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Historical Bias in the Making of *The Silmarillion*

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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

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Historical Bias in the Making of *The Silmarillion*

Alex Lewis

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The Silmarillion, published some four years after the death of its author J.R.R. Tolkien, was the piecing together of tales that spanned half a century of single-minded writing effort (Tolkien, 1979a, pp. 7-9). Critics have hailed the achievement as the creative equivalent of a whole people (Ezard, 1977, p.16), and indeed it is a complex and many stranded work spanning a vast timescale whose complexity has baffled fans and sometimes thwarted some readers' attempts to penetrate it. But always it has proven itself worth the effort as it contains some of Tolkien's greatest writings and his most powerful tales and descriptions.

However, being as complex and long-viewed as this means that we can regard it in much the same way as a "history book". Indeed, it is written as a history book, and – as the saying goes – history is always written by the victors. In this sense I believe that Tolkien incorporated into *The Silmarillion* – either intuitively or on purpose – the kinds of bias and one-sided reporting of events that occurs naturally within the course of real history. It is perhaps for this reason that *The Silmarillion* is such a powerful and compelling work, because it approximates "real history" in subtle ways rather than merely telling a catalogue of events in shopping-list fashion. Within *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien does give us a clue that perhaps he intended this bias to exist all along, for (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 123) it is admitted that *The Silmarillion* is incomplete and "only a part is here told of the deeds of those days, and most is said of the Noldor, and the Silmarils, and the mortals that became entangled in their fate."

In this paper I wish to examine the internal biases within the story framework and try and uncover the nature of this "political bias" in *The Silmarillion* – that is to say "political" merely within the confines of the world *in which the work is set*, and not within the primary world context. I believe this to be a worthwhile exercise since just as with real history, there are characters who are portrayed as being essentially just and good, on whose side the reader would ally himself, and there are also characters who are portrayed as essentially unreliable or even evil and whom the reader is expected to have little if any sympathy with. To have some idea for the reasons behind the portrayals and which characters fit into this will give us a glimpse into the political dynamics within

the intricate world that Tolkien created in *The Silmarillion*.

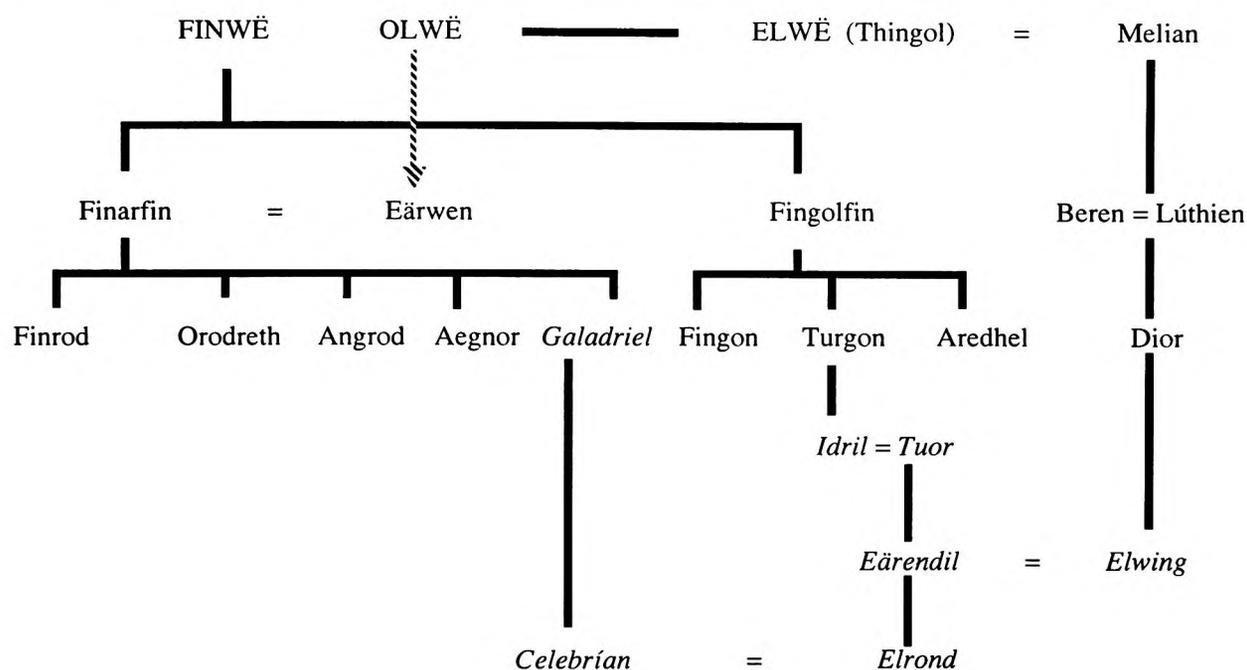
The first question that must be asked is: who wrote *The Silmarillion*? By this I do not mean the primary world author, but instead the internal authorship of the work as we read it and as Tolkien intended it. Christopher Tolkien explains in *The Book of Lost Tales, part I* that the three volumes bound in red leather that Bilbo carried back to the Shire and which were his "translations from the elvish" must have been *The Silmarillion*, and was possibly the device that J.R.R. Tolkien might have used to introduce the reader familiar with Middle-earth and the Third Age into the vast expanse of the earlier years and histories (Tolkien, 1985, pp. 5-6).

So the physical chronicler of *The Silmarillion* within the tale is Bilbo Baggins. It is said that Frodo did not use these writings much as they did not concern the events of the War of the Ring. Bilbo is said to have used all the authorities both written and living within Rivendell to write his work. Let us examine what these sources might have been and their possible affiliations in the context of Middle-earth.

Most obviously there is Elrond. Looking into Elrond's family tree, we know that his mother and father were Elwing and Eärendil (see table 1). Eärendil's parents were Tuor and Idril and Idril's parent who appears within the tales is Turgon of Gondolin. Turgon's father was Fingolfin whose mother was Indis, a Vanya. It is interesting to note that none of the elvish side of the family are Fëanorians and that Fëanor had a different mother to his two half-brothers Fingolfin and Finarfin. Lúthien's parents were Thingol and Melian. At Melian we stop, but with Thingol we once more have someone who is not a Noldo and more significantly not connected to the Fëanorians. The first strand of possible bias thus comes into play: Fëanorians are not very closely related to Elrond and therefore would tend to receive little sympathetic treatment from him. It is to be seen whether one can trace a correlation of any sort between the treatment of characters and their relationship to Elrond through bloodlines.

Then we have Glorfindel who was in Rivendell during Bilbo's stay (Tolkien, 1974a, p. 218). All we know of him is that he was once of Gondolin but he died and returned in the Third Age to Rivendell. He too has no known connection

Table 1: Elrond's Family Tree



Those in italics would have been known personally by Elrond

with the Fëanorians, belonging as he does to Turgon's people who marched from Vinyamar to Gondolin and built the hidden city.

Erestor we know little about other than that he is one of Elrond's people. Being a loremaster he is most likely to be a Noldo, and he would be expected to follow Elrond's "political leanings" as he was closely influenced by his lord.

Galadriel may also have been a source – though not a very strong one from Bilbo's viewpoint. *The Silmarillion* betrays a singular paucity of information regarding her. She lived in Lórien and seldom came to Rivendell, and Bilbo met her rarely. She was also not of the Fëanorians and is said to have been at odds with Fëanor (Tolkien, 1982b, p. 230).

Elrond's daughter Arwen may have been a source of information for Bilbo's writings. She would have been in Rivendell during some of the time that Bilbo lived there. He knew her, from what he says to Frodo on his arrival (Tolkien, 1974a, p. 224). Again it can be reasonably assumed that she too would follow her father's views in historical/political matters.

Non-elvish sources are more difficult to determine. For mortals we probably can suspect only Aragorn whom Bilbo knew very well and who it would be guessed might follow the thoughts of Elrond since he was in love with Elrond's daughter and was brought up in Rivendell and taught by him too. Gandalf the wizard may have been a source for Bilbo, though I would imagine that he was not a very important one. He was close and did not speak much about important things and usually treated Bilbo in a kind though patronising way; for he was not the more worldly-wise Hobbit that

Frodo turned into and to whom Gandalf would make statements of a deeper nature.¹ Also Gandalf's time was that of the Third Age – as he himself tells us (Tolkien, 1974c, p. 220). His knowledge of the earlier times would have been second-hand as he did not become involved with Middle-earth history in earlier Ages. However, his influence may have been crucial in one respect for giving a balance to Fëanor's case, since Gandalf obviously demonstrated a high regard for Fëanor's creativity as he spoke of the Palantír of Orthanc and how through it he might see Fëanor at work (Tolkien, 1974b, p. 181).

So *The Silmarillion* as we receive it is at least third-hand information, usually fourth- and sometimes even more (see table 2) – from the original person who experienced events or some intermediary, to one of the above and then to Bilbo, who was either good at shorthand or had a phenomenal memory. The only parts that can be said to be more closely reported are those told by Elrond concerning his own adventures (see table 2), and the brief telling of the Gondolin tale that Glorfindel might have talked to Bilbo about, though the bareness of that tale as told would indicate that Glorfindel spoke little to Bilbo about Gondolin. Perhaps it was too painful for him to recall it.

I would hypothesise that much as Galadriel was under a ban of exile but passed her test by refusing the One Ring and was allowed to go to the West (Tolkien, 1981, p. 386), Elrond's task was to pass on his knowledge to others so that it would not die out when he left Middle-earth. He had chosen to be of the Firstborn and yet remained in Middle-earth when elves were returning to the West. It is not clear

¹ Gandalf says, "You are old enough, and perhaps wise enough" (Tolkien, 1974a, p. 42).

Table 2: Handing down of story to Bilbo

Ch. 1 and 2	Story of Valar	nth hand
Ch. 3 and 4	Elwë Thingol and Melian	6th hand
Ch. 5 and 6	Princes of Noldor and Chaining Melkor	5th hand
Ch. 7	Fëanor banned	5th hand
Ch. 8	Melkor and Ungoliant	nth hand
Ch. 9	Darkening of Valinor	5th hand
Ch. 10	The Sindar	5th hand
Ch. 11 and 12	Sun and Moon, Men awaken	nth hand
Ch. 13	Noldor return, Battle under Stars	5th hand
Ch. 14	Beleriand and realms	5th hand
Ch. 15	Turgon and Ulmo, Gondolin built, Melian and Galadriel	nth, 4th and 3rd hand
Ch. 16 and 17	Maeglin, Of Men	4th hand
Ch. 18	Battle of Sudden flame, Fingolfin's death	nth and 4th hand
Ch. 19	Beren and Lúthien	5th and nth hand
Ch. 20	Fifth Battle: Nirnaeth	5th and nth hand
Ch. 21	Túrin's Tale including Mîm's story	5th and nth hand
Ch. 22	Húrin's journey, Thingol's death, Dior's death	nth and 3rd hand
Ch. 23	Tuor's story	4th and 3rd hand
Ch. 24	Eärendil's journeys and War of Wrath	nth, 2nd & 3rd hand

just how far his actions were sanctioned and whether the ban covered him too. His family line contains people who did fall under that ban (Tolkien, 1981, p. 407).

Therefore it can be concluded that *The Silmarillion* is essentially an elvish viewpoint of the world and its history, and of the kindred of the elves it is essentially Noldorin but distinctly anti-Fëanorian. I shall give examples that support this conclusion below.

Looking to the text of *The Silmarillion* and the events described there, we can see an immediate drawing up of camps of good/light versus evil/darkness (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 41). This is quite classical practice in historical texts and has been carried out by peoples from the earliest days (see for instance David and Goliath in *The Old Testament*, Shakespeare's treatment of *Richard the Third* and historical texts concerning the War of the Roses, and even today propaganda directed at Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War that has been proved false, such as the babies in the hospital incubators story (BBC, 1992)). This is not to suggest that a fictional history should seek to do anything other than what real life does – quite the opposite – nor to suggest that Melkor was not the “Black Foe of the World” as he was dubbed, but that the mechanism for polarisation is already established in the first pages of the work, and that colours the reader's attitude towards each party thereafter.

Melkor's inability to create but only mimic is something that needs to be looked at in the context of what the Valar as a whole were capable of. The Valar may create *if their actions are sanctioned by Eru*. Yavanna made the Ents and growing things and Aulë made the dwarves. Melkor was said to be the most powerful of the Valar (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 28) and that even his contribution is “part of the whole and tributary to its glory” (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 18). Eru explains to Ulmo that without Melkor's influence snow and ice and steam and clouds might not have come to pass (Tolkien,

1979b, p. 20). Therefore Melkor represents a balance or dynamic that allows Arda to work and develop. He is essential to the genesis of the whole story of the Noldorin elves as are his “creations”: orcs, dragons, trolls and so on. It is *The Silmarillion* that tells us that orcs are elves that were stolen and twisted; it is something the reader takes as a given fact. Melkor and the Orcs might have told a different story.

Of course elves would not have viewed Melkor's role in Arda in a positive way as needed balance, and thus their portrayal of Melkor is as an evil to be got rid of. Tolkien has the elves possessing limited knowledge within his sub-created world and therefore the decisions they take and conclusions they come to are subject to those restrictions. This is a normal mechanism for an author to use for characters within a book.

There are three themes of Eru. Men are a necessary part of Arda, the second-comers. But during the Ages of the Trees only Valinor had light. Middle-earth was dark and the Firstborn came into being seeing only stars. The Valar persuaded them to come and live in the light of Valinor; they did not instead spread the light beyond their realm to all of Middle-earth. They were in effect acting *possessively* to the light. The elves who didn't heed the call to go to Valinor are dismissed from consideration as “Moriquendi”. Yet we know from when the Noldor returned to Middle-earth that those elves that had remained behind were well organised and lived in peace for much of the time (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 107). Even the Teleri are mildly reprimanded for their lack of steadfastness (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 71) whereas the Vanyar (Elrond's ancestry contains Vanyar blood from Indis) are exalted as being elvish perfection (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 69). When Melkor was imprisoned elves lived in bliss in Valinor, but beyond, it was not possible for mortal men to arise since the sun and moon had not yet risen (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 122). These lights that shone equally upon all the lands of Arda

were needed by mortal men. Therefore it can be said that the demise of the Two Trees was a necessary part of Eru's plans in order to allow light to reach all of Arda for the arising of the Second-comers. Indeed, Fëanor's words (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 97) are as follows: "Here once was light, that the Valar begrudged to Middle-earth, but now dark levels all . . ." In this there is the germ of truth about the Valar's use of light in Arda, but it is presented as Fëanor's folly of the darkness of his heart speaking. Once more, we have evidence of a political slant to events that give *The Silmarillion* a realism far removed from mere contrivance.

The elvish centrality of *The Silmarillion* can be seen in the description of death as the "gift of Ilúvatar". Elves do not understand death; it does not affect them, therefore they can be philosophical about it. Men have not the same viewpoint and are always described as being coarse and imperfect. Yet at the last Arwen describes death as she sees Aragorn die:² Now at last an understanding of death comes to the deathless.

With the enslavement of Melkor by the Valar we have the first political statement. *The Silmarillion* is at pains to point out that elves had no part in the battle to enslave Melkor and thus his blame of them for causing his downfall is unjust (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 59). Thereafter, propaganda against Fëanor and his sons begins, showing Fingolfin and Finarfin to be reasonable sons of Finwë, and Fëanor to be hot-headed and impetuous. Finwë is painted as a fairly neutral character, misguided perhaps in his love for his eldest son (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 75). This fits in with the pattern of Elrond's ancestry, Finwë being a direct ancestor of his as are Fingolfin and Finarfin, but Fëanor is less directly related. Even though Elrond through Bilbo has to admit that Fëanor was the greatest of the Noldor, there is a definite attempt to show that even his greatest creations were not his own – the Silmarils were jewels made with the light of the Two Trees, i.e. they came of Yavanna, a point driven home at the time of their darkening by Tulkas: "And did not the light of the Silmarils come from her work in the beginning?" (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 91). The argument between Fëanor and his half-brothers is shown as a completely black and white situation, with Fëanor entirely in the wrong and the two half-brothers acting with extreme forbearance and showing mercy towards him. This is the kind of event that may well contain the "seeds" of political bias – though as with all of these events, there is no other source to which we can turn to obtain alternative accounts; all there is for the discerning reader is a steady body of evidence pointing in one way. The disagreements culminate in the taking of the Oath and the Kinslaying at Alqualondë; other Noldor took their part in that battle, but it is the Fëanorians who are said to shoulder the principal guilt and blame (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 103).

Fëanor and his kin cannot give us the benefit of their viewpoint as they are not writing *The Silmarillion*, the kin of Fingolfin are. It is noteworthy that of the other Noldor present at the time of the Oathtaking it is said, "Fingolfin and Turgon his son therefore spoke against Fëanor, and fierce

words awoke, so that once again wrath came near to the edge of swords." Fingolfin and Turgon are Elrond's paternal antecedents and they are skilfully cleared of blame, more so than others (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 98).

Leaving for Middle-earth, Fingolfin and his people are left behind on the shores of Aman, and Fëanor's words to his son are reported; how could Elrond or Fingolfin's people know these words? They were told to Maedhros and it would seem unlikely he would wish to admit such sentiments to any. The followers of Fingolfin were on the western shore and would only have seen the light of the burning ships at Losgar (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 106). Yet the departure of the Fëanorians almost seems to occur at the wish of the powers of the West or rather of Ilúvatar (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 105): "And as though it came at his call, there sprang up a wind from the north-west, and Fëanor slipped away secretly." Later, it says (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 129), "many of Fëanor's people indeed repented of the burning . . . and they would have welcomed them [Fingolfin's folk], but they dared not, for shame." Again this is a distinctly pro-Fingolfin camp stance that Tolkien casts events in, thus lending the partisan nature of Noldorin politics to the enrichment of *The Silmarillion*.

Once in Middle-earth, we are given detailed and lavish descriptions of the dwellings of Fingolfin's children and of Thingol; Gondolin, Nargothrond and Doriath, but we are left with bare bones of areas where the seven sons of Fëanor live.³ Maedhros and his brothers live "east beyond Aros" and this important sector is dismissed in thirteen lines of text! Yet the Fëanorians and Thingol between them "bore the brunt of Morgoth's attacks"! This is another instance of the political bias skilfully built into *The Silmarillion*; once more, this could be intentional on the part of Tolkien to create the "feel" of real history as in the real world.

Another instance of the essentially elf-centred nature of *The Silmarillion* is the treatment of dwarves in the histories (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 108): "Ever cool was the friendship between the Naugrim and the Eldar, though much profit they had one of the other." The treatment of Mîm's people is given brief mention in Túrin's tale – they seem to have been hunted down like animals by the elves, and even the elf-biased *Silmarillion* can do little to ease the wrongness of this act, though it is not dwelt upon very much (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 245) as one comes to expect, skilfully mirroring real history once more.

In Beleriand Thingol is given a high profile – a whole chapter to himself (Chapter 10) – and the fact that he did not go to Valinor is played down. The only other leader of elves who is mentioned is Denethor, who led the Green-elves, and even he is glossed over. Why is Thingol raised in prominence? Possibly because Thingol is the father of Lúthien, who bore Dior, whose daughter was Elwing – Elrond's mother.

A clear indication of the anti-Fëanorian bias in *The Silmarillion* is given by the account of the Battle-under-Stars (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 126). This was a real victory for the

elves, but of course it was achieved by the Fëanorians alone. How is it described? Is it given a chapter to itself? No, it is dismissed in seventeen lines. Compare with the Battle of Sudden Flame which takes up the whole of a chapter (Chapter 18) and which was a defeat. Similarly, Fëanor's demise is given a caveat: he is extremely courageous: "Nothing did he know of Angband or the great strength of defence that Morgoth had so swiftly prepared; but even had he known it would not have deterred him . . .", but it *adds*: "for he was fey, consumed by the flame of his own wrath" (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 126). This subtlety devalues Fëanor's courage by insinuating that it was a fit of battle fever or berserker action. Fëanor fought with many Balrogs (unlike Ecthelion who fought only one) but this battle is dismissed in six lines (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 126). How skilfully the method of bias is woven into the story-line to make it seem closer to real history than to contrived events.

When first contact is made with Thingol, Angrod is sent to talk to the king in Doriath (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 132). It is said: "but being true, and wisehearted, and thinking all griefs now forgiven, he spoke no word concerning the kinslaying." How could he possibly have thought all was forgiven? The words of the messenger from Mandos were quite clear. Indeed, the fact is mentioned in passing by Melian in one brief line much later on (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 155). So, Angrod was deceiving Thingol whose kin were Olwë's, Lord of the Teleri. But this deception is glossed over – because he is not of the Fëanorian camp. Angrod is the son of Finarfin and so related more directly to Elrond. Thingol also is treated very sympathetically at this point, seeing as he all but excluded any elves to come to his halls other than as guests: "King Thingol welcomed not with a full heart the coming of so many princes in might out of the West, eager for new realms . . ." (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 131). This is a cool welcome and he is not overly criticised for this and other worse actions. But then Thingol was directly related to Elrond. Thingol sends only Mablung and Daeron (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 134) to the Mereth Aderthad, Feast of Reuniting. He was granted twenty years of peace from Morgoth by the actions of those Princes who invited him to that feast, so this seems more than a little ungrateful of him.

Fingon for some reason seems to be played down as regards his valour; he saved Maedhros single-handed and was friendly with the son of Fëanor (was this why, perhaps?), and he routed the Orcs and wounded Glaurung and made him retreat (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 138). Yet his brave act was not made as much of as Fingolfin's. Once more, an intricate web of subtle bias is being built up and it is hard to think that this was not done on purpose to simulate a "real world" history full of political dynamics.

Ulmo comes to speak to Turgon and tells him to prepare armour and leave it in Vinyamar. He tells him (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 150): ". . . the curse of the Noldor shall find thee too ere the end . . ." But how was Turgon implicated in the quest of the Silmarils? We can tell how some elves were drawn into it; Thingol desired a Silmaril and Finrod was drawn by his promise to Beregond into Beren's quest. Turgon as far as we know never desired the jewels. This is

probably one of the most puzzling parts of the tale. It is only the coming of Maeglin and Eöl to Gondolin that bring about its demise. Could it be that Eöl was somehow connected to the Fëanorians or he or his son had nurtured a desire of the Silmarils? We shall never know. For a further discussion of bias against Eöl and Maeglin, see Appendix A of this paper.

The Silmarillion's view of men is decidedly elf-centred (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 169): "Now the Eldar were beyond all other peoples skilled in tongues . . . Men had long had dealings with the Dark Elves east of the mountains, and from them had learned much of their speech." This is certainly a distinct bias towards elves.

The tale of the awakening of mortal men has a strong parallel with the fall of Adam and Eve, thus mirroring "original sin" (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 170): "when men awoke in Hildórien . . . spies of Morgoth were watchful . . . tidings were soon brought to him; and this seemed to him so great a matter that secretly under shadow he himself departed from Angband and went forth into Middle-earth, leaving to Sauron the command of the War." But: "Of his dealings with Men the Eldar indeed knew nothing . . . a darkness lay upon the hearts of Men . . . even in the people of the Elf-friends whom they first knew." So Morgoth was essentially playing the role of the serpent in Eden (Hildórien). Therefore according to elves, all men are untrustworthy. This is a very skilful biasing of the history by the author towards the elvish peoples, the Noldor in particular.

Indeed, with men, it seems that the Fëanorians were more helpful to them than the others (Tolkien, 1979b, pp. 171-2). See where men dwelt: Bëor and Baran went to Estolad – the lands of Amrod and Amras. Haladin went to Thargelion in the north – the lands of Caranthir. Caranthir looked kindly on men (Tolkien, 1979b, pp. 175) and did Haleth great honour – which proves that he was capable of kindness, unlike the bad press he is given earlier in *The Silmarillion*.

Amlach sought service with Maedhros after Morgoth's deceit was uncovered (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 174). But Thingol simply banned men from Doriath and was excused for doing so (Tolkien, 1979b, pp. 172-3): "he was ill pleased . . . because he was troubled by dreams concerning the coming of Men, ere ever the first tidings of them were heard. Therefore he commanded . . . [etc.]". A skilful biasing in his favour by the author.

The puzzle of Galadriel is the most interesting, for here we can see Tolkien constructing a "political" statement on a character. She is said to depart from Valinor at the same time as the Fëanorians in *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 98), and yet in *Unfinished Tales* we have a possible reconstruction of the story to show that she left Valinor independently of the others (Tolkien, 1982b, p. 232). This is as Christopher Tolkien says an attempt to elevate her in status above that originally intended. More discussion of Galadriel's role in *The Silmarillion* and how it closely follows this pattern of bias towards certain elvish families is given in Appendix B of the paper. It shows that the pattern Tolkien established (whether consciously or not) is maintained with Galadriel as with the other characters.

At the Dagor Bragollach, we have another clear indication

of bias against the Fëanorians (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 180). The text tells us that Fingolfin was ill at ease and wanted to attack Morgoth, but that the other Noldor “were little disposed to hearken to Fingolfin, and the sons of Fëanor at that time least of all.” But what of their Oath?⁴ Surely any plan to attack Morgoth should have elicited their immediate help? It does not fit. And yet, we are told that the Fëanorians in the Dagor Bragollach were the hardest hit by Morgoth (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 183): “war had gone ill with the sons of Fëanor, and well nigh all the east marches were taken by the assault. The Pass of Aglon was forced, though with great cost to the hosts of Morgoth.” So they fought, and they fought well. But it is not given much good press. Indeed, of all the elves, Maedhros was probably the most successful of them during this battle (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 183): “Maedhros did deeds of surpassing valour, and the Orcs fled before his face . . . for . . . his spirit burned like a white fire within, and he was as one that returns from the dead.” It is told simply that the Fortress of Himring could not be taken. This is dismissed in seven lines.

Compare now if you will the description of Fingolfin’s battle with Morgoth (Tolkien, 1979b, pp. 184-5): We are given sixty-eight glorious lines of vivid description – yet no one else was there to witness the duel! This is all hearsay and legendry. Yet the detail is incredible: Ringil the sword of the High King glittered like ice and Fingolfin inflicted seven wounds on his foe. Morgoth bore down Fingolfin three times to the ground and the High King hewed at Morgoth’s foot before he died. But this ties in well with Elrond’s family connection to Fingolfin, and so the bias reinforces the “historicity” of the work.

We see the same threads of bias in another tale: When Huor and Húrin are brought to Gondolin, Maeglin is given an extremely bad press for being against allowing them to leave. But Turgon the King had made his rule and he was breaking it (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 191), and it is precisely because Turgon allows them to leave that Morgoth learns vital information: “the strange fortune of Húrin and Huor reached the ears of the servants of Morgoth.” Therefore Morgoth takes Húrin alive to find out more (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 235) and he betrays Gondolin by going to the Fen of Serech (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 276): “and Morgoth smiled, for he knew now clearly in what region Turgon dwelt . . . This was the first evil that the freedom of Húrin achieved.” Morgoth had his spies draw closer to where he now guessed Gondolin to lie (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 291): “. . . none knew [in Gondolin] that the region wherein the Hidden Kingdom lay had been at last revealed to Morgoth by the cries of Húrin . . .” Thus was Maeglin taken. The differences between the full account given in *The Book of Lost Tales* and the short version in *The Silmarillion* are marked. Here we see Maeglin in the worst light (Tolkien, 1986, p. 178). But Turgon was a direct antecedent of Elrond and Maeglin was not, and so he is blamed entirely for the fall of Gondolin (Tolkien, 1986, p. 178). Tolkien began revising this tale (Tolkien, 1982a, pp. 5-6) but never finished it: how would he have treated Maeglin

the second time around? We shall unfortunately never know.

If any character is likely to be favoured then it is without doubt Beren who will be treated kindly by *The Silmarillion*. He is a great-grandfather of Elrond. Thingol acts abominably towards him and towards his own daughter – imprisoning her in a tree and setting Beren on a quest that he believes will lead to his death (Tolkien, 1979b, pp. 201-2): “. . . if there were hope or fear that Beren should come ever back alive to Menegroth, he should not have looked again upon the light of heaven, though I had sworn it.” Beren is essentially defeated in the dungeons of Sauron (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 211) until Lúthien comes to save him, and once again it is Lúthien’s power that allows them to reach Angband and gives Beren a chance to cut a Silmaril from the iron crown (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 217), and it is Beren’s lack of power that allows Carcharoth to bite off his hand with the jewel (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 218) and eventually to kill Beren in the woods. Yet he is honoured as a great hero; it was actually Lúthien who was the truly heroic figure in the tale, but he is the one credited in *The Lord of the Rings* by Elrond with the bravery of gaining the Silmaril (Tolkien, 1974a, p. 259).

The Union of Maedhros (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 226) is a master stroke of tactics that might have worked. But critically Thingol would not cooperate or help (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 227). Yet he is not criticised for his lack of cooperation, rather Celegorm and Curufin are held to blame (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 227). And in this Fifth Battle we begin to see the elvish bias of *The Silmarillion* working against men. Húrin was a far better tactician than Fingon or Turgon. He had the best idea of keeping the high-ground advantage (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 230) – a fact that is overlooked in the eulogising of Fingon: Indeed, Fingon’s forces break ranks and without orders! This shambles is portrayed as “glorious” – much as the charge of the Light Brigade might be, and *for much the same reasons* (i.e. that particular version of history is told by the British in Crimea). Indeed elvish bias against men in this battle is pinpointed by one telling sentence (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 232): “Yet neither by wolf, nor by Balrog, nor by Dragon, would Morgoth have achieved his end, but for the treachery of Men.” Yet tactically it does not seem such a fatal blow to the elvish alliance. The damage was already done (a) by the uncoordinated attack of Fingon’s forces and (b) by Maedhros’s delayed arrival, and (c) by Glaurung. The bias against dwarves is even greater perhaps, for Azaghâl’s valour in wounding Glaurung is dismissed in one paragraph (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 233)! This was a great deed and one can see the subtle skill of the author in giving it this lesser level of attention. To have done more would have altered the balance of the work and made it less elf-centred. And again of the sons of Fëanor, there is but one small paragraph (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 232): “though all were wounded none were slain.” So they fought valiantly and skilfully it seems – but history passes them over: for this history, like real history, is written by those who see it in a particular way: Elrond’s way.

⁴ Compare with an earlier scene where the six brothers risked Maedhros’s life because: “they were constrained also by their oath, and might not for any cause forsake the war against their Enemy” (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 128).

Túrin's tale is covered extremely carefully (it is no coincidence, perhaps, that it was one of the tales with the largest number of versions) – and it seems to be so since it casts Thingol in a good light. For about the only time in his whole life he seems to have acted charitably. He succours Túrin, forgives his slaying of Saeros, allows Beleg to seek him, succours Morwen and Nienna and even allows Húrin to enter Doriath and cast the Nauglamír at his feet and accuse him of deeds that he had not committed. Had it been Beren instead of Húrin, he would surely have been slain on the spot, but Thingol stays his hand. Celegorm and Curufin are criticised for turning the people of Nargothrond against their king (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 204): the years of secrecy had actually served them well. When Túrin persuaded them to build a bridge and to go out openly against their foes, their downfall came swiftly (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 254). So were the sons of Fëanor not in fact being wise to suggest secrecy? In this we see a differential bias, the order being that Túrin is treated better than the Fëanorians. Túrin is shown as an ill-fated person, while Tuor (being more closely related to Elrond) is cast in quite a different light and always seems to be right about everything; of course they were different characters, but it is interesting to note the family connections, all the same. It fits the political bias of everything that precedes it, too. We have the line of bias: Tuor – Túrin – Fëanorians.

The extant versions of the role of the dwarves in the slaying of Thingol and the taking of the Silmaril and Nauglamír are interesting. In *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 281) the dwarves are shown in a very bad light: “. . . and they were filled with a great lust to possess them [Nauglamír and Silmaril], and carry them off to their far homes in the mountains. But they dissembled their mind, and consented to the task.” But in *The Book of Lost Tales* (Tolkien, 1986, p. 227): “they knew nonetheless that they were prisoners, and trying the exits privily found them strongly warded.” Tolkien here I feel intentionally builds up the elvish bias against dwarves in the final versions of the work. It is these tensions that give *The Silmarillion* its dynamics and realism.

Coming to Eärendil, Elrond's father, we see him forsaking their mother Elwing for a long time to go to sea. She grieved for him and yet he is not reprimanded by history for that (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 296): “and she sat in sorrow by the mouths of Sirion.” And had he remained behind, would the Fëanorians have attacked Elwing's folk? It is difficult to determine such a thing, of course.

The final act in Beleriand's history, the capture of the two remaining Silmarils by Maedhros and Maglor, appears to be far too simple. Eönwë would surely have taken more care, since Maedhros and Maglor had demanded the jewels from

him (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 304): “And they sent a message therefore to Eönwë, bidding him yield up now those jewels which of old Fëanor their father made and Morgoth stole from him.” Could this be the will of Ilúvatar working to ensure that the Silmarils did not return to Valinor and perhaps be used in an attempt to rekindle the Two Trees? For Eönwë tells the two brothers (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 304): “The light of the Silmarils should go now into the West, whence it came in the beginning . . .” This seems to indicate they are planned to be kept exclusively by the Valar in the West and that this may be contrary to Ilúvatar's designs.

To compare the writing of *The Silmarillion*, which is elf-written, to man-written narrative, we can look to the section “Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age.” Here, history as told by men is put into its context. The whole of *The Lord of the Rings* and its major appendices are summarised in two pages (Tolkien, 1979b, pp. 365-6); this is Elrond's version, as opposed to *The Lord of the Rings*, the history told by Frodo and corrected by Aragorn.

So the political slant to events is what gives *The Silmarillion* a realism far removed from mere contrivance. The incidences of narrative bias throughout the text towards certain characters and against others seem to suggest that they were placed there on purpose by the author, rather than a natural development, reinforcing in my belief the enormous skill of the author by which the work gains such credibility and realism for the reader.

As a final word, I shall give the floor to the words of Professor Tolkien himself, as expressing views on the subject of war and the victors, written to Christopher on 30th January 1945. This (Tolkien, 1981, p. 111) indicates that he was more aware than many of his time of the perils of victory and biases of history: “I have just heard the news. . . . Russians 60 miles from Berlin. It does look as if something decisive might happen soon. The appalling destruction and misery of this war mount hourly: destruction of what should be (indeed is) the common wealth of Europe, and the world, if mankind were not so besotted, wealth the loss of which will affect us all, victors or not. Yet people gloat to hear of the endless lines, 40 miles long, of miserable refugees, women and children pouring West, dying on the way. There seem no bowels of mercy or compassion, no imagination, left in this dark diabolic hour. By which I do not mean that it may not all, in the present situation, mainly (not solely) created by Germany, be necessary and inevitable. But why gloat! We were supposed to have reached a stage of civilization in which it might still be necessary to execute a criminal, but not to gloat, or hang his wife and child by him while the orc-crowd hooted. The destruction of Germany, be it 100 times merited, is one of the most appalling world-catastrophes.”

Appendix A: A more detailed discussion of Eöl and Maeglin

Of Eöl we have few facts. He is said to be “of the kin of Thingol” (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 159) and is named the Dark Elf. But this is a derogatory term used of Thingol too (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 132). Eöl says to Maeglin: “You are of the house

of Eöl, Maeglin, my son, and not of the Golodhrim. All this land is the land of the Teleri” (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 161). But we have no idea who related this information to Elrond. Certainly Eöl and Aredhel died within a short time of

arriving in Gondolin and must hardly have been able to talk to anyone, and Maeglin would hardly have admitted such words to Turgon, for he was trying to curry favour with his uncle (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 166). Also, a sharp conversation between Curufin son of Fëanor and Eöl in the deep woods is related – but by whom? Eöl can hardly have lived long enough to sit and tell this tale. Eöl “thanks” Curufin for helping him (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 163): “It is good, Lord Curufin, to find a kinsman thus kindly at need. I will remember it when I return.”

Curufin: “Do not flaunt the title of your wife before me. For those who steal the daughters of the Noldor and wed them without gift or leave do not gain kinship with their kin.” This skilfully casts both speakers in a bad light – Eöl as a grudge-holder and Curufin as a hothead. It has to be remembered: who was the witness to this conversation? Nobody.

It is interesting to see how Maeglin (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 160) is described in terms very much like those for Fëanor himself! “Then he called him Maeglin, which is Sharp Glance, for he perceived that the eyes of his son were more piercing than his own, and his thought could read the secrets of hearts beyond the mist of words.” Also (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 160): “His words were few save in matters that touched him near, and then his voice had a power to move those that heard him and to overthrow those that withstood him.”

Compare that with what is said of Fëanor (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 74): “He was tall, and fair of face, and masterful, his *eyes piercingly bright* and his hair raven-dark; in the pursuit of all his purposes eager and steadfast. Few ever changed his courses by counsel, none by force.” And (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 96): “Fëanor was a master of words, and *his tongue had great power over hearts* when he would use it . . .” This is somewhat uncanny and there seems to be an echo of Fëanor within Maeglin; both bring about destruction to peoples by various ways. This can be traced even further and into

creativity. The craft of Eöl and Maeglin is mighty. Indeed, only Fëanor or Celebrimbor created things in such abundance apart from them. Eöl made the magical dark swords Anglachel and Anguirel, and the dark metal *galvorn* (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 159). Maeglin fashioned the seventh gate of Gondolin according to the last writings on Gondolin (Tolkien, 1982b, p. 49). Oddly, there is a glimpse of another thread that enters the tale (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 163). Turgon had a liking for Maeglin: “and he looked with liking upon Maeglin his sister-son, seeing in him one worthy to be accounted among the princes of the Noldor.” And Maeglin was not unvaliant. At the Nirnaeth (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 166): “Wise in counsel was Maeglin and wary, and yet hardy and valiant at need. And that was seen in after days: for when in the dread year of the Nirnaeth . . . Maeglin would not remain in Gondolin as regent of the King but went to the war and fought beside Turgon, and proved fell and fearless in battle.” Yet he is then portrayed as a craven who betrayed Gondolin to save his life and to gain Idril (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 292) – even though it is said he loved the beauty of Idril and desired her without hope (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 167). If he had no hope in this, why should he bother to insist?

Of Aredhel (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 160): “It is not said that Aredhel was wholly unwilling (to marry Eöl).” Indeed, there seems to have been a deep rift between the King and the White Lady of the Noldor which *The Silmarillion* seems to play down. She “weariest of the guarded city” – but only after staying there for 200 years. On her departure, bitter words were spoken by her to Turgon her brother: “I am your sister and not your servant, and beyond your bounds I will go as seems good to me. And if you begrudge me an escort, then I will go alone” (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 157). Was it Idril that did not see eye to eye with Aredhel, perhaps? Such “family matters” are kept beyond the remit of *The Silmarillion* when it comes to Elrond’s immediate kin. The same is not the case with either the Fëanorians or mortals such as Túrin.

Appendix B: More on Galadriel’s treatment

Galadriel’s reported actions in Beleriand in the First Age are few, suggesting that perhaps she was not a significant source of information for Bilbo’s scholarship, but she did play a key part in bringing Thingol’s wrath upon the Fëanorians. It is Galadriel who first tells Melian of the Silmarils and Finwë’s death (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 152). But she does nothing more than raise Melian’s suspicions concerning the Noldor. After this Melian is against the Fëanorians (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 152) but Thingol is still ambivalent. Then a short while later on hearing from Círdan, Thingol turns against the Fëanorians and the Noldor and bans Quenya from being spoken in his realm (Tolkien, 1979b, pp. 153, 155). Thingol’s banning of Quenya is by Tolkien’s standards a heinous crime; forcing a language out of existence, the elvish mode of communication

that was closest to the Valar. Yet Thingol is not castigated for this as much as one might expect – because of his connection to Elrond; another example of the bias built into the story as it is told in *The Silmarillion*.

Galadriel also does not return to Valinor after the War of Wrath – she is rather glossed over at this juncture in preference to the acts of the sons of Fëanor (Tolkien, 1979b, p. 306). This is of course to be expected as the story is of those events connected with the Silmarils, but it also adds to the slant of events reported. Thus Galadriel is shown to be close to Elrond – they are both Ringbearers, but, more than that, they are related by the marriage of Elrond to Celebrían, Galadriel’s daughter. Therefore Galadriel is treated well.

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