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Abstract

Claims the “idea that a warrior must die with his lord in battle is one of the most important moral injunctions among the various Germanic peoples.” Uses this theme to examine Tolkien’s work for his reworking of the Old Germanic ethic into a Christian perspective.

Additional Keywords

Germanic culture—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Nordic culture—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of Northern cultures; Paula DiSante



Tolkien and Old Germanic Ethics

Robert Boenig

The indebtedness of Tolkien to medieval Germanic literature is axiomatic. The Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford and founder of the Kolbitar Club--the distinguished group of scholars who met in Oxford to translate and discuss Old Norse sagas¹--a man who once recited the Lord's prayer in Gothic into a suspect tape recorder to exorcise any technological demons, was this century's greatest authority on Old Germanic language and literature. It takes only a superficial familiarity with Tolkien's imaginative works, moreover, to see that his Middle-earth, in which good characters fight a seemingly hopeless battle against the forces of evil, is an Old Germanic world--that of Snorri's *Edda* and the last half of *Beowulf*. Critics, of course, have noted Tolkien's debt to such works,² but a mere list of names³ he borrowed from Old English and Old Norse--Beorn, Eorl, Theoden, Gandalf, Durin--or even a list of characters he adapted for use--Smaug/Glaurung/Fafnir, Turin/Sigurðr, Morgoth/Loki, Theoden/Hroþgar--cannot exhaust his indebtedness. Even more important, I feel, than details of character and plot is the Germanic ethic that Tolkien remolded for *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, *The Unfinished Tales*, and *The Lost Tales*. The idea that a warrior must die with his lord in battle is one of the most important moral injunctions among the various Germanic peoples; how Tolkien treats it will serve as a good example of what Tolkien really did to Old Germanic ethics as a whole.

In his *Germania* (ca. AD 100), Tacitus provides us with our earliest literary

witness to what he finds a remarkable custom:

Cum ventum in aciem, turpe principi virtute vinci, turpe comitatu virtutem principis non adaequare. Iam vero infame in omnem vitam ac probrosum superstitem principi suo ex acie recessisse: illum defendere, tueri, sua quoque fortia facta gloriae eius adsignare praecipuum sacramentum est: principes pro victoria pugnant, comites pro principe.

When the battlefield is reached it is a reproach for a chief to be surpassed in prowess; a reproach for his retinue not to equal the prowess of its chief: but to have left the field and survived one's chief, this means lifelong infamy and shame: to protect and defend him, to devote one's own feats even to his glorification, this is the gist of their allegiance: the chief fights for victory, but the retainers for the chief.⁴

This passage is problematic:⁵ Tacitus speaks in general terms and does not provide a specific example of one individual warrior who died for his lord in one individual battle. If warriors did indeed act like this in specific battles, did they all do it when the circumstances arose, or was this a goal which only the very bravest reached? If the

historical reality of this ethical injunction is hard to establish, its literary reality, however, is not: vernacular references are frequent in the corpus of Old Germanic literature, especially in English and Norse. In Beowulf, for instance, the poet reproaches the cowardly thanes who deserted their lord in his last fight with the dragon:

	Næs ða lang to ðon,	
þæt ða hildlatan		holt ofgefan,
tydre treowlogan,		tyne ætsomne,
ða ne dorston ær		dareðum lacan
on hyre mandryhtnes		miclan þearfe,
ac hy scamiende		scyldas þaran,
gudgewadu,	þær se gomela læg. . . .	
	(2834b-2851)	

It was not very long before those cowards left woods--the weak pledge-breakers, ten together, those who did not dare play with spears earlier in their earthly lord's greatest need; but they were ashamed to bear shields, battle clothes, where the warrior lay.⁶

Wiglaf, the one faithful thane, adds his reproaches to those of the poet by telling his cowardly companions that Deað bið sella/eorla gehwylcum bonne edwitlif ("Death is better for every earl than a life of reproach" [2890b-2891]). The moral consequences of this cowardice extend beyond the reproachful lives of these cowardly thanes, because the destruction of the whole Geatish social order will follow: the Franks, Friesians, and Swedes (2912-2921) will rise up and destroy the lordless nation.

In the Old Norse Bjarkamal,⁷ fragmentary in its original language but translated into Latin by Saxo Grammaticus around the turn of the thirteenth century in his History of the Danes, we have an eloquent defense of the moral injunction to die with one's lord. Over the slain body of the Danish King Hrolfr, two loyal warriors, Bjarki and Hjalti, exhort the surviving retainers to die by their lord. Hjalti speaks:

Dulce est nos domino percepta
rependere dona. . . . Quid moror?
Extremam iam degustavimus escam.
Rex perit, et miseram sors ultima
corripit urbem.

Sweet it is for us to return to a
lord the gifts we have received. .
. . . What if I should die? For in
the end we shall all taste that
food. The king has died, and that
miserable lot has lain hold of the
city.⁸

The retainers heed this advice and fall one by one; Bjarki and Hjalti are the last to die.

Perhaps the most famous literary treatment of this ethical motif, however, is The Battle of Malden. There Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, as the result of a tactical error, allows a large force of vikings to land and thus finds himself in a losing battle. After he dies courageously, his thanes either flee like those in Beowulf or die beside their lord like those in Bjarkamal--actions which, of course, define their moral natures:

Þær wurdon Oddan bearn	ærest on fleame,
Godric fram guþe,	and þone godan forlet
þe him mænigne oft	mear gesealde--
he gehleop þone eoh	þe ahte his hlaforð.
	(185-189)

Those who did not want to be there retreated from the battle. The son of Odda, Godric, was the first to flee from the battle and abandon the good one who often gave him many horses; he mounted the horse that his lord owned.⁹

Byrhtwold, perhaps, sums up the Old Germanic ethical injunction to die with one's lord best with his words,

Her lið ure ealdor	eall forheawen,
god on greote.	A mæg gnornian
se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan	wendan
	þenceð.
Ic eom froð feores;	fram ic ne wille.
ac ic me be healfe	minum hlaforde,
be swa leofan men	licgan þence.
	(314-319)

Here lies our elder, all hewn up,
the good one on the ground. Ever
may the one who now thinks to turn
from this battle grieve. I am
experienced in life; I will never
turn away, but I myself think I
will lie by the side of my lord,
the much beloved man.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this ethical injunction as a structural principle in Tolkien's imaginative works. In The Hobbit, for instance, Bilbo feels the pull of conscience to return to the caves from which he has so recently escaped so he can defend his leader Thorin Oakenshield; later Fili and Kili fall beside Thorin, who is slain in the Battle of the Five Armies. In The Lord of the Rings Sam goes--in the Norse sense--beserk when he sees Frodo lying, apparently, dead; he must find his enemy Shelob so he may die defending his lord's body. But there are two especially instructive treatments of this theme in The Lord of the Rings: first, when Aragorn and Boromir prepare to fall with their leader Gandalf in his fatal battle with the Balrog and, second, when Merry and Eowyn prepare to die in the battle for Gondor defending the

fallen King Theoden. Both of these scenes take the Germanic ethic as a given: what the surviving characters expect of themselves is heroic death. In the conceptual world of The Battle of Malden, in other words, they reject the choice of Godric for that of Byrhtwold. But in neither scene does Tolkien allow his characters to die: Merry and Eowyn escape wounded but alive while Aragorn and Boromir are forced to make the choice of the coward Godric and flee. Tolkien, of course, is reluctant to kill off his good characters: Gandalf comes back from death, and most of the others survive. But this reluctance is not, I feel, the main reason Tolkien allows these four characters to survive the death of their lords; it lies instead in what I would like to call his acceptance and supersession of the Old Germanic ethic.

The context of the first passage is as follows: faced with the dangerous crossing of the Misty Mountains, the fellowship of the ring has been forced to find its dark way through the deserted tunnels of Moria. The companions are attacked by a huge troop of orcs, who pursue them to the narrow bridge before the exit. There a Balrog arises and Gandalf must do battle with him. Tolkien writes:

The wizard swayed on the bridge, stepped back a pace, and then again stood still.

"You cannot pass!" he said.

With a bound the Balrog leaped full upon the bridge. Its whip whirled and hissed.

"He cannot stand alone!" cried Aragorn suddenly and ran back along the bridge. "Elendil!" he shouted. "I am with you, Gandalf!"

"Gondor!" cried Boromir and leaped after him.¹⁰

(p. 345)

So far Aragorn and Boromir are acting like perfect thanes, who owe loyalty not so much to a cause but to a man. It would have been tactically wise for Bryhthnoth's thanes in The Battle of Malden to have regrouped and attacked the vikings from a position of strength; England would have been served the better. Under a different ethical system those who retreated would have been praised, not damned. But it is personal loyalty that is important in Old Germanic ethics. Thus Aragorn and Boromir leave their safe position and run back onto the bridge. But as he falls off the bridge, Gandalf gives them one last command: "Fly, you fools!" (p. 345). They do, and Aragorn assumes the leadership of the group. We respond first to the courage and loyalty of Aragorn and Boromir, but then we realize that there is a greater ethical injunction that supersedes that of dying with one's lord: accomplishing the all-important task of destroying the ring. An analogous situation in The Battle of Malden would have been for the poet to praise those who flee for their wisdom in choosing to defend England rather than a dead lord.

The context of the second passage is as follows: Gondor is besieged by a seemingly invincible force from Mordor led by the Nazgul. Old King Theoden, however, halts the momentum of the evil forces momentarily by arriving unexpectedly from Rohan with his troop of horse soldiers--among whom are the hobbit Merry, recently accepted as one of Theoden's thanes, and Eowyn, Theoden's niece, who is disguised as a male named Dernhelm in her refusal to stay home in safety with the rest of the women. Enraged by the sudden turn in the battle, the Lord of the Nazgul attacks King Theoden, causing his horse to fall upon him, crushing him to death. As the Nazgul prepares to mutilate the King's body--as the vikings did to Bryhthnoth's in The Battle of Malden--Eowyn and Merry, like Byrhtwold, prepare to fall beside their dead lord:

But Theoden was not utterly forsaken. The knights of his house lay slain about him, or else mastered by the madness of their steeds were borne far away. Yet one stood there still: Dernhelm the young, faithful beyond fear; and he wept, for he had loved his lord as a father. Right through the charge Merry had been borne unharmed behind him, until the Shadow came. . . . "King's man! King's man!" his heart cried within him. "You must stay by him." (p. 115)

The situation here is similar to that in Beowulf: all the lord's thanes are gone except for one blood relative willing to die with him. The one becomes two when Merry overcomes his sensible instinct to preserve life and submits himself to the ethical injunction to die with his lord. But because of two swordstrokes both lucky and courageous--the first from Merry and the second from Eowyn, the enemy is killed. They, however, are badly wounded, but later are healed by Aragorn.

At first glance Tolkien's reluctance to kill off good characters seems the only reason for the survival of Merry and Eowyn. Unlike Aragorn and Boromir earlier, they are not faced with a moral crisis in which the Old Germanic ethic of dying with one's lord is superseded by a higher one. Like Byrhtwold, Bjarki, and Hjalti they fall in battle--but like Wiglaf they live. And by the end of the book we understand why they live. Unlike Wiglaf, who survives to rule a country facing sure and swift destruction, they both are instrumental in building the new world after the wars have ended. Eowyn marries Faramir, Steward of Gondor, and with him rules the new realm of Osgiliath, and Merry is the main instrument in the scouring of the Shire of the remnants of evil. Again, as with Aragorn and Boromir at the bridge, the larger, communal concerns outweigh the individual.

In short, Tolkien accepts Old Germanic ethics--but only partially. The idea of dying with one's lord is admirable as long as it is a limited and not absolute commandment. This analysis leads me to make three observations about Tolkien's use of medieval material; the first is historical, the second biographical, and the third critical.

First, as we find out from Bede, the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons from the Old Germanic religion to Christianity was largely a process of accepting the good from pagan cult worship and giving a Christian dimension to those things. As Pope Gregory writes to Abbot Mellitus on his departure for Britain:

Cum ergo Deus omnipotens vos ad
reverentissimum virum fratrem
nostrum Augustinum episcopum
perduxerit, dicite ei, quid diu
mecum de causa Anglorum cogitans
tractavi: videlicet quia fana
idolorum destrui in eadem gente
minime debeant; sed ipsa quae in
eis sunt idola destruantur; aqua
benedicta fiat, in eisdem fanis
aspergatur, altaria construantur,
reliquie ponantur. . . .

When Almighty God shall bring you
to our most reverend brother
Augustine, bishop, tell him what I
have for a long time devised about
the cause of the English: that is,
that the temples of the idols in
that country ought not to be
broken; but only the idols which
are in them; that holy water be
made and sprinkled about those
temples, altars built, relics
placed. . . .¹¹

Thus Archbishop Augustine's first meeting with the British prelates is in a sacred grove (II.2), and St. Columba establishes the monastery of Dearthach in another sacred grove (III. 4). This, analogously, is also Tolkien's method: he takes an established element from the Old Germanic past, accepts what is useful in it and constructs something greater in its place.

My second observation has more to do with Tolkien's life than English history. As a dedicated, enthusiastic Roman Catholic who was a scholar of Old Germanic language and literature by profession, he had to come to terms with his own moral dilemma. The medieval Church condemned the Old Germanic gods bluntly as demons, yet Tolkien delighted in stories about them as long as a means could be found by which they could fit into his Christian beliefs. Thus we can find traces of the paradigm of acceptance and supersession, which he saw in Bede and used in The Lord of the Rings, in his life. The famous story (see Carpenter, pp. 163 ff.) about how Tolkien argued his friend, C. S. Lewis, into Christianity is a case in point. On an evening's walk around Oxford, Lewis

confided in Tolkien that although he was now willing to accept God's existence, he saw no reason behind Christ and the Crucifixion--even if it was a pleasing myth similar to that of the Norse god Baldr. One of our God-given capabilities, ran Tolkien's rejoinder, is to be a sub-creator¹² and make myths which are imperfect reflections of the truth. Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection comprise the true, historical myth which the Baldr myth reflects imperfectly. That insight of Tolkien's, based on acceptance and supersession of Old Germanic religion, was the immediate cause of Lewis' conversion.

My third observation is about Tolkien's literary criticism. As he demonstrates in his verse play, "The Homecoming of Beorhthnoth, Beorhthelm's Son," (see Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories," pp. 3-25) which he coupled with his scholarly article, "Ofermod," creative work can be literary criticism as valuable as scholarship and complementary to it. I suggest that we can view The Lord of the Rings as criticism of Old Germanic literature as useful as Tolkien's famous article, "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics." In other words, by presenting this paradigm of acceptance and supersession worked out imaginatively, Tolkien gives us a useful tool for sorting out the relationship between Old Germanic and Christian values in Beowulf and so many other masterpieces of early medieval literature. Thus the vexing last lines of Beowulf,

. . . he wære wyruld cyninga
manna mildust ond monðwærust
leodum liðost ond lof geornost.
(3180-3182)

. . . he was of earthly kings the
mildest of men and most gentle,
kindest to his people and most
eager for praise.

in which the Old Germanic boastfulness and the Christian meekness are yoked with violence together make perfect sense if we apply Tolkien's paradigm to them: we may accept the Germanic heroic values as good in themselves as long as they are superseded by the Christian. Sacred oak groves are wonderful places as long as Christian churches are built in them.

NOTES

1. See Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien: A Biography (New York: Ballantine, 1978), p. 134 for this detail.
2. See, for instance, Mariann Russell, "'The Northern Literature' and the Ring," Mythlore 18 (1978), pp. 41-42; and Gloriana St. Clair, "The Lord of the Rings as Saga," Mythlore 20 (1979), pp. 11-16.
3. See J. R. R. Tolkien, "Guide to the Names in The Lord of the Rings" in Jared Lobdell,

world, why should there not be a sort of "Christianity" in his secondary world? The answer is that there should be, as evidenced by Boromir's absolution, Gandalf's resurrection, and the eucatastrophe of Minas Tirith. The Christian influence brought to Middle-earth is evidenced in ways other than resolution. It is a strange coincidence that the day Frodo departs from Rivendell on his quest is December 25, Christmas Day, and the day on which the Ring is destroyed is March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation.

The very nature of Christianity is optimistic, based on the ultimate triumph of good over evil. The sub-creator of Middle-earth was a devout Catholic and believed in this optimistic faith, and he passed this belief into his sub-creation. Tolkien, the Christian, could not in good conscience allow evil to triumph again.

In each example, we see evil trying to work its will, only to be beaten off by some Christian belief. For Boromir, the lust for the Ring was too much to fend off. Yet in the end, Boromir confesses this sin to Aragorn and dies with a clean conscience. I personally have no doubt that he finally passed over the sea. He was forgiven.

Gandalf fell defending the members of the Fellowship against one of the most powerful evil beings left in Middle-earth, and it appeared that his guidance, wisdom, and motivation were taken from the Free Peoples of the world too soon. Yet he was sent back to complete his task, truly a eucatastrophe, and a miracle to those who thought he was gone.

Minas Tirith was on the brink of disaster, and the Rohirrim suddenly appeared to turn the course of the battle. Each time that evil is on the verge of a victory, there is some sort of saving grace, a eucatastrophe, just as the eucatastrophe of Christ's resurrection saves Man in the Bible. The Christianity of the primary world is mirrored in Tolkien's secondary world.

As shown by examples above, the dissonances of the first victory of Evil (in The Silmarillion) are resolved into the harmony of the victory of Good (in The Lord of the Rings) by the Christian influence brought into Middle-earth by its sub-creator. To Tolkien, the Christian and the sub-creator, it seems almost inconceivable that The Lord of the Rings would end in any way other than a happy ending:

The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the "happy ending"... So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he [man] may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation. All tales may come true.... (Ibid.)

NOTES

- [1] J.R.R. Tolkien, "Leaf by Niggle," The Tolkien Reader (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p.88.
- [2] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 320.
- [3] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Silmarillion (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), p. 153.
- [4] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Two Towers (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 135.
- [5] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Return of the King (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), p. 24.

- [6] J.R.R. Tolkien, The Book of Lost Tales -- Part II (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 160.
- [7] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," The Tolkien Reader (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 68.

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- Old Germanic Ethics, continued from page 12
- ed., A Tolkien Compass (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1975), pp. 153 ff.
4. Tacitus, Agricola and Germania, ed. and trans. Maurice Hutton (New York: Putnam, 1925), pp. 282-285.
5. See Rosemary Woolf, "The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the Germania and in The Battle of Malden," Anglo-Saxon England 5 (1976), pp. 63-81.
6. C. L. Wrenn and W. F. Bolton, eds., Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), p. 200. Translations from Old English are my own.
7. See Peter Hallberg, Old Icelandic Poetry, trans. Paul Schach and Sonja Lindgrenson (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), pp. 102 f.
8. J. Olrek and H. Raeder, eds., Saxonic Gesta Danorum, Vol. I (Hauniae: Levin and Munksgaard, 1931). pp. 54-55. The translation is my own.
9. The passages from The Battle of Malden are taken from Frederic G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler, eds., Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971).
10. J. R. R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
11. Bede, The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation ed. J. E. King (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 161-163. The translation is my modernized version of King's.
12. See Tolkien's essay, "On Fairy Stories," in J. R. R. Tolkien, The Tolkien Reader (New York: Ballantine, 1966), pp. 5 ff.

Williams Panel, continued from page 21

about the way you have to learn a new language to read science fiction. Well, you have to learn a new language -- and it's not just a sub-language, either -- to enjoy Charles Williams. Sooner or later you do, if you keep up with it.

DAVID BRATMAN: I think we've come to a conclusion on Charles Williams and I thank you for coming to this panel.

Art Submissions

Submissions of art are strongly encouraged and requested. They may be drawings of scenes from, or thematic treatments of, the works of Tolkien, Lewis, and/or Williams, as well as general treatments of fantastic and mythological themes. Art should be 4 1/2" wide and from 1 to 5 1/2" tall. Full page art should be 7 1/2" wide by 10" tall. Address inquiries to the Art Editor (see page 2 for address).