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Turning Back the Tides: the Anglo-Saxon Vice of *Ofermod* in Tolkien's *Fall of Arthur*

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Abstract

Tolkien's *Fall of Arthur* has at its heart the theme of *ofermod,* a theme which appears throughout Tolkien's criticism and creative work. In his essay "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," he argues that the Anglo-Saxon word *ofermod* in the poem *The Battle of Maldon* condemns the warband's leader for an over-reaching pride which places his men in desperate straits. This paper conducts a study of the word and its derivatives in various Anglo-Saxon texts, taking the *Microfiche Concordance to Old English* as its starting point, and traces Tolkien's creative use of the theme in both his tales of Middle-earth and his pastiche of "The Battle of Maldon" to establish the patterns of its temptation, attraction, use, and effect in his work before analyzing these same patterns as driving motivations for the characters in *The Fall of Arthur.*

Turning Back the Tides: The Anglo-Saxon Vice of *Ofermod* in Tolkien's *Fall of Arthur*

Colin J. Cutler

J.R.R. Tolkien was deeply concerned with the vice of pride in leaders; whether in the characters of Túrin or Isildur, it is pride that drives them to grasp at the personal power that then twists them and drives them to their doom. Tolkien traces this theme in Anglo-Saxon poetry, as well: in his critical pastiche "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" (1953), he discusses both the king Beowulf and the earl Beorhtnoth of *The Battle of Maldon* as Germanic chieftains who succumbed to the allurements of personal glory and by their *ofermod* fell in battle, leaving their people defenseless against their enemies, whether dragons or Danes. The recently published Tolkienian work, *The Fall of Arthur*, takes a Celtic subject, but at its core is this same concern: Arthur crosses the sea to fight the Saxons "for a last assay of pride and prowess" (canto I, lines 15-16), is encouraged in this "folly" by Mordred, and eventually loses his kingdom, which he has left defenseless against enemies both foreign and domestic. Fred Robinson argues that disloyalty was, for the Anglo-Saxon warrior caste, the worst of vices, perhaps worse than pride (436)—in my view, the two were tied very closely. Pride in a subordinate was treason, but overwhelming pride in an Anglo-Saxon leader was disloyal because disastrous for his soldiers—many of whom were family.

Tolkien writes in "Homecoming" that "*ofermod* is in fact always a word of condemnation. In [Anglo-Saxon] verse the noun occurs only twice, once applied to Beorhtnoth, and once to Lucifer" ("Homecoming," 22, n.6). Some scholars have disagreed with Tolkien's understanding of *ofermod* as a word necessarily of condemnation, suggesting that there is a different understanding of the term in an heroic context as opposed to a sacred. In this paper, I will engage with Tolkien's critical understanding of *ofermod* and other critical understandings, and discuss the use of the word and its derivatives throughout Anglo-Saxon literature, focusing especially on the little-noted occurrence of the term in the Anglo-Saxon translation of Boethius. I will then trace Tolkien's creative use of the theme in both his tales of Middle-earth and his pastiche of *The Battle of Maldon* to establish the patterns of its temptation, attraction, use, and effect in his work before tracing these same patterns in *The Fall of Arthur*,

establishing this concern as his motivation for the Celtic hero. The discussion is significant because it adds a hitherto overlooked contemporary use of *ofermod*, roughly contemporary and parallel to that of the Maldon poet, to the ink-spilling that has raged in response to Tolkien's thesis in a way that helps clinch Tolkien's point. This paper also develops the theme as one of Tolkien's major concerns, not just in the *The Tale of the Children of Húrin* or *The Lord of the Rings*, but in one of his earliest begun but most recently published works.

The *Battle of Maldon*, an eleventh-century poetic retelling of a battle fought in 991 AD between the Saxons of Essex and an invading Viking force, played a large enough role in Tolkien's creative imagination to warrant both a scholarly article and a creative pastiche, which were published together in *Essays and Studies* in 1953 as "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son." He first outlines the tactical situation in *Maldon*: With two armies drawn up on opposite sides of a ford from Northey Island to the mainland across the River Blackwater, the Vikings first try to force the passage, then taunt Beorhtnoth into allowing them across for an equal meeting of their forces. The Saxon duke allows them to cross the causeway; after he falls in battle, some of his men flee, but most of them fight to the death beside the body of their lord. Tolkien focuses on Beorhtnoth's decision to allow the Vikings across the causeway as the deciding moment of the tragedy: "This act of pride and misplaced chivalry proved fatal" ("Homecoming" 4). In the article, Tolkien differentiates between the heroic code and the chivalric code—the first is rooted in duty outside of oneself, the latter in the glory one receives from one's actions. He describes Beorhtnoth's *ofermod* as a pride akin to *hubris* that goes beyond legitimate glory-seeking to reckless endangerment of the soldiers for whom he's responsible. In the pastiche, too, Tolkien has his characters comment on this fault, describing him as "Too proud, too princely! But his pride's cheated" and "[n]eedlessly noble" (*Homecoming* 14).

Tolkien refocused contemporary scholarship from the heroic statements of Beorhtnoth's retainers after his death to their leader's motivation that put them into their final desperate situation:

> The *Battle of Maldon* has usually been regarded […] as an extended comment on, or illustration of the words of the old retainer Beorhtwold ["Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens"(5)] […] the finest expression of the northern heroic spirit, Norse or English […]. Yet the doctrine appears in this clarity, and (approximate) purity, precisely because it is put in the mouth of a subordinate […]. ("Homecoming" 19, 20)

Modern statue of Beorhtnoth at Maldon, facing Northey Island, and the causeway from Northey Island. It is still covered by the tides of the Blackwater Estuary for several hours each day (photographs by the author).

In other words, heroism is tied to duty, not to danger. Tolkien argues instead that the poem's narrative hinge is the commentary on Beorhtnoth's decision: "*ða se eorl ongan for his ofermode alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode,* 'then the earl in his [*ofermode*] actually yielded ground to the enemy" ("Homecoming" 20).

In differentiating between Beorhtwold's statement and Beorhtnoth's motivation, Tolkien establishes the difference between what he calls the heroic and chivalric codes. While the heroic code "would direct a man to endure even death unflinching, *when necessary"* [emphasis mine], the chivalric code drives "a man beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess" (20). It is this excess on the part of Beorhtnoth that Tolkien condemns. He makes a further distinction between a desire for glory on the part of a soldier and one with responsibility, however, enlisting Beowulf as his example: Beowulf's wrestling with Grendel was acceptable when he had no subordinates or responsibilities, but "the excess persists, even when he is an old king upon whom all the hopes of a people rest" ("Homecoming" 21). His critical argument is that the *Maldon* poet has penned "lines in fact of *severe* criticism, though not incompatible with loyalty" ("Homecoming" 22, emphasis original) in describing Beorhtnoth's decision as based on *ofermod*. This was a shift in critical emphasis from the heroism of Beorhtnoth's retainers—which Tolkien maintained—to the foolishness of Beorhtnoth as a leader. This stance was not only novel in its time, but also controversial, and led to a wide range of scholars taking up battle positions on either side of the line.

Tolkien further develops this point in the creative pastiche. A verse dialogue written in alliterative meter, the pastiche section of "Homecoming" follows two servants sent to find Beorhtnoth's dead and mutilated body. When they find it and are carting the remains back to the Abbey of Ely, Torhthelm

comments on the lack of bodies upon the causeway. Tídwald, the elder of the two servants, responds that Beorhtnoth was "Too proud, too princely […] so keen was he / to give minstrels matter for mighty songs. / Needlessly noble […] Well, doom he dared, and died for it" ("Homecoming 14). Here Tolkien puts his own concerns, following his interpretation of the *Maldon* poet's, into Tídwald's voice, and Torhthelm's response suggests the impending consequence with an ominous line, "from the North need comes again: / wild blows the wind of war to Britain." War has come and will come again, but their leader and his warriors have fallen, due to his vanity, leaving the poor to be "robbed / and lose the land they loved and toiled on, / They must die and dung it" ("Homecoming" 15).

While the retainers' loyalty to their lord and each other was the central motivation to their heroic effort (Robinson 436), admirable regardless of their leader's wisdom, and portrayed as such, Tolkien complicates our reading of the poet's commentary by refocusing us on the *ofermod* of the leader, over and against the romanticized heroism imagined by critics from the decades prior to the First World War (Robinson 427), a war which had horrified the world with its sheer scale of carnage. Beorhtnoth's warriors are heroic in their stoic embracing of a do-or-die position, but they were placed in that position needlessly; in Tolkien's view, the poet admires the heroism of Beorhtwold and his fellow warriors while simultaneously criticizing Beorhtnoth for his *ofermod.*

Not all scholars have agreed with Tolkien's understanding of the word or of his understanding of the heroic tradition (West 236). Gneuss's encyclopedic essay catalogs the different interpretations of the word in translations of *The Battle of Maldon*: interpretations range from "magnanimous and over-confident" (Gordon) to "pride and self-reliance" (Ker) (119). His successor at Leeds, Tom Shippey, especially takes Tolkien to task, arguing that the Germanic heroic tradition delights in such moments of excess, citing Cynewulf's charge on Cyneheard in the 755 AD entry of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: "One must conclude that those who passed on the story of Cynewulf took a certain delight in the king's sudden decision that life counted for nothing against the furious hatred he felt for his ambusher" ("Boar and Badger" 222). He also cites the *Waldere* fragment (with references to the complete Latin *Waltharius*) as an example of a hero maintaining a position of safety, but with the inclination to "rush out to his death" (225). He notes, rightly, the parallels between these situations and Beorhtnoth's, of "this image of the man in the doorway, poised between two necessities" (225, 226). However, he then extends this argument beyond saying that an Anglo-Saxon audience would have found this situation compelling, to say that the poet therefore could not have meant *ofermod* to condemn Beorhtnoth's decision, instead interpreting it as "brave" (227).

Faced with these competing understandings of *ofermod*, I took to the *Microfiche Concordance of Old English* to catalog the uses of the word and its

derivatives. The vast majority of uses come from monastic rules, homilies, and the Psalms, warning against it as a vice right next to being "*druncengeorn ne beo he to slapol ne beo he to micel aete*"—"eager to drink," "too sleepy," "eager for too much food" (Theodosius of Orleans in *Microfiche Concordance* 316) or exhorting parishioners "*Ne beon ge ofermode ne to weamode ne to niðfulle ne to flitgeorne*"— "do not be *ofermode* nor too dispute-minded, nor too malice-full nor too eager for dispute" (Wulfstan, Homilies, in *Microfiche Concordance* 315). It is often used to translate the Latin *superbus,* which is, simply, overbearing pride.

Its non-clerical uses, on the other hand, are rare. The first Tolkien mentions: the *Genesis B* manuscript, whose original A.N. Doane dates by its language to the late ninth century or early tenth (49), uses it in describing Lucifer: "*deore waes he drihtne urum ne mihte him bedyrned weorðan / þaet his engyl ongan ofermod wesan. / Ahof hine wið his herran*" (208). Pauline Alama translates this latter part as "[God's] angel began to be *ofermod*, raised himself against his master," pointing out also that "other compounds with *ofer-* suggest that the prefix may refer to the relative position of two entities, rather than the magnitude of a single entity" (83). In other words, to say that one is *ofermodig* is not to say that they have a great amount of *mod,* but that they are over and beyond a proper amount of *mod.* This is further supported by the Christian association of Lucifer with his discontent at his own glory, his desire to rival his creator's, and by the directional implication of *ahof*—"to raise." That is, Lucifer had more *mod* than was fitting, and his prideful attempt to raise himself up against his creator was treason; this understanding of *ofermod* is in agreement with Tolkien's in *Homecoming*.

Other non-clerical uses are revealing. The entry for 750 in the Chronicle D reads "*Her Cuðred Waestseaxna cyning gefeaht wið aeðelhun þone ofermodigan ealdormann*" (*Microfiche* 321)—"Here Cuthred, king of the West Saxons, fought with Aethelhun, that *ofermodigan* ealdorman." Just as Lucifer did, Aethelhun rebels against his rightful lord, and the Chronicler ascribes this rebellion to his *ofermod.* Orosius, also, compares Babylon's acceptance of servitude to Cyrus of Persia to Rome's being freed from the rule of the Tarquins: "*þara unryhtwisestana cyninga, þara ofermodgestana, þe mon hæt Tarcuinie*"—"of the most unrighteous kings, and of the proudest, who people called Tarquin" (qtd. in Hosaka, 73). In these examples, we see that, while a rebellious subordinate can be described as having *ofermod*, a ruler who ignores the good of his people can be as well. Tarquin re-appears elsewhere in the Old English corpus as the exemplar of an *ofermodig* king, in the instance of *ofermod* and its derivatives that is most relevant to Tolkien's point.

Perhaps the most important instance of *ofermod* goes unmentioned by Tolkien (he only references in "Homecoming" its instances as a noun in verse) and other critics of his interpretation, but it is highly suggestive for two reasons.

First, it uses the same word in describing a leader who is careless of his subordinates, a parallel to Tolkien's interpretation of *Maldon*. Second, it not only uses the same word, but the same grammatical structure in describing the situation. The West Saxon translation of Boethius's sixth-century *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (*On the Consolation of Philosophy*), dating to the mid-tenth century (Irvine and Godden x), describes Tarquin, last king of Rome, in terms that are both clearly disapprobatory and also parallel in their grammatical structure to the later phrase in *The Battle of Maldon*. Though Boethius's treatise was a philosophical work, not a heroic one, it is also not a strictly religious text, and it does specifically address the roles of leaders and their use of power, and discusses *ofermod* within that context. It is therefore the most relevant comparison to the instance in *Maldon*, supporting the idea that *ofermod* means an excess of glory-seeking, or overwhelming pride.

The eighth prose section of *Consolation* is a treatise on the right uses of power. The section's central point is that power does not make one great; rather, one's greatness lies in oneself, and is evidenced by the right use of what power one has. Boethius's speaker both addresses the reader directly and also gives examples from history. She begins by speaking of the power that belongs to the secular world, translated to Old English from the Latin with the dative *thisse worulde*: "*For þæm anwealde ge eow woldon ahebban up oð ðone heofen gif ge meahten*" ("On account of that power you mortals would like to raise yourselves up to heaven if you could") (Irvine and Godden 82-83). The verb translated "to raise" is the same used of Lucifer in *Genesis B*: *ahebban* is the infinitive, *ahof* is the past tense (Modern English: "to heave, hove"). The sense is then hammered home with the examples of the Gothic king Theoderic (the post-Roman Gothic ruler of Italy, in whose prison Boethius first penned the *Consolation*) and Nero, who "*ealle ða ricu þe him under bioð oððe awer on neaweste forslean and foheregian*"— "destroy and ravage all the kingdoms that are under them or anywhere near by" (Irvine and Godden 82-83).

Boethius then turns to "*Torcwines dagum þaes ofermodan cyninges*"—the days of Tarquin the *ofermodig* king—for his next example. Tarquin is deposed, and the "kingly name" of Roman rulers ended, "*for his ofermettum*" (*ofermettum* is the dative form of *ofermetto*, a feminine variant). Boethius continues the story: the very rulers who deposed Tarquin were then driven out *for hiora* ("their") *ofermettum* (Irvine and Godden 84-85). Within the previous context of his discussion of power and its destructive force under bad rulers such as Theoderic and Nero, the Anglo-Saxon translator clearly intends *ofermod* to describe Tarquin's and the consuls' prideful misuses of power. This strengthens Tolkien's point that it is a word of "severe criticism" and his argument that we should read it as such in *Maldon*.

"*Ofermod*" appears in a similar construction in both the Old English Boethius and in *Maldon*, suggesting a similarity in meaning and understanding for the original audience. Though "*for*" is used in the Boethius translation to indicate an external cause rather than an intention—the Roman council (OE *witan*) removes Tarquin because of his "*ofermettum*," as opposed to Byrhtnoth clearing the bridge because of his own *ofermod*—the structure is parallel: "*for his ofermettum*" in Boethius, "*for his ofermode*" in *Maldon*, both taking the dative (*ofermetto* is a feminine variant on *ofermod*). While there is not enough evidence to say that this phrase is a poetic commonplace, nor that the *Maldon* poet was familiar with the Old English translation of Boethius, the Boethius translator's use of the phrase and the word, precisely within the context of a treatise on a ruler's responsible use of power, is strong evidence of how we should approach the *Maldon* text as well. Not only was the Boethius translator a close contemporary to the Maldon poet (the two works were penned about sixty years apart), their common themes and grammatical choices suggest an agreement in usage.

In "Tolkien and 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth,'" Shippey argues further that Tolkien's interpretation is an "act of parricide" and a rejection of the Germanic heroic tradition (337), attributing Tolkien's reticent impulse to a reaction against the "self-consciously Nordic or Germanic attitudes in Nazi Germany" (337). Here is where he overreaches, however; Tolkien clearly distinguishes between the heroic tradition of bravery in the face of necessity and the "chivalric" excess of glory-seeking ("Homecoming" 20). He also distinguishes between the bravery and glory-seeking of a single fighter without responsibility, which would more clearly parallel the circumstances of Shippey's allies, Cynewulf and Waldere, and the excess of a leader seeking glory without regard to his responsibilities: "Yet [Beowulf] does not rid himself of his chivalry, the excess persists, even when he is an old king upon whom all the hopes of a people rest" ("Homecoming" 21). Further, Shippey misidentifies Tolkien's object of criticism as Nazi Germany, when Tolkien clearly has in mind the Victorians and their chivalric ideals. Tolkien's praise of Beorhtnoth's followers comes with a sly glance at Tennyson's heroic poetry:

> Their part was to endure and die, and not to question, though a recording poet may fairly comment that *someone had blundered*. […] It is the heroism of obedience and love not of pride or wilfulness that is the most heroic and the most moving; from Wiglaf under his kinsman's shield, to Beorhtwold at Maldon, down to Balaclava, even if it is enshrined in verse no better than *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. ("Homecoming" 22-23, emphasis mine)

Tolkien had in mind here not the nationalistic excesses of Nazi Germany (though he certainly rejected these, as well), but the chivalric excesses of the jingoistic Victorian slogans used by British leaders in recruiting and justifying the reckless waste of life in the Great War trenches. In this passage, Tolkien gives a scathing back-hand to Tennyson's "Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs but to do and die" at precisely the same moment he is exalting the heroism of the Germanic warrior. He is not rejecting heroism, but a callous leadership that would take advantage of it.

I agree with Tolkien that the *Maldon* poet's use of *ofermod* indicted Beorhtnoth for his decision rather than glorying in it, without diminishing the heroism of those who served under him. Though Shippey argues well that a heroic culture will find compelling the tension between glory-seeking and wisdom, that is not to say that such a culture will always err on the side of glory-seeking, nor that they will have nothing disapproving to say of those who do, especially if their people are put in unnecessary danger by it. Besides Tolkien's description of the dramatic tension between the heroic and chivalric codes—between devotion to duty and devotion to personal glory—the contemporary textual evidence supports his thesis, as well. By the time *The Battle of Maldon* was written in the early eleventh century, *ofermod* and its derivatives had already acquired a resonance of prideful over-reaching of one's proper responsibilities, and this is therefore how we ought to take it in that poem.

Besides his pastiche on an Anglo-Saxon work, Tolkien develops his understanding of *ofermod* through several of his other works, which we will explore before discussing *The Fall of Arthur*. It drives the most tragic of Tolkien's tales of Middle-earth, the *Narn i Hîn Húrin,* or Tale of the Children of Húrin. Uncharacteristically for Tolkien's *oeuvre*, the bright spots of love offer only a false relief to the gloom, as they end up being lit into fires of destruction—Túrin loses Finduilas, remains unconscious of Nellas's love for him, and his marriage to Níniel is an unwitting case of incest. While this is, on the one hand, thanks to Morgoth's curse on Húrin's family, events are also driven by the pride of several characters, especially Túrin and his mother, Morwen. Both John Garth, in his *Tolkien and the Great War,* and Richard C. West, in "Túrin's *Ofermod,*" approach the story through Túrin's pride. Where Garth sees it as heroic, however, West sees it as symptomatic of *ofermod.* The text and appendices to the story in *Unfinished Tales* support West's reading and establish the tale of Túrin as yet another story Tolkien developed to address the theme of *ofermod.*

First, a brief summary of Túrin's tale, from the *Unfinished Tales*: after Húrin, his father, is captured in the Battle of Unnumbered Tears, Morgoth curses his family: "[U]pon all whom you love my thought shall weigh as a cloud of Doom, and it shall bring them down into darkness and despair" (*Unfinished Tales* [*UT*] 67). After hearing of the defeat, Morwen sends Túrin to Thingol, king

of the elves of Doriath, where he is raised a warrior and fights with Beleg in the northern marches of the kingdom. After an altercation with one of Thingol's liegemen, he flees, expecting to be outlawed, and lives for several years in exile until Beleg brings him news of Thingol's pardon. The *Silmarillion* tells of his involvement in the fall of the elven kingdom at Nargothrond, before he returns to Dor-lómin to confront Brodda, the chieftain who dispossessed his family, and then goes to Brethil after killing Brodda, to hang up his sword and live in peace among the people there. He there meets and marries his sister, known now as Níniel; when the dragon Glaurung threatens the people of Brethil, Túrin goes out to slay him. Glaurung's death reveals the truth that Níniel is actually Niënor, Túrin's sister, and her child is his son. This revelation is only atoned for in suicide—first Niënor's, then Túrin's.

In *Tolkien and the Great War*, John Garth casts Túrin's pride within the context of Tolkien's portrayals of heroism in war, in which Tolkien stood apart from most of his contemporaries' disillusionment in the wake of World War I: "Túrin's dogged struggle against fate sets the seal on the heroic status he achieves in combat. Fate may laugh at his efforts, but he refuses to be humbled" (Garth 304). This echoes Tolkien's own description of Germanic heroism in "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth," as "uttermost endurance in the service of indomitable will" (20). While it is true that Tolkien rejected the complete disenchantment with war that many of his contemporaries embraced, Tolkien is also clear that Túrin's actions, heroic in themselves, brought tragedy not on himself alone, but on those around him. Túrin is several times contrasted with leaders who take more care for their people than themselves, and his mother's pride, too, is implicated in the family's downfall.

Christopher Tolkien's appendices to this narrative reveal several notes by his father that further accentuate this point: though Túrin is overcome by the pain of Glaurung's venom and the spell of his gaze in the main text, Tolkien's notes portray another encounter between them that is reminiscent of Beorhtnoth and the Viking at the Maldon bridge. In Tolkien's notes, Glaurung taunts Túrin with refusing to reveal his face from behind the Dragon-Helm that protected him in battle. Túrin, "being thus taunted, in pride and rashness […] thrust up the visor and looked Glaurung in the eye" (*UT* 155). Just as Beorhtnoth succumbs to the goading of the Viking chieftain and thereby yields to him the land that protects him and his people, so does Túrin give up his own protection for the sake of a taunting enemy.

Tolkien goes further in another note, contrasting Túrin with a leader who represents Tolkien's ideal heroism in leadership. Orodreth, king of Nargothrond, holds back those in his kingdom who, fired by news of Túrin's successes, would go forth to join him at Amon Rûdh in open battle against Morgoth's forces. Tolkien writes of Orodreth that "he was a wise lord, according

to the wisdom of those who considered first their own people" (*UT* 153). This approbation echoes what Tolkien writes of a heroic leader in "Homecoming": "the lord may indeed receive credit from the deeds of knights, but he must not use their loyalty or imperil them simply for that purpose" ("Homecoming" 24). Orodreth was not to be taunted out of the safety of the hidden kingdom, despite those who sought glory in battle. His reticence was not due to fear, but to care for the good of his people in a situation that could only lead to disaster if they moved rashly and pridefully in a search for glory.

Túrin was not alone in his pride, however, and Tolkien is careful to handle this. The portion of Tolkien's narrative that follows Morwen, Túrin's mother, further traces the thread of pride that dooms the family. While both Garth and West discuss Túrin's *ofermod*, Tolkien places the initial threads of the family tragedy in Morwen's hands. Though Húrin had told her to flee Dor-lómin if the battle was lost, she refused for several reasons. She was pregnant with her third child and hoped that Húrin might return. These are both reasonable concerns, and Tolkien handles them as such. However, she also held back from action because of an aristocratic sense of pride: she "would not yet humble her pride to be an alms-guest […] the first strand of the fate of Túrin was woven" (*UT* 70). This separation was Túrin's first sorrow, but she maintained her pride even when Melian invited her to join her son in Doriath: "Morwen would not depart from her house, for her heart was yet unchanged and her pride still high […]. This was the second sorrow of Túrin" (75). Besides the psychological effect this had on her son, in refusing to abandon her home for the Girdle of Melian, her coming into Doriath was delayed past Túrin's time there.

When she then went forth to search for him in the Nargothrond, against the advice of Thingol and Melian, she also refused the pleadings of Niënor for her to return: "she could not overcome her pride, and would not seem thus […] to be led back by her daughter, as one old and doting" (*UT* 115). When Glaurung then came upon the party, Niënor was overcome by his spell and Morwen disappeared. With Morwen gone and Niënor never having met her older brother, the stage was set for the final tragedy of Túrin and Niënor's incest, resolved only by their suicides after all was revealed. Thus was the doom of Morgoth on Húrin's family accomplished—enabled by the pride of each member.

Besides the tales of the Children of Húrin, Tolkien further develops this vice of pride in leaders by attributing Isildur's fall to the temptation of Sauron's Ring directly to his pride. Though *The Lord of Rings* doesn't deal in his motivations besides saying the Ring is precious to him, "The Disaster of the Gladden Fields" in *Unfinished Tales* records Isildur's recognition of his inadequacy to use the Ring, and also his pride in ever thinking that he could. As

the Orcs descend upon his company, his son asks Isildur if he would take up the Ring and use it to "cow these creatures and command them to obey you" (*UT* 273). Isildur responds that he cannot wield it and that "My pride has fallen." When his same son urges him to flee to preserve both the Elendilmir and the Ring, Isildur pleads, "Forgive me, and my pride that has brought you to this doom" (*UT* 274).

Having established *ofermod* as one of Tolkien's primary creative concerns across his corpus, we come now to tracing it throughout *The Fall of Arthur*. An early work, most of it was probably written prior to 1934 (Flieger 214). Though it is only a thousand lines, and the ink-spilling set off by his discussion of *ofermod* in the *Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* was not to come for another twenty years, the prominence of pride in the narrative establishes the theme as a pressing concern to Tolkien that he would develop throughout his lifetime. The first few lines focus the reader's attention on the theme, and the four main characters—Arthur, Guinevere,[1] Mordred, and Lancelot—each suffer from *ofermod* in one respect or another. Each of these four main characters sets the stage for the final tragedy through their pride—Guinevere starts the chain in her desire to manipulate and possess Lancelot, Lancelot continues it as he succumbs to the pride of serving his lady, Mordred capitalizes on the adulterous situation in his own lust for power and sex, and Arthur, in his *ofermod*, yields his land to Mordred in his desire for far-off glory. Throughout the narrative, the tides continue turning, and the height of the human actors' hubris is portrayed by the repeated motif of their attempting to master the masterless seas.

The first seventeen lines of the first canto focus the reader on Arthur's adventure eastward and bring pride to the reader's immediate attention in four different ways. First is the second sentence (I.5): Arthur sails "the tides of time to turn backward"—a hopeless and hubristic effort. The next phrase addresses pride by its negative result: "the heathen to humble" (I.6); elsewhere, other proud opponents are set up to be humbled by power (I.189). In line 16, Tolkien attributes Arthur's foray to his desire for "pride and prowess." Though this could be understood neutrally and as a natural heroic desire, it is off-set by the previous phrase: "after long glory." The grammar here is ambiguous: "so burned his soul / after long glory" could be understood at first to simply mean that Arthur desired glory. But comparison with the preceding lines' image of a man attempting to do summer's work under autumn's waning confirms that Tolkien intends the reader to understand the soul as having already achieved the height of its powers and now trying pridefully to extend it. The last example suggests that part of Arthur's downfall is a return to the pagan heroic code: "to

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[1] As Christopher Tolkien notes, his "father's spelling of the Queen's name was very various"; it is standardized to *Guinevere* in this paper (64n27).

the proof setting / will unyielding in war with fate" (I.16-17). These lines call to mind the passage from *The Battle of Maldon* that Tolkien was to later call "the finest expression of the northern heroic spirit, Norse or English" ("Homecoming" 20): "*hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, mod sceal þe mare þe ure maegen lytlað.*" Tolkien translates this as "Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens" (5) and interprets it as "the clearest statement of the doctrine of uttermost endurance in the service of indomitable will" (20). Though this might initially seem a positive argument for Arthur's motivations, we must be careful to note that Tolkien sees this as heroic only for the warriors bound by loyalty and duty: "the doctrine appears in this clarity […] precisely because it is put in the mouth of a subordinate […]. Personal pride was therefore in him at its lowest, and love and loyalty at their highest" ("Homecoming 20). For Arthur, Tolkien might use the same criticism he reserved for Beorhtnoth: "the king wished for glory, or for a glorious death, and courted disaster. There could be no more pungent criticism in a few words of 'chivalry' in one of responsibility than Wiglaf's exclamation [in *Beowulf*]: […] 'by one man's will many must woe endure'" ("Homecoming" 24).

The drama begins *in media res*; Guinevere and Lancelot have already committed adultery, the fellowship of the Round Table is broken with Lancelot's rescue of her, and Lancelot exiled. Arthur is in the autumn of his reign. But the narrator's commentary draws us back to the beginning of this series of events, Guinevere's desire to possess Lancelot during the height of Lancelot's glory and Arthur's reign. The narrator's portrayal of Guinevere is remarkably unsympathetic. She finds gladness "in his great glory" (III.40), even though she has "great glory" of her own (III.38), a personal renown that becomes overshadowed as she seeks to possess Lancelot. The narrator marks Lancelot's pride in his service to her (III.48, 49), but compares this service to Guinevere's preference for "cold silver / or glowing gold" (III.49, 50). Between the service and the gold, Guinevere would rather have "what she alone treasured / darkly hoarded" (III.52, 53)—she'd rather have the gold. But when it comes to the man himself, "Fair she deemed him / beyond gold and silver to her grasp lying" (III.57-58). This distinction is crucial. Though the service of a knight to his lady was the hinge-point of courtly romance (as the service of a knight to his lord was the hinge-point of Germanic heroism), she rejects this in favor of wealth, and she desires the man himself, therefore placing Lancelot in the position of having to choose between loyalty to his lady and loyalty to his lord. "Strong oaths they broke" (III.62), and with this sexual breaking of oaths, the fellowship of the Round Table was broken.

Verlyn Flieger notes the absence of Arthur's arch-nemesis, Morgan Le Fay, in Tolkien's version of the tale, and argues well that Tolkien conflates her character with Guinevere's. While "Guinevere is no sorceress" (Flieger 219), she

is compared several times to the "fay-woman" (II.28, III.55, III.75, IV.71), and Flieger also points out the etymology of "fay": besides coming from the French for "fairy," it is also related to "fate." Just as the Anglo-Saxon's *wyrd* descended in meaning from "goddess in control of fate" to the modern *weird*, "uncanny," so is the uncanny manipulation of the fay-woman on display in *The Fall of Arthur*. Though she has none of Morgan's specifically magical powers, Guinevere is driven by the desire for control. She scorns Lancelot when he repents of his sundering of the Round Table—insofar as he is divided in his loyalties to her and Arthur, she finds "her life's splendour" (III.101) more important. The narrator then describes her as "proud and scornful" (III.167) and finally portrays her as seeking to control fate through the minds of men: "as gladness waned / danger weighed she in her dark counsel, / her hope in havoc, in her heart thinking / men's fate to mould to her mind's purpose" (III.183-86). Her desire for control extends not only to the wills of men, but to their fates. Besides these references to Morgan Le Fay, which would explain the relentlessly unsympathetic portrayal, Guinevere is also compared to the traitor Mordred in their mutual desire to "master chance / and the tides of time turn to her purpose" (II.212-13). Not only is she a seductress and a traitor, she is driven by pride, to boot. It is this pride that Tolkien uses to drive the tragedy, and it is Guinevere's fall to temptation that brings others down with her.

Tolkien cites pride as Lancelot's downfall, too, but much more subtly and sympathetically, perhaps because he is driven by conflicting loyalties. Where Guinevere's pride was tied up in control of others, Lancelot's pride was in service to his lady and his king. It was when these loyalties came into competition that Lancelot fell and took the peace of the kingdom with him. These competing loyalties become a repeated motif in Lancelot's misery, being stated as the reason for his grimness when we first encounter him (III.15-16) and repeated later in the canto in lines 140-141: "He lord betrayed to love yielding, / and love forsaking lord regained not." Loyalty was the primary duty of the Anglo-Saxon warrior, and betrayal the highest sin; as Fred Robinson points out, "To Christians elsewhere, the primal sin of Lucifer was pride; to the Christian Anglo-Saxon it seems more often to have been disloyalty" (436). Tolkien skillfully combines these two into one—because of his pride, Lancelot ends by betraying his lord.

Lancelot is described twice as proud: In line 48, he is "proudly serving / Queen and lady." Just prior, he is described mostly in superlatives: "noblest," "most daring," "all surpassing," "fairest" (III.20-25), and this is contrasted with Gawain, who "envy […] knew not" (III.32). Subtly, Tolkien uses this to undermine Lancelot's prowess as driven by, or at least resulting in envy. More importantly, Gawain's loyalty was undivided, as he "to his lord alone his love giving; / no man nor woman in his mind holding / dearer than Arthur" (III.34-

36). Lancelot's penchant for glory and remaining unsurpassed and his loyalty to Guinevere then proves to be his downfall when she becomes unfaithful to Arthur and turns Lancelot's loyalty against him with her "tender poison" (III.61). When their breach of loyalty results in open war around the Table and the Queen, Lancelot kills Gaheris and Gareth, thus ensuring Gawain's implacable hatred. This, in turn, forces Arthur to choose between the knight who has been steadfastly loyal to him, but is second in force of arms, and his best warrior, who has betrayed him. Lancelot twice repents of his pride, which Tolkien cites along with his "prowess" as the means for "the rending of the Round Table" (III.89 and 119). This repentance becomes crucial to Lancelot's character, but Tolkien is consistent in his application of *ofermod* and its consequences to heroes, who are most vulnerable to its allurements.

Tolkien's repetition of "he lord betrayed to love yielding, / and love forsaking lord regained not" casts Lancelot in the grey light of the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Wanderer," whose speaker repeatedly bemoans the loss of his lord. Unlike Canto I, which begins immediately with Arthur and his action, Canto III of *Fall of Arthur* opens with a description of a storm-tossed sea before re-focusing on Lancelot, watching the "heaving welter" (III.12) from high in his castle. This contrasts also with Canto II—though it begins with a similar scene of wind-wracked waves, the action remains focused at sea-level, as it follows the "fleet vessel / dark and dragon-prowed" (II.7-8) and the unnamed men aboard, who collectively meet their doom while Mordred sleeps. Lancelot, on the other hand, is "alone" (III.13), facing the sea, and we are quickly drawn into his psychological state—"Deep his anguish" (III.14)—and given the reason for it: "He his lord betrayed to love yielding, / and love forsaking lord regained not" (III.15-16). Canto III then parallels the opening structure of "The Wanderer," which likewise opens with a solitary man on the sea before diving into his introspections.

> *Oft him anhaga* (the lonely one) *are gebideð*
> *metudes miltse* (lord's mercy), *þeah þe he modcearig*
> *geond lagulade* (sea-waves) *longe sceolde*
> *hreran mid hondum   hrimcealde sæ*
> *Wadan wræclastas* (trudges with heavy step the way of [wretch's] exile).
> *[…]*
> *Forþon wat se þe sceal   his winedryhtnes*
> *leofes larcwidum   longe forþolian* (who must long forgo the lore-speaking
>   of his loved friend-ruler).

I have translated the relevant phrases here: the result of Lancelot's pride is that he is now also an *anhaga,* having sailed back to Benwick over the *hrimcealde sae* (rime-cold sea), and is cut off from the counsels of his beloved lord.

Mordred's motivation, on the other hand, is simpler: he is envious of Arthur's power and lustful for Arthur's wife and is willing to take advantage of the tides' turning to acquire them both. As he says when he invades Guinevere's bower, "New tides are running in the narrow waters. / False or faithful, only fearless man / shall ride the rapids, from ruin snatching / power and glory. I purpose so" (II.150-53). In envying Arthur's kingdom, he commits treason, and it is in this treason that Tolkien reveals his Luciferian pride, as well. Mordred is not explicitly described as prideful until the fifth canto, after he has already made his suit to Guinevere, made alliances with pagan kingdoms, seized Camelot, and been defeated at sea by Arthur's navy under Gawain. "On the land [Arthur] looked lofty shining. / Treason trod there trumpets sounding / in power and pride" (V.12-14); Tolkien explicitly connects treason with the lust for power and pride. This connection between treason and *ofermod* is parallel to the *Genesis B* poet's portrayal of Lucifer's rebellion (one of those instances of *ofermod* that Tolkien references in "Homecoming"). As cited earlier, Pauline Alama argues: "In *Genesis B*, Lucifer's *ofermod* is associated with raising himself up: "[God's] angel began to be *ofermod*, raised himself against his master" ["*his engyl ongan ofermod wesan, ahof hine wið his herran*"; 262-63]. He sins by trying to raise his *mod* over God" (Alama 83). It is pride, then, that drives Mordred's envy and lust—the desire to over-rule his ruler. Though he does not seek to change the tides of time, he does desire to use them to his own purpose. In an early passage on Guinevere, both she and Mordred (traitors both) are indicted for the same manipulation of the natural order: "Guinevere the fair, / not Mordred only, should master chance / and the tides of time turn to her purpose" (II.211-213).

This is a repeated trope in *The Fall of Arthur*—Arthur, Guinevere, and Mordred all seek to turn the tides, against nature. As Flieger points out, Tolkien is probably punning on the common root of "time" and "tide" in the "Germanic **tidiz,* 'division of time,' in Old English, *tid* "time, season" (219). A later, Danish king of England once sat upon the shore to prove to his fawning courtiers that, though he could conquer men and lands, not even he, Canute, could turn back the tide. While the story is apocryphal, it would have been familiar to Tolkien and many of his British contemporaries, and would have found resonance in Tolkien's portrayal of kings and tides. Flieger misreads Lancelot, though, when she says that "Lancelot's hope that 'times would change and tides alter' (III, l.218) is a vain one" (219). At this point of the narrative, Lancelot has already repented his pride and is not hoping that "times would change and tides alter"; rather, his hope is precisely that they *do* change and alter, regardless of his opinion on it or anyone else's desire and jostling for control. Just as constant as the changing of the tides is the coming of morning from darkness: "Ever times would change and tides alter, / and o'er hills of morning hope come striding / to awake the weary, while the world lasted" (III.218-20); it is this certainty that

gives Lancelot hope. Even though the "flood was passed" and the tides of Arthur's kingdom and Lancelot's glory were ebbing out, the sun still rises and nature goes on its way, regardless of kings and their kingdoms.

Arthur's last scenes are more ambiguous, but I would argue that he, like Lancelot earlier, sees a sea-change in his heart. The first canto begins with him faring forth, "the tides of time to turn backward" (I.5), setting in motion the tragedy of civil war that Guinevere's, Lancelot's, and Mordred's prideful faithlessness set up. He wins the passage of the sea, by Gawain's might, at high tide: "Tide was turning […] / rocks robed with red rose from water" (IV.225). This victory won, however, he pauses. Where he could have tried again to turn the tides back to their height, he waits, rejecting "ruthless onset" and the "toll of death / to pay for passage" for a passive acquiescence to the coming fate: "let us trust the wind and tide ebbing / to waft us westward" (V.55-63). This is much more in line with a rejection of *ofermod* and a return to Tolkien's sense of the Germanic heroic code as opposed to the chivalric. Arthur has finally begun to recognize his responsibility to his people, sparing them a forlorn assault: "Now pity whelmed him/ and love of his land and his loyal people" (V.37-38). Arthur, too late, has come to accept the role that the tides of time play in the affairs of men, women, and kingdoms, but not before *ofermod* has undermined them all.

Whatever we think of Tolkien's interpretation of *ofermod* and its relation to the heroic code of the Anglo-Saxons—and I would contend that the extant literature supports his reading, at least of the Maldon poet, whose interpretation of events may or may not have fit the actual warrior's code—it is at least clear that the scene made a deep impression on Tolkien and that *ofermod* was an overriding concern throughout his own work. A warrior could die gloriously in battle, and could seek out those situations when he had no other responsibilities—but a leader should not seek glory on his own account, and certainly not at the expense of his followers. Indeed, his contention is that, once placed in a position of authority, a leader's desire for glory is more likely to end in disaster than in the good of his followers, as Wiglaf's foresighted mourning of Beowulf illustrated.

He expands on this theme in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*, and he develops it also in the tales of the Children of Húrin, more or less explicitly in different versions. *Ofermod* is also the driving motivation in *The Fall of Arthur*—Guinevere's lust for Lancelot, Lancelot's desire for glory as opposed to Gawain's service to his lord, Mordred's treachery against his lord, and Arthur's own desire for glory beyond his own realm—all the actors succumb to the temptation of pride, which comes before the fall of kings and kingdoms both.

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