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## Germanic *Fate* and *Doom* in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*

### **Abstract**

The roots of Tolkien's concepts in early Germanic understandings of the ideas of fate and doom are the subject of Whitt's essay. Examines how these initially pagan notions were subsumed into the Christian idea of divine providence, and most notably blended together in the Old English *Beowulf* and Old Saxon *Heliand*, to provide a basis for understanding how even the Valar are subject to time and the fate decreed by Ilúvatar.

### **Additional Keywords**

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Silmarillion; Beowulf; Doom in J.R.R. Tolkien; Fate in J.R.R. Tolkien; Heliand



## GERMANIC FATE AND DOOM IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE SILMARILLION*

RICHARD J. WHITT

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, a collection of stories concerning the creation and First Age of Middle-earth, provides the mythological background that undergirds the more famous *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Unlike these two works, however, *The Silmarillion* provides us with a rich account of Tolkien's development of his mythology of Middle-earth. It goes without saying that a number of other mythologies—Germanic, Celtic, Finnish, Classical, Biblical—inspired his creation to varying degrees. As a Germanic philologist, I cannot ignore the presence of Germanic influence in Tolkien's work, as can be seen, for example, in the culture of the Rohirrim in *The Lord of the Rings*. In this essay, I would like to examine a much more elusive motif whose Germanic influence may not be immediately visible, but is present nonetheless: fate and doom. These closely related, and sometimes interchangeable, notions play a prominent role in *The Silmarillion*, as the myriad characters in the stories find their "fates" tied in with the larger fate of their clan or of Middle-earth in general. Granted, ancient Germanic literature is hardly the only place where one finds the notion of fate a central theme (consider the role of the Roman *fates* or the Greek *moirae* in Classical mythology, for example), but it is also one of the only places where the conceptualization of fate becomes blended with the Christian idea of Divine Providence. And this harmonization can also be found in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*.

A number of scholars have already addressed the role of fate within Tolkien's legendarium. Bullock and Deyo, for example, have separately touched on the interplay between fate and free will in Tolkien's works, particularly in *The Lord of the Rings*. They argue that fate is synonymous with the will of Ilúvatar, the omnipotent creator God in Tolkien's mythology, and that the free will of his creation is ultimately subordinate to this. Helms (46) arrives at similar conclusion in his discussion of fate in *The Silmarillion*. Flieger has taken up this issue as well, going so far as to say the free will of men is just as significant as fate (Ilúvatar's will as expressed in his great Music) in shaping the future of Middle-earth. Hostetter argues the opposite, insisting free will only operates when there is "a fully aware purpose" (185) and that fate occupies a more privileged position in Tolkien's mythology. Shippey also briefly touches on the presence of fate and doom in Tolkien's work, but he only makes a few general comments and an in-

depth analysis falls outside the scope of his discussion of Tolkien and his inspiration. But when one looks at the many cases where fate and doom are invoked in *The Silmarillion*, it is not always clear that the will of Ilúvatar is in question, and I argue the semantic field expressed by these two words is much broader than has been asserted before. Ilúvatar's will may ultimately triumph in the end, but it is not necessarily synonymous with all the workings of fate and doom in Tolkien's world.

What is also relevant to the discussion here is the harmonization between notions of Germanic fate and Christian Divine Providence one finds in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*. Indeed, the medieval conversion of the Germanic tribes to Christianity resulted in the production of several literary works where both Germanic and Christian epistemologies play a central role, two of the most prominent being the Old English *Beowulf* and the Old Saxon *Heliand*.<sup>1</sup> The Germanic conception of fate is present in both these works, but so is the presence of the Christian God. Considering the historical context of these texts, when Christianity was exerting much influence over Germanic culture and religion, and vice versa (Russell; Green; Augustyn, *Semiotics of Fate*), it makes perfect sense that one should find such a blending of two worldviews in the literature of this period. And it is such a blend, a harmonious blend, that one finds in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* as well. Sometimes, there appears to be a force controlling men's destinies independent of a divinity, while not detracting from this divinity's power. This does not seem pose a problem in much of medieval Germanic literature, and it does not pose a problem in Tolkien's works either.

Before embarking on an in-depth examination of the role of *fate* and *doom* in *The Silmarillion* and Germanic mythology, it is necessary to get an idea of the semantic field of these words, for they do not avail themselves of a singular, all-encompassing definition. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *doom* can denote statutes and decrees, legal or personal judgments, the act of judging, justice, fate and "irrevocable destiny," and death ("final fate"). Such legal denotations can be found in phrases such as the Old English *cyninges dom* 'king's doom, judgment, decision.' Green adds to this, pointing out that *doom* can also mean renown or praise in the older Germanic languages: Gothic *doms* 'renown,' Old English *dom* 'honor, praise,' Old Norse *domr* 'opinion,' and Old Saxon *dom* 'honor, praise' (44-45). This meaning is not unconnected with the legal notions of judging and decreeing, however, for honor and praise are bestowed on those

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<sup>1</sup> The *Heliand* is a lesser known literary work of the Germanic world, and it was commissioned by Louis the Pious (778-840) in an attempt to convert the Saxons to Christianity. It contains 6,000 lines of alliterative verse (similar to *Beowulf*) telling the story of the Christian gospels in a Germanic linguistic and cultural framework understandable to the Saxons. An English prose translation by Murphy is available.

who have been judged worthy of such renown. *Fate* is not totally unrelated to *doom*, even though the denotation of legal judgment is much weaker. The OED provides definitions such as the agency of predetermined events, “that which is destined or fated to happen,” one’s “appointed lot,” one’s “ultimate condition,” and death. The cognate of *fate* does not appear in the oldest Germanic literature (the first OED attestation isn’t until the fourteenth century); instead, we find two other lexical items filling *fate*’s semantic function: *metod* and *wyrd*. *Metod* in Old English and Old Saxon can be glossed as ‘fate’ and found in several related compounds such as Old Saxon *metodogiskapu* ‘decree of fate’ and *metodigiskaft* ‘fate’ or Old English *metodgesceaft* ‘fate, death’ and *metodwang* ‘battlefield’ = ‘death-field.’ It is derived from the verb *metan* ‘to measure out/apportion, to estimate, to judge,’ and as Green explains, “[u]nderlying this word is therefore the idea of a power that measures, apportions, and judges [...]. That the judgments and decrees of a power of fate which disposes of men’s lives could be seen negatively in terms of death is clear from two of the [Old English] compounds, but also from [Old Norse] *mjötúðr* ‘death’” (383-4). Old English *wyrd* (Old Saxon *wurd*, Old High German *wurt*) also means fate, but it often contains the additional connotation of the Norns, a group of female figures who—similar to the Roman *fates* or Greek *moirae*—predetermine all of men’s fates at birth (Augustyn, *Semiotics* 40-41). *Wyrd* is derived from the Indo-European verb *\*uert* ‘to turn,’ which became Germanic *\*werþ* ‘to become,’ and is cognate with modern German *werden* ‘to become’ and English *weird*. Indeed, the personification and endowment of fate with a proper name (the Norns) signify this concept’s primacy in Germanic mythological consciousness (cf. Lotman & Upensky 214).

As can be seen above, one of the major concepts associated with doom (and sometimes fate) is judgment. That is, one’s “doom” is tied in with what has been decreed by an authority. This notion is prominent in Germanic mythology. Consider the role of the Norse gods, as described in the Old Norse *Poetic Edda*:

*Þá gengo regin þll á rokstóla,  
ginnheilög goð, ok um þat gættuz:  
nótt ok niðiom norn um gáfo:  
morgin héto ok miðían dag,  
undorn ok aptan, árom at teila. (Völuspá, Stanza 6)*

‘Then the powers all strode / to their thrones of fate  
sacrosanct gods, / and gave thought to this:  
to night and her offspring / allotted names,  
called them morning / and midday,  
afternoon and evening, / to count in years.’

(*Poetic Edda* 8, emphasis added)

Here the gods ascend their thrones of judgment to decide what names to assign “night and her offspring.” The first two lines of this Stanza are repeated later in the *Völuspá* when the gods deal with the creation of the dwarves (Stanza 9), how to deal with Heiðr the sorceress (Stanza 23), and what to do about a forbidden marriage between a fellow goddess and a giant (Stanza 25). The prefix of this compound noun, *røk*, is yet another lexical item that can denote fate or destiny, as can also be seen in *ragnarök* ‘the fate/doom of the powers.’ And there is an additional element of judging or decreeing in the *Völuspá* excerpt above. This notion of judgment is also present in the Old English *Beowulf*:

*ðær geflyfan sceal*  
*Dryhtnes dōme sē þe hine dēað nimeð.* (ll. 440-441)

‘Whichever one death falls / must deem it a just judgment by God.’  
 (*Beowulf* 31, emphasis added)

Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion* is, unsurprisingly, full of examples where doom has a denotation of judgment similar to that found in Old Norse and Old English. This is perhaps most apparent in the figure of Mandos, one of the Valar, who is “the keeper of the Houses of the Dead, and the summoner of the spirits of the slain” (*The Silmarillion* [*Silm.*] 19). He is called the “Doomsman of the Valar,” and he “pronounces his dooms and his judgments only at the bidding of Manwë” (19). His wife is Vairë the Weaver, who “weaves all things that have ever been in Time into her storied webs, and the halls of Mandos that ever widen as the ages pass are clothed within them” (19). This association of fate and doom with weaving (or spinning) is also present in Classical and Germanic mythology (see Graves for Classical mythology; Dronke; and both Augustyn items in the bibliography for Germanic mythology). Regarding the coming of the elves (the Firstborn Children of Ilúvatar), it is their “doom [...] [to] come in the darkness, and [they] shall look first upon the stars” (*Silm.* 44). That is, it has been decreed by Ilúvatar that the creation of the elves shall occur before the creation of the sun and the moon. Similarly, that Ilúvatar decreed men should be mortal is described as “the doom of Men” (315), and “death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy” (36). And almost exactly like the Norse gods, the Valar proceed to their “Ring of Doom” when there are pressing issues concerning either Valinor or Middle-earth. Plus there is the “Doom of Mandos” (or the “Doom of the Noldor”), a curse upon a tribe of elves—the Noldor—for the kinslaying at Alqualondë (95-96). Indeed, the association of judgments and decrees with fate and doom found in Germanic mythology is ever present in *The Silmarillion* as well.

Closely tied in with the notion of judgment as one's fate or doom is the personification thereof, as is transparent, for example, in Mandos, "the Doomsman of the Valar" (19). In Germanic mythology, the personification of fate manifests itself most obviously in the Norns, three sisters who decree each person's destiny at their birth. According to the *Poetic Edda*:

*Þaðan koma meylar margs vitandi  
þriár, ór þeim sæ, er und þolli stendr.  
Urð hétu eina, aðra Verðandi  
—skáro á skiði— Skuld ena þriðio.  
Þær lög lögðu, þær líf kuro  
aldo þørnóm, ørlög seggia. (Völuspá, Stanza 20)*

'From there come maidens / deep in knowledge, / three, from the lake / that lies under the tree. / Urðr they called one ['had to be'], / the second Verðandi ['coming to be'] / —they incised the slip of wood— / Skuld the third ['has to be']. / They laid down laws, / they chose out lives, / for mankind's children, / men's destinies.' (*Poetic Edda* 12)

And in Snorri Sturluson's prose *Edda*, we learn that there are many more Norns in addition to the primary Norns of the Past (Urðr), Present (Verðandi), and Future (Skuld):

*Þær kollum vér nornir. Enn eru fleiri nornir, þær er koma til hvers manns er borinn er at skapa aldr, ok eru þessar goðkunningar, en aðrar álfá ættar, en inar þriðju dverga ættar, svá sem hér segir:  
Sundrbornar mjök  
hygg ek at nornir sé,  
eigut þær ætt saman.  
Sumar eru Áskunnar,  
sumar eru álfkunnar,  
sumar ðætr Dvalins. (Sturluson, "Gylfaginning" 18)*

'We call them norns. There are also other norns who visit everyone when they are born to shape their lives, and these are of divine origin, though others are of the race of elves, and a third group are of the race of dwarfs, as it says here:

Of very diverse parentage I think the norns are, they do not have a common ancestry. Some are descended from Æsir, some are descended from elves, some are daughters of Dvalin.' (Sturluson, *Edda* 18)

So some Norns come from the elves, others from the gods (the Æsir), and yet others from the dwarves (the daughters of Dvalin). If we take Augustyn's lead that *wyrd* implicitly refers to the Norns in its denotation of fate (*Semiotics* 39), then the Norns are present in *Beowulf* as well. For example, when Grendel plans to attack the mead-hall Heorot yet again, little does he know what fate (the Norns) have in store for him:

*Ne wæs þæt **wyrd** þā gēn,  
þæt hē mā mōste manna cynnes  
ðicgean ofer þā niht.* (ll. 734-736)

'but his fate that night / was due to change, his days of ravening / had come to an end.' (*Beowulf* 49, emphasis added)

This time, Grendel is to be confronted and defeated by Beowulf, and this apparently had been decreed long before the actual event took place. Even in the Old Saxon *Heliand*, the Norns are present at the conception and birth of John the Baptist:

*scolda im erbiward,  
suiðo godcund gumo gibiðig werden,  
barn an burgun. Bed aftar thiū  
that wif **wurdigiscapu**. Skred the wintar forð,  
geng thes geres gital. Iohannes quam  
an liudeo liht: lik uuas im sconi,  
was im fel fāgar, fāhs endi naglos,  
wangun warun im wlitige.* (III, 194-201)

He [Zachariah] would be given an heir, a very godlike man, [...] a baby within the battlements. [Elizabeth] waited for this, the woman waited for what Fate was creating. Winter skidded by, the year wore on swiftly [...], John came to the light of mankind: his body was beautiful, his skin was flawless as well as his hair and his nails, his cheeks shone. (qtd. in Murphy 36, emphasis added)

In *The Silmarillion*, there is no concrete persona of fate aside from Mandos, but on many occasions, fate and doom appear to be operating as agents independent of any other power. Or if they are not independent of a greater power, it is unclear who exactly has made a decree or "fated" certain events to come to pass (see also Flieger 168-170). For instance, when Beren enters the Kingdom of Doriath and is brought before King Thingol, he explains, "My fate, O King, led me hither, through perils such as few even of the Elves would dare" (*Silm.* 196). And after Beren and Lúthien escape from Angband, Beren convinces



Lúthien to return home to Doriath. They return indeed, “[s]o their doom willed it” (216). They are, however, followed into Doriath by Carcharoth—Morgoth’s hell-hound and the one who bit Beren’s hand off and swallowed the Silmaril it was carrying. He also passes through the Girdle of Melian and enters into the forest without hindrance, “for fate drove him, and the power of the Silmaril that he bore to his torment” (217-18). There certainly appears to be a volitional force guiding the actions of Beren, Lúthien, and Carcharoth, which ultimately result in the latter’s defeat and the delivery of a Silmaril to King Thingol, a pivotal event during the First Age of Middle-earth. Flieger (168-170) adds that this scenario provides a paradox within Tolkien’s legendarium because whereas fate is generally an expression of the ultimate will of Ilúvatar (even if the decree is made by Mandos), it is unclear that these instances of fate are direct decrees from a higher power. But she does not go so far as to suggest that fate is operating as its own entity independent of anyone or anything else.

Túrin Turambar, perhaps the singularly most hapless character in all of Tolkien’s works, finds himself similarly guided by fate and doom (ironically, his title *turambar* means ‘master of doom,’ cf. Hostetter’s discussion of Quenyan etymology). He accidentally slays his friend Beleg, but his actions appear to be more than mere accident:

Beleg drew his sword Anglachel, and with it he cut the fetters that bound Túrin; but fate was that day more strong, for the blade slipped as he cut the shackles, and Túrin’s foot was pricked. Then he was aroused into a sudden wakefulness of rage and fear, and seeing one bending over him with naked blade he leapt up with a great cry, believing that Orcs were come again to torment him; and grappling with him in the darkness he seized Anglachel, and slew Beleg Cúthalion thinking him a foe. (*Silm.* 248)

In addition to the fact that Anglachel is the cursed sword of Eöl, fate also appears to work against Túrin during this tragic ordeal. The case is similar when later Túrin accidentally slays Brandir as well, for “doom [had overtaken] him” (270). And when Maeglin son of Eöl is captured by Orcs after wandering too far away from Gondolin, this too is described as an act of fate:

But often Maeglin went with few of his folk beyond the leaguer of the hills, and the King knew not that his bidding was defied; and thus it came to pass, as fate willed, that Maeglin was taken prisoner by Orcs, and brought to Angband. (290)

This event proves most unfortunate, seeing that Maeglin betrays King Turgon and reveals Gondolin’s secret location to Morgoth, which results in the subsequent sacking of the Hidden City. Yet fate “willed” that these events come

to pass. Throughout *The Silmarillion*, fate and doom themselves appear to be volitional agents acting independently of any higher power's decree.

On the other hand, individuals (and even groups) sometimes appear to be the architects of their own fate or doom. That is, the actions they commit begin a chain of further events over which no control is to be had. A clear case of this comes from the gods of Norse mythology, who themselves are subject to fate because in their act of creating the world, they have subjected themselves to time. As Dronke points out,

That the gods are themselves subject to the newly ordered course of time, the poet has indicated by his ambivalent, and unparalleled, term for their thrones: *røkstólar*. *Røk* can imply 'authority,' but it can also imply 'fate.' The *røk*, the course of happenings that develop under the gods' control, becomes a destiny—*ragnarök* ['the fate of the powers']—that carries them with it. (37)

So even though the gods pronounce their dooms from their thrones of authority (as we saw earlier), in doing so, they subject themselves to "the newly ordered course of time" they created, which will result ultimately in their demise at *ragnarök*. The gods of Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, the Valar, are subject to no such grim future by nature of their creating the world, even though they must remain within the will of Ilúvatar their creator. But there are cases where the act of creation precipitates a number of following events that then lie outside of the creator's hands, most notably Aulë's creation of the dwarves and Fëanor's creation of the Silmarils (Dodds). The dwarves were not part of Ilúvatar's original design, for he only wished to create elves and men (the Firstborn and the Followers, one immortal and one mortal). But when Aulë, one of the Valar, grew impatient from waiting for the creation of the Children of Ilúvatar, he designed his own sentient, conscious creation out of the rocks of the earth—the dwarves. Ilúvatar was not pleased with this, but because of Aulë's pleading, he spared their lives. Yet the relationship between dwarves on the one hand and elves and men on the other proved perilous, as can be seen in the sacking of Doriath, for example, and whose consequences are still found in the Third Age. In *The Lord of the Rings*, after all, tensions still exist between dwarves and elves; this tension, however, is partly resolved in the friendship that develops between Legolas and Gimli. Yet these thousands of years of strife were the consequence Aulë's single act of disobedience. Fëanor's creation of the Silmarils from the light of Telperion and Laurelin, the two sacred trees of Valinor, also results in much devastation and loss of life. Yet here too, it is mainly because of an act of disobedience: after Morgoth and Ungoliant destroy the two trees, the Valar ask Fëanor for the Silmarils so they could restore life to Telperion and Laurelin, but Fëanor refuses

to hand over his creation. Morgoth subsequently steals the Silmarils, and Fëanor's vow to recapture these jewels with his fellow Noldor result in much tumult, thus forming the crux of *The Silmarillion's* plot. So in a sense, Fëanor fated (or doomed) his fellow Noldor and much of Middle-earth to the disasters resulting from his disobedience to the Valar. On a smaller scale, when Beren asks for the hand of Lúthien, King Thingol of Doriath's daughter, the King consents on one condition: that Beren wrench a Silmaril out of the crown of Morgoth and bring it back to him. In doing so, he "wrought the doom of Doriath, and was ensnared within the curse of Mandos" (*Silm.* 197). Thingol's wife Melian adds, "you have doomed either your daughter, or yourself. And now is Doriath drawn within the fate of a mightier realm" (197). Beren's quest is successful, even though it costs the hero his life. Lúthien then chooses a life of mortality in an attempt to be reunited with Beren:

This doom she chose, forsaking the Blessed Realm, and putting aside all claim to kinship with those that dwell there; that thus whatever grief might lie in wait, the fates of Beren and Lúthien might be joined, and their paths lead together beyond the confines of the world. (222)

Mandos grants Lúthien her wish, and Beren and Lúthien are reunited for a mortal life, and they live out their days on the Isle of Tol Galen on the River Adurant. Things do not go so well for Thingol, however, for when he asks the dwarves to encase the Silmaril in the dwarven necklace Nauglamír, the dwarves lust after the jewel and slay Thingol. They attempt to flee but most are killed, and the necklace is returned. Melian, in her grief, returns to Valinor and the protection of her Girdle is hence lifted from the forest kingdom. Beren and Lúthien's son Dior rules briefly in Doriath, but he is killed and Doriath is sacked when the sons of Fëanor attempt to recapture the Silmaril. The doom brought upon the Kingdom of Doriath by its king is thus full wrought. These cases show that not all instances of fate are directly or indirectly manifestations of a higher power's will (as has been argued by Helms, Bullock, and Deyo). Indeed, the actions of Aulë and Fëanor were in direct opposition to the wills of Ilúvatar and the Valar, respectively.

Finally, often implicit in the notions of *fate* and *doom* is a sense of death. Regarding Germanic mythology, Clunies Ross explains, "to have a fate means that one is subject to death as the supreme misfortune" (242). As discussed above, the Norse gods subject themselves to fate when they create the world, and this leads to their demise at *ragnarök*, when Ásgard is overrun by giants. Throughout the mythological texts, "the threat of death and mortality to the world of gods and humans is presented [...] in terms of the action of fate, whether that force is represented in personified form or in more abstract ways"

(Clunies Ross 237). The final words spoken by Beowulf reinforce this Germanic belief in fate resulting ultimately in death:

*calle **wyrd** forspēon*  
*mīne māgas            tō **meodsceaft**e,*  
*eorlas on elne;        ic him æfter sceal. (ll. 2814-2816)*

‘Fate swept us away, / sent my whole brave high-born clan / to their final doom. Now I must follow them.’ (*Beowulf* 189, emphasis added)

There are several cases in *The Silmarillion* where fate and doom point to death as the “supreme misfortune.” For example, a foreboding knowledge drives Fëanor to craft the Silmarils: “For Fëanor, being come to his full might, was filled with a new thought, or it may be that some shadow of foreknowledge came to him of the doom that drew near; and he pondered how the light of the Trees, the glory of the Blessed Realm, might be preserved imperishable” (*Silm.* 69). And no sooner does Fëanor forge the Silmarils than Morgoth and Ungoliant assault and destroy Telperion and Laurelin. Of course, Fëanor’s creation of Silmarils and subsequent rebellion against the Valar causes a whole other chain of events to unfold (see above), but in creating these jewels, he was able to preserve some of the light of the sacred trees before their untimely demise. When Beren passes successfully through the Girdle of Melian into the realm of Doriath, we learn he was successful because “a great doom lay upon him” (193). It was his fate to die in a quest to capture a Silmaril for King Thingol. Indeed, right before Beren dies, he proclaims that “Now is the Quest achieved [...] and my doom full-wrought” (220). Similarly, when Huan—the Valinorian hound who accompanies Beren and Lúthien on their quest—does battle with and defeats the hell-hound Carcharoth, he “in that hour slew Carcharoth; but there in the woven woods of Doriath his own doom long spoken was fulfilled, and he was wounded mortally, and the venom of Morgoth entered into him” (220). He was destined to die in battle with one of Morgoth’s vilest servants. And after Nienor finds Túrin Turambar unconscious after his battle with Glaurung the dragon and mistakes him for dead, she learns from the dying dragon that Túrin was her brother and that she had committed incest with him (and was even carrying his child). She laments, “A *Túrin Turambar turun ambartanen*: master of doom by doom mastered! O happy to be dead!” (268), and promptly commits suicide by throwing herself from the brink of Cabed-en-Aras into the River Teiglin. The place is later called Cabed Naeramarth, “the Leap of Dreadful Doom” (268). Finally, after Ar-Pharazôn breaks the Ban of the Valar and sets foot on the coasts of Aman—an act guaranteeing the destruction of the Isle of Númenor—we learn that Elendil and his sons Isildur and Anárion “fled before the black gale out of the twilight of

doom into the darkness of the world" (336). They escape certain death by fleeing to the shores of Middle-earth. As in Germanic mythology, death is closely tied in with the concept of fate and doom in *The Silmarillion* as well.

Up to now, we have examined the broad semantic field covered by *fate* and *doom* in the older Germanic literatures and Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*. We now turn to an examination of how this central aspect of ancient Germanic culture becomes blended harmoniously with the concept of an omnipotent Christian God who cares for his creation. In the *Heliand*, for example, both Fate and God are present at the birth of John the Baptist:

*That ni scal an is liþa gio liðes anbîtan wînes an is weroldi: so hæbed im uurdgiscapu, metod gimarkod endi maht godes.* (II, 127-129)

That never in his life will he drink cider or wine in this world: this is the way Fate made him, the Measurer marked him and the power of God [as well].<sup>7</sup> (qtd. in Murphy 34, emphasis added)

There is no conflict between the two powers here, for as Murphy explains, "the *Heliand* appears to give God all ultimate power concerning the *bringing into existence* of persons and creatures, but leaves the detailed characteristics of the *essence* and the temporal *length of existence* of these persons to Fate and time" (Murphy 36). Green goes a step further and argues that after the Christianization of the Germanic tribes, God became viewed as the ultimate judge and was more powerful than Fate (387). This certainly appears to be the attitude of Hrothgar in *Beowulf*, who although admittedly is not described to be a Christian, utters sentiments similar to those expressed by Green. When telling Beowulf of the plight he finds himself in at the hands of Grendel, he says:

*is mîn flet-werod,  
wîg-hêap gewanod; hîe wurd forswêop  
on Grendles gryre. God êaþe mæg  
þone dol-sceaðan dæda getwæfan!* (ll. 476-479)

'My household-guard / are on the wane, fate sweeps them away / into Grendel's clutches—but God can easily / halt these raids and harrowing attacks!' (*Beowulf* 33, emphasis added)

That is, although fate is delivering Hrothgar's thanes into Grendel's hands on a nightly basis, God has the power to bring fate's workings to an end. And that he does in sending Beowulf to assist Hrothgar:

*swā hē hyra mā wolde,  
nefne him wītig God            **wyrd** forstōde  
ond ðæs mannes mōd.* (ll. 1055-1057)

'as he would have killed more, had not mindful God / and one man's daring prevented that doom.' (*Beowulf* 71, emphasis added)

Similarly, when Beowulf later does battle with Grendel's vengeful mother, we are told that *hālig God / gewēold wig-sigor* 'holy God / decided the victory' (ll. 1553-1554, *Beowulf* 107). Beowulf is, of course, successful in this battle as well. In *The Silmarillion*, we know that the Doomsman of the Valar, Mandos, pronounces his dooms "only at the bidding of Manwë" (19). Manwë is the leader of the Valar, but he too must abide by the will of Ilúvatar, and we learn very early on how Ilúvatar operates. When Morgoth (Melkor) rebels during the creation of the world, Ilúvatar explains:

And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined. (6)

So no matter what mischief Morgoth may bring to Valinor or Middle-earth, Ilúvatar will cause all these things to work for good.

And this is exactly where the harmonious blend between fate and doom on the one hand and the notion of an omnipotent all-powerful God on the other hand occurs in Tolkien's world. This blend is closely tied in with Tolkien's distinction between *dyscatastrophe* and *euatastrophe*, a distinction he makes in his seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories": whereas *dyscatastrophe* entails "sorrow and failure," *euatastrophe* takes "the happy ending: or more correctly [...] the sudden joyous 'turn'" (153) in its scope. The reality of the *dyscatastrophe* is accepted and acknowledged, but only insofar as "the possibility of these [sorrow and failure] is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies [...] universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (153). Tolkien utters similar sentiments in his other landmark essay, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics." Here, he reconciles death and defeat (i.e. sorrow and failure) at the hands of the "monsters" with his Christian worldview:

The tragedy of the great temporal defeat remains for a while poignant, but ceases to be finally important. It is no defeat, for the end of the world is part of the design of Metod, the Arbiter who is above the mortal world.

Beyond there appears a possibility of eternal victory (or eternal defeat), and the real battle is between the soul and its adversaries (22).

Of course, we know through his notion of eucatastrophe that Tolkien believes good will ultimately triumph in the end. Even though Beowulf dies in battle, the great dragon is also defeated. Interestingly, Tolkien here appears to equate fate (*metod*) with God, “the Arbiter who is above the moral world.” So it is with Ilúvatar, the ultimate Doomsman who sees to it that even the most malicious of actions “shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful” (*Silm.* 6). Throughout the *Silmarillion*, it can be seen that even though there are a number of small-scale dycatastrophies, the metaplot of the legendarium is headed towards eucatastrophe. Take the case of Beren and Lúthien, for example, who although are successful in their quest to take one of the Silmarils from Morgoth, ultimately lose their lives (Beren through a mortal wound, Lúthien in forgoing her immortal elvenhood to be with a mortal man). They are granted another mortal life on Middle-earth, but they do eventually die of old age. This was hardly in vain, though, for their capturing of a Silmaril began the long chain of events that ultimately allowed Eärendil to sail to Valinor—with Silmaril in hand—to plead on behalf of the elves and men of Middle-earth for deliverance from Morgoth’s reign of terror. The result: the War of Wrath, in which the Valar march on Middle Earth, overthrow Morgoth and cast him into the Void, thus bringing the First Age of Middle Earth to its conclusion. And it is Túrin Turambar, the most ill-fated character in *The Silmarillion* and the victim of Morgoth’s most malevolent scheme, who is to arise at *Dagor Dagorath* (the Last Battle) and deliver Morgoth his deathblow:

In that day Tulkas shall strive with Morgoth, and on his right hand shall be Feonwë, and on his left Túrin Turambar, son of Húrin, coming from the Halls of Mandos; and the black sword of Túrin shall deal unto Morgoth his death and final end; and so shall the children of Húrin and all Men be avenged.<sup>2</sup> (*Lost Road* 333)

What may initially appear as gloom and hopelessness in *The Silmarillion* always finds its way back to the music of Ilúvatar, who has designed everything with ultimate good in mind. Unlike in Germanic mythology, fate and doom do not result in death as the “supreme misfortune” (Clunies Ross 242) in Tolkien’s world; rather, they are part and parcel of Ilúvatar’s symphonic eucatastrophe.

Fate and doom are ever present forces in Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*, whether they be indicating a judgment of the Valar, the consequences of one’s

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<sup>2</sup> Granted, the story of *Dagor Dagorath* is not included in *The Silmarillion*, but since it does form part of Tolkien’s entire legendarium, I thought it relevant to the discussion at hand.

action, or death. These various denotations of doom are also to be found in much of Germanic mythology and lore, from which Tolkien no doubt drew much inspiration. Yet another thing heavily influential in Tolkien's shaping of his mythology was his Christian worldview, a mix not unknown in the older Germanic literatures as well. This combination of fate and doom on the one hand and a supposed omnipotent God on the other finds itself at home in both the Middle-earth of Tolkien and of medieval Germania. Fate and doom are key players throughout *The Silmarillion*, but as can be seen in Germanic texts such as the *Heliand* or *Beowulf*, they ultimately fall in accord with the will of Ilúvatar.

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