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### Abstract

Tolkien's legendarium writings display a subtle command of the perspectives and aims of different storytellers, as this examination of the many "chroniclers of Elvish history" and their various motivations demonstrates. At the meta-level, the paper discusses Tolkien's own historiographical aims in using these different voices to advance sometimes opposing views of military motive and courage.

### Additional Keywords

Historiography; Narrator in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Elrond; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Elves; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Fëanor; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Fingolfin; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of Northern cultures; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theory of Northern Courage; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Silmarillion



## THE 'WYRDWRITERAS' OF ELVISH HISTORY: NORTHERN COURAGE, HISTORICAL BIAS, AND LITERARY ARTIFACT AS ILLUSTRATIVE NARRATIVE

RICHARD Z. GALLANT

**W***YRDWRITERE*<sup>1</sup> MEANS 'HISTORIAN' OR 'CHRONICLER' in Old English, literally a writer of *wyrd* (a Germanic concept of fate inextricably tied to the Germanic warrior ethos). In J.R.R. Tolkien's *Legendarium*, the history of the Eldar is quite literarily *wyrd* (Gallant, "The Dance of Authority in Arda" ["Authority"]) invoked by Fëanor and pronounced by the Herald of Manwë as the *Doom of Mandos*. It is quite fitting, therefore, that the writing of *wyrd* would find a place within Tolkien's *Legendarium* and indeed be essential to it.

Furthermore, historians or chroniclers are narrators: narrators of temporal facts put into the context of a story which we can understand. The narrator, or narrators, of the history of the Elves, from the *Quenta Silmarillion* to the end of the Third Age, are no different. They are the *wyrdwriteras* of Arda; the chroniclers of Elvish history. Their history is chronicled as a compilation of stories, either by one or many narrators, but the stories are united by the common theme of the theory of Northern courage—the Germanic warrior ethos, inescapable doom of the long defeat, and a common elegiac tone of what was is now lost. Cristine Barkley directs our attention to an omniscient narrator, a *wyrdwritere* who writes in "broader [...] purpose or theme. But he's still controlling to what the reader will be exposed" (258)—or the audience in Middle-earth for that matter. The question, which we will deal with in this discussion, then becomes: for what purpose does the *wyrdwritere* control that to which the reader will be exposed?

This discussion picks up where others have left off. It does not explore *who* wrote or chronicled the history, but rather the *how* and *why*. To examine the broader purpose or theme this discussion, for the most part, approaches the history of the Elves as a metanarrative (Genette 84-95) as written by the unnamed intradiegetic narrators—the *wyrdwriteras*. That is, it looks at the text as one that is written in Middle-earth for an audience in Middle-earth. At this narratological level, it becomes clearer that the history of the Elves is one that is

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<sup>1</sup> s.v. "*wyrdwritere*" in Clark Hall.

both *morally* ideological and *politically* ideological as the *wyrdrīteras* exposit the theme of Northern courage in their tales.

The narrative technique used by the Eldar may be associated with the medieval (and classical) tradition of the *exemplum* (Davenport 11) in which the examples used in this discussion—the deaths of Fëanor and Fingolfin—reenact the “actual, historical embodiment of communal value” (Scanlon 34). This enactment, whether in medieval literature or Tolkien’s fiction, can be ideological or historical but its moral (*sententia*) “effects the value’s reemergence with the obligatory force of moral law,” and therefore the *exemplum* may be considered a narrative enactment of cultural authority (ibid.). The political rhetoric and *sententiae* of the Noldorin *wyrdrīteras* embedded in the text show how *The Silmarillion* (and by extension the Elvish history continuing into *The Lord of the Rings*) develop a sense of depth and authenticity that we find in primary world histories and the medieval *exemplum*.

While Tolkien is quick to reject allegory, he is not beyond a didactic use of story as moral exposition. Tolkien makes clear “there is indeed no better medium for moral teaching than the good fairy-story” (“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” [“Gawain”] 73), and this discussion argues that Tolkien does just that with his academic views on the theory of Northern courage through his unnamed *wyrdrīteras* within his secondary world. The *Legendarium*’s text(s) of Elvish history enact the moral rather than the moral simply glossing the narrative. In doing so it establishes a form of authority which beckons the (secondary-world) audience to heed its lessons and act accordingly (Scanlon 33). The *Silmarillion*’s ‘*exempla*,’ like the primary world’s classical tradition, refers to the deeds of famous rulers and heroes of Arda and provides “an illustration of the social norm to be taught, of a certain social action to be shunned” (Kemmler 62-63) from the cultural authority of the text(s) and its narrators and the code of Northern courage in both its positive and negative aspects.

#### TOLKIEN AND THE THEORY OF NORTHERN COURAGE

Before we move to Tolkien’s Arda, a few points need to be made about Tolkien’s views. Firstly, one of the reasons to keep Tolkien the author in mind is because, as Dirk Vandebek and Alan Turner have recently noted, “the author necessarily keeps one of his feet firmly in the primary world and its reference systems; in Tolkien’s case this includes not only traditional myths and fairy-stories, but also the whole body of literature and philosophy” (8). One of these reference systems, and the author’s views of this system, that shows up in the *Silmarillion* text (and the entire *Legendarium*) may be discerned in his academic writings. Tolkien’s “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” both an academic essay and a brief, fictional *exemplum*, is a fine example of his didactic use of fiction to exhibit his views of Northern courage. In his essay

Tolkien emphasizes this poetic line: “*Will shall be sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens*” (124).<sup>2</sup> This is Tolkien’s translation of the famous lines 312-313 in *The Battle of Maldon*, words that Tolkien thought were “a summing up of the heroic code.” While Tolkien’s contemporary E.V. Gordon looked at the poem as “the only purely heroic poem extant in Old English” (24), Tolkien was more suspicious of what the poem had to say. For Tolkien, these words held their clarity not because they were spoken by the hero, Earl Beorhtwold, but because they were spoken by a sworn liegeman of Beorhtwold’s *comitatus*, “for whom the object of his will was decided by another [...]” (“Homecoming” 144). The lord’s deciding of his retainer’s will, invoking the heroic ethos of indomitable will, was only something to be done in need and duty and most certainly a vice, something to be shunned, when invoked for personal pride “in the form of the desire for honour and glory” (ibid.). The only “extant heroic poem in Old English” for Tolkien, then, was “not a celebration of the heroic spirit but a deep critique of it and of the rash and irresponsible attitudes it created” (Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* [Author] 294).

A second point concerning the author’s view on Northern courage was the obstacle brought up by Tom Shippey, which was the nature of Germanic heroes. Weland,<sup>3</sup> for instance is a child-murderer and rapist and “[T]o us [in the 21<sup>st</sup> century], the fact that this retaliation [Weland’s vengeance] is for robbery, slavery, torture and mutilation is no excuse.” Heroes of the ancient Germanic world were often extremely cruel and “morally distasteful” (*Laughing Shall I Die* [Laughing] 33). And as Shippey also notes, this was an obstacle to recreating a like world in Middle-earth (*The Road to Middle-earth* [Road] 81). There are no Gunnars or Ingelds or Weland in Middle-earth. However, the closest Tolkien does come to the Germanic hero is in his portrayal of Fëanor (Gallant, “Original Sin in Heorot and Valinor” [“Original Sin”] 116) and his sons. And like Beorthnoth, Fëanor dramatizes and shows us the vices of Northern courage (*ad malum exemplum*), while the Fingolfians on the other hand, show us the virtuous elements of Northern courage (*ad bono exemplum*). That is, “the heroism of obedience and love, not pride or willfulness, that is the most heroic and the most moving” (“Homecoming” 148), such as the death of Finrod Felagund, who sacrificed himself (and by extension of cause and effect, his kingdom) in the dungeons of Sauron (*The Silmarillion* [Silma] 204). Finrod did this not only because of the oath to Barahir and his kin, but also out of love for Beren.

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<sup>2</sup> *Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, / mod sceal þe mare þe ure maegen lytlað*. It should be noted that both characters discussed here are unequivocal in their courage and abide by the ethos expressed in these lines from *The Battle of Maldon*.

<sup>3</sup> For Fëanor’s connection to Weland, see Gallant, “Original Sin” 11, 117.

The other side of the Northern courage coin is the *wyrd* with which we began this discussion. In Germanic heroic literature, the heroic ethos and fate are inseparable as this example in *Beowulf* illustrates:

Wyrđ oft nereð  
unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah<sup>4</sup>.  
(*Beowulf* lines 572b - 73)

*Wyrd*, 'final event, final fate, doom, death' (Stanley 86), is what happens to the hero; his courage is the manner in which he faces the circumstances of his fate. When Alfred the Great translated Boethius's *De Consolatio Philosophiae*, he interpreted *wyrd* as God's plan translated into action in the world, as simply what happens in the world (Frakes 95, 98). Alfred's interpretation of *wyrd* also encompasses the choices an individual makes in their use of their gifts or 'goods.' A wrong choice may initiate *wyrd* as a chain of events which eventually corrects the wrong choice.<sup>5</sup> For example, Fëanor was given the choice to surrender the Silmarils to Yavanna in order that she might restore the Two Trees. However, in his possessiveness, he stated that this thing he would not do of his own free will. Fëanor refused Yavanna not something that Fëanor *created*, but which he *sub-created*. He misused his gifts by forgetting that they did not come from himself (*Silm* 82-83). In doing so, Fëanor conjured or instigated the sequence of cause and effect of his, and the Elves', *wyrd* (Gallant, "Authority"). That this *wyrd* manifests itself shortly afterwards as a judgement, or doom, in the *Doom of Mandos* is not evidence of a malicious or arbitrary punishment but rather as a corrective measure in order to fulfill Eru's plan. E.G. Stanley translates the relevant passage of A. Brandl's 'Zur Vorgeschichte der *weird sisters* im "MacBeth"' in which *wyrd*

[...] does not do so [give Beowulf victory over the dragon] wantonly, nor of course maliciously, but in execution of a judicial or penitentiary office, [...] It is in character with her very being to act in conformity to laws; the Germanic fatalistic view of life gains something of a foundation in natural philosophy as a result of this characteristic [...] But at the same time, the *Beowulf*-poet thinks of *Wyrd* as subservient to God, who himself is wont to execute as office of the same kind [...] (Stanley 98-99)

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<sup>4</sup> As Seamus Heaney translates it: *Often, for undaunted courage / fate spares the man it has not already marked* (39).

<sup>5</sup> "Mankind's greed is so predominant that Wisdom can no longer exercise control over his own servants and has even been drawn to false goods himself [...]. Since goods have a divine origin, according to Alfred, this perversion of them by human greed is an attack on the natural, divine order of the cosmos" (Frakes 105).

As Brandl suggests, this *wyrd* serves a judicial function, punishing those who step outside of God's plan. In the case of Tolkien's *Legendarium*, this judicial function sets in motion the cycle of cause and effect that we call the Elder Days.

In addition to setting in motion the Germanic narratives of Elvish history, *wyrd* functions as the same sort of judicial force in the Doom of Mandos. And while *wyrd* may be seen as a retribution from the Valar by the Elves, it is really subservient to Eru's plan—after all, if Fëanor had not chosen as he did, Ilúvatar's other children, Men, would not have awoken with the rising of the Sun and Moon and, arguably, we wouldn't have a story.

Lastly, concerning Tolkien's skillful use of *wyrd* as a guiding force of the Elvish narratives, Shippey notes that Tolkien knew the etymology of both *wyrd*<sup>6</sup> (from OE *weorþan* 'to become') and fate (Latin *fari* 'to speak,' that is "'that which has been spoken,' sc. by the gods"). Both are rather different in that *wyrd* also "means 'what has become, what's over', so among other things, 'history'—a historian is a *wyrdwritere*, a writer down of *wyrd*. *Wyrd* can be an oppressive force, then, for no one can change the past; but it is perhaps not as oppressive as 'fate' or even 'fortune', which extend into the future" (Author 145). Tolkien's Elvish narrators are chronicling past events of courage and tragedy within their history: they are the *wyrdwriteras* of Elvish history in Middle-earth.

#### THE HISTORY OF THE ELVES AS A LITERARY WORK AND A WORK OF SECONDARY-WORLD HISTORY

With one foot in the primary world and one foot in the secondary world, we may treat the history of the Elves as a "fictional historiography," which is a literary artifact not only concerned with actual events and the "beauty of the story" (Cristofari 176) but also, I suggest, as *Volksgeschichte* or *Origo Gentis* of the Eldar with a particular point of view and agenda. Indeed, as Nagy points out, "these are not simply *stories* but *history*" (247). As such, they have a, or many, undramatized narrator(s) within the secondary world.

Firstly, as a literary artifact of secondary world history, the text has a secondary world narrator and a secondary world audience<sup>7</sup>:

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<sup>6</sup> Yet it also has a corrective and judicial function. Stanley identifies contexts in Old English poetry where *wyrd* is seen not only as an event but also in the sense of a doom or judgement in connection with the word *fræge*, signifying 'final fate, doom, death' as well as (*gewyrd*) 'that which is agreed upon, is decided, is settled; destiny' (86-87). We can't help but think of the Doom of Mandos in this sense of *wyrd*.

<sup>7</sup> Discovering *who* the secondary audience is seems to be as problematic as discovering *who* the narrator/s is/are. However, we do have at least one secondary audience in the *Legendarium* who are well described in *The Lord of the Rings*: the Elves, Men and Hobbits in Rivendell (*The Lord of the Rings* II.1.233-38).

[...] an audience that exists in the narrator's world, that regards the characters and events as real rather than invented, and that accepts the basic facts of the storyworld regardless of whether they conform to those of the actual world [...]. (Phelan and Rabinowitz 6)

The secondary world audience not only accepts the facts, but in the *Legendarium's* case, many witnessed and participated in those facts. Galadriel, for one, travelled to Middle-earth with the Flight of the Noldor, Elrond was quite literally born out of a great tale, Beren and Lúthien are real for Aragorn—not just in the lay he sings but as his ancestors. On the intradiegetic level of the textual world, “the lore of the Elder Days contextualizes the whole story and the allusions for the characters themselves, for whom the *Silmarillion* tradition is accessible, quite regardless of the reader in the primary world” (Nagy 243). The lore of the Elder Days is not only quite accessible, but was literally witnessed by many of the protagonists themselves.

This discussion primarily concerns itself with the third, intradiegetic level of the text as a secondary world historical corpus of stories. The question of who the narrators are, or at least the narrators' point of view, is answered by Tolkien, himself: “[T]he high Legends of the beginnings are supposed to look at things through Elvish minds” (*Letters* 145, #131). The high Legends attempt to “reconcile” creation myth, providential design, and the events of Elvish history (Freeh 65). Like primary world illustrative narratives, the narratives of the Elvish *wyrdrīteras* so intertwine their rhetorical complexity and their historical specificity that it is nearly impossible to separate the two (Scanlon 7).

Nonetheless, because of the discontinuity of chronology and various styles and narrative modes, it is nearly impossible to read the Elvish history as the product of one historian (Cristofari 179).<sup>8</sup> Yet one may read Elvish history as a sort of *Gesta Romanum*, or perhaps a *Gesta Noldorum*; that is, a collection of tales of the distant past, from varied and wide-spread sources, in which the deeds of heroes and kings may be moralized (Davenport 59) within a thematic context. For Kemmler,

the thematic context of illustrative narratives is determined by a set of particular norms and values. These norms and values (themes) may already be observed in a particular community—or they may be intended

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Wilson Wise offers a counter-argument: “I see *The Silmarillion* as a ‘completed and coherent entity,’ a single *unified* text in which all five stories are structurally linked and thematically interlocked, where all the seeming inconsistencies and strange silences are actually part of an intentional rhetorical strategy devised by a single, anonymous author of high moral seriousness” (Wise 101).



by the author [...] to be observed and adhered to in a community.  
(Kemmler 181)

For the community of the Noldor, the norms and values fall within the framework of Tolkien's theory of Northern courage. Indeed, the theory of Northern courage is enshrouded in a unified melancholic tone of loss and decay throughout the stories (Vanderbeke and Turner 15), which harmonizes with a theme of the defiant fatalism of the 'long defeat.'

[...] the tone of the different narrations is far less diverse than their content. Whoever tells the tale is invariably enamored of names, be it places, persons or things, and the tone is always somber and slightly melancholic [...] (Vanderbeke and Turner 14)

Regardless whether there is one or many narrators of the stories, they all possess a tone of elegiac pathos and simultaneously praise a theme of ethos in which "defeat is no refutation" (Shippey, *Road* 177) .

Nevertheless, the Elvish histories and great tales are not without either political slant or moral focus. Dennis Wilson Wise observes that the Elvish minds (or mind, singular, for Wise) in chronicling or narrating the Elvish history, maintain a moral focus throughout the story:

[...] the subtle warnings to the reader to avoid evil because evil will ultimately destroy itself; the affirmation that divine grace *will* intercede in history, though *only* after much sorrow; and that the single best way to handle one's fate is through humility, submission to the higher powers, and—if necessary—self-sacrifice. Whether these particular virtues are salutary or the final word must depend on the individual reader. But what is certainly magnificent about *The Silmarillion* is the skill and craft utilized by the book's writer to entreat—to guide, to seduce—the reader to that writer's particular vision of the Good. (Wise 117)

The moral and political focus of our Elvish narrators presents an "elvish viewpoint of the world and its history, and the kindred of the elves it is essentially Noldorin but distinctly anti-Fëanorian" (Lewis 160). The anti-Fëanorian focus is not by any means an ideological power doctrine, but rather its ideological power is "constituted by its rhetorical specificity as narrative" (Scanlon 31). For example, when Fëanor refuses Yavanna as discussed above, the text tells us that "[...] yet had he said yea at the first, before the tidings came from Formenos, it may be that his deeds would have been other than they were. But now the doom of the Noldor drew near" (*Silm* 84). This is a rhetorical statement of judgement and speculation, not of historical fact: if only Fëanor had

chosen differently, then doom would have been avoided. The blame is laid on Fëanor.

The portrayals of Northern courage and its sister, *wyrd*, differ greatly when portraying the Fingolfians and Fëanorians. Our *wyrdwīteras'* moral focus and theme of Northern courage is one that is politically charged. Tolkien's "Elvish minds" have an agenda, and parallel agendas may be analyzed within our own primary world histories. For example, Walter Goffart examines four authors that Tolkien should have been aware of if not read, who certainly wrote their histories with a political or ideological point of view. Goffart writes:

The Constantinopolitan perspective of Jordanes overshadows his Gothic theme. Gregory of Tours was primarily concerned with current events rather than with the Franks, and he was intent on portraying the depravity of all men rather than a subgroup among them. Bede was Northumbrian rather than English and cared more about the Christian face of his compatriots than about their ethnic peculiarities. Paul waited so long to write about his fellow Lombards, applying his pen to other subjects, that he left their history unfinished. (Goffart 6)

In our Elvish history, like Jordanes, the narrator/s' Fingolfian perspective overshadows their theme of Northern courage and chronicling of events. The Fingolfian perspective, while simultaneously thematic, has "a propensity toward the evil example, toward narratives which demonstrate the efficacy of their *sententiae* by enacting violations of them" (Scanlon 81). What follows is a quick analysis which illustrates the propensity toward the evil example.

#### FĒANOR'S BATTLE WITH MORGOTH VS FINGOLFIN'S BATTLE

Hayden White, in his essay "Historicism, History, and the Imagination," provides a model for the rhetorical analysis of historical writing (107-110).<sup>9</sup> As we have established within the secondary world of the text, *The Silmarillion* may be read as a history written by Elvish chroniclers for a secondary world audience and therefore an analysis treating the text as historical writing is appropriate. For White, there are two levels of historical discourse: the *facts* and the *interpretation* of those facts that tells a story. The discourse is the combination of both facts and interpretation, "which gives to it the aspect of a *specific* structure of meaning that permits us to identify it as a product of one kind of historical consciousness rather than another" ("Historicism" 107, emphasis in original). White, as an historian, is concerned with historical documents, and the tales of the *Legendarium* are just that. It is also

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<sup>9</sup> Hayden White chose a passage at random of A.J. Taylor's *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of Germany* to analyze.

suggested that the tales of the *Legendarium* are illustrative narratives. Scanlon identifies the same levels of discourse that White identifies but in different terms:

As narratologists have convincingly argued, it is precisely the gap between *dictum* and *factum* which enables a narrative to produce meaning. By emphasizing certain aspects of the *factum* and minimizing or eliding others the *dictum* implicitly assigns the *factum* a specific significance. Without this form of reference there can be no narrative. (Scanlon 96)

Facts and interpretation, *factum* and *dictum*, are rhetorically manipulated to emphasize judgements of good and bad behavior and good and evil deeds. The judgement is more often than not in the eyes of the beholder, that is, of the narrator.

The passage of Fëanor's death provides an illustrative example of Northern courage *ad malum exemplum*. Most of the information in these three paragraphs is scantily covered in the *Later Quenta* and *Quenta Silmarillion*.<sup>10</sup> All the variations, however, do not invalidate the argument made here. In the published *Silmarillion*, Fëanor's death is narrated as follows:

For Fëanor, in his wrath against the Enemy, would not halt, but pressed on behind the remnant of the Orcs, thinking to come to Morgoth himself; and he laughed aloud as he wielded his sword, rejoicing that he had dared the wrath of the Valar and the evils of the road, that he might see the hour of his vengeance. Nothing did he know of Angband or the great strength of defence that Morgoth had so swiftly prepared; but even had he known it would not have deterred him, for he was fey, consumed by the flame of his own wrath. Thus it was that he drew far ahead of the van of his host; and seeing this the servants of Morgoth turned to bay, and there issued from Angband Balrogs to aid them. There upon the confines of Dor Daedeloth, the land of Morgoth, Fëanor was surrounded, with few friends about him. Long he fought on, and undismayed, though he was wrapped in fire and wounded with many wounds; but at the last he was smitten to the ground by Gothmog, Lord of Balrogs, whom Ecthelion after slew in Gondolin. There he would have perished, had not his sons in that moment come up with force to his aid; and the Balrogs left him, and departed to Angband. (*Silm* 120-121)

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<sup>10</sup> C.f. Tolkien, *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, 249 and "The Grey Annals," §45-§46 (*The War of the Jewels* 17-18). See also Douglas Charles Kane, pp. 133, 139.

Following the rhetorical model, we want to state the factual information (*factum*) of this passage, which is:

- 1) Fëanor does not halt his pursuit of the routing Orcs and leaves his vanguard behind.
- 2) The servants of Morgoth turn to meet Fëanor and Balrogs reinforce them from Angband.
- 3) Fëanor was surrounded by the enemy with a "few friends."
- 4) He fought long, surrounded in flame, and fell.
- 5) His sons and the vanguard finally reach him while the Balrogs retreat back to Angband.

Secondly, it is important to state what appears to be statement of fact but are really statements of judgement or interpretations (*dictum*):

- 6) Fëanor "in his wrath" charged the Enemy "thinking to come upon Morgoth himself."
- 7) "he laughed aloud as he wielded his sword, rejoicing that he had dared the wrath of the Valar and the evils of the road, that he might see the hour of his vengeance."
- 8) He did not know of the strength of Morgoth's defenses, but the narrator makes clear that it would not have mattered "for he was *fey*, consumed by the flame of his own wrath."
- 9) "Long he fought on, and undismayed"

The first statement of judgement interprets Fëanor as 'wrathful' in thinking to reach Morgoth himself. In the ethos of Northern courage, this action is congruent with revenge, whether in revenge for the murder of his father Finwë or, like Weland/Volund's motivation of possessiveness, for revenge of the rape of the Silmarils, or both. Or perhaps, simply looking at the 'fact' (1) again, would it be plausible to interpret that fact as a simple battlefield challenge for single combat with Morgoth, like, for example, Hildebrand and Hadubrand?

The second statement of judgement again stresses vengeance and emphasizes the wild, 'fey,' almost berserker nature of Fëanor's charge. It implies that Fëanor was out of control and manic by his laughter. Yet another interpretation is also plausible within the ethos of Northern courage, especially if we can imagine an account written by a Fëanorian chronicler. Would it be plausible that Fëanor was acting out his death song, with fewer words the better – *læjandi skalk devja?*<sup>11</sup> Can we speculate, from perhaps another interpreter

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<sup>11</sup> 'laughing shall I die.' Cf. Shippey, *Laughing* pp. 86-91. Also consider the narrative of the *Grey Annals*: the sentence "Soon he stood alone; but long he fought on, and laughed

of this event, that Fëanor knew this was the hour of his death and that he chose its manner?<sup>12</sup> After all, under the umbrella of Northern courage, a hero is not defined by his deeds but by his death; not by victory but by his demise (Haferland 208; Shippey, *Laughing* 37). This hypothetical interpretation seems to be as plausible as the interpretation of the next point (8) where it is stated that Fëanor did not know Morgoth's defenses. The question is, how do we actually know what Fëanor himself was thinking at that moment? The last point once again emphasizes Fëanor's out of control, manic rage: certainly, berserker-like rage is a trait of the heroes of Germanic heroic literature although in the context of the Eldar not a very flattering one. The last point (9) seems to, almost begrudgingly, recognize a valiant, undismayed, death. Fëanor dies a hero's death, despite all of his perceived flaws, the one virtuous aspect that cannot be denied him is his Northern courage; that he died well—a point that Lewis also notices (162).

By contrast, during the fourth great battle, *Dagor Bragollach*, Fingolfin also charged Angband, and this time it is stated that he personally challenged Morgoth to single combat, calling Morgoth "craven" (*Silm* 178-179). The account is much too long to cite in full; however, a few key sentences will show the rhetorical differences between the deaths of the two Noldorin leaders in which Fingolfin may be considered *ad bono exemplum*.

- 1) "Fingolfin beheld (as it seemed to him) the utter ruin on the Noldor, and the defeat beyond redress of all of their houses; and filled with wrath and despair he mounted upon Rochallor his great horse and rode forth alone, and none might restrain him."
- 2) "[A]ll that beheld his onset fled in amaze, thinking Oromë himself was come: for a great madness of rage was upon him, so that his eyes shone like the eyes of the Valar."
- 3) "[T]he rocks rang with the shrill music of Fingolfin's horn, and his voice came keen and clear down into the depths of Angband; and Fingolfin named Morgoth craven, and lord of slaves."

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undismayed, though he was wrapped in fire and wounded with many wounds" even more strongly supports such a reading (*War of the Jewels* §45, 18).

<sup>12</sup> Consider, also, the Old English etymology of this particular word 'fey' (Clark-Hall, s.v. *fæge* 'fey,' doomed (to death), fated, destined). Stanley remarks that [...] *wyrd* occurs not infrequently in collocation with the poetic word *fæge* [...]. In these contexts the meaning of the word is something like 'final event, final fate, doom, death.'" (86). That Fëanor was *fey* may imply that this was his *wyrd*, his doom and may also support an alternative point of view, if we had the hypothetical Fëanorian narrator, that Fëanor chose how he would face his death, his *wyrd*, instead of a fatal mistake spurred on by a blind berserker rage.

- 4) "But Fingolfin gleamed beneath it as a star; for his mail was overlaid with silver, and his blue shield was set with crystals; and he drew his sword Ringil, that glittered like ice."
- 5) "Thrice he was crushed to his knees, and thrice arose again and bore up his broken shield and stricken helm. [...] Yet with his last and desperate stroke Fingolfin hewed the foot with Ringil, and the blood gushed forth black and smoking and filled the pits of Grond."
- 6) "Thus died Fingolfin, High King of the Noldor, most proud and valiant of the Elven-kings of old."

In the first excerpt (1), we may factually determine that Fingolfin mounted his horse and charged the Enemy and none were able to stop him. Rhetorically, however, his wrath is interpreted and judged as ignited by noble sentiments: he must save his people from ruin as a good king should. The narrator seems to know exactly how the situation "seemed to him" and that his wrath is accompanied by despair in sharp contrast to the narrator's interpretation of Fëanor's personal reason of revenge for his father, revenge of the rape of the Silmarils, or both.

In the second excerpt (2), all that we can glean factually is that Fingolfin, like Fëanor, seemed filled with rage. But the interpretation of the "great madness" is not fey as it was with Fëanor. Rather, it is likened to the great hunter Oromë and causes his eyes to "shine like those of the Valar" and thus implies a 'holy' wrath that does not wildly consume him like the flame of Fëanor's own wrath.

The third excerpt (3) describes the hero's approach to the enemy. We know that Fingolfin blows his horn loudly and he goads Morgoth in his challenge. Rhetorically, however, this is described as 'clear' and 'shrill' and ringing the surrounding rocks. Nonetheless, we cannot be sure that Fingolfin's voice reached "into the depths of Angband" and this merely emphasizes the righteousness of the High King's actions in contrast to Fëanor's wild and 'fey' charge.

The righteousness of Fingolfin is further rhetorically highlighted in excerpt four (4). The imagery of the description, 'gleamed,' 'star,' the colors 'silver' and 'blue,' crystals and swords that glitter like ice, reinforce Fingolfin as *ad bono exemplum* of righteous Northern courage. We notice, however, that excerpt five (5) lessens the rhetorical focus and emphasizes a more factual account of the duel without much rhetorical embellishment. Most of the adjectives describe actions readily observable by spectators: three times beaten down and three times returning to the fight, broken shields and blood gushing forth. The obvious, dramatical element of the excerpt is that the last stroke is 'desperate' as it suggests the King's state-of-mind at the moment of death. Lastly, number six (6) is purely rhetorical to the point of being almost

formulaic,<sup>13</sup> like an excerpt of a posthumous panegyric to the “most proud and valiant of the Elven-kings of old” —*ad bono exemplum*.

Alex Lewis has also analyzed this same passage of Fingolfin’s death and his conclusion, which deserves to be cited in full, supports the above analysis while emphasizing that the interpretive rhetorical narration adds to the historicity and depth of the Elvish *wyrdwriteras*:

Compare now if you will the description of Fingolfin’s battle with Morgoth [...]: We are given sixty-eight glorious lines of vivid description—yet no one else was there to witness the duel! This is all hearsay and legendary. Yet the detail is incredible: Ringil the sword of the High King glittered like ice and Fingolfin inflicted seven wounds on his foe. Morgoth bore down Fingolfin three times to the ground and the High King hewed at Morgoth’s foot before he died. But this ties in well with Elrond’s family connection to Fingolfin, and so the bias reinforces the “historicity” of the work. (Lewis 163)

The two accounts show a discursive structure made up of facts and the interpretation of those facts (*factum* and *dictum*); however, the interpretive and rhetorical level foregrounds negative aspects of Northern courage in Fëanor’s passage (he was fey with wrath) and backgrounds, or minimizes Fëanor’s valour to one line.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, while Fingolfin also charges the foe in “wrath” but his wrath is minimized while his glorious deeds are foregrounded. Both accounts are biased in favor of the Fingolfians, who wrote the history. The events do not “speak for themselves” or “tell their own story,” the “narrativizing discourse serves the purpose of moralizing judgements” (White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” [“Narrativity”] 3, 24). The narratives are certainly ideological in their representation of events through the figurative language they use and they portray certain characters as just and

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<sup>13</sup> We may recall that a similar formulaic statement is spoken by Gandalf to opposite effect: “So passes Denethor, son of Ecthelion [...] And so pass also the days of Gondor that you have known; for good or evil they are ended. Ill deeds have been done here; but let now all enmity that lies between you be put away, for it was contrived by the Enemy and works his will” (*The Lord of the Rings* V,7,854-55, emphasis mine).

<sup>14</sup> Lewis also notices the discrepancy in Fëanor’s death: “Fëanor’s demise is given a caveat: he is extremely courageous: ‘Nothing did he know of Angband or the great strength of defense that Morgoth had swiftly prepared; but even had he known it would not have deterred him . . .’, but it adds: ‘for he was fey, consumed by the flame of his own wrath’ [...]. This subtlety devalues Fëanor’s courage by insinuating that it was a fit of battle fever or berserker action. Fëanor fought with many Balrogs (unlike Ecthelion who fought only one) but this battle is dismissed in six lines [...]. How skillfully the method of bias is woven into the story-line to make it seem closer to real history than to contrived events” (162).

good, on whose side the audiences would ally themselves (Lewis 158). In essence, the negative traits of Northern courage are placed on the Fëanorians, although they also display virtues of Northern courage; while at the same time the virtues of Northern courage are rhetorically emphasized when the account centers on the Fingolians. White accounts for these shifts in perspective:

The issue of ideology points to the fact that there is no value-neutral mode of emplotment, explanation, or even description of any field of events, whether imaginary or real, and suggests that the very use of language itself implies or entails a specific posture before the world which is ethical, ideological, or more generally political: not only in interpretation, but also all language is politically contaminated. ("The Fictions of Factual Representation" 129)

There are other examples of the one-sided Fingolian nature of the narrative. Consider Maedhros's and Maglor's dialogue (*Silm* 304) in which the only way the narrator may know what was said is by his own embellishment and emplotment. The conversation between Maedros and Maglor concerns whether they should abandon their Oath or attempt to fulfill it no matter how mad the attempt may be. Maglor ends the conversation by stating, "If none can release us [...], then indeed the Everlasting Darkness shall be our lot, whether we keep our oath or break it; but less evil shall we do in the breaking." The choice is between a lesser of two evils chained to an oath, a choice found often in the Northern courage of Germanic heroic literature, because

The quality of man is not known until he is sore beset, either by defeat in battle or by being placed in a situation in which he must do violence to his sense of right. Fate can put men and women into positions whence it seems impossible for them to emerge with honour. They are judged by their choice, still more, perhaps, by the steadfastness with which they carry out their chosen aim, never looking back. [...] But the point is that there is a choice. It may be no more than a choice between yielding and resisting to the uttermost what is bound to happen: it may be a choice between two courses each of which is hateful. (Phillpotts 5)

The decisions are always "hard decisions and bitter prices" (Shippey, *Laughing* 81). Yet the question remains: who is there to witness their hard decision, who witnessed this exemplary motif of Northern courage? The answer is no one. This is an embellishment of a gap between events made by the narrator. Cristofari finds these embellishment of gaps within the Elvish history as a symbiotic growth of history and legend which fuse into myth, in which the



[...] narratives originating in reality, but stylized and embellished (though this does not have to mean transformed) until they become meaningful in themselves. In this context, the question of authorship becomes extremely uncertain, to the point that the traditional role of author as go-between in the relationship between history and narratives of history seems in-existent. History is embedded in its narrative, and vice-versa [...] (Cristofari 187)

This distinctly pro-Fingolfian embellishment (*dictum*) which Tolkien creates lends a “partisan nature of Noldorin politics” to the Elvish history and thereby enriches its depth (Lewis 161). The partisan bias, that is, its ideological status, consists of two distinct but converging aspects. The first is its rhetorical specificity, as we have seen in the deaths of the two Noldorin leaders, and the second is the relation of the historical Elvish texts and the power dynamics of the Fingolfians who produced them. Scanlon finds these two aspects as two sides of the same coin:

[T]hese two aspects converge because they represent the two sides of a text’s ideological status. To the extent a text is ideologically enabling, it participates in power relations. Yet it can participate in such relations only textually, that is, by virtue of its discrete rhetorical strategies. (Scanlon 84)

The functioning of the ideological status, comprising of the two aspects, produces moral and cultural authority. It is not a static authority but rather active and dynamic. That is, the *exempla* of the two Noldorin royal houses are embedded in the histories of the Noldor: one a good example of heroic ethos, the other an example to be shunned. Retelling these great tales throughout the ages not only confirms the moral authority of the Fingolfians, but reproduces it (Scanlon 5) in the telling and further reinforces their moral and cultural authority. At the end of the Third Age, as narrated in *The Lord of the Rings*, there is no doubt of Fingolfian Elrond’s authority. His story is known to many members of the secondary-world audience (who at times instruct the Hobbits of Elrond’s story) and it always portrays him in the most favorable light (*dictum*). His reputation, derived from these histories, empowers him with enough cultural and moral authority that even the most antagonistic members of the Ring Council fall silent and listen when he speaks.

#### ELROND’S OATH

At the beginning of this discussion, it was mentioned that the history of the Elves went beyond *The Silmarillion* and into the Third Age with *The Lord of the Rings*. This is fairly obvious, but the continuity of the historical bias, or

ideological status, of the *wyrdwriteras* is interesting as it reflects the reproduction of cultural and moral authority. One example of the continuity is a dialogue between Elrond and Gimli as the Ring goes south:

[...] You may tarry, or come back, or turn aside into other paths, as chance allows. The further you go, the less easy it will be to withdraw; yet no oath or bond is laid on you to go further than you will. For you do not yet know the strength of your hearts, and you cannot foresee what each may meet upon the road.'

'Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens,' said Gimli.

'Maybe,' said Elrond, 'but let him not vow to walk in the dark, who has not seen the nightfall.'

'Yet sworn word may strengthen a quaking heart,' said Gimli.

'Or break it,' said Elrond. (*The Lord of the Rings* II.3.281)

Elrond is wise to not hinder the Fellowship by any potential conflict of loyalties. The wisdom of Elrond may be apparent simply because he is of the Eldar, but it is also imbued with the cultural and moral authority of the Fingolfians. As a Noldo of the First Age, Elrond is certainly aware of the power and devastating effect of oaths. Of course Gimli, although of the 'Free Peoples of Middle-earth,' is an outsider to the Eldar-Mannish culture. While Gimli speaks of oaths as binding sources of strength and loyalty, Elrond speaks from the authoritative narratives that illustrate examples of tragedy due to binding oaths.

Oaths are motifs of heroic literature that often set up a conflict of loyalties and fall directly within the theme of Northern courage. Whether it is a conflict between loyalty to one's lord and the duty to die with him versus personal freedom,<sup>15</sup> duty to one's lord and duty to one's kin in *Hildebrandslied*,<sup>16</sup> or various other conflicts of oaths, loyalties, and duty, the conflict between the oath-sworn is a staple of Germanic heroic literature. I've suggested elsewhere that this dialogue between Elrond and Gimli may refer back to the Oath of Fëanor (Gallant, "Original Sin" 126, n. 14). No doubt that Fëanor's Oath broke many hearts during the long defeat and it had even threatened Elrond's life as a boy (*Silm* 297).

However, there is also another way to read Elrond's wisdom and reference to the tragic element of oaths as it applies to the Fingolfians. Recall that Elrond's uncle-in-law, Finrod Felagund, was rescued by Barahir of the House of Bëor during the *Dagor Bragollach*, the Battle of Sudden Flame. In response, Felagund "swore an oath of abiding friendship and aid in every need

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<sup>15</sup> 'Cynewulf,' p. 755.

<sup>16</sup> Nusser, pp. 120-121.

to Barahir, and in token of his vow he gave to Barahir his ring" (*Silm* 177). A ring, it may be added, that Aragorn presumably, as the descendent and heir of Barahir, happens to be wearing in the presence of Elrond during the dialogue above. In the *Beren and Lúthien* tale, Beren calls on Felagund who "knew that the oath he had sworn was come upon him for his death, as he had foretold to Galadriel" (199). Furthermore, in the same passage, Felagund says to Beren,

It is plain that Thingol desires your death; but it seems that this doom goes beyond his purpose, and that the Oath of Fëanor is again at work. For the Silmarils are cursed with an oath of hatred, and he that even names them in desire moves a great power from slumber; and the sons of Fëanor would lay all Elf-kingdoms in ruin rather than suffer any other than themselves to win or possess a Silmaril, for the Oath drives them. [...] Yet my own oath holds; and thus we are ensnared. (*Silm* 199)

Felagund is later slain by a werewolf while saving Beren in the dungeons of Tol-in-Gaurhoth, the fortress of Sauron. The passage is concurrent with Stanley's conception of *wyrd*-as-doom, a great slumbering power. But it also speaks of two oaths. The Oath of Fëanor, sworn to recover the Silmarils at all and any costs, as an 'oath of hatred,' possession, and vengeance in contrast to Felagund's oath to Barahir, and subsequently to Beren. Felagund's oath was given not in hatred or vengeance, but freely given in love and loyalty to friendship. Again, we are presented with both *ad malum exemplum* and *ad bono exemplum* in the two prominent oaths of the First Age. Both induced tragic events and endings, and both broke hearts as when Felagund perished, Beren "mourned beside him in despair" (*Silm* 205). The illustrative narrations involving the two oaths give Fingolfian Elrond the gravitas and authority to shun any binding of oaths within the Fellowship.

A third way of reading Elrond's reaction to Gimli is pure ironic speculation. The text is silent as to whether Felagund's oath died with him or if there is some sort of obligation to keep it by his kin. We may wonder if it is plausible that Elrond feels some sort of moral obligation to Aragorn stemming from that oath. We know that Elrond provided sanctuary to the Chieftains of the Dúnedain, i.e. the descendants of Barahir (as well as descendants of his own brother, Elros) and the presence of Aragorn, the Ring of Barahir, and Elrond together may lead us to think so. We may also speculate that in aiding Aragorn to reclaim his throne, Elrond's own fatherly heart may be broken as Arwen chooses the fate of Men and he leaves for the Undying Lands. And that may be Elrond's *wyrd*. Nevertheless, the illustrative narrations of Northern courage (in this case the oaths) are once again contrasted between Fëanorians and Fingolfians, *ad malum exemplum* and *ad bono exemplum* which parallel the views

presented in Tolkien's academic essays and personal correspondence discussed at the beginning of this essay.

## CONCLUSION

The history of the Elves, this discussion concludes, is a neatly woven tapestry of theme and tone in its unity of several stories. The goal is not different than the goal of *The Lord of the Rings*, which "was to dramatise that 'theory of courage' which Tolkien had said in his British Academy lecture was the 'great contribution' to humanity of the old literature of the North" (Shippey, *Road* 177). Nevertheless, Tolkien had reservations and criticisms of Northern courage as well, which are reflected in his personal correspondence and academic papers. Such reservations and criticisms may be seen in the illustrative narration technique used to narrate the fictional history of the Eldar.

The discourse of the dramatization forms two *exempla* throughout the narrative: the virtuous Fingolfian ethos and the impious Fëanorian ethos which are defined by the rhetorical manipulation of *factum* and *dictum* as we see not only in classical and medieval *exempla* but in historical discourse as well. Tolkien uses partisan Fingolfian *wyrdrīteras*, narrators or chroniclers, whose discourse "serves the purpose of moralizing judgements" (White, "Narrativity" 24) while simultaneously chronicling their own, secondary world history. Indeed, while Tolkien abhorred allegory, he did feel that there was no better medium than the fairy-story for moral teaching ("Gawain" 73). The historical bias and moral authority of the Elvish *wyrdrīteras* gives their entire history, in Alex Lewis's words, "a realism far removed from mere contrivance" (164). It is a realism in depth once realized in the heroic epics of Germanic literature.

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