



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

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Volume 14  
Number 3

Article 4

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Spring 3-15-1988

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### **Recommended Citation**

Greenman, David (1988) "*The Silmarillion as Aristotelian Epic-Tragedy*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 14: No. 3, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol14/iss3/4>

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### *The Silmarillion* as Aristotelian Epic-Tragedy

#### Abstract

Illustrates how the First Age narratives in *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales* implement key ideas from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Identifies the history of the first age as Aristotelian epic-tragedy.

#### Additional Keywords

Aristotle. *Poetics*—Relation to *The Silmarillion*; Epic tragedy in *The Silmarillion*; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*—Relation to Aristotle; Tolkien, J.R.R. *Unfinished Tales* of Númenor and Middle-earth

# The Silmarillion as Aristotelian Epic-Tragedy

David Greenman

It is unlikely that J.R.R. Tolkien would have acknowledged that Aristotle's *Poetics* played a large part in his depiction of the First Age of the world (Arda), material that constitutes a complete segment of *The Silmarillion*.<sup>1</sup> Yet, since *Poetics* is the original "handbook" of literature, since it expounds brilliantly on nearly all features of tragedy and epic, since Tolkien was steeped in ancient Greek even before he became an expert in later languages and literatures, and since *The Silmarillion* is best understood as epic-tragedy, he could hardly have avoided, nor likely would he have wanted to avoid, writing this work in accordance with the most sensible ideas of Aristotle, that most sensible of all literary arbiters.

The illustration that follows, of the ways *The Silmarillion* accepts and implements key ideas from *Poetics*, will establish the genre to which Tolkien's work belongs, and will identify the components of its narrative structure. My discussion concerns itself with completeness, plot, magnitude, spectacle, language, character, recognition, reversal, and catharsis of emotion through pity and fear.

Because Tolkien left the work unassembled and unfinished at his death the thorny problem of just what *The Silmarillion* is as a literary work necessarily enters into any serious discussion. Christopher Tolkien has gone over this ground several times in his introductions to it and to *Unfinished Tales* and *The Book of the Lost Tales*. In an effort to show its total effect others have also tried to impose their schematizations on *The Silmarillion*, sometimes with helpful insight.<sup>2</sup>

The question of completeness is something that *Poetics* explicitly deals with, especially as concerns plot. Aristotle says "tragedy is imitation of action that is complete and whole and has a certain magnitude" (P, 15). Plot, per se, he calls the "principle" and "soul" of tragedy (P, 13). Consequently, he puts the highest premium on the construction of the incidents, "for tragedy is imitation, not of men, but of action or life" (P, 13) and "plot is the imitation of action... the synthesis of the incidents" (P, 12). Although "epic-making differs from tragedy in the length of its construction and in its meter... it [nevertheless] ought to be possible to see the beginning and end together" (P, 46), which means that the author's overview is most important. It is necessary then, to see how *The Silmarillion* qualifies as a consciously artistic whole construct.

The First Age is a complete mythos which includes "Ainulindale," "Valaquenta," "Quenta Silmarillion," "Of Tuor and His Coming to Gondolin," and "Narn i Hîn Hurin." The last two narratives are not printed in *The Silmarillion* but in *Unfinished Tales*, yet they are integral to the story of the First Age while several other narratives which are found in *The Silmarillion* deal with the Second and Third Ages. These printing decisions were made by Christopher Tolkien, the editor of his father's works that remained unpublished at the time of his death.<sup>3</sup>

After the cosmic and earth-shaping events described in "Ainulindale," the narrative focus of the First Age centers on the elder children of Iluvatar:

Elves. Just prior to their awakening at Cuivienien in the far east of Middle-earth, the angelic Valar had "brought order to the seas and the lands and the mountains" (S, 35). They had also overcome the Lucifer figure Melkor who fled to Outer Darkness. Although a great number of Elves remain in Middle-earth, many of them accept the call of the Valar who invite them to journey west to reside in the blessed realm of Valinor over the great sea, the place where their tragedy will later begin.

The First Age comes to an apocalyptic end approximately six hundred years after exiled Moldovan Elves return to Middle-earth from Valinor, at which time the Valar, now assisted by Elves and Men, once again war with Melkor, (now named Morgoth "the Dark Enemy of the World,") and defeat him in the War of Wrath, a global conflict in which the physical shape of Arda changes with the submerging in the ocean of the western portion of Middle-earth, Beleriand. Action depicted in the First Age is continuous, and the contours of its beginning and end are strikingly clear.

*Poetics* also declares that tragedy, "the most beautiful by art," will result from plots synthesized "about a few households... who happened to suffer or produce terrible things" (P, 24). In Tolkien's First Age narrative several such households occupy the forefront of attention, primarily those of the Elves Feanor, Turgon, and Thingol, among others, and that of the Man Hurin. *The Silmarillion* in fact, consists of a single great plot of the struggle for survival on the part of all the world's beings who must fight against the enslaver Morgoth, and of numerous smaller plots which involve the characters in conflicts with each other and with their physical environments.

If an author is going to construct an entire mythical age single-handedly then he had better be concerned with magnitude, as Tolkien certainly was. "In regard to extending magnitude," Aristotle claims, "there is a great advantage which is proper to epic-making." The poet can describe many actions concurrently, and these, if appropriate, increase the mass of the poem... introducing dissimilar episodes[;] this is a good, for it is the sameness of the incidents which, by quickly satisfying the hearer, makes tragedies fail (P, 46).

In reading *The Silmarillion* in its published form one certainly encounters "dissimilar episodes." Tolkien's conflicts span eons of time and uncountable leagues of space. Nevertheless, the variety of "dissimilar episodes" in *The Silmarillion* is a good "because they do not break down into unconnected fragments; rather, they force the reader to expand his perceptions so that he feels the ongoingness of all the aspects of the life described and the simultaneity of actions spread far and wide across Valinor and Beleriand. The reader "lives" concurrently in the enchanted forest of Doriath, in the stone-hewn fortress of Nargothrond, in coastal Nevrastr and in the hidden kingdom of Gondolin, in the stark west marches, in the lush forests of Ossirand, in the grim hill-land of Dor-Lómin and Hithlum, in the northern hell-kingdom of Angband, and in the trackless wastelands and along the rivers in between all these places.

The magnitude of time in the First Age is especially awesome—to take nothing away from the magnitude of space, which includes activity in the cosmos, expanding oceans, and contracting land masses. Leaving aside the incalculable amount of time that passes between Creation and Melkor's flight to Outer Darkness, forward time as counted only from the end of the First War is itself staggering to comprehend. During this long, indeterminate period the Valar raise the Pelori Mountains in Aman and bring nature to a state of perfection and the two holy Trees of Light arise in Valinor. With their daily waxing and waning "thus began the Days of Bliss of Valinor; and thus began also the Count of time" (S, 39). But time there passes more slowly than we experience it in our mortal lands.

Meanwhile, as "the ages drew on to the hour appointed by Iluvatar of the coming Firstborn, Middle-earth lay in a twilight" (S, 39). Another long stretch of time passes from the awakening of the Elves to the beginning of their westward sojourn, and an incalculable amount of years pass between these migratory days and the return of the Noldor to Middle-earth after "ages" in Valinor. The extent of time in this last period alone boggles the imagination if we accept the calculation of Karen Wynn Fonstad's *The Atlas of Middle-earth* which notes that "the towering Mountains of Mist... were even taller and more terrible in those days". Consequently, "half a million years would hardly be sufficient for the gradual process of erosion to noticeably lower the peaks" (S, 39).

As the episodes of *The Silmarillion* began to involve terrestrial beings more than the Valar, time begins to move in a fashion more familiar to mortals. Still, the years are unhurried as we observe Thingol and Melian rapt silently in each other's gaze "while long years were measured by the wheeling stars above them; and the trees of Nan Elmoth grew tall and dark before they spoke any word" (S, 55).

Valinor-time is still operative when Fenar makes the Silmarils, when Melkor and Ungoliant poison the two Trees, and when, after the horrendous Kinslaying, the Noldor begin their long trek back to Middle-earth in the stolen ships of the Teleri or via the grinding northern ice of the Helcaraxe. Only when Píngolfin blows his horn in a triumphant signal that he has landed in Beleriand does the moon rise and, several years later, the sun. Even then, in years as we know them, the story unfolds slowly and the reader feels the weight of the magnitude of those storied six hundred years, creeping "from day to day./To the last syllable of recorded time" until the occurrence of the age-ending War of Wrath.

Magnitude and spectacle are clearly allied in epic, for by definition, spectacular events are something far beyond ordinary, everyday experience and when they occur they enhance the grandeur of the story. Aristotle worries about misuse of spectacle in drama but he has little to say against it in epic. If spectacle has a primary function it is surely to enhance feeling of wonder in the beholder, and Aristotle is mindful that this is more likely to occur artistically in epic than in stage tragedy. He says "the unreasonable (through which the wondrous most often happens) may be produced more easily in epic-making because what is done is not seen" (P, 47). Even more emphatically, he declares "with regard to the making, a persuasive impossibility is to be picked over an unpersuasive possibility" (P, 53).

The First Age narrative abounds in spectacle that

produces wonder: for instance, the appearance of Dragons. Tolkien tells us in "On Fairy Stories" that he himself "desired dragons with a profound desire" (41). In *The Silmarillion*, to substantiate Aristotle's claim that "the fearsome and the piteous may arise from the spectacle" (P, 24), we behold Glaugur, his gigantic head propped on the hilltop of Amon Ethir, encountering poor Nienor in an uneven battle of wills, and fatally skirmishing with Turin, in psychological and physical combat. *The Silmarillion* depicts the ending of the First Age in a burst of dragon-centered spectacle as Earendil sails into airborne battle and defeats Morgoth's fierce winged dragons.

Another prominent peak of spectacle is the remarkable tale "Of Beren and Luthien," which among all its wonders produces nothing so fearsome as the sight of the almost holy pair metamorphosed into a wolf and a vampire bat swiftly approaching Angband to wrest a Silmaril from Morgoth's Iron Crown:

Beren became in all things like a werewolf to look upon, save that in his eyes there shone a spirit grim indeed but clean; and horror was in his glance as he saw upon his flank a bat-like creature clinging with creased wings. Then howling under the moon he leaped down the hill, and the bat wheeled and flittered above him. (S, 179)

In his essay in *Shadows of Imagination* Peter Kreeft declares "language is magical in *The Silmarillion*, as music is magical: moving, effective, transforming, making a difference, possessing not just Meaning but Power" (168). Any student of Tolkien's career and writings knows that language is everything to him, that "the 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse" (Letters, 219). So significant is language in *The Silmarillion* that when Thingol declaims: "never again in my ears shall be heard the tongue of those who slew my kin in Alqualonde! Nor in all my realm shall it be openly spoken while my power endures" (S, 129), his decree effectively destroys the Noldorian culture in all but a few hidden places in Middle-earth.

In the First Age Men have their varieties of speech, the noblest of which, that of the House of Hador, becomes the source for Adunaic, the speech of Numenor in the Second Age (UT, 215-16). Quenya is the speech of the Elves of Valinor, transported back to Middle-earth by the Noldorian exiles. Condemned, it becomes basically an "archaic language of lore... meant to be a kind of 'Elvin-Latin'" (Letters, 176). Sindarin is the common tongue of Beleriand. These invented languages of Tolkien's are not merely fictive names; they really exist and they grew over the span of Tolkien's lifetime. He was serious when he said "I should have preferred to write in 'Elvish'" (Letters, 219).

But although Tolkien carried the concept of language far beyond what Aristotle envisaged, *Poetics* is clearly concerned with the actual language used by the artist in his production, whether stage tragedy or epic, and for Tolkien this language -- enhanced to be sure by the flavor of Elvish -- is English. For the language of epic, Aristotle particularizes, "the suitable meter is the heroic... for the heroic is the most stately and massive of meters" (P, 47). He means Greek in dactylic hexameter as employed by Homer. Tolkien, of course, does not even write dactylic hexameter in English. His heroic English in his own brand of "heigh style," somewhat archaic and carefully produced and refined, has stirred up some controversy



and each reader must decide whether or not he enjoys it.<sup>4</sup>

*Poetics* approves diction which is "clear and not abject," balanced by "diction that uses strange words" (P, 41). For Tolkien, those strange words are usually names, which are of the utmost importance to him: "to me a name comes first and the story follows" (*Letters*, 219). This emphasis tends to polarize critics. For example, Jane C. Nitzsche describes the "plethora of names of peoples, individuals, and places" as an "appalling" "problem" (129) while to Peter Kreeft "all names are like 'Ea': operative and magical" (186). Whatever one feels about names in *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales*, one can hardly deny that the effect of so many names for important places and characters helps create "the literary impression of depth" that is one of Tolkien's concerns.

We turn now to the subjects of characters, recognition, and reversal. Aristotle claims that characters ought to make effective choices, have suitable traits, fit their dramatic situations, and be consistent (P, 27-28). The tragic character should be "held in high opinion," be "of good fortune," be from a notable family, be average in virtue and justice, and be one who "changes to misfortune, not because of badness or wickedness, but because of some mistake" (P, 23). This mistake is the "flaw" or "hamartia" or "missing of the mark"; it may be but need not a moral flaw.<sup>4</sup> All the important First Age characters display these traits.

Also bound up with successful tragic characterization are recognition and reversal. *Poetics* describes recognition as "a change from ignorance to knowledge" of something done or not done or of another character, a change "to either friendship or enmity in those determined to good fortune or misfortune." Reversal "is a change to the contrary of previous actions... in accordance with likelihood or necessity" (P, 19-20).

Since the First Age is dominated by Elves, we may look closely at three Elf-chieftains to illustrate Tolkien's implementation of these famous Aristotelian ideas. The first two are lofty, proud, most unsympathetic; these are Fëanor, Thingol, and Finrod.

Fëanor, eldest son of Finwë, King of Noldor, is easily the most spectacular of all Elves. He is Promethean, "mightiest in skill of word and of hand... his spirit burned as a flame" (S, 60). He proves his skill of word benevolently in the creation of the Fëanorian Letters<sup>7</sup> and malevolently in his horrible oath that leads to the marring of all Arda. He proves his skill of hand by fashioning gems that encase light of the two Trees, the most beautiful and useful of all things that grow.

Once Melkor-Morgoth and Ungoliant destroy the Trees, the Valar ask Fëanor to unlock the light from the Silmarils to "recall life to the Trees, ere their roots decay and then our hurt should be healed, and the malice of Melkor be confounded" (S, 78). Fëanor's fateful choice, affected and somewhat extenuated by his earlier contact with the deceitful Melkor, is to refuse: "It may be that I can unlock my jewels, but never again shall I make their like; and if I must break them, I shall break my heart.... This thing I will not do of free will" (S, 78-79). His is certainly a moral flaw, "an elvish fall from grace, analogous to the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden" according to Kathryn F. Crabbe (120).

Upon learning that Morgoth has stolen the Silmarils:

Fëanor swore a terrible oath. His seven sons leapt straightway to his side and took the selfsame vow together.... They swore an oath which none shall break, and should take, by the name even of Iluvatar, calling Everlasting Dark upon them if they kept it not... vowing to pursue with vengeance and hatred to the ends of the World Vala, Demon, Elf, or Man as yet unborn, or any creature, great or small, good or evil, that time should bring forth unto the end of days, who should hold or take or keep a Silmaril from their possession. (S, 83)

Stemming from the refusal and the oath is nothing less than the great reversal of the tendency towards perfection of Arda. "The first fruit of their fall," writes Tolkien in a letter, "is war in Paradise, the slaying of Elves by Elves, and their and their evil oath dogs all their later heroism, generating treacheries and undoing all victories" (*Letters*, 148).

Fëanor comes to recognize the earth-shaking consequences of his actions. Nonetheless, with his dying breath he compounds his tragic mistakes by insisting that his sons hold to their oath. This dooms them to centuries of outcast status, involves them in further kinslaying, and results in the loss of two of the Silmarils which they steal but are unable to keep. One is lost in a volcano and the other in the ocean.

If there is one character among the Elves who has the potential to prevent or at least delay interminably the tragic demise of Middle-earth, it would seem to be Elve Thingol, King of the Sindar, one of the three original Elves chosen to visit Valinor. Thingol's tragic flaws are pride and selfish desire. The keynote is struck early. When he first hears Melian's voice "it filled all his heart with wonder and desire. He forgot utterly all his people and all the purposes of his mind" (S, 55), and remains in Middle-earth instead of leading the Teleri to Valinor. Later, he begrudges the Noldor on their return, places in his part of the world.

In dispensing justice Thingol is haughty, outwitting the Noldorian tongue and pronouncing hasty sentence on Turin who killed one of Thingol's retainers. Although Thingol himself once had a grand passion for a maiden far above his station, he tries to destroy Beren when this Man becomes enraptured by the King's daughter. By requesting the Silmaril in exchange for Luthien's hand Thingol "wrought the doom of Doriath, and was ensnared within the curse of Mandos" (S, 167). He dies ingloriously at the hands of vindictive Dwarves whom he has mistreated:

in his wrath and pride he gave no heed to his peril, but spoke to them in scorn, saying: 'How do ye of uncouth race dare to demand ought of me, Elu Thingol, Lord of Beleriand, whose life began by the waters of Cuivien years uncounted ere the fathers of the stunted people awoke?' And standing tall and proud among them he bade them with shameful words he gone requited out of Doriath.... They rose up about him and slew him as he stood. (S, 233)

Paradoxically, Thingol's lifelong reputation for knowledge is often belied by his ignorant actions.

The series of tragic reversals he instigates proves that he is incapable of acting like the high king he claims to be. Instead of rallying together all the free peoples of Middle-earth and staving off the onslaughts of Morgoth, this pivotal figure instead seeks to protect his own turf, to aggrandize his own power, and to satisfy his own desires. His degeneration and failure are among the saddest things in *The Silmarillion*.

Finrod Felagund, King of Nargothrond, is in important ways the opposite of Thingol and Fëanor. Called "the Faithful" and "the Friend of Men," he is renowned for his benevolence and true wisdom. Unlike Thingol, Finrod befriends, not antagonizes homeless wanderers. Out on a hunt one day, he hears singing in the forest and becomes the first Elf in Beleriand to encounter Men, who have newly come over the eastern mountains into that land: "Long Felagund watched them, and love for them stirred in this heart.... Felagund dwelt among them and taught them true knowledge and they loved him, and took him for their lord...." (S, 140-41).

Like Fëanor, Finrod swears an irrevocable oath, but his unlike Fëanor's vow of vengeance, is one of true friendship, made to the Man Barahir who had rescued him in Battle of Sudden Flame. He fulfills the oath by helping Barahir's son Beren in his attempt to recover a Silmaril from Morgoth.

As squalid as is Thingol's death, Finrod's is splendid. First he strives nobly with Sauron in songs of power; then upon being cast with Beren into a pit Finrod dies protecting his friend:

When the wolf came for Beren, Felagund put forth all his power, and burst his bonds; and he wrestled with the werewolf and slew it with his hands and teeth; yet he himself was wounded to the death.... Thus King Finrod Felagund, fairest and most beloved of the house of Finwe, redeemed his oath.... (S, 174)

Finrod's tragic flaw, if it can be called that, is that he is too generous: promising and delivering too much; his recognitions of the needs of other lead ultimately to reversals that ensure his own doom.

There remains one further point to discuss; this is Aristotle's enigmatic and much-debated statement that a tragedy should produce in characters and audience "through pity and fear a catharsis of such affections" (P, 11). In the First Age stories there are numerous instances in which leading characters are emotionally purged after piteous or fearful actions. An outstanding example, to give just one, is found in Hurin. After having just flung the beautiful Dwarf-crafted necklace, the Nauglamir (in which is inset a Silmaril), at the feet of Thingol to "pay" for that king's treatment of his family, he is undeceived by Melian:

"Hurin Thalion, Morgoth hath bewitched thee; for he that seeth through Morgoth's eyes, willing or unwilling, seeth all things crooked...."

And hearing the words of Melian Hurin stood moveless, and he grazed long into the eyes of the Queen; and there in Menegroth, defended still by the Girdle of Melian from the darkness of the Enemy, he read the truth of all that was done, and tasted at last the fullness of woe that was measured for him by Morgoth. (S, 231)

Incidents like this one also affect the reader powerfully and elicit his sympathy for the suffering character.

Such incidents and their evocation of strong feelings are tied to what is probably the dominant theme of Tolkien's work, the theme of dwindling -- dwindling from greatness in conception and in fact to a lesser state of existence. The realization of this sad truth about life on Arda is hauntingly evoked on every page and it affects Valar, Elves, Men, and readers. Since the process of dwindling is continuous, cathartic purgation of the emotions or affections is in operation all through the story of the First Age. Like Frost's anguished Owen Bird, Tolkien the storyteller sadly

knows in singing not to sing  
The Question that he frames in all but words  
Is what to make of a diminishing thing.

Even from the very first, when the splendid Music of the Ainur is realized by Iluvatar as he "made a new thing: Ea, the world that is" (S, 20), the Valar are shocked: "for it was as if naught was yet made which they had seen in vision, and all was but on point to begin and yet unshaped, and it was dark" (S, 20). And after they begin to shape the world according to their vision they must contend with Melkor whose machinations invariably reduce the world to a lesser and sadder state right up to the end of the First Age and beyond, for

he lies that Melkor, the mighty and accursed, Morgoth Bauglir, the Power of Terror and of Hate, sowed in the hearts of Elves and Men are a seed that does not die and cannot be destroyed; and ever and anon it sprouts anew, and will bear dark fruit even unto the latest days. (S, 235)

The Silmarillion itself "has passed from the high and the beautiful to darkness and ruin" (S, 255).

But there is consolation, for in every act that produces a dwindling a corresponding greatness results. For the reader these are thrilling moments of realization, moments which produce feelings of exaltation in the very midst of sorrow and loss. To have effected this is perhaps Tolkien's greatest artistic achievement. Here are three of the most striking examples of exaltation: (1) After the lamps are destroyed we behold the rising of the Pelori, "the Mountains of Aman, highest upon Earth. And above all the mountains of the Pelori was that height upon whose summit Manwe set his throne. Tanequetil the Elves name that holy mountain...." (S, 37). (2) After the devastation wrought by Glaurung we behold him slain by Turin:

Then Turambar seized the hilts and set foot upon his belly, and cried in mockery of the dragon and his words at Nargothrond: "Hail, Worm of Morgoth! Well met again! Die now and the darkness have thee! Thus is Turin son of Hurin avenged." (S, 222)

(3) Most splendid moment of all, after the War of Wrath, with Morgoth "thrust through the Door of Night beyond the Walls of the World, into the Timeless Void" we behold a guard "set for ever on these walls" as, Silmaril browed, Earendil "keeps watch upon the ramparts of the sky" (S, 254-55).

I think I have adequately shown that *The Silmar-*

Illion provides catharsis of emotion, reversal, and recognition; that what was said about three chief characters can also apply to dozens of other significant characters from Tuor and Earendil at one extreme to Turin and Hurin at the other, whose roles and personalities and whose creation show the ingenuity with which Tolkien expands Aristotle's notions on this subject; that in the matters of language, spectacle, magnitude, and plot *The Silmarillion* displays not sketchily or haphazardly sought-for design, but established, masterful artistry. And finally, to end where I began, with "completeness," that indisputably Tolkien has been able "to place the action before his eyes as much as possible" (P, 32), that he has "seen [the beginning and the end together]" (P, 46). To the ancient world Aristotle declared "Homer was the most important poet of the worthy" (P, 7). For us, using Aristotle's own criteria, it is J.R.R. Tolkien.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Usually *The Silmarillion* has been explained as having been shaped from Tolkien's imagination in combination with thematic, narrative, linguistic, stylistic, and characterization features derived from the Old Testament and from a number of medieval language, folklore, and literary sources, particularly Norse ones. It is also, quite clearly, a "divine comedy" in that all that occurs in the Creation it delineates redounds to the glory of God (Iluvatar). For commentary on Norse influence, particularly on the influence of the Finnish epic *Kalevala* see *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, pages 87, 214, 345; T.A. Shippey's *The Road to Middle-Earth*, pages 181, 185ff.; Randel Helms' *Tolkien and the Silmarils*, chapters I and III; Paul H. Kocher's *A Reader's Guide to "The Silmarillion"*, chapter I.
- <sup>2</sup> T.A. Shippey sees *The Silmarillion* as turning on a lyric core and a conflict of kinship (pages 187-89); Randel Helms finds Arda operating under three "laws": "an omnipotent Divine Being with a conscious plan for history who tends, even within the apparent victories of evil and darkness, an ultimate goodness"; "the power of the oath, curse, or prophecy"; "the Law of Creativity" (pages 46-49); Katharyn F. Crabbe's book *J.R.R. Tolkien views The Silmarillion* as "highly structured, taking the form of a triptych, a three-paneled picture often used as an altarpiece.... As in an actual triptych, the central panel is the largest ["Quenta Silmarillion"] and carries the most meaning, but the two side panels ["Ainulindale" and "Valaquenta"; "Akallabeth" and "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age"] provide a context for the central panel, give a perspective on it, and direct the eyes toward it" (page 114).
- <sup>3</sup> *The Book of Lost Tales, The Lays of Beleriand, and The Shaping of Middle Earth* contain even earlier material which, since it was later rewritten or discarded by the author, seems in appropriate to consider as part of the ultimate First Age mythos.
- <sup>4</sup> "Hate it" or "Love it" and nothing in between seems to be the reaction to the language of *The Silmarillion* (and undoubtedly to *Unfinished Tales* and *The Book of Lost Tales* also). See for example, as a counterpoint to the Kreeft quotation that opens my discussion of language Jane C. Nitzsche's chapter on *The Silmarillion* in *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England*. She is annoyed that *The Silmarillion* "is hard to follow" and she declares "as a work of fiction it remains so dominated by philology that it is nearly reduced to the state of a dictionary or encyclopedia of words and myths." However, she is willing to admit that "the 'prose

poem' has an air of authentically and reads like the Elder Edda" (pages 129-30).

- <sup>5</sup> For Tolkien's creation of character on the plan of Norse sagas T.A. Shippey is informative: "character" is in a sense fixed, static, even diagrammatic.... The convention of Norse saga, then, is to say what a man is like as soon as he comes into the story.... These statements are always true, though there is still an interest, and a suspense, in seeing how events will prove them so." He finds the family-trees and diagrams important as indicating that Tolkien shared the saga belief "that people are their heredity. Sagas commonly introduce characters with a list of their ancestors, often significant in their distinction, wisdom, ferocity, or unreliability" (pages 185-86).
- <sup>6</sup> Kenneth Telford's note on "hamartia" explains more fully:

In a complex plot the hamartia is essentially an action, a missing of the mark in the sense that a character has himself brought harm to the very things he values. In a plot of suffering the hamartia is not an action but a passion, a state to which a character is brought by opposing forces in the dramatic situation. In a plot of character the hamartia is a flaw of character, the general tendencies constituting a man's nature which account for the incidents of which he is the cause. In a plot of spectacle the hamartia is a tendency implicit in the nature of the incidents rather than in the nature of the characters, since the characters appear simply as stereotypes which symbolize the effectiveness of the course of events in reducing misfortune. (*Poetics*, 123)

Since all these plot features are operative in *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien usually endows the most significant tragic characters with a mixture of all four kinds of "hamartia," with one or other kind perhaps predominating in a given individual. Turin, for instance, is a classic example of a man who destroys those he loves.

- <sup>7</sup> The Fennorian Letters are "a system of consonantal signs, of similar shapes and style, which could be adapted at choice or convenience to represent the consonants of languages observed (or derived) by the Elder" (*The Lord of the Rings*, III, page 397. See appendix E for a full explanation).

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# Calendar of Events in the First Ages to the Ruin of Beleriand

I. From Creation to the Rising of the Sun and the Moon (dates according to "The Earliest Annals of Valinor"; information from The Silmarillion and "The Earliest Annals of Valinor")

## Valian

Years (1 = 10 Years of the Sun)

(100 Valian Years = an "age")

- 0 --Eru Iluvatar and the Ainur (later=Valar) create music and Ea is created
- Valar shape Arda (the world) and Melkor tries to corrupt it
- Melkor casts self into outer darkness after losing the First War to Tulkas and the other Valar who bring Arda into full growth and shape: the Spring of Arda
- 500 --Melkor returns, builds Utumno, destroys the lamps
- Valar leave Middle-Earth, go west to found Valinor in Land of Aman
- 1000 --Yavanna brings forth the two trees, Telperion & Laurelin; Valinor flourishes
- Aule creates Dwarves and is scolded by Iluvatar; Yavanna creates the Shepherds of the Trees in Middle-Earth
- 2000 --Varda makes the stars; the Quendi (Elves) awaken at Cuivienen in far east of Middle-Earth; meanwhile, Dwarves have been put to sleep, not to awaken for centuries
- Valar summon Elves to Valinor; some go and some do not; Melkor corrupts some Elves and Orcs
- Utumno destroyed by Valar & Melkor imprisoned in Halls of Mandos for 900 Valian Years; Elves flourish in Valinor (races of Vanyar, Noldor, Teleri)
- 2100 --Meanwhile, Elu Thingol (Elven King) marries Melian (a Maia); he stays in Middle-Earth in forest kingdom of Doriath in Beleriand
- 2500 --Feanor makes three Silmarils in Valinor (gems encasing light of the two Trees)
- 2980 --Melkor & Ungoliant destroy the two Trees, then escape.
- 2991 --Melkor sets up realm of Angband in the north, surrounded by mts. of Thangorodrim. Feanor refuses to give up Silmarils which are stolen by Melkor; Feanor leads Noldor back to Middle-Earth after kinslaying (of Teleri)
- 2995 --Yavanna extracts morsels of light from the dead Trees and Varda uses them to create first the Moon--which later rises when Fingolfin leads his deserted people to Middle-Earth--then the Sun

- Enchanted Isles are placed before Valinor to prevent unwanted visitors
- the Atani (Men) arise with the Sun, somewhere in Middle-Earth; their early history unknown but when they migrate to Elven realms they are "fallen."
- Years as we know them begin with rising of the Sun over Middle-Earth; meanwhile Vanyar and Teleri (those who went west over the sea) flourish in Valinor
- Thingol defeats Morgoth's (formerly Melkor) Orcs in the first battle of Beleriand
- 2995 --Feanor defeats Orcs in Dagor-nuin-Gilraeth: Battle Under the Stars; he perishes
- 2997 --Maedhros, son of Feanor, captured by Morgoth
- 2998 --Morgoth hangs Maedhros by his wrist above a precipice upon Thangorodrim
- 3000 --Valar raise the Moon and the Sun; Fingolfin's people arrive in Beleriand

## II. Beleriand at the end of the First Age (dates and information according to The Silmarillion)

### Years of the Sun

(time as we now know it)

- 1 --Fingolfin's people arrive in Beleriand
- 20 --Fingolfin holds "unification" feast
- 50 --Turgon (whose dwelling is Nевrast) & Finrod have visions of their future kingdoms; shortly afterwards Finrod builds Nargothrond
- 104 --Turgon's new kingdom of Gondolin is ready; he departs in secret; the kingdom is hidden and no one sees Turgon in Beleriand for 351 years
- 51- --"Siege of Angband" after Dagor Aglareb (51): Glorious Battle, in which Fingolfin and Maedhros (whom Fingon has rescued) defeat Orcs
- 151 --Orcs are defeated again by Fingolfin
- 251 --Glauring the dragon appears and is defeated by Fingon
- 251 --"Long Peace"
- 300 --Men come into Beleriand from eastern Middle-Earth: three "houses" of Edain; years later come Easterlings and others
- 325 --Maeglin comes to Gondolin; Eol and Aredhel, his father and mother, die
- 455 --Dagor Bragollach: Battle of Sudden Flame; Fingolfin killed by Morgoth; Finrod's oath to Barahir (father of Beren)
- 457 --Sauron (corrupted Maia & chief henchmen of Morgoth) defeats Orodreth & occupies tower of Minas Tirith
- 465 --Turin born
- 467 --Beren & Luthien (daughter of Thingol) get a Silmaril from Morgoth's Iron Crown; Finrod dies helping them, so does Huan the Hound; Beren dies; Luthien goes to Mandos after her spirit falls; she meets Beren there; Mandos grants them a second life as mortals; they return to Middle Earth & live in Ossirand in the green isle of Tol Galen; son Dior born to them
- 473 --Tuor born; Nirnaeth Arnoediad: Battle of Unnumbered Tears -- Morgoth unleashes all his power & defeats Elven Alliance as Easterlings betray Elves and join Morgoth; Dwarves help Elves defeat Glauring; Fingon killed by Gothmog, Lord of Balrogs; Hurin imprisoned on top of Thangorodrim for next 28 years; Turin goes to Doriath as foster son to Thingol & remains there until 385
- 485- --Turin dwells in woods with band of outlaws



visions, visions of exquisite revelation and visions of depravity and horror, beyond his own control. To the end he loved small children but they, understandably, found his presence disturbing.

The man who loved children and childhood, natural splendor and quiet gardens, and -- with some hesitation -- fairies (personifying spirits, he might have preferred to have called them) ended as a lost and blasphemous soul. Better to remember the dream-builder he was, gently and severely urging us, by his own inner vision, to love the earth and, for the children, to hold it in trust. "Suppose," he tells us,

you had each, at the back of your houses, a garden, large enough for your children to play in, with just as much lawn as would give them room to run, -- no more -- and that you could not change your abode; but that, if you chose, you could double your income, or quadruple it by digging a coal shaft in the middle of the lawn and turning the flower-beds into heaps of coke. Would you do it? I hope not. I can tell you, you would be wrong if you did, though it gave you income sixty-fold instead of four-fold.

Yet this is what you are doing with all England. The whole country is but a little garden, not more than enough for your children to run in the lawns of, if you would let them all run there. And this little garden you will turn into furnace ground, and fill with heaps of cinders, if you can; and those children of yours, not you, will suffer for it. For the fairies will not be all banished; there are fairies of the furnace as of the wood, and their first gifts seem to be "sharp arrows of the mighty;" but their last gifts are "coals of juniper."<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In *Arrows of the Chace* (1886), for example, Ruskin's speaks of having read the *Arabian Nights* "many times over" but now wishes he "had been better employed." In the same essay he praises Lear's *Book of Nonsense* and laments the adulteration of Andersen, who "has been minced up, and washed up, and squeezed up, and rolled out, till one knows him no more." John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-1912) XXXIV, 585-586. Quotations taken from Cook and Wedderburn's 39-volume edition of Ruskin's works will hereafter be cited as (Works).

<sup>2</sup> Of mountains, he writes elsewhere, "These mightier and stranger glories should become the objects of adventure, -- at once the cynosures of the fancies of childhood, and the themes of the happy memory, and the winter's tale of age" (Works, VI, 168).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Quennell, *John Ruskin: The Portrait of a Prophet* (London: Collins, 1949), pp. 79-80.

<sup>4</sup> *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 39, Works, XXVIII, 53.

<sup>5</sup> *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 60, (Dec. 1875), Works, XXVIII, 462.

<sup>6</sup> *The Order of Release: The Story of John Ruskin, Effie Gray and John Everett Millais Told for the First Time in Their Unpublished Letters*, ed. Sir William Milburne James (London: John Murray, 1948), p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> "For, so natural is it to the human heart," writes

Ruskin, "to fix itself in hope rather than in present possession, and so subtle is the charm which the imagination casts over what is distant or denied, that there is often a more touching power in the scenes which contain far-away promise of something greater than themselves, than in those which exhaust the treasures and powers of Nature in an unconquerable and excellent glory, leaving nothing more to be by the fancy pictured, or pursued" (Works, VI, 168).

<sup>8</sup> Letter 8 (Aug. 1871), Works, XXVII, 132.

<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Dr. John Brown, 29 March 1881, Works, XXXVII, 348.

<sup>10</sup> *Sesame and Lilies*, Works, XVIII, 133-134.

## GREENMAN, continued from page 25

- 487 --Turin goes to Nargothrond & becomes chief under Orodreth; he builds bridge over River Narog to aid military sorties
- 495 --Tuor sent by Ulmo to Gondolin with message to depart to the sea; Turgon refuses; Tuor stays & marries Turgon's daughter Idril
- 501 --Turin kills Glaurung; deaths of Turin & his wife/sister Nienor; Hurin, freed from Angband, finds Nauglamir in ruins of Nargothrond, brings it to Thingol who has Silmaril set in it; Hurin meets dying wife Morwen; Hurin casts self into the sea
- 502 --Thingol killed by Dwarves in dispute over the Nauglamir; Melian departs for Valinor
- 503 --Earendil born (son of Tuor & Idril)
- 505 --Dwarves return to Menegroth in Doriath & attempt to recover the Nauglamir; they are routed by Beren and Ents in the Battle by Sarn Athrad
- 506 --Dior reigns in Menegroth
- 508 --Beren & Luthien die; the Nauglamir comes into Dior's possession
- 509 --Second Kinslaying: sons of Feanor attack & kill Dior -- they want the Silmaril inset in the Nauglamir -- some of the brothers are killed; Elwing, daughter of Dior escapes with the jewels
- 511 --Balrogs attack Gondolin via treachery of Maeglin; Turgon killed; Ecthelion & Glorfindel slay Balrogs out are slain also; Tuor & Idril & Earendil escape; they join Elwing; Gil-Galad named High King of Noldor (he is son of Fingon who was son of Fingolfin)

In the following century a new Elven kingdom sprouts up at the mouth of River Sirion; Tuor & Idril sail over the sea; Earendil marries Elwing & begets Elrond & Elros; 3rd Kinslaying: Maedhros & Maglor (son of Feanor) attack the Sirion kingdom but Earendil & Elwing escape with the Silmaril; Maglor fosters Elrond & Elros; over 100 years after the Nirnaeth the Valar receive Earendil who sailed west to Valinor; Valar unleash forces and destroy Angband; Morgoth cast permanently into outer darkness; Sauron escapes; Maedhros & Maglor steal other Silmarils but can't keep them --Maedhros leaps into a volcano with his and Maglor casts his into the sea; the other Silmaril is on Earendil's brow as he sails the heavens in his boat; Most Elves leave Beleriand (which has been inundated by the sea) & go to Valinor; some remain in Middle Earth under kingship of Gil-Galad; Elros becomes first king of Numenor; The First Age of Middle Earth ends.