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Abstract

Takes us back to classical warfare and the Fall of Troy with his examination of what Tolkien did with the Aeneid when he used it as a source for "The Fall of Gondolin." The parallels between the stories of Tuor and Aeneas are striking, but more interesting is how Tolkien put his own thematic and symbolic stamp on the material.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Tuor; Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Fall of Gondolin"; Vergil—Characters—Aeneas; Vergil. Aeneid,—Escape quest—Compared to "Fall of Gondolin"; Quintus Smyrnaeus. Posthomerica (The Fall of Troy)—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien

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THE FALL OF GONDOLIN AND THE FALL OF TROY: TOLKIEN AND BOOK II OF *THE AENEID*

ALEXANDER M. BRUCE

IN CHAPTER 23 OF THE *QUENTA SILMARILLION*, entitled “Of Tuor and the Fall of Gondolin,” J.R.R. Tolkien describes, in some eight paragraphs and less than 1,600 words of prose, how in the First Age the Elven city of Gondolin, ruled by Turgon, was overrun by Morgoth, whose Balrogs, orcs, wolves, and dragons destroyed the city. The brief account highlights the death of Maeglin, the dark elf who betrayed his people, and the escape of the human Tuor, his Elven wife Idril, and their son Eärendil, along with the remnant of the Elves of Gondolin. But as for the battle within the city, the narrator says only,

Of the deeds of desperate valour there done, by the chieftains of the noble houses and their warriors, and not the least by Tuor, much is told in *The Fall of Gondolin*: of the battle of Ecthelion of the Fountain with Gothmog Lord of Balrogs in the very square of the King, where each slew the other, and of the defence of the tower of Turgon by the people of his household, until the tower was overthrown; and mighty was its fall and the fall of Turgon in its ruin. (*Silmarillion* [*Silm.*] 242)

The story referred to—*The Fall of Gondolin*—can be found in a much fuller form in *The Book of Lost Tales Part II*, a collection of Tolkien’s unpublished writings edited by his son Christopher and published in 1984. In nearly thirty pages and over 16,000 words, Tolkien tells a much richer and more moving story of the events summarized in *Quenta Silmarillion*; the longer narrative takes us through the details of the battle in painful, heroic, and tragic tones. And the story Tolkien gives us reminds us of another tale: we have a city thought impregnable, an enemy who enters through treachery and guile, defenders who are caught unawares, and a citadel set in flame; we have a hero who leads the resistance but, upon the death of his king, is forced to retreat, escaping with his son and the last survivors by a hidden path and into an extended exile. The similarities with the story of the fall of Troy as told in Book II of Virgil’s *Aeneid* cannot be denied: Tolkien certainly borrowed from the first-century Roman epic in telling us the story of the fall of Gondolin. In fact, that Tolkien himself clearly meant for us to connect the fall of Gondolin with the story of Troy is strongly suggested in the last lines of *The Fall of Gondolin* wherein the narrator muses, “Nor Bablon, nor

Ninwi, nor the towers of Trui, nor all the many takings of Rûm that is greatest among Men, saw such terror as fell that day upon Amon Gwareth in the kindred of the [Elves]" (*The Book of Lost Tales Part II* [BoLT2] 196). Certainly we can trace clear parallels in motifs and episodes in the two works; however, I would draw our attention to the ways that Tolkien's story diverges from Virgil's work, ways that ultimately redirect the meaning and impact of the story of the fall of the great city. In short, Tolkien did not just gloss the epic: he changed its entire focus, for Tolkien's work, though drawing on the Roman narrative, is ultimately both Germanic and Christian in its themes.

Tolkien's connection with the classical world—the ways he tapped into the philosophies, myths, literatures, and histories of the Greeks and Romans—has been explored by various critics. Both new perspectives and thorough reviews of major critical observations can be found in the section "Tolkien and Ancient Greek and Classical and Medieval Latin" in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*, edited by Jane Chance.¹ Various entries in the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* likewise address the points of connection between Tolkien's works and his classical sources and inspirations. Still, only one critic has previously directly addressed the relationship between the accounts of the fall of Tolkien's Gondolin and the fall of Troy in *The Aeneid*: in his 1992 essay "Aeneidic and Odyssean Patterns of Escape and Return in Tolkien's *The Fall of Gondolin* and *The Return of the King*," David Greenman notes various similarities and differences between the two tales. For example, he discusses how the account of the fall of Gondolin is about as long as Book II of *The Aeneid*, how both accounts are framed as narratives told well after the fact (Littleheart, son of Bronweg, a follower of Tuor, retells the story, and of course Aeneas tells his), how both tales involve the "gods" (it is however important to understand, as I will discuss below, that Tolkien did not consider his Valar as deities), and how the action in each is ultimately driven by the need to "escape." Greenman also explores parallels between Tolkien's Maeglin and Virgil's Sinon, between Idril and Creusa, between Eärendil and Astyanax—factors that I too will consider below, yet with a focus not just on cataloging similarities and differences (certainly a notable contribution by Greenman) but more on seeking a greater perspective on how Tolkien re-shaped the Roman epic, for again, Tolkien's *The Fall of Gondolin* is far more than a calquing of Virgil's work.

¹ See especially Gergely Nagy, "Saving the Myths: The Re-Creation of Mythology in Plato and Tolkien"; Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, "Myth, Late Roman History, and Multiculturalism in Tolkien's Middle-earth"; Jen Stevens, "From Catastrophe to Eucatastrophe: J.R.R. Tolkien's Transformation of Ovid's Mythic Pyramus and Thisbe into Beren and Lúthien"; and Kathleen E. Dubs, "Providence, Fate, and Chance: Boethain Philosophy in *The Lord of the Rings*."

According to Tolkien's biographer Humphrey Carpenter, *The Fall of Gondolin* was "the first story [of what would be *The Silmarillion*] to be put on paper—it was written out during Tolkien's convalescence at Great Haywood early in 1917" (100), and he completed a full draft some time before he read it to his colleagues at Exeter College in 1920.² Whether he began the story in 1916 or 1917, *The Fall of Gondolin* is among the foundational narratives for the First Age of Middle-earth, and those familiar with Tolkien's mythology know that the storylines of the First Age are complex. Furthermore, Tolkien experimented with multiple drafts of various tales over the bulk of his lifetime—from at least his service in World War I until his death in 1973. Along the way he re-imagined, rewrote, and revised many pieces; it took the considerable organizational and editorial skills of his son Christopher to shape the various separate drafts into *The Silmarillion*, the "complete" text of J.R.R. Tolkien's mythology.

Actually, the resulting single-volume *Silmarillion* contains five distinct works. The *Quenta Silmarillion*, with which we are most concerned here, is the extended narrative telling of the First Age. Eru creates Elves in Middle-earth, some of whom choose to move across the sea to the west to live with the Valar in Valinor. Of these, Fëanor and his sons are most powerful; Fëanor creates beautiful gems, the Silmarils, that preserve the light of the Valar—the light of the two trees the Valar have created to give light to the world. Melkor corrupts Fëanor, destroys the trees, takes the Silmarils, and sets out to ruin the rest of Middle-earth. Fëanor renames Melkor *Morgoth*, "the Black Foe of the World," and his sons swear vengeance and denounce the Valar and leave Valinor for Middle-earth. These Elves join both those who never left Middle-earth and Men to fight Morgoth for centuries. Great heroes rise—Túrin and Húrin, Tuor and Huor, Beren and his wife Lúthien—until finally Eärendil and Elwing, children of Man and Elf, make the seemingly impossible journey back to Valinor and reconcile Elves and Men to the Valar, who in turn imprison Morgoth forever as the First Age ends.

Even with Tolkien's propensity to revise works over the decades, it is worth noting that Christopher Tolkien specifically acknowledges in *The Book of Lost Tales Part II* that for *The Fall of Gondolin*, "the narrative itself underwent very little change of note in the course of [its] history" (147). Thus it is reasonable to believe that in *Quenta Silmarillion*, when Tolkien directs us to the story of the fall of Gondolin, he has in mind the form of the story now presented in *The Book of Lost Tales 2*.

² However, Paul Edmund Thomas's entry on "The Book of Lost Tales II" in the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* gives the date for the initial draft of *The Fall of Gondolin* as 1916 (72). See also Christopher Tolkien's notes on the history of the drafts of *The Fall of Gondolin* in *The Book of Lost Tales Part II*, pp. 148-151.

As a starting point for discussing the interaction between Virgil's and Tolkien's works, I would like to highlight some of the particular elements within Tolkien's *Fall of Gondolin* that have parallels in *The Aeneid*. Like Troy, the city of Gondolin is thought impregnable: "'tis said that such a magic had its builders set about it (by aid of Ulmo [the Valar associated with the sea] whose power ran in that river even if the dread of [Morgoth] fared upon its banks) that none save the blood of the [Elves] might light upon it thus by chance" (157).³ Thus Morgoth first faces the challenge of finding the city—it takes him centuries to do so—and then of gaining entrance through or over its walls. Though of course the Greeks know where to find Troy, we are reminded in *The Aeneid* that the Greek army was kept at bay for ten years by the great walls built by Neptune, god of the sea.⁴

Yet each city is undone by treachery. While Morgoth discovers the general location of the city by observing Elves who flee there for safety, it is the treachery of Maeglin, a "dark Elf" who lives in Gondolin, that leads to the fall of the city. Venturing from the city, Maeglin is captured by Morgoth's orcs and, both fearing for his life and hoping to claim King Turgon's daughter Idril for himself, the Elf advises Morgoth how best to destroy the city:

[T]he rede that [Maeglin] gave to [Morgoth] was that not all the host of the Orcs nor the Balrogs in their fierceness might by assault or siege hope ever to overthrow the walls and gates of Gondolin even if they availed to win unto the plain without. Therefore he counselled [Morgoth] to devise out of his sorceries a succour for his warriors in their endeavour. From the greatness of his wealth of metals and his powers of fire he bid him make beasts like snakes and dragons of irresistible might that should overcreep

³ In "Of Tuor and his Coming to Gondolin," found in *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (17-56), Tolkien offers an even more detailed description of the layers of protection surrounding the hidden realm of Gondolin. Having been chosen by Ulmo, who also gives him a protective cloak, Tuor and his Elven guide Voronwë travel to the edges of the kingdom before meeting the captain of the guards, who, though he initially distrusts Tuor, leads him through the seven gates of the increasingly fortified walls encircling the city. Interestingly, Ulmo's cloak protects Tuor and also amplifies his stature, prompting the Elves of Gondolin to accept him more readily—just as Venus protected Aeneas from the Carthaginians by casting a mist over him, and then later made him appear more royal and powerful before Dido.

⁴ Though *The Iliad* more frequently associates Troy and Poseidon [Neptune], Aeneas also clearly considers the city as Neptune's; as he sees the walls of his city falling under the wrath of various gods, Aeneas laments, *Tum uero omne mihi uisum considerare in ignis / Ilium et ex imo uerti Neptunia Troia* ["I knew the end then: Ilium was going down / In fire, the Troy of Neptune going down"]. Text of *The Aeneid* from P. Vergili Maronis [Virgil], *Aeneidos* [*The Aeneid*], in *Opera*, ed. R.A.B. Mynors, II.624-625. Translation from Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, II.816-817. As the translation does not follow the text line-by-line, footnotes rather than in-text references will be used to preserve clarity.

the Encircling Hills and lap that plain and its fair city in flame and death.
(169)

It takes seven years for Morgoth's plans to come to fruition, and during those years Idril has a prophetic fear that Maeglin wishes to kill her and Tuor's son and burn the city; heeding her dream, she and Tuor arrange to have a secret tunnel dug out of the city. Tuor also prompts King Turgon to increase his vigilance, but Morgoth times his attack for the "great feast [of] Tarnin Austa or the Gates of Summer" (172). Thus the guard is relaxed when his forces assault the city: the orcs breach the walls in their tank-like iron creatures, called "fire-serpents" and "dragons," upon which "rode the Balrogs in hundreds" (170), and the minions of Morgoth set the city ablaze.

Troy falls as well because of treachery, though treachery instigated by its external foe and not from one of its own. Still, there are similarities. The enemy catches the occupants unawares: the Trojans were caught celebrating what they thought was the retreat of the Greeks, as the Elves were surprised during a festival. Both the Trojan horse and Morgoth's fire-serpents bore the enemy into the city, and similarly the Greeks immediately began burning the city. Even Tolkien's image of "serpents" echoes *The Aeneid*, for Virgil also gives us serpents: the Trojan priest Laocoön and his sons are killed by great serpents *ardentisque oculos suffecti sanguine et igni / sibila lambebant linguis uibrantibus ora* ("[with] burning eyes, fiery and suffused with blood, / Their tongues a-flicker out of hissing maws").⁵ And Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, is compared to a serpent as he begins his massacre in the palace of King Priam, culminating in the slaughter first of Priam's son Politēs and then of Priam himself.⁶

⁵ Text from P. Vergili Maronis II.210-211; translation from Virgil, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, II.288-289.

⁶ *Vestibulum ante ipsum primoque in limine Pyrrhus
exsultat telis et luce coruscus aëna:
qualis ubi in lucem coluber mala gramina pastus,
frigida sub terra tumidum quem bruma tegebat,
nunc, positus nouus exuviis nitidusque iuuenta,
lubrica conuoluit sublato pectore terga
arduus ad solem, et linguis micat ore trisulcis.* (P. Vergili Maronis II.469-475)

Just at the outer doors of the vestibule
Sprang Pyrrhus, all in bronze and glittering,
As a serpent, hidden swollen underground
By a cold winter, writhes into the light,
On vile grass fed, his old skin cast away,
Renewed and glossy, rolling slippery coils,
With lifted underbelly rearing sunward
And triple tongue a-flicker. (Virgil, trans. Fitzgerald, II.613-619)

It is worth noting here a parallel to a different account of the fall of Troy: Once Morgoth's forces crash the walls of Gondolin, Maeglin seeks out the beautiful Idril, Tuor's wife, to claim her as his own. He finds her with her son Eärendil and attempts to throw the boy over the walls; as Greenman has noted, it is a scene drawn from Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, in which Astyanax, son of Hector, is thrown to his death from the high walls of the city. Except that Eärendil fights back—he bites Maeglin, and then Tuor arrives in time to break Maeglin's arm and "then taking him by the middle leapt with him upon the walls, and flung him far out. Great was the fall of his body, and it smote Amon Gwareth three times ere it pitched in the midmost of the flames; and the name of [Maeglin] has gone out in shame from among [the Elves]" (178).

After ordering a company of Elves to escape with Eärendil, Tuor returns to the fighting within the city and leads the resistance, joining with various Elf-lords who fight valiantly before falling in battle. Several Elves kill Balrogs, but the most dramatic account is that of the Elf Ecthelion: he and Tuor fight side-by-side until Ecthelion is wounded on his shield arm. Tuor helps him retreat to a great fountain at the center of the city, where the Elves regroup and form a wall of resistance. Yet Gothmog, greatest of the Balrogs, breaks through; Ecthelion challenges him but the Balrog immediately wounds him on the sword arm.

Then leapt Ecthelion lord of the Fountain, fairest of the [Elves], full at Gothmog even as he raised his whip, and his helm that had a spike upon it he drave into that evil breast, and he twined his legs about his foeman's thighs; and the Balrog yelled and fell forward; but those two dropped into the basin of the king's fountain which was very deep. There found that creature his bane; and Ecthelion sank steel-laden into the depths, and so perished the lord of the Fountain after fiery battle in cool waters. (184)

Then the Elven king Turgon retreats to the citadel in defiance, refusing to leave his burning city in defeat and urging Tuor to lead the survivors away. His royal guards surround the tower, drawing the enemy's full attention and force. As Tuor watches, his wife Idril comes to find him, and together they see the citadel crash to the ground beneath the flames and crushing assault of dragons. His king—her father—now dead and the citadel destroyed, Tuor and Idril decide that all must flee through the secret tunnel. Out of the city, they soon see the party of Elves entrusted with Eärendil being pursued by orcs, and Tuor kills them and rescues his son. The evacuees must fight another Balrog high in the mountains, but they eventually escape into exile.

Aeneas similarly rallies Trojans to fight off the invading Greeks, and like Tuor, he is ultimately unsuccessful and must witness the death of his king, Priam. His mother the goddess Venus comes to him in the heat of battle and reminds him of his family; he returns to them but his father Anchises refuses to

depart until a portent sent by Jupiter alights upon the head of Aeneas' son, Ascanius. That omen convinces Anchises to leave, and Aeneas leads his family away. However, as they rush from the city by secret paths, Aeneas is separated from his wife Creusa; he searches for her until her ghost appears to urge him to depart from Troy forever. As the account of the fall of Troy closes, Virgil leaves us with the clear image of Aeneas bearing the past in his father and leading the future in his son, having lost the "present" of his wife. Obviously, Tolkien's tale is notably different here—Tuor escapes with his wife—but for the moment, we have the same general ending to the episode: the hero, with his son, must lead the last survivors of his people to a new land, in Aeneas' case, ultimately to Italy where his descendants will found Rome.

So there are obvious parallels between the two tales, but just as obviously the fall of Troy and the fall of Gondolin are not the same. In his work, Tolkien presents us with his own decidedly non-Roman perspectives on heroism, gods, and love.

First, in the battle within Gondolin, Tolkien gives us heroes who embody the Germanic "heroic spirit" with its "creed of unyielding will"—the ability to face imminent death with a resolution and strength of spirit that refuses to see death as defeat (Tolkien, *"Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics"* 70). He presents us with a catalogue of brave Elves who venture one after another into the thick of battle—a battle in which they are hopelessly outnumbered. Here Tolkien is channeling the Anglo-Saxon poem *"The Battle of Maldon,"* in which the Anglo-Saxon army, comprised of a few professionals but mostly untrained conscripts who do not even know how to hold a shield, much less form a shield wall, faces off against a Viking force that could best be described as professional marauders.⁷ The Anglo-Saxons lose their leader Byrhtnoth and, in response to his death, we have a catalogue of English warriors who one by one boast that they will avenge their lord—and one by one enter the battle, and one by one do some heroic deed before being cut down.⁸ Their acts are not in vain or in folly—they

⁷ *Ʒa þær Byrhtnōð ongan beornas trymian,
rad and rædde, rincum læhte
hu hi sceoldon standan and þone stede healdan,
and bæd þæt hyra randan rihte heoldon,
fæste mid folman, and ne forhtedon na.*

Then Byrhtnoth set about drawing up the men there,
he rode and instructed, he told the soldiers
how they should form up and hold the position,
and he asked that they should hold their shields properly,
firmly with their fists, and not be at all afraid. (*"The Battle of Maldon"* 17-21)

⁸ Multiple instances could be cited from *"The Battle of Maldon"*:

Dunmere þa cwæð, daroð acwehte,

embody the Germanic heroic spirit as stated by the oldest among them: “*Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, / mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað*” (312-313). Tolkien translated these lines in his short play *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtelm’s Son*: “Heart shall be bolder, harder the purpose, / more proud the spirit as our power lessens!” (17), and he considered the lines the “finest expression of the northern heroic spirit, Norse or English; the clearest statement of the doctrine of uttermost endurance in the service of indomitable will” (20).

*uneorne ceorl, ofer eall clypode,
bæd þæt beorna gehwylc Byrhtnoð wræce:
“Ne mæg na wandian se þe wrecan þenceð
frecan on folce, ne for feore murnan.”*

Dunnere then spoke, he shook his spear,
a simple yeoman, he called out over all,
he asked that each warrior should avenge Byrhtnoth:
“He must never flinch who thinks to avenge
his lord in this body of men, nor be anxious about life.” (255-59)

*Ða gyt on orde stod Eadweard se langa
gearo and geornful; gylpwordum spræc,
þæt he nolde fleogan fotmæl landes,
ofer bæc bugan, þa his betera leg.
He bræc þone bordweall and wið þa beornas feaht,
oðþæt he his sincgyfan on þam sæmannum
wurðlice wrec, ær he on wæle lege.*

Edward the Tall then still stood in the van,
ready and eager; he announced vauntingly
that he did not intend to run away by so much as a foot of land,
to turn back, when his superior lay dead.
He broke through the shield-wall and fought against the warriors,
until on those seamen his treasure-giving lord he
nobly avenged, before he lay amongst the slain. (273-279)

*Raðe wearð æt hilde Offa forheaven;
he hæfde ðeah geforþod þæt he his frecan gehet,
swa he beotode ær wið his beahgifan
þæt hi sceoldon begen on burh ridan,
hale to hame, oððe on here crincgan,
on wælstowe wundum sweltan.
He læg ðegenlice ðeodne gehende.*

Offa was quickly cut to pieces in the battle,
yet he had accomplished what he promised his lord,
as he vowed formerly to his treasure-giver
that they must both ride back to their dwelling,
safe into the homestead, or die amongst the vikings,
perish with wounds on the field of slaughter.
He lay near his lord as a thegn should. (288-294)

We can contrast the Elves of Gondolin with the men of Troy, whose approach was quite different. Though the Trojans are certainly no cowards, we have less of the “joy of battle” that we see among the Germanic Elves; Trojans are named and killed, some by their own friends in the confusion, yet without getting to strike definitive blows in return; King Priam’s son is killed by Pyrrhus as he flees; Priam himself dies a pathetic and ignominious death.⁹ In contrast Ecthelion, like Beowulf facing the dragon, kills the Balrog with his dying strength. Defying Morgoth’s orcs and dragons, Turgon’s household guard “would not budge a foot, but gathered thickly about the base of the king’s tower,” much like the faithful retainers choosing to die with their lord Byrhtnoth (185). Turgon himself, though it is absolutely evident that his doom is sealed, cries out, “Great is the victory of the [Elves]!” both to rally his men and to draw

⁹ In describing the counter-attacks of the Trojans, Virgil stresses the desperation and fatalism of Aeneas and his followers; Aeneas seems near despair as he speaks to his men: “*moriamur et in media arma ruamus. / una salus uictis nullam sperare salutem*” [“Come, let us die, / We’ll make a rush into the thick of it. / The conquered have one safety: hope for none”] (P. Vergili Maronis II.353-354; Virgil, trans. Fitzgerald, II. 471-473). And of course the death of Priam evokes terror and pity in the reader:

*[Pyrrhus] hoc dicens altaria ad ipsa trementem
traxit et in multo lapsantem sanguine nati,
implicuitque comam laeua, dextraque coruscum
extulit ac lateri capulo tenus abdidit ense.
haec finis Priami fatorum, hic exitus illum
sorte tulit Troiam incensam et prolapsa uidentem
Pergama, tot quondam populis terrisque superbum
regnatorem Asiae. iacet ingens litore truncus,
auulsumque umeris caput et sine nomine corpus.* (P. Vergili Maronis II.550-558)

With this,

To the altar step itself [Pyrrhus] dragged [Priam] trembling,
Slipping in the pooled blood of his son,
And took him by the hair with his left hand.
The sword flashed in his right; up to the hilt
He thrust it in his body.

That was the end

Of Priam’s age, the doom that took him off,
With Troy in flames before his eyes, his towers
Headlong fallen—he that in other days
Had ruled in pride so many lands and peoples,
The power of Asia.

On the distant shore

The vast trunk headless lies without a name.

(Virgil, trans. Fitzgerald, II.716-729)

the enemy his way and thereby give Tuor a chance to lead the others safely out of the city. In these moments, death was not defeat: though Turgon's death meant that "for that hour the victory was to [Morgoth]" (187), that victory truly is fleeting, for Eärendil, having escaped, will one day save Elves and Men and bring about the end of Morgoth forever.

Thus concerning heroism, I think *The Fall of Gondolin* is more Germanic than *The Aeneid* it otherwise echoes. And concerning the role of divine powers, Tolkien's mythic structure into which this tale fits is much more Christian than Roman. Tolkien makes it clear in his writings that the Valar who influence the events of Middle-earth are not themselves deities, whatever their semblance to Greco-Roman or Norse gods. According to *Ainulindalë*, the first tale in *The Silmarillion*, there is only one true god, Eru, who created all, including the Valar, of whom Melkor/Morgoth was highest. *Ainulindalë* itself is a re-telling of the Judeo-Christian beliefs about the creation of the archangels (the Valar) and of the war in heaven that led to Satan (Morgoth) being cast out for his pride and disobedience. The Valar do have a presence in Middle-earth—they live in Valinor, far to the West, and Ulmo, the Valar who loves the sea, does have an interest in and takes action to preserve the Elves from Morgoth. Yet the involvement of the Valar is far different from that of the Roman gods in *The Aeneid*; as Greenman has noted, Tolkien's Valar are "clearly good (Ulmo) or clearly evil ([Morgoth])" but the "moral natures [of the Roman deities] are not in question" (4). Moreover, we can see how much more meddlesome—and capricious—the Roman gods are: Jupiter sends omens; Neptune, who once supported the Trojans but has changed sides, sends snakes to kill the Trojan priest Laocoön; Juno and Mars fight the Trojans directly; and Venus comes to her son Aeneas to rescue him and make sure Rome is founded. In contrast, Ulmo intervenes in the affairs of Elves and Men specifically to avert the victory of Morgoth because should Morgoth win, all of Middle-earth would be lost. The stakes are much, much higher than the fall of a city or the establishment of an empire—it is a question of the fate of the world of Elves and Men, a cosmic question of good versus evil. And even with such high stakes, Tolkien does not have the powerful Ulmo take direct action: he instead gives us the hero Tuor, a great man but still a man who must contend against the overwhelming power of evil.

This observation about the role of divine powers leads me to the final point of thematic distinction between Virgil's work and Tolkien's. Virgil wrote *The Aeneid* to explain the founding of Rome and to idealize the Roman virtues of Aeneas, but mostly to celebrate Augustus Caesar, to show that Augustus was descended from the gods: the image on the shield of Aeneas in Book VIII clearly reinforces that the triumph of Augustus, not the founding of the city, is the

culmination.¹⁰ But Tolkien's myth is about divine reconciliation and the power of love. We know from the full tale of the Elves in *Quenta Silmarillion* that the pride and disobedience of certain Elves led to their estrangement from the Valar, and thus from Eru himself; at its root, the story parallels the Fall of Man in Genesis. And as in the Christian tradition, the story moves toward a reconciliation first of body with soul, and then of body and soul with the divine. *The Fall of Gondolin* tells of a key scene in that story, with Tuor, his wife Idril, and their son escaping destruction: Tuor is a Man, mortal; Idril is Elf, immortal; he is the physical, she the spiritual; and their child Eärendil is the union and balance of the two. Aeneas could succeed without his wife Creusa because his work was "of arms and the man." In Tolkien's myth neither Tuor nor Idril could be lost, as Creusa was lost to Aeneas, for the whole being must be saved. In fact, throughout *Quenta Silmarillion* we have multiple examples of true lovers, united in marriage, who were able to overcome tremendous odds. We are told how Beren and Lúthien, mortal Man and immortal Elf, traveled into Morgoth's fortress to steal one of the beautiful gems, the Silmarils, in an effort to appease her father. When Beren dies shortly after her father has accepted him, Lúthien dies of grief—a thing unheard of among the immortal Elves—and her spirit, now in the Halls of the Mandos, where "those that wait sit in the shadow of their thought," pleads for Beren to be returned to life (186). Her sorrowful song convinces the Valar to let Beren to return to Middle-earth, and she is presented with a choice: to remain among the Valar, apart from Beren,

[or] to return to Middle-earth, and take with her Beren, there to dwell again, but without certitude of life or joy. Then she would become mortal,

¹⁰ *in medio classis aeratas, Actia bella,
cernere erat, totumque instructo Marte uideres
feruere Leucaten auroque effulgere fluctus.
hinc Augustus agens Italos in proelia Caesar
cum patribus populoque, penatibus et magnis dis,
stans celsa in puppi, geminas cui tempora flammis
laeta uomunt patriumque aperitur uertice sidus.* (P. Vergili Maronis VIII.675-681)

Vivid in the center were the bronze-beaked
Ships and the fight at sea off Actium.
Here you could see Leucata all alive
With ships maneuvering, sea glowing gold,
Augustus Caesar leading into battle
Italians, with both senators and people,
Household gods and great gods: there he stood
High on the stern, and from his blessed brow
Twin flames gushed upward, while his crest revealed
His father's star. (Virgil, trans. Fitzgerald, VIII.912-921)

and subject to a second death, even as he; and ere long she would leave the world for ever, and her beauty become only a memory in song.

This doom she chose, forsaking the Blessed Realm, [so that] the fates of Beren and Lúthien might be joined, and their paths lead together beyond the confines of the world. (187)

In the closing chapters of *The Silmarillion* Beren and Lúthien's daughter Elwing marries Eärendil, and the two risk making the forbidden journey to Valinor across the sea to seek the pardon of the Valar. They reach Valinor where Eärendil "stood before [the Valar], and delivered the errand of the Two Kindreds. Pardon he asked for the [Elves] and pity for their great sorrows, and mercy upon Men and Elves and succour in their need. And his prayer was granted" (249). Through their love, their union as husband and wife, Eärendil and Elwing reconcile the peoples of Middle-earth to the Valar, as our whole being—body and soul—must be reconciled before God.

So the fact that Tuor and Idril escape together is not a case of Tolkien's sentimentality. It is an essential trope in his greater story of love and reconciliation. Aeneas subjugated himself to the will of the gods; he is denied free will and with it the freedom to love. Ultimately Aeneas matters only as the one who saved his child and thereby set into motion those events that will lead to the rise of Augustus. In contrast Tolkien's tale emphasizes the tremendous power of selfless love, love freely given; the union of Tuor and Idril, so strong that it can endure the Fall of Gondolin and the ensuing exile, matters because their child will, with his wife, venture to Valinor and reconcile Man and Elf with the Valar, and through them with Eru Ilúvatar. Thus, while Tolkien clearly owes a debt to Virgil, Tuor's tale exceeds that of Aeneas, for if Virgil united "arms and the man" to glorify Augustus and the empire of Rome, Tolkien united body and soul to save all of Middle-earth.¹¹



¹¹ A version of this essay was read at the 2010 meeting of the Popular Culture Association of the South / American Culture Association of the South. My thanks to my colleague Professor Christopher M. McDonough of the University of the South for his perspective and insight during the writing process.

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