

Approved translation of Dutch review of *Germanic Heroes, Courage, and Fate: Northern Narratives of J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium*

Publisher Walking Tree Publishers sends the Dutch Tolkien Society Unquendor its new issues to bring them to the attention of members.

Among these are very innovative publications. This is certainly the case for this book. One clue to that is that Richard Gallant wrote this book under the supervision of the great Tolkien expert Professor Thomas Honegger and that the introduction was written by the acclaimed Tom Shippey. And the first sentence of that introduction already sets the tone for the importance of this book: "For Tolkien (...) the dominant intellectual issue of his life was the urge to reconcile his own Christian faith with the ethos of the works he spent his professional life annotating and interpreting - works such as *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, the *Prose Edda*..." etc.

Those works were referred to as 'Germanic heroic literature' in Tolkien's time as a professor. And that time coincided to a great extent with the reign of the Nazis and World War II, which put 'Germanic heroism' in a decidedly bad light; or, as Tolkien put it in a letter to son Michael, that heroism was, to his chagrin, "for ever accursed." But for Tolkien as a Christian, this was not the only problem with that form of heroism. Whereas Christian "myth" offers the prospect of an ultimate victory of good, Germanic heroism only offers the prospect of a downfall of the world without any hope. That this theme preoccupied Tolkien we could already hear during the lecture of Thomas Honegger, our guest of honour at the 2016 Unquendor Lustrum Feast, when he spoke about the heroic ideal as presented (among other things) in the poem *The Battle of Maldon*.

It is essential to understand that Tolkien resisted the doom and gloom that characterized that heroism. Tolkien's problems with this can be found in his poem *The Homecoming of Beorhnoth Beorhthelm's Son* about that battle of Maldon. Beorhnoth lost the battle because of his *hubris*, caused by excessive self-importance and pride (or, as Honegger called it "misplaced priorities"). This led not only to his own death, but also to a massacre of his followers. For a man who, like Tolkien, lived through World War I and saw many fellow soldiers killed in it, an indigestible fact.

Gallant analyses this Germanic heroism and then relates it to Tolkien's legendarium. An innovative insight is that Fëanor should be seen as a Germanic hero: think of his greed and pride (*hubris*). He also shows the conformity between Fëanor and Grendel, the monster in *Beowulf*. And both the destructive Oath (of Fëanor) and the kinslaying (in Tolkien's case: of the Teleri) are recurring themes in Germanic heroic literature. Against the "Germanic" Fëanorians, according to Gallant, Tolkien sets the virtuous "Fingolfians". With the comparison between the description of the last battle of Fëanor and of Fingolfin, Gallant brings this convincingly to the fore. He also brings into this context a link with the concepts of fate, wyrd and providence. Space is lacking here to elaborate on these.

Surprisingly, he then shows how the cultural embedding of the Edain in the world of the Noldor lays the foundation for Númenor, the most powerful empire of Men in Arda, with which the Edain are also drawn into Germanic heroism. Thus Gallant traverses history by means of the Germanic heroics, finally arriving in the Third and Fourth Era. His conclusion that Galadriel, by refusing the One Ring and thus setting herself against pride and *hubris*,

redresses Fëanor's mistake and thus achieves the "redemption" of the Noldor, did not entirely convince me. But it is a very appealing thought that Tolkien uses Galadriel, with her life that spans the Eras and her connection to the Noldor, in this very way. However, it is another character who brings a definitive end to Germanic heroism in Middle-earth. The final chapter is fittingly named, "Elessar Telcontar Magnus, Rex Pater Gondor, Restitutor Imperii. Aragorn is heroic, but not in the way that Fëanor was. He is a mighty warrior, but not proud; he does not drive his men to death, but rather offers them the choice to turn back, when on their way to the final battle before the Black Gate. He has an iron will, but is also merciful and lenient when necessary. He also bore the name Estel, and its significance takes on even more weight when we realize that Gallant told us that a defining element of German heroism was the lack of hope.

Gallant has done a wonderful job with this book. His analyses are innovative and offer great insight into many characters and events in the legendarium. In doing so, he has written a book that belongs in the library of anyone who cares about Tolkien studies.