

GERMANIC HEROES, COURAGE, AND FATE

Review by Todd Jensen

Germanic Heroes, Courage, and Fate. Northern Narratives of Tolkien's Legendarium by Richard Z. Gallant; Walking Tree Publishers, 2024. Paper, \$24.30 from Amazon.com.

Practically all Tolkien readers know that Tolkien drew on Norse mythology and "Germanic" legend for his *legendarium*, including works like *Beowulf*, the Eddas, and "The Battle of Maldon". While capturing much of the spirit of these tales, he also modified it to match his Christian perspective, rejecting those portions of it that repulsed or alarmed him, while building on its strengths. Richard Z. Gallant's book *Germanic Heroes, Courage, and Fate: Northern Narratives of Tolkien's Legendarium* studies how Tolkien did this, which elements of the old hero-sagas he turned away from, and why.

As Tom Shippey pointed out in his *The Road to Middle-earth* (and appropriately, he wrote the foreword to this book), Tolkien admired what he called "the northern theory of courage", a willingness and readiness to fight for one's cause even if it was hopeless and only defeat awaited the hero, an attitude that just because you lost did not mean that you were in the wrong. (And it applied not only to the human heroes themselves, but even the Norse gods, who would die in battle at Ragnarok.) Such an outlook required even greater courage and steadfastness than the Christian world-view, which promised the faithful an eternal reward in Heaven.

But Tolkien also noted that the heroes of the "Germanic" legends often conducted themselves in ways that were far less admirable. They often indulged in revenge and cruelty; for example, Volundr/Weland, the master-smith of legend, retaliated against the king who had robbed him, taken him prisoner, and crippled him, by murdering his sons and raping his daughter. Tolkien wished for a heroism that would preserve the "northern theory of courage", but accompanied by higher and nobler behavior than the heroes of the old legends, and developed it in his *legendarium*.

In the first chapter, "The 'Germanic': Our World – Tolkien's world", Gallant provides an overview of the "Germanic" heroes. (He also discusses the term "Germanic" for them, pointing out its defects – not only thanks to the consequences of its being embraced by organizations like the Nazis, but also it is not quite accurate. They are called "Germanic", not because they arose from a monolithic Germanic race, but because they were written in "Germanic" languages such as Icelandic or Old English.) Alongside the "northern theory of courage", he speaks of how they frequently met their end when they were torn between two duties, such as having to choose between killing a kinsman and breaking a vow. (*Beowulf* was a rarity in escaping this fate.) For example, a warrior-hero named Hildebrand finds himself facing his son Hadubrand on the battlefield. Hadubrand taunts him as unwilling to face him in fair fight, trapping his father in a dilemma; if he does not fight his son, he will be seen as a coward, but if he fights and kills him, he will be a kinslayer. (He takes the latter option, and kills his son.)

Tolkien, as mentioned above, admired the "northern theory of courage" for its willingness to face death and defeat in order to stay faithful to one's cause. He recognized, however, not only that it was often expressed in cruel and brutal acts (as also mentioned above), but that those who followed it often sought glory and fame at the cost of their people (such as Beorhtnoth in "The Battle of Maldon", who dooms his followers to death at the hands of the invading Vikings for the sake of his honor). As he wrote his *legendarium*, particularly the *Silmarillion*, Tolkien bestowed the different elements of northern heroism on the Noldorin leaders in the War of the Great Jewels, with Fëanor and his sons receiving the darker aspects (embodied in their Oath to pursue to the death all who hold a Silmaril, and the Kinslaying at Alqualondë), and Fingolfin and his House the nobler aspects.

The second chapter, "Original Sin in Heorot and Valinor", studies how Tolkien gave Fëanor the more negative attributes of a "Germanic" hero. He breaks the Peace of Valinor by threatening to slay Fingolfin (this act is all the more serious since Fingolfin is Fëanor's half-brother, and thus one of his kinsfolk). Gallant shows how Fëanor echoes one of the flawed heroes of Germanic legend, Volundr/Weland (discussed above); both are master-smiths who commit atrocities to avenge the loss of the treasures they forged. (Fëanor does not descend quite to Volundr's level, such as rape; Gallant, however, points out how the "living light" of the Silmarils parallels Volundr setting gems in the eye-sockets of the two princes he slew.) He also compares Fëanor's fiery nature to that of the monstrous Grendel in *Beowulf*. Gallant concludes the chapter by showing how Fëanor's pride and wrath lead him on to a hopeless war with Morgoth (and committing wrongs such as the Kinslaying along the way), yet also showing how there is something impressive about his readiness to face Morgoth and go down fighting against him, which Manwë himself acknowledges.

The third chapter, "The Dance of Authority in Arda", turns its attention to the three forms that Ilúvatar's authority in Arda take. The first is fate, the rules upon which Arda is built (such as the immortality, or at least longevity, of the Elves). The second is what Gallant calls *wyrd*, the doom that falls upon those who have defied Ilúvatar's design, part punishment, part correction, such as the Doom of Mandos. The third is providence, when Ilúvatar steps in to arrange an event, which seems to be chance but is actually His doing (such as Oromë "stumbling" upon the Elves soon after their creation). They weave together in such a way as to form "a dance to the Music of the Ainur and choreographed by Eru Ilúvatar according to the divine plan" (57) – an image that evokes C.S. Lewis's Great Dance (though Gallant did not mention Lewis's works, and I do not know if he was inspired by them when he wrote this chapter).

Gallant draws particular attention to the scene where Yavanna asks Fëanor to give her the Silmarils so that she might use them to rekindle life in the Two Trees, which Morgoth has mortally wounded. Fëanor's choice, as *The Silmarillion* points out, is moot in one sense; Morgoth has already stolen the Silmarils, so Fëanor would be unable to yield them up anyway. But Fëanor chooses to refuse, and this leads him deeper into the frame of mind that will drive him to swear his dreadful Oath and to commit the Kinslaying.

Chapter Four, "The 'Wyrdwriters' of Elvish History", deals with the perspective of the narrative voices in *The Silmarillion* ("Wyrdwriters" is Old English for "historians"). Gallant compares *The Silmarillion* to *exempla*, narrative accounts written in medieval times of the deeds of famous kings and warriors, designed to teach their audiences what to do, and what not to do. Gallant points out

that the voice of The Silmarillion is clearly biased towards Fingolfin and away from Fëanor; Fëanor's deeds, while impressive, are depicted as flawed by his pride and vengeance, while Fingolfin's own feats are shown to be motivated by his concern for his people. Both, in particular, fall in battle, fighting valiantly against hopeless odds, but the picture of Fëanor's death stresses his faults, even while acknowledging his courage (including the fact that he was fighting several Balrogs); this bias towards Fingolfin over Fëanor adds a touch of realism to the work, similar to that of actual early medieval chronicles (such as those of Gregory of Tours and the Venerable Bede) which also told their tales with a slant reflecting their ideological purpose. (Gallant also explores the oaths in The Silmarillion, both Fëanor's oath which brought about much evil, and Finrod's Oath which had nobler motives but still led to his death in Sauron's dungeon; he even analyzes the scene in The Lord of the Rings where Gimli and Elrond dispute whether or not to swear an oath at the start of the Fellowship's journey, suggesting that Elrond's doubts about the wisdom of such an oath stem from his awareness of the ills wrought by Fëanor's Oath, including his being captured by the sons of Fëanor in his youth.)

Chapter Five, "The Noldorization of the Edain", turns to the role of the Edain in The Silmarillion, comparing the influence the Noldor had on them to that which the Romans had upon the Germanic peoples, such as the Goths. Both the Noldor and the Romans seek to raise their "barbarian" neighbors to a level closer to their own nature, through such methods as educating the sons of their chieftains (teaching their language, in particular, whether Latin or Sindarin) and establishing client kingdoms, often as buffers against their enemies. Chapter Six, "Discontinuity of Heroic Ethos", traces the history of the Edain further, focusing on Númenor. Gallant points out the different atmosphere of the Númenórean stage of the Edain's story, which draws on Plato's tale of Atlantis rather than on Germanic hero-legends; the themes of doomed heroes fighting to the end fade out, and the "Akallabêth" even makes clear that the Númenóreans (until they fell into corruption) were men of peace, who channeled their energy into sea-voyages of exploration, rather than the battlefield. Númenor's decay parallels that of Atlantis; its people fall victim to the temptations of greed and possessiveness (temptations which appear as well in the more "heroic" stages of the *legendarium*, such as Fëanor's greed for his creations, and the lure of the One Ring).

Chapter Seven, "Wergild, Heirlooms and Monuments" returns to the tone of Germanic hero-tales with the Kingdoms in Exile, while showing that the story of Gondor and Arnor blends that element with the atmosphere of Númenor/Atlantis. The former shows itself in Isildur's claiming the Ring as *weregild* (he even uses that very term, as the opening quote shows), the latter in the great monuments built by the Dúnedain, such as the Argonath (Gallant brings up Tolkien's comparison of Gondor to ancient Egypt in his letters, and the decay of Gondor's monuments to Shelley's poem "Ozymandias").

In Chapter Eight, "Northern Courage in the Dúnedain Successor States", Gallant compares Gondor's relations with its Northman allies, particularly the Rohirrim, to that of the Roman Empire and the "Germanic" barbarians, earlier evoked in the Noldor and Edain's relations in the First Age. The rulers of Gondor make pacts with the Northmen, just as the Romans made pacts with the Goths, employing them as *foederati* against the invading Huns (the chapter even makes comparisons with specific incidents and figures in the history of the late Roman Empire, such as Stilicho and Aetius); many of the men of Gondor look down on the Northmen, unfortunately, regarding them with disdain, with such disastrous consequences as the Kin-strife. (Gallant also points out that the *legendarium* is inconsistent on what caused the Edain's elevation above their fellow Men; some passages suggest it is due to their meeting the Noldor and learning from them, while others portray it as a gift from Ilúvatar and the Valar when they receive Númenor. He even posits that the decline of Gondor may be simply the Dúnedain returning to the original nature of Men, as Ilúvatar had intended them to be.)

Chapter Nine, "Galadriel and Wyrð", explores the role of Galadriel and her dilemma. In a parallel to Fëanor and his desire for the Silmarils, Galadriel had come to Middle-earth hoping to found a domain of her own; she had fulfilled that goal with Lothlórien. However, as the War of the Ring approaches, all of its possible outcomes seem doom-laden. If Sauron wins, Lothlórien will be overrun and destroyed, along all the other lands of the Free Peoples. If the Ring is destroyed, Lothlórien and the Elves will fade. Frodo's offering her the Ring seems to present a solution, to take the Ring and overthrow Sauron with it, thereby becoming a mighty queen over Middle-earth, as she had dreamed. Instead, it becomes a test; Galadriel understands that it is a temptation, and rejects the Ring and the power it offers. As a result, she will be allowed to return to the Undying Lands, where, she understands, the Elves belong. She becomes, not a "Germanic hero" seeking to overthrow Sauron and win glory, but a penitent who will lead her people back to the West, as Ilúvatar's plan for them. Gallant also shows how Galadriel does display elements of the Germanic hero even afterwards (though elevated), such as when she bestows gifts upon the Fellowship (gift-giving was a customary activity of kings in the Germanic hero-tales). (He focuses, in particular, on her giving Frodo the Phial that contains the light of Eärendil, a symbol of hope, and three strands of hair to Gimli, in contrast to her earlier refusal to give one hair to Fëanor.)

Chapter Ten, "Elessar Telcontar Magnus, Rex Pater Gondor, Restitutor Imperii" studies how Aragorn presents a purified version of the Germanic hero. While facing Sauron's forces with courage and resolve, he also displays mercy and meekness. He offers comfort to the dying Boromir (whose own end Gallant compares to that of Roland, bringing up Roland's own *ofermod* at Roncesvalles), and offers the faint-hearted members of the Army of the West a task that they can perform, much less intimidating than assailing Mordor: recovering Cair Andros from Sauron's army. As King, he displays mercy, such as when he passes judgment on Beregond for shedding blood in the Hallows, and makes peace with Gondor's neighbors, even pardoning Sauron's human allies, the Haradrim and Easterlings. Aragorn offers a new style of heroism, as brave as the old "Germanic" kind, but cleansed of its darker aspects, lifted up higher.

Gallant's book is an admirable study of how Tolkien handled the themes of the "Germanic hero-epic" in his work. It is very scholarly (using such words as "intradiegetic"), but still a good read for the Tolkien-lover who is familiar with, and interested in, the legends and history that inspired the *legendarium*.