

GERMANIC HEROES, COURAGE, AND FATE

Review by Magne Bergland

The central thesis of this book is stated in the very first paragraph of chapter one: "The argument of this work is simply that the Elves (and Men under their influence) of Middle-earth function as 'Germanic' heroes within an illustrative, northern heroic tradition of the *exemplum*." (p. 1) Points for clarity, but I am not sure about the "simply". For what is meant by "Germanic", or "northern"?

The book's first chapter aims at defining that, but it is soon clear that the term "Germanic" is "problematic, to say the least, especially in the fields of historiography and ethnology and to some extent in literature." (1) The variations over time, space and other parameters are so big that concepts like "Germanic people(s)", "Germanic history" or "Germanic literature" makes little sense.

So though many of the central themes and ideas can be seen to emerge roughly out of the Migration Period in Europe, the "Germanic" Gallant is setting out to find and explain is not a trait of a particular people or country, but found in a wide range of literature and traditions, "defined by the mood and tenor of heroic courage found in Northern literature." This "mood and tenor" is equated with "Tolkien's theory of Northern courage" (15) for which Tom Shippey formulated the "central thesis [...] that even ultimate defeat does not turn right into wrong." (17; quoted from Shippey, *Road* 136) The hero in this tradition or ethos, then, fights on for the "right thing", even facing inevitable defeat. Indeed may fight even harder when facing defeat, as expressed in the famous lines Tolkien quotes from "The Battle of Maldon": "Heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose,/ more proud the spirit, as our power lessens!" (17, quoted from *Tree and Leaf* 124)

Tolkien's preoccupation with this form of Northern courage has of course been discussed and studied before, notably by the abovementioned Professor Shippey, whose works Gallant frequently refers to, and who even contributed a preface to this book.¹

Gallant, while building on Shippey's work and that of many other scholars – the book is very well-researched, with a discerning use of a wide range sources from Tolkien studies and other fields – sets out to add both more depth and width to our understanding of Tolkien's use of the "Germanic" ethos. Tolkien's fascination and admiration of it was not without reservations. As we know from "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth", where he quoted the lines from "Maldon", he criticized the excessive variant of this heroism, which lead Beorhtnoth into sacrificing the victory (and most of his army) in *ofermód*, overmastering pride. There are two "alloyed" sides to the Northern courage, a good and a bad one.

With the required definitions and demarcations in place, the next chapters go on to demonstrate and discuss how "These two sides [...] of the Germanic warrior ethos become evident in the narrative discourse of the history of the Eldar." (17) One prominent example involves Fëanor, "Middle-earth's first Germanic hero" (31), as an embodiment of the vices of Northern courage, contrasted with "the Fingolfinians [who] embody its virtues." (17) Fëanor was not only, as Beorhtnoth, proud and *lofgeornost*, "most desirous for glory". He also committed kinslaying, the worst sin of the "Germanic" ethos which held the kin group or "Sippe", as a fundamental unit of commitment and loyalty. This is one of the topics of the book's second chapter, "Original Sin in Heorot and Valinor".

While on the subject of "original sin": Though the heroic ethos may be "...a relic of a pre-Christian past" (Shippey's Foreword, xvii), Gallant makes clear that it should not be equated with paganism. "Most of the historic, 'Germanic' peoples were already Christianized when the subject matter of the lays and epics occurred." (11) Indeed the Christian viewpoint on these stories, and the modification of the ethos brought by the Christian faith in a final eucatastrophe, particularly appealed to Tolkien and fueled his imagination.

Other central concepts discussed in these first chapters are the oath ("a pillar of the heroic creed of Northern courage." (29)) and not least *wyrd*, a variety of "God's will", in Tolkien's world sometimes signaled by the phrase "chance, if chance you call it". Gallant describes *wyrd* as a sort of divine adjustment to the negative consequences of heroic behavior. *Wyrd* forms a three-layered structure with fate and providence, performing what in an uncharacteristically vivid metaphor is described as "a dance" with the persons of the stories of the First Age of Middle-earth.

In these first chapters of the book I feel that Gallant touches on central parts of Tolkien's world view and sub-creative driving force. I would have wished that he delved even deeper into this, with more examples and analyses. Instead, as he moves chronologically through the ages of Middle-earth, I find that the discussion, especially Ch. 6 about the Second Age and Númenor, moves away from the central topics and loses some of its focus.

I should mention here that the book, as far as I understand an extension of Gallant's doctoral work, consist of "ten thematically-linked but independent chapters, six of which have been published in various journals or books". (xiii) These papers have been edited into chapters for this book, and to them have been added another three freshly written ones. At times the book feels more like a collection of papers than a coherent study. This feeling is emphasized by the style of cross-referencing between the chapters, and by each chapter ending with a separate "Conclusion" paragraph, which seems a bit superfluous, especially as there is a "Conclusion" chapter which summarizes the whole book. (Which, by the way, I would recommend reading as an introduction before starting on chapter 1.)

Summing up: In some parts I would have liked the discussion to be even more focused and the parts more integrated. This could have given even more insight into the important, but large and quite complex subject matter. Gallant very competently draws parallels between primary world history and events in Tolkien's works. However, in a few cases he stops at declaring that Tolkien's rendering is similar, but different; "Tolkien deviates for his own narrative purposes..." (147) At these points it would have been very interesting to be able to study more closely *how* and *why* Tolkien has made just the twists he has when adapting his

source material.

I fear that the author's ambition to "...reach the audience of the causal Tolkien reader,..." (21) may fail; the book is in a distinctly academic style, loaded with quotations from other scholarly works, as well as technical terms in both Latin and German. ("All perfectly true, no doubt; but not the sort of thing to spring on a lad with a morning head", to quote Wodehouse.)

For those who study it, though, the book is quite a hoard of insight and knowledge, and an academic work of high quality. Gallant deserves credit for discussing in depth a fascinating and pervasive strand in Tolkien's sub-creative process and works. His broad knowledge of previous Tolkien studies as well as classical and medieval history, literature and philosophy, is put to good use in analyzing and presenting large and sometimes complex topics. I have no hesitation in recommending the book to any Tolkien scholar, aspiring or established.

The book contains a comprehensive index (though I coincidentally found one occurrence of the important word *wyrd* (30) missing; whether by design or oversight I cannot say). The typography and layout is very appealing. It is admirable that Walking Tree publishes a scholarly work at such a reasonable price, but I would really wish the covers to be thicker and more solid; these flimsy ones may soon be creased and torn if the book is used as much as it deserves.

Note

1. Shippey 2005, 2007; and also 2018, which discusses a certain variety of the "northern courage", though with far fewer direct connections to Tolkien.

Bibliography

Shippey, Tom. "Heroes and Heroism: Tolkien's Problems, Tolkien's Solutions", Roots and Branches: Selected Papers on Tolkien, ed Thomas Honegger, Cormarë series 11. Walking Tree Publishers, 2007. ("Heroes")

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Tolkien, J.R.R. Tree and Leaf, ed Christopher Tolkien. HarperCollins, 2001.

Wodehouse, P.G. "Jeeves Takes Charge", Carry On, Jeeves. Everyman's Library, 2003.

I appreciate this opportunity to do a careful reading of an interesting but somewhat dense book, which I fear otherwise I might not have read, or only browsed and shelved. It was worth the effort! - Magne Bergland

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