance to Tolkien, his conception of past heroic models, and his reconfiguration of these models in his ~~in~~ epic, is the "Germanic ideal": the heroic code established in Old English poetic works such as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, and

related Norse texts. This is what, in a British Academy Lecture, Tolkien called "that

Northern theory of courage," where "even ultimate defeat does not turn right into wrong"

(*Road* 120). Elsewhere, in a letter to his son Michael in the midst of World War II, he

described it as "that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have

ever loved," the focus of his scholarly and personal passions since youth (*Letters* 45).

That Tolkien refused, unlike many of his contemporaries (and the royal family), to

change his German-derived name in the wake of the declaration of war shows perhaps

some of the personal stakes in the matter for him (Garth 42). Tolkien would take this

spirit evinced in the Anglo-Scandinavian epic tradition and build an entire culture, the

Rohirrim, based on their poetic evocation. The Rohirrim and their king, Théoden, figure

prominently in Tolkien's heroic schema.

This "Germanic ideal" seems to stem from what one may call "the spirit of

Ragnarök." Foretold in the Old Norse *Poetic Edda*, Ragnarök is the Norse "doomsday,"

the end of all things. Even the gods will die, fighting a Pyrrhic last stand of mutually-

assured destruction against their ancient foes, the giants. To compound the sense of

inevitable destruction, Odin, king of the gods, is well aware of the prophesied obliteration

of the cosmos. With this in mind, there is an overall aura of fatalism that pervades

Germanic epic works and which is attached to the heroic behaviors of the characters.

This is not to say that all of these works are directly linked to the myth of Ragnarök itself.

While *Beowulf* may have been drawn from earlier mythic oral traditions (*Beowulf* 136),

extant Anglo-Saxon literature was written down substantially after the conversion to

Christianity in the 6th century. Similarly, Norse material, while perhaps better preserving

the pagan mythic landscape, was also recorded well after the adoption of Christianity by

Scandinavian cultures. The heroic code depicted in these epics presents an ethos of grim

determination and stoic fortitude in the face of near-certain defeat. As Tolkien would

write in his seminal critical work "*Beowulf:* The Monsters and the Critics," this central

poem of Anglo-Saxon heroic literature has as its primary theme "man at war with the

hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time" (*Monsters* 23). Death is a given, and

one's potential place in an afterlife is uncertain. Immortality and longevity are still

associated with temporal existence, bound to an earthly sphere: name, reputation, these

are the paths to a lasting legacy. Honor, courage, and similar behavioral virtues are of

utmost importance in this worldview. The spiritual promise of the hereafter, while

floated in poems such as *Beowulf*, takes a backseat to these more tangible rewards. This

ethos is best encapsulated in pithy lines from the *Hávamál* in the *Poetic Edda*:

> Cattle die, kinsmen die,
>
> onself dies just the same.
>
> But *words of glory* never die
>
> For the one who gets a good name. (76, emphasis mine)

The heroic code of this Anglo-Scandinavian literature then has elements that

stretch back into a pagan past that predates Christianity and the promises of salvation and

the certitude of a benevolent God. Much of Old English heroic poetry was attempting to

accommodate this code of conduct and filter it through a system of Christian ethics. As a

Christian (and Catholic), Tolkien was trying to make sense of this historical process

himself in his assessment of *Beowulf*: his translation of the poem, worked on throughout

his life and published posthumously with his commentary, is frequently concerned with

what he perceives to be the careful and deliberate effort of the poet to "work over" anomalous mythic (i.e., pagan) material (147). The traditional interpretation of the arc of *Beowulf* reads the poem as the epitome of the Germanic heroic ideal. Beowulf arrives in Heorot to make good on his clan's debt to the Scyldings, and to earn his fame as a young warrior. Tolkien summed up "Beowulf's personal objects in his journey to Denmark" as "his own renown, and above that the glory of his lord and king" (*Letter 183*). Christian ethics play little part in this motivation, even if the poet eventually draws a larger moral lesson from the tale of Beowulf and his ultimate demise.

There are problems with this Germanic ideal. Beowulf's motivations are decidedly narcissistic, even if they serve an overall larger end and make good on his family's debt to Hrothgar. More than this, however, it is that Germanic ideal, with its spirit of stoic fortitude and its "burden of pessimism" (Garth 42), that seals Beowulf's fate, giving the poem its lamentable conclusion. Beowulf's final confrontation with the dragon highlights the problems with the heroic code and its behaviors. Beowulf chooses to face the dragon alone, even knowing he is likely to be slain. This may at first appear to be a heroic sacrifice for the greater good, but Beowulf's death is cast in a far more tragic light when we consider the elegiac closing of the poem and the lament of his subjects. With the king dead, his people are subjected to the predations of hostile neighbors, to be slain or sold into slavery (ll. 2639-2644). If a king's job is to guard and protect his people, Beowulf has in a manner failed at this. Certainly, the dragon lies dead, but what does this avail the Geats now that their human enemies circle like hawks ready to swoop in for the kill?

Tolkien was aware of the issues present in the Germanic ideal. Its problems and ambivalences color his heroic characters. Outside of his epic creation, Tolkien tackles the complications of the Germanic heroic tradition. In his dramatic poem *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*, Tolkien creates a sequel of sorts to the fragmentary *Battle of Maldon*. In the original poem, a force of Viking raiders has landed off the coast of Essex. The ealdorman of Essex, Byrhtnoth, arrives with his own army to repel the raiders. Despite having a tactical advantage, with the Vikings stranded on a headland separated by a narrow causeway, Byrhtnoth heeds the Vikings' call to fight on even ground. A noble and chivalrous gesture, it leads to his demise and the destruction of his army: Byrhtnoth is slain, and his household troops, inspired by the courageous words of Ælfwine, make a last, doomed stand. Tolkien considered this poem to contain "the finest expression of the Northern heroic spirit, Norse or English" (*Homecoming* 21). A couplet near the end of the poem, spoken by one Byrhtwold, sums up the heroic code for Tolkien and its spirit of fatalistic courage. Tolkien includes the original Old English and a translation of it in his commentary accompanying his own dramatic poem: "Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater, as our strength lessens" (*Homecoming* 5).

In Tolkien's dramatic sequel, the Saxon Torthelm and Tídwald pick over the field of dead, searching for the corpse of Beorhtnoth (Tolkien's spelling for the Byrhtnoth of the original, using an alternate Old English dialect). Their dialogue features their musings over the nature of heroism, death, and sacrifice. The young Torthelm has his mind full of "gleeman's stuff" (the "gleeman" a loose translation of an Old English word for story-teller or bard) the older Tídwald cynically reminding his rosy-hued companion

of the senselessness of Beorhtnoth's death and the vanity of his sacrifice. Tolkien

appended an analysis of the original poem to this work of his, wherein he laid out his

thoughts on the heroic code encapsulated in the original and in similar works such as

Beowulf. He identifies the "alloy" of apparently selfless bravery melded with self-regard

in the quest for renown that this very bravery fulfills (*Homecoming* 22). Tolkien finds in

this behavior a kind of "excess," related to *ofermod,* "pride" as he translates it from the

Old English. This quality is epitomized by Beowulf's pledge to fight Grendel hand-to-

hand, without arms or armor. This places Beowulf in a position of "unnecessary peril"

that could spell doom for his compatriots and for Hrothgar – if he should fall, not only

will Beowulf's men be left leaderless, but the last best chance to rid Heorot of its demon

may die as well. As a Catholic, this narcissistic "excess" is particularly suspect for

Tolkien.

Tolkien sees in *The Battle of Maldon* an even more pointed example. Beowulf

may be a mythic character, filled with all the larger-than-life exaggerated virtues and

vices of the epic tradition, but in *The Battle of Maldon*, we are presented with a story and

a lesson taken from history relatively contemporary to the tenth century poet. Not only

that, but while *Beowulf* depicts "only the legend of 'excess' in a chief," *Maldon* depicts

an entire society's futile adherence to a dangerous and toxic model of courage. It is not

merely Byrhtnoth who succumbs to the consequences of his pride, his *ofermod*, but his

companions who follow suit and who die as well. Like Beowulf, Byrhtnoth has failed the

people he is supposed to be protecting by his very heroism. Pointedly, in his evaluation

of Byrhtnoth and *The Battle of Maldon,* Tolkien uses the modern military language of

"subordinate" to describe the earl's companions (*Homecoming* 23). Elsewhere he uses

the Old English word *heorðwerod,* or "household." This dual language is an interesting blending of twentieth-century militaristic jargon and medieval terminology. Whether entirely deliberate or not on Tolkien's part, it casts a certain light on our understanding of his response to the poem and its relation to World War I. It does not take a stretch of the imagination to picture Byrhtnoth as the antecedent to the British commanders who ordered wave after wave of soldiers to throw themselves at the German redoubts along the Somme, even as tens of thousands of those soldiers were obliterated.

There is another, elegiac connection between *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* and the Great War. Torthelm and Tídwald picking over the corpses of the slain is a far departure from the heroic valor of epic tradition. While *Beowulf* grants us a vision of the titular hero's pyre, the funeral is heightened by the singular nature of Beowulf's individual death and the lamentations surrounding it. *The Homecoming*'s field of largely nameless dead, however, seen hours after the battle as night falls on the landscape, is a scene more fitting with modern depictions of war-torn aftermath. Indeed, it is an image that evokes the grainy black-and-white photos of no-man's-land and the anonymous dead churned into the slurry of mud and grime. Torthelm and Tídwald's catalogue of the dead and their positions on the field – "Here's Ælfnoth too, by his arm lying" (9) – almost echoes the reports back home of the discovery of the body of Tolkien's school friend Rob Gilson, found "back in the front trench, as if he had been dragged or had dragged himself all the way back there" (Garth 156).

In light of the war, the Germanic heroic model becomes even more suspect than a simple wariness of the dubious quality of its "excess." This view of chivalrous death-for-honor, of a valiant rush into the jaws of death, loses its romantic appeal when a

generation of young men were thrown over the lips of the trenches, only to be mowed

down in the wire-tangled stretches of no-man's-land. Similarly, the association of these

values with blind patriotism begins to sour. The Germanic code is rarely, if ever,

couched in terms that we would associate with modern concepts such as patriotism and

nationalism. The code is based on more intimate obligations, between kith and kin.

However, it is not difficult to see how this system where personal bravery meets familial

and social obligation, where honor, name, and reputation become absolute values, could

contribute to or fall in line with the patriotic fervor of the war: Tolkien identifies

Byrhtnoth's actions as in some way part of a system of social pressure, in which a fear of

disgrace and a bond of camaraderie combine to motivate the East Saxons to make their

doomed stand. That Tolkien, unlike so many of his generation and even his closest

friends, refrained from jumping headlong into the call to arms may signal his

apprehension with this set of ideals and behaviors. Certainly he expressed an affinity and

sympathy for the common Germanic heritage the two now-belligerent nations possessed,

evincing a capacious empathy for and sensitivity to universal human suffering. There

was also, however, an apprehension of "Victorian triumphalism" that may have been

tempered by the very pessimism of the Germanic literary tradition Tolkien was steeped in

(Garth 40-43). His view of warfare was not that of a glorious adventure, but a grim and

fatal necessity.

While Tolkien certainly found much nobility in this stoic "Northern" system of

behavior, he couldn't fully endorse it. It is in *The Lord of the Rings* that Tolkien most

thoroughly wrestles with his ambivalences about the Germanic code, and its implications

for a larger definition of heroism. We get the sense in *The Lord of the Rings* that there is

certainly something honorable in this system of behavior, as espoused by certain

characters and cultures, namely, the Riders of Rohan and their king Théoden. Still,

Tolkien falls short of romanticizing it. Returning to his letters, in almost the very same

breath in which he avows his passion for the Germanic ideal, he denounces "this 'Nordic'

nonsense," alluding to its perversion for political ends (*Letter 45*). Despite accusations of

warmongering and propagandizing, despite the very fact that his epic is in the generic

form of romance, he does not wholly embrace the kind of courageous, chivalrous valor

that launched so many young men to their deaths. As the *Beowulf*-poet was attempting to

make sense of past ideologies in light of his own era and personal creed, so too was

Tolkien attempting to understand the material of the past and work it into a contemporary

fable that would have meaning for his generation.

Théoden, Excess, and Heathendom

The most direct embodiment of the Germanic ideal in Tolkien's epic are the

Riders of Rohan, and the central figure among them, their king Théoden. By examining

these characters and their fictional culture, we can see how Tolkien is continuing to work

on some of the problems with the Germanic heroic tradition that he first began to address

in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth.* Looking at these flawed models of heroism and

sacrifice, we find Tolkien considering what exactly is the meaning or purpose of courage,

bravery, and the willful laying down of life which occurs all too frequently in war. What

takes shape is an ambivalence for the old Germanic model of bravery, and the need for a

new way to configure and make sense of heroism.

The Riders of Rohan are "not the first children of Tolkien's imagination but the ones he regarded with most affection and also in a sense the most central" (*Road* 122). Théoden is introduced in a chapter that is "straightforwardly calqued onto *Beowulf*," and his court of Meduseld is a "Beowulfian" synonym for "hall" (*Road* 124). That Théoden and the Rohirrim are analogous to Anglo-Scandinavian heroic culture can be readily seen by the literary allusions Tolkien associates with the Lords of the Riddermark. When Aragorn and companions cross into the bounds of Rohan, Aragorn recites a snippet of their poetry. This is an almost word-for-word translation of the Old English poem *The Wanderer* (ll. 92-96), a poem which captures the fatalistic attitude of both Anglo-Saxon poetic culture and Tolkien's fictional culture inspired by it (*TT* 497). Elsewhere, Théoden rallies his troops with a speech that draws its wording from the very lines of *The Poetic Edda* which foretell the coming of Rangarök (45):

> "Arise, arise, Riders of Théoden!
>
> Fell deeds awake: fire and slaughter!
>
> Spear shall be shaken, shield be splintered,
>
> a sword-day, a red day, ere the sun rises!
>
> Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor!" (*RK* 812)

Indeed, Shippey goes so far as to say that "the Riders spring from poetry, not history" and that a significant portion of their culture is based on song (*Road* 125). Song and poetry are of utmost importance for Tolkien throughout his oeuvre, and bear a significant relation to memory and memorial. This relationship between song and memory is particularly important for the Rohirrim, inspired as they are by a heroic culture that values fame and reputation as a recompense for temporal death and mortality. Tolkien is

fond of presenting the reader with snatches of Rohirrim poetry, and goes so far as to give "recorded" songs memorializing the events Tolkien himself relates, written in a form of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse. The Rohirrim even sing as they charge onto the Pelennor Fields. In our first glimpse of Meduseld, Théoden's hall, we see it is surrounded by barrow-mounds flowing with the flowers *simbelmynë,* whose name can be translated to "ever-memory" or "forget-me-not" (*TT* 496). These flowers and the mounds themselves stand "for the preservation of the memory of ancient deeds and heroes in the expanse of years" (*Road* 125).[3] Moreover, this poetic origin for the Rohirrim is important to note in that it allows Tolkien to extrapolate from the Anglo-Scandinavian culture presented in literature, to create a culture of his own that could hone or exaggerate the virtues and vices he saw presented in the medieval sources. Again, he is working in a process not entirely dissimilar from the anonymous *Beowulf*-poet, fabricating a mythic past from the frayed threads of history for the purposes of elaborating a moral lesson.

The reliance of the Rohirrim on memory and song as a process of memorialization may relate them, in Tolkien's mind, to the pagan beliefs of the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons and Norse. In a culture with no true promise of an afterlife, of salvation or existence beyond this earthly sphere, memory, fame, and reputation take on greater significance. It is important to keep in mind the "historical" chronology of Tolkien's Middle-Earth. Tolkien wrote his legendarium to elaborate and chronicle a lost "mythic" period of earthly history. His Middle-Earth is in fact *our* earth, a now-lost

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[3] Throughout the epic the Rohirrim are very preoccupied with rituals of burial and memorial. As mentioned, their hall is surrounded by the mounds of the dead. On several occasions Tolkien details the Horse Lords' commemoration of the dead via mound-building: following Éomer's attack on the orcs carrying Merry and Pippin (*TT* 424), following Helm's Deep (*TT* 532), on the road to Orthanc (*TT* 538), and finally after Théoden's fall (*RK* 826).

epoch that can only be glimpsed murkily through snatches of legend. Pagan myths of the

past, such as the Norse legends of elves and dwarves, are but dim reflections of this lost

history of elder races and half-forgotten heroes. This evolution is made evident in the

very opening of *The Lord of the Rings* (in fact, it is made earlier, in *The Hobbit*) when

Tolkien traces the behaviors and habits of the hobbits in their heyday as they stand in

relation to the current day and age (*FR* I). The Prologue to the entire series establishes

that Tolkien is apparently reconstructing his narrative based on the details of long-lost

texts and annals (*FR* 13-15). This makes the connection between the mythic Rohirrim

and the historical Anglo-Saxons all the more pertinent. Like the anonymous *Beowulf*

author, Tolkien is a Christian writer casting back to the pre-Christian past. He is aware of

his characters' place as ignorant, unbaptized "heathens," but is still conscious of where

they fit into the Christian theological milieu (*Beowulf* 150).[4]

It is Théoden and the Rohirrim who best exemplify this kind of pagan spirit – that

Germanic ideal which reached back into heathen practices surrounding the cults of Wotan

and Thunor. As we have seen, Tolkien takes pains to connect their culture, language, and

poetry to the Anglo-Scandinavian past. Théoden himself is the ultimate embodiment of

this ethos and the figure through which its complications best emerge. We have noted

already that the Rohirrim have a particular tie to song, poetry, and memorialization in

general – to a preoccupation with honor, name, and reputation. Théoden does not diverge

from this established culture. He quotes Rohirric verse several times, including in his

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[4] Shippey has noted that Tolkien is rather excruciatingly sparing in details about religious practice
in Middle-Earth, despite the rather elaborate mythology he has created. Only twice do we have
any direct references to religious practice; both are in relation to Denethor and his self-
immolation, and both use the word "heathen." See *Road* 202.

various battle-speeches to his troops. Penned in at Helm's Deep and preparing to make a last sally, Théoden explicitly connects glorious death to memorial in song: "Maybe we shall cleave a road, or make such an end as will be worth a song – if any be left to sing of us hereafter'" (*TT* 526). We have in this moment an echo of that sentiment from *The Battle of Maldon* which Tolkien thought so exemplified the Germanic heroic spirit: "Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater, as our strength lessens."

The above quotation of Théoden's also highlights the fatalistic sense of doom that is at the core of this Germanic heroism and Tolkien's epic. The air of Ragnarök hangs over *The Lord of the Rings*: it is a monumental confrontation fraught with finality. There is, throughout the novel and voiced by various characters, a sense that the world's grandeur is fading. This is the last cataclysmic shudder of its descent into darkness. Théoden utters this sentiment of finality himself, looking out from the porch of Edoras and gazing out over his kingdom falling under shadow: "'Dark have been my dreams of late…I would now that you had come before, Gandalf. For I fear that already you have come too late, only to see the last days of my house. Not long now shall stand the high hall which Brego son of Eorl built. Fire shall devour the high seat. What is to be done?'" (*TT* 504). The hall being consumed by fire is pointedly the same end forecast for Heorot in the events following *Beowulf* (ll.65-69). This apocalyptic pall would be quite familiar to the soldiers of the war, who labored in a conflict that by turns seemed interminable and world-ending. Despair set in among the trenches, both that the war should ever end, and with it the world.

With doom looming over all, Théoden frets over his old age, particularly the potential for a passive and ignominious death. "If I could have set a spear in rest, riding

before my men upon the field, maybe I could have felt the joy of battle and so ended. But I serve little purpose here," he laments watching the battle at Helm's Deep unfold (*TT* 525). The call to battle rouses Théoden, and he seems to be in some way comforted or consoled by the idea that he may die in battle, stating that the promise shall help him rest easier (TT 507). "Behold! I go forth," Théoden declares exuberantly as he marches to Helm's Deep. "and it seems like to be my last riding" (*TT* 511). Death is inevitable; what matters is the kind of death one earns. To die as an old man is shameful, tantamount to cowardice. Théoden's pride will not allow him to die such a death.

The actual end Théoden does earn is remarkably similar to that of Beowulf, both in its physical details and in its embodiment of fatal *ofermod*. Eschewing his companions, the king rushes headlong into the face of battle in a passage that hearkens back to the best of the epic tradition. In single combat he strikes down the captain of the Southrons, wicked humans who Sauron has gathered to his banner. At that moment, the Witch-King, captain of the Nazgûl and leader of Sauron's armies, pounces on Théoden. The Witch-King's "fell beast" is a decidedly draconic mount, echoing the dragon that Beowulf faces (*RK* 822). Like Beowulf, Théoden is "rescued" by the aid of a subordinate – Wiglaf ultimately slays the dragon that Beowulf is unable to defeat, while Théoden's niece, Éowyn, reveals her disguise and defeats the Nazgûl. Like Beowulf, Théoden dies in battle and leaves his people. Unlike Beowulf, Théoden has the good fortune of having in Éomer a responsible heir at hand not only to pick up the command in battle, but to lead the people of Rohan after his death. It is actually Gandalf who, prior to leaving Edoras, halts the king's haste to march and counsels him to appoint an heir, so that he does not leave his people "unarmed and unshepherded" (*TT* 507). Théoden might die like

Beowulf, in a moment of heroic excess, but he is spared (if only by happenstance and good counsel) from leaving his kingdom in a similarly precarious state. However, true to form, even with his dying breath, Théoden is concerned with his name and legacy: "My body is broken. I go to my fathers. And even in their mighty company I shall not now be ashamed. I felled the black serpent. A grim morn, and a glad day, and a golden sunset!" (*RK* 824). Théoden is of course wrong; he did nothing to defeat "the black serpent," that honor goes to his niece. Théoden's death may be satisfying for him, but there is something a little hollow for the reader. As Tolkien says of Byrhtnoth's death, it is "[m]agnificent perhaps, but…too foolish to be heroic" (*Homecoming* 24).

It should not be overlooked that the heir Théoden does name, his nephew Éomer, almost succumbs to the very excess of heroic spirit that Théoden does. His response to his lord's death is strikingly reminiscent of Ælfwine's to Byrhtnoth's demise. With rallying words, Éomer rouses the Rohirrim to make a final stand on the field: "Death! Ride, ride to ruin and the world's ending!" (*RK 826)*. In an image straight from *The Battle of Maldon* (ll. 100-105)

> [Éomer] let blow the horns to rally all men to his banner that could come thither; for he thought to make a great shield-wall at the last, and stand, and fight there on foot till all fell, and do deeds of song on the fields of Pelennor, though no man should be left in the West to remember the last King of the Mark. (*RK* 829)

It is only good fortune that Éomer and his companions do not meet the same fate as Byrhtnoth's *heorðwerod*: what they at first perceive to be newly-arrived enemies are in fact Aragorn and his reinforcements, which turn the tide of battle. They come precariously close to going down in a blaze of glory, however. Éomer's "salvation" is in

direct contrast to Théoden's demise, and they play into a Christian view of chance and

fate that Tolkien carries throughout his epic. Éomer is saved by *eucatastrophe,* the

"happy accident," the workings of God's providence in the world (*Road* 175). Despite

how dark they appear, things *do* turn out for the best, in the long run. Théoden's

rashness, his fatalism, and his fall are in part due to a failure to see this because they rely

on an older worldview which does not acknowledge that providence.

The failings of the Germanic ideal are related, in part, to a pagan belief system or

at least a system of belief stemming from originally pagan ignorance. It is certainly true

that Byhrtnoth, in the tenth century, came and died long after his forebears had been first

baptized. However the "excess" of bravery that he falls victim to is related to a pagan

ideology. It is, first and foremost, a mindset that values earthly reward and as such is a

mindset driven by ego and self-regard: pride, *ofermod.* Secondly, this kind of bravery is

a bravery that hinges on a sense of despair. This is a sacrifice made because all hope

seems lost, because it is better to die fighting than to die "hiding in the hills," as Théoden

says (*RK* 775). For a Christian, despair is a denial of the providential workings of God.

Théoden's courage and the sacrifice that comes along with it, then, is a product of

despair. It is a denial, to the Catholic Tolkien, of the prospect of salvation. "No counsel

have I to give to those that despair," Gandalf tells Théoden (*TT* 503). This stoic and

fatalistic bravery is, ultimately, ego-driven and narcissistic. What we have in this

allusion to a pagan mindset is the depiction of a heroic value that is flawed, possibly

obsolete. It is still courageous, but it is incomplete and thus falls short of an ideal. While

we are of course not to take that the soldiers of the Great War were secretly or

unknowingly pagan in their attitudes and belief, Tolkien is highly suspicious of the kind

of bravery that leads to the sort of blind and apparently senseless sacrifice that became commonplace in the war. Tolkien is, in his own peculiar way, attempting to make sense of codes old and new, of trying to figure out how past patterns of behavior and ethical and social codes now relate to a markedly changed world. Théoden and the Rohirrim themselves, even in the world of Middle-Earth, appear to be a markedly antiquated culture facing off against a frighteningly new machine of "modern" war, with its fire-powder and mass-production.

Tolkien, then, needs a new model of heroism. Like the old models of triumphant nationalism and jingoistic patriotism, this ancient model of heroism is both obsolete and dangerous. Sacrifice of the kind embodied by Théoden, Beowulf, and Byrhtnoth is toxic. The rush into battle, even under apparently virtuous auspices, is tainted. It is the kind of action that leads to needless death, the slaughter of one's companions or subordinates, that leaves a gap in the world. For Tolkien, however, bravery and sacrifice are not completely useless values. If they were, we would not have the kind of heroic epic we do in *The Lord of the Rings.* However, courage, heroism, and sacrifice must be reconfigured around a new center in order to be made more worthwhile, less flawed. With a particularly Christian perspective, Tolkien constitutes the ways in which heroic behavior can be made more virtuous and the ways in which sacrifice can have a more positive end.

Frodo and the Rood

Like almost all things in his legendarium, Tolkien's reconfiguration of heroic effort and sacrifice has a Germanic antecedent to it: *The Dream of the Rood*, a tenth-century Old English poem which recasts Christ ascending the cross as a warrior-prince

approaching the line of battle. *The Dream of the Rood* offers an alternative form of

heroism to the one presented in *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*. We are still in the

milieu of the Germanic heroic ideal, but it has been adapted and mapped onto a far more

overt Christian framework. Whereas in *Beowulf* there is the sense that Christian material

is being inserted to mitigate the more barbaric or pagan aspects of the heroic code, in *The

Dream of the Rood*, the feeling is that the heroic code is now being bent to serve

Christianity. In the poem, the cross of the crucifixion speaks to the narrator in a dream-

vision. The anthropomorphized suffering of the cross is conflated with the Passion of

Christ. Jesus is a "young hero" and a "warrior," who ascends the cross as though

stepping up to the shield-wall. His sacrifice is configured in language reminiscent of

Germanic traditions of blood-debt:

> He stripped himself then, young hero – that was God almighty –
>
> Strong and resolute; he ascended the high gallows,
>
> Brave in the sight of many, when he wanted to ransom mankind.
>
> I trembled when the warrior embraced me; even then I did not dare to bow to

earth,

> Fall the corners of the earth, but I had to stand fast. (ll. 39-43)

The cross is akin to Christ's *heorðwerod*, given a voice as it watches the world tremble:

"I would have / felled all the enemies; even so, I stood fast" (ll. 37-38). In the case of

both cross and Christ, a grim resolution to face death and suffering are valued. So far,

this is not too dissimilar from the traditional Germanic hero.

What is entirely different is the nature of the sacrifice and the ends to which it is

being made. Christ is "ransoming" mankind, alluding to ancient Anglo-Saxon traditions

of feud and *wergild*, the price paid in recompense for a wrongful death. Christ's death is not a prideful aggrandizement of his ego, an obstinate push to match some criterion of manhood, or a quest for glory memorialized in song. It is a sacrifice made for the greater good of mankind. Furthermore, in acceding to God's grand design, it is trusting in the providence of the Almighty, in the promise of resurrection and salvation.

This is a very Christian notion of heroism, one that hinges on the idea of bravery and sacrifice in particular as an act of love. It is a new model of heroism, based on love of other, rather than love of self. Tolkien certainly acknowledges that the sacrifice of Byrhtnoth's "subordinates" at Maldon is at least in part inspired by martial camaraderie among brothers-in-arms (*Homecoming* 25). This is itself a kind of love, one which Tolkien himself felt, expressing that the experience of the war imbued him with "a deep sympathy and feeling for the Tommy" (qtd. in Garth 94). However, this martial love is still hindered by its relationship to the system of heroic excess. After all, Byrhtnoth's compatriots die not to save their fallen lord (who is, after all, already dead) but in a way to carry on and match the example of staunch defiance that he has set. Éomer may be stricken by grief at the death of Théoden, a grief born by love, but his response to that love, tied as it is to the heroic tradition of excess, would likely have cost him his life if not for Aragorn's timely intervention.

In Frodo we have the counterbalance to Théoden's Germanic excess. We still have a figure who faces the inevitability of death with determination, who accepts his own ultimate demise in the course of a heroic action. However, Frodo's kind of courage under pressure, his humility, and his ultimate approach to the necessity of sacrifice set

him quite apart from Théoden. Frodo's grim resignation may be set opposite Théoden's almost exuberant striving for a heroic opportunity:

> A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo's side in Rivendell filled his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice.
>
> "I will take the Ring," he said. "Though I do not know the way." (*FR* 263)

Frodo dreams of peace, while nodding, in assent, that he must (in his way) go to war. Théoden, by contrast, dreams of war while he has been at peace. From the beginning, Frodo's acceptance of the quest to destroy the Ring has been a burden he has taken upon himself out of a sense of duty. This is very different from the kind of kin-obligation we find in traditional Germanic heroism. It is a much broader, larger sense of duty and responsibility to the world at large. It is, in short, Christ-like. Frodo-as-Christ may be too obvious an analogy; certainly it is not to be argued that Tolkien was deliberately putting forth Frodo and his sufferings as an allegory for the Passion. It is undeniable however, that Frodo's suffering fits all too well into a Christian scheme of redemption based on a courageous sacrifice founded on universal love.

This connection to salvific sacrifice was an important strand to soldiers of the war. The suffering Christian soldier could take some solace in relating himself to the suffering of his Savior (Fussell 118). It provided meaning to what otherwise seemed an ultimately nihilistic existence, and to a conflict that seemed ever more senseless the longer it dragged on. Christ's message is a message of hope, and one founded on the

supremacy of the meek in the face of the apparently strong. This is all very Frodo-like.

Generations of readers have been heartened by Tolkien's message of the power of "small

people" to change the fate of the world. This is a very modern sentiment, quite at odds

with traditional epic or romance which is almost exclusively concerned with the deeds of

the mighty and the great. It is, perhaps, a very soldierly sentiment. It is the kind of belief

one could imagine being espoused by the average "Tommy" in the trenches, wishing to

understand that his hardship and efforts will make a difference. It is a kind of faith – with

every meaning of the word – in goodness, in a providential plan or purpose that shapes

the world. This is quite different from the near-suicidal doubt which propels the ultra-

heroic figures like Théoden (and which literally drives Denethor to actual suicide).

"Despair," says Gandalf, "is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt" (*FR* 262).

Frodo certainly has his moments of doubt, particularly in regards to his own fate.

However, his very fortitude in his quest signals a hope for the world, an abjuring of

despair regardless of whether he thinks he'll see the end of the road. The fact that Frodo

is at peace even as Mount Doom crumbles around him after the destruction of the Ring

would seem to signal this beatific embrace of a wider hope.

It is certainly true that Frodo, unlike Théoden, does not die. So, his sacrifice may

seem incomplete, or less personally consequential. However, it is important to note the

emotional and psychological toll the experience has had on him. Frodo's lingering

malaise after the events of his quest strikes an undeniable chord with the symptoms of

PTSD. This "silent" sacrifice is rather fitting in the context of Christian humility, and

even further reinforces Tolkien's message. Rather than being valorized in song like

Théoden, or even his fellow hobbits Merry and Pippin, Frodo fades into the background

and tries to settle into an unassuming life: "Frodo dropped quietly out of all doings of the Shire, and Sam was pained to notice how little honour he had in his own country. Few people knew or wanted to know about his deeds and adventures; their admiration and respect were given mostly to [Merry and Pippin]" (*RK*, 1002). This again stands as a vast contrast to Théoden's excess, to the songs that Tolkien himself "records" are composed about the fallen king. Frodo does not need memorialization, in fact almost spurns it. There again seems to be a connection to the sentiments of the soldier, come home to find himself and his home profoundly changed: "I am wounded,…wounded; and it will never really heal" (*RK* 1002). Frodo's humility is attached to a desire for normalcy he will never truly acquire. Even if he has not given up his life, he has sacrificed peace of mind and psychological wholeness: a poignant reminder of the unseen scars brought home even by those soldiers who managed to step out of the trenches unscathed. "I think that 'victors' never can enjoy 'victory'," Tolkien wrote in 1956 to an early reviewer of *The Lord of the Rings.* "[N]ot in the terms that they envisaged; and in so far as they fought for something *to be enjoyed by themselves* (whether acquisition or mere preservation) the less satisfactory will 'victory' seem" (*Letter* 181). His words bear a solemnity that rings hauntingly true for a member of what would come to be called "the lost generation."

Tolkien's alternate heroism provides a Christian alternative to the pagan-inspired courage espoused by many of the works of the Germanic epic tradition. Théoden's excess, born of a mix of pride and despair, is countered by an increasingly Christian model presented by Frodo based on humility and selfless love. Shippey takes this a step further, noting that after Lothlorien, Frodo exhibits increasing "restraint" in his actions,

eventually eschewing violence altogether by the end of the series (*Author* 185). In this case, Frodo becomes almost counter-heroic, or at least counter to heroism as traditionally envisioned. Tolkien, operating in a Christian model similar to *The Dream of the Rood*, may be presenting an example of how the values of the Gospel prove superior and eventually replace the values of a pagan ideology. Beyond this historical-theological framework, Tolkien is also creating something that is resonant with the war experience. The old model of bravery seems, at the least, grandiose. There is something perhaps "magnificent" about it, but it is ultimately vulgar and foolish. It is also the bravery more consistent with a now-passed and forgotten age: the age of chivalry, which was once and for all annihilated by the bombs of the Great War. It is the bravery of a world that, in some way, loves war or the values attached to it: the ability to gain renown and make a song. The new bravery is one of resolved duty, of loving sacrifice made for a better world, made by perfectly average people who long for peace even while they say, "I will go."

Conclusion: This Middle-Earth

Frodo's sacrifice – and the sacrifice of Théoden and the other heroes on the Pelennor Fields – is, in some way, incomplete. The Ring is destroyed and Sauron defeated, yes. In remembering that Middle-Earth is antecedent to our world, however, we are also reminded that evil, war, and death are hardly banished with the fall of Barad-Dûr. If anything, violence and sin only seem to have escalated since the end of the Third Age. This may all seem to negate Tolkien's entire message: what good then is sacrifice – *any* kind of sacrifice, even one made out of love – if the result is meaningless? This

was a question that came to haunt the generation of the First World War who had to come to grips with the reality that theirs was not "the war to end all wars." In June of 1945, musing over the end of World War II, Tolkien wrote, "The War is not over…Wars are always lost, and The War always goes on (*Letter* 101). This grim sentiment seems fitting to the Germanic ideal, with its stoic acceptance of the reality of war. It may seem that Tolkien is falling into just the despair he cautions his characters against. However, a moment later he turns himself around: "it is no good growing faint!" he declares.

For Tolkien the Christian, we live in a fallen world. War and sin and death are inevitable, if horrific, facts of our existence. There is, however, consolation to be had in the face of this horror. One of those consolations is myth itself. Tolkien saw a rejuvenating power in "fairy-story." He saw in fairy-story a tripartite power of escape, recovery, and consolation. "Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining – a regaining of a clear view" (*FS* 77). The consolation is "The Consolation of the Happy Ending," a glimpse into the divine promise of joy and peace and redemption. This "happy ending" – *eucatastrophe,* the happy turn – may be at odds with the elegiac ending of his epic, but, as Tolkien asserts, the happy ending "does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (*FS* 85-86).

Tolkien's myth is the embodiment of this consolatory happy ending, and the ways in which heroes fit into it. The true hero – the Christian hero – does not despair. One of the primary thematic messages of *The Lord of the Rings* is the need for heroes to step up

in times of extremity. Warfare is, unfortunately, sometimes a necessary ill to forestall an even greater evil. This is entirely the message behind the council of the Ents and Merry and Pippin's attempt to convince them to join the looming war. In light of the wars, this may be read as both a repudiation of Chamberlain's attitude of appeasement and an application of Aquinian philosophies on just war (Richards and Witt 5). This attitude itself bears a stoic similarity to that Germanic theory of courage, acknowledging a realist (if not pessimist) admission to the hard truths of existence. Tolkien lamented the horrors of war while grudgingly admitting its necessity in a fallen world: "The utter stupid waste of war, not only material but moral and spiritual, is so staggering to those who have to endure it. And always was (despite the poets) and always will be (despite the propagandists) – not of course that it has been and will be necessary to face it in an evil world" (*Letter* 64).

This element of accommodating apparently opposing views, like Tolkien's straddling of the line between medieval and modern, epic and novel, has disconcerted a fair number of readers. Despite criticism, this paradox is an important aspect of Tolkien's response to the war. It shows the mind of a man who, as a Catholic, a soldier, and a human being, was horrified by the conflicts he lived through (the one as a combatant, the other as a wartime civilian) and the loss of life they caused, but who also couldn't reduce those experiences to nihilistic meaninglessness. Unlike many post-war writers, who eschewed an ultimate significance to the universe or the course of history and the place of violence in it, Tolkien had to create for himself a system that provided some kind of meaningful context for the atrocities of these defining events of the twentieth century.   Tolkien is no warmonger; he may be a kind of apologist, and we

could even accuse him of a certain naivety. What he is attempting to do is to find some kind of consolation in the dark depths of war. His personal theory of bravery rejects despairing sacrifice for its own sake, or for a worldly renown, and embraces a sacrifice based on love and redemption. For Tolkien, *this* is true sacrifice, the sacrifice of salvation set forth by the Son of Man. This is the kind of sacrifice that provides purpose to the lives lost in the war: the love of kith and kin, the hope that in the laying down of one's life, that a better world may be opened for future generations.

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