

Spring 3-15-1988

## Wyrd and Will: Fate, Fatalism, and Free Will in The Northern Elegy and J.R.R. Tolkien

Steven Mark Deyo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Deyo, Steven Mark (1988) "Wyrd and Will: Fate, Fatalism, and Free Will in The Northern Elegy and J.R.R. Tolkien," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 14: No. 3, Article 11.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol14/iss3/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



---

## Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



### Wyrd and Will: Fate, Fatalism, and Free Will in The Northern Elogy and J.R.R. Tolkien

#### Abstract

Notes Tolkien's admiration for the literature and myth of the pagan North. Discusses how the concepts of loyalty to lord, battle-ethic, wyrd and free will appear in Arda, but transmuted by Tolkien's Christian viewpoint.

#### Additional Keywords

Free will and determinism; Military ethics in J.R.R. Tolkien; Norse mythology—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien

# Wyrd and Will

## Fate, Fatalism and Free Will in the Northern Elegy and J.R.R. Tolkien

Steven Mark Deyo

"Where will wants not, a way opens."<sup>1</sup> These words of Eowyn summarize a Rohirric view of life: resourcefulness, resolution, and courage in the face of adversity. Tolkien's playful reformulation of the familiar proverb, "Where there's a will, there's a way," is put in the mouth of a noble maiden caught up in her Saxon people's battle ethic. Like her household warriors mustered to battle the dark forces of would-be overlords Sauron and Saruman, Eowyn longs to prove her loyalty by fighting to the death beside her sworn lord Theoden. That she wins a battle, but not death and rather love, is only one instance where Tolkien reaffirms the nobility of the Northern war ethic, but tempers it with a necessarily Christian worldview.

He is right to do so; ours is the reward. In his monumental 1936 essay on *Beowulf* criticism, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien asked:

Shall we or shall we not consign the heathen ancestors to perdition?... [What has Ingeld to do with Christ?] The author of *Beowulf* showed forth the permanent value of that *pietas* which treasures the memory of man's struggles in the dark past, man fallen and yet not saved, disgraced but not dethroned.<sup>2</sup>

This thought links perfectly with Tolkien's concept of mythopoeia -- what I call his "theology of creativity" -- the motivation behind his secondary creation and story-spinning:

... Although now long estranged, Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed. Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned; and keeps; the rage of lordship once he owned: ... though we dared to build Gods and their houses out of dark and light, and sowed the seed of dragons -- 'twas our right (used or misused). That right has not decayed: we still make by the law in which we're made.<sup>3</sup>

It says in Scripture, and Tolkien would agree, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy --" (and this includes loyalty, courage and boldness in service of one's good lord, whether fealty kept by Christian or Northern pagan) "let us think on these things."<sup>4</sup> The songs of the Saxon scopas can teach us much about heroism, if we will enter the elegies, and let our hearts be "wounded with sweet words."<sup>5</sup> For Tolkien, in his essay "The Monsters and the Critics," cautioned modern-day man regarding *Beowulf*:

He is a man, and that, for him and many, is sufficient tragedy.... For the monsters do not depart, whether the gods go or come. A Christian was (and is) still like his fore-fathers, a mortal hemmed in a hostile world.<sup>6</sup>

### The Northern Battle Ethic

Tolkien notes the theme of Northern heroism broached in the first words of *Beowulf*:

Loþeðum fœd in mægþa gehwære man  
gefeon

[By praiseworthy deeds shall a man thrive among many people?]

and, in the poem's last words, elegizing *Beowulf* himself:

He þære pyrwu cyniga  
manna milbuft onb monðþeapurt  
leobum lifort onb logeornort.

[He was of earthly kings  
mildest of men and most gentle,  
kindest to his people and most eager for praise.]

Praise, for the Northern warrior, was a palpable thing won by generous deeds while living, and by prowess on the battlefield before death.

ƿa fœd man ðon, þonne he æt gube gegan  
þenceð longumne lof: na ymb hiſ liſ  
ceapæð.

[So must a man do, when he thinks to obtain in was long-lasting praise: he will have no care for his life.]

While this ultimate loyalty to the warrior's liege-lord, this allegiance-to-the-death, may strike a modern and gentrified civilization such as ours as perhaps "hypermacho" or smacking of a "martyr complex," such were the facts of Germanic civilization, beset by dragons and hostile foes. To the Saxon, the lord was all. Without a *mihhtig drihten*, a mighty lord to lead the defense, a tribe was open to assault and destruction on any number of fronts. Allegiance to one's sworn lord was a safeguard against society's very elimination. The firm circle of spears, the stalwart shieldwall of defense, must remain unbroken; else one, then many, then the lord, and finally all will fall.

[Hnæf] hleoþnobe, heafgeong cynig:  
"He ðiſ ne ƿagað eaſtan, ne heþ ƿraca ne  
fleagað,  
ne heþ ðiſſe heaðle hoþnaſ ne bypnað;  
ac heþ ƿonþ beað [feorhgeſeol]  
fyrþreap [gylc] fugeleſ ringað,  
gylleð gnaeghama: gudeþuþu blynnæð,  
ƿcyð ƿcefte oncƿyð. Huſcƿneð þeſ mona  
ƿaol unþeſ polcnum, nu aſigað ƿeaþaba,  
ðe ðiſne folceſ nið fremman ƿillað.  
Ac onƿaſcegað nu, ƿigenð mine!  
Habað eorpe [hlencn], hiegeaþ on ellen,  
þiſnað on ƿeþe, ƿeſað onmoba!"

[Hnæf spoke, the warlike young king:  
"Neither is this the eastern dawn, nor here flies a  
dragon,

nor are this hall's gables flaming;  
nay, here approach mortal enemies  
in ready armor. Birds are crying,  
wolf is yelping; spear clashes,  
shield answers shaft. As this moon arises

wandering behind the clouds, so arise woeful deeds, that will end this people's well-known enmity. Yea, awaken now, my warriors! Grasp your mailcoats, think upon valor, bear yourselves proudly, be resolute!"

The underlying message of pagan beliefs expressed in the above passage from *Finn and Hengest*, and the succeeding one from *The Battle of Maldon*, is that "Good men die together" while "Cowards flee and die alone." Since death will one day come to all, it is best to remain loyal to the end, and in battle-provess win long-lived praise. True, there is something in the Northern ethic which implies, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die"; but in the lack of greater purpose, the ethic lends nobility and meaningfulness to the Saxon society and individual.

The meaningfulness of this battle ethic grows all the more intense, the more literally it is understood. In *The Battle of Maldon*, Beorhtwold prepares to die in a desperate last stand and exhorts his comrades in a strong summary of the heroic code:

Hige sceal þe hearpan heorte þe cenep  
mod sceal þe mape þe fepe mægen lyfað...

[Heart shall be the bolder, purpose be the sterner,  
prouder the spirit as our strength lessens.  
Mind shall not falter, nor mood waver;  
though doom shall come and dark conquer.]

These words are quoted in a scopic dream in Tolkien's fictional sequel (written in modern English alliterative verse) to *The Battle of Maldon*, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtelm's Son." Tolkien's creative work is actually a critical reflection on *Maldon*'s observation that the pride of Beorhtwold grew beyond his own good and that of his retainers. (Beorhtwold and his men were defending a bridge from a position of superiority, but their enemies asked leave to cross over in order to join a fair fight. Beorhtwold acceded -- which proved to be a fatal error.) The *Maldon* poet states:

ða þe eoplangan for þip oþermode  
alyran lander to fela loþepe ðeobe...

[Then the earl, in his excess of pride,  
actually yielded ground to the enemy  
as he should not have done.\*]

Beorhtwold's *ofermod*, or "excessive pride," was foolish because it went beyond need and duty, and rather interfered with it.<sup>10</sup> Tolkien, then, saw and identified an element to be improved upon in the Northern battle ethic: Loyalty to duty must be held higher than loyalty to the leader.

#### The Middle-Earth Battle Ethic

As expected, Tolkien shows his respect and debt to the Northern battle ethic throughout his works.<sup>11</sup>

In *The Hobbit* Bilbo feels "the pull of conscience"<sup>12</sup> and, in his own bourgeois-become-burglar way, swashbuckles a path back to Thorin & Co. to save them from the giant spiders of Mirkwood. Thorin himself is, during the Battle of Five Armies, wounded to the death; but only after being shielded by the very bodies of his sister's sons, Fili and Kili, in true Northern *comitatus*.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn and Boromir

rush back to defend their leader, Gandalf, against the Balrog of Moria. Boromir pays his debt to Frodo (for trying to take the Ring) by defending the hobbits Merry and Pippin to his death. Merry and Eowyn make a last stand over Theoden as the Nazgul lord makes his daunting onslaught on the body of the king of the Rohirrim. And Sam goes berserk -- "in the Northern sense"<sup>13</sup> -- in his rush on Shelob, defending his fallen master Frodo against the evil creature's attack.

But in each of these episodes, especially those in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Northern heroic ethic is subtly changed. Tolkien does not allow Aragorn and Boromir to fall in utter and final loyalty at Gandalf's side. Merry and Eowyn are prepared to die with Theoden, but receive a different victory. And the mission of the Ring's destruction would have failed if Sam had only remained at his master's side.

For Tolkien, loyalty is ever paramount; but loyalty alone is insufficient. Loyalty is but a steppingstone to duty. In the above instances, loyalty to any one individual would have courted disaster; Boromir's fervency for his own people and his own glory nearly betrayed Frodo's errand. Rather the chief and over-riding duty -- to destroy the One Ring and defeat Sauron -- required a wider loyalty. More important than serving any one individual or any one geopolitical cause, victory required loyalty to the community of free peoples.

In Moria, Boromir and Aragorn and the others stand ready to fight with Gandalf at the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, "unable to leave their leader, to face the enemy alone" even though the Balrog was, in Gandalf's words, "a foe beyond any of you."<sup>14</sup> Falling into the chasm with the Balrog, Gandalf gainsaid the Northern battle ethic by commanding the Fellowship to "Fly, you fools!"<sup>15</sup> To remain and fight may well have doomed the higher mission: the destruction of Sauron's Ring at Mount Doom.

In a later scene, Samwise would similarly have doomed the Ring's destruction if he had remained by his master after Frodo's "anesthetization" by Shelob. Sam struggles to realize his duty: to continue on with the Ring. Not to remain by his master in grief, not to avenge Frodo on Gollum, not to despair and commit suicide; the voice within directs him to "see it through," the errand that "must not fail."<sup>16</sup>

"Goodbye, master, my dear!" he murmured [to the fallen Frodo]. "Forgive your Sam. He'll come back to this spot when the job's done -- if he manages it. And then he'll not leave you again."<sup>17</sup>

Sam's loyalty to mission above master actually saves the Ring from capture by Sauron's orcs -- which in turn would have meant the total subjection of all free peoples under the iron fist of Lugburz.

On another battleground, Merry and Eowyn stand at the body of Theoden, ready to prevent their liege-lord's body from mutilation by the Nazgul king by their own living bodies:

But Theoden was not utterly forsaken. The knights of his house lay slain about him.... Yet one stood there still: Dernhelm [Eowyn] the young, faithful beyond fear; and he [she] wept, for he [she] had loved his [her] lord as a father.... Merry crawled on all fours like a dazed beast....



"King's man! King's man!" his heart cried within him. "You must stay by him. As a father you shall be to me, you said."<sup>18</sup>

The filial loyalty of Eowyn and Merry save the day, as it were -- but not by the heroic ethic's merit alone. They are prepared to fulfill the ethic's demand, to shield the king's body from harm; yet it is only by a combination of providential circumstances that they succeed. Merry distracts the Nazgul king from his death-blow to Eowyn because he happens to carry a barrow-blade of Westergesse, the only capable of severing undead flesh; and Eowyn, a woman, slays the enemy which "no living man may hinder."<sup>19</sup>

Eowyn's battle-lust is cheated. She will live, through great hurt, to rebuild the House of the Rohirrim and wed Faramir. Merry, too, will survive his wounds to rebuild the Shire with Pippin and Sam. These are higher and more hopeful ends than mere death at their liege-lord's side, and Providence kindly allows them to survive the claims of loyalty.

### Fate and Fatalism

As bold and courageous as men were -- Germanic and Gondorian -- yet still inextricably bound in their deeds of valor, in their choices and their ends, stands fate.

The *Beowulf* poet ascribes many events to *wyrð*-fate, as most translate it -- though the Christian flavor of the poem views this working-out as the hand of the *Metod*, the Lord. King Alfred explained the Saxon understanding of (what is to us) the apparent contradiction between the interaction of divine Providence and mankind's free will:

What we call God's forethought and His providence, is while it is there in His mind, before it gets done, while it's still being thought; but once it's done, we call it *wyrð*.<sup>20</sup>

Under the classical definition, then, fate is actually composed of two elements: the divine plan, and how men of their own free will cooperate with it. T.A. Shippey well notes in his *Road to Middle-Earth*:

...people are not under the domination of *wyrð*, which is why fate is not a good translation of it. People can 'change their luck,' and can in a way say 'No' to divine Providence, though of course if they do they have to stand by the consequences of their decision. In Middle-Earth, one may say, Providence or the Valar sent the dream that took Boromir to Rivendell (I:259). But they sent it first and most often to Faramir, who would no doubt have been a better choice. It was human decision, or perversity, which led to Boromir claiming the journey, with what chain of ill-effects and casualties no one can tell. 'Luck' [*wyrð*], then, is a continuous interplay of providence and free will, a blending of so many factors that the mind cannot disentangle them....<sup>21</sup>

That providence and free will are curious and uncanny cooperators is most evident upon reading *The Silmarillion*. In the first of his Three Laws of Arda, Randal Helms in *Tolkien and the Silmarils* elucidates that "fate," for Tolkien,

really means the hidden will of Iluvatar [All-Father], controlling for good all the destinies of Arda and its overlords and inhabitants. Yet fate is not merely applied from outside a character; it is paradoxically the expression of his own free nature as that exists within Eru[the One]; for each character, whether evil or good, stands before Iluvatar with both free will and the certainty that whatever he wills will turn out, like the acts of Melkor, as but 'a part of the whole and a tributary to its glory.'<sup>22</sup>

We can in this way understand, through the inexpressible meshing of divine foresight and mortals' free choice, that Bilbo came upon the ages-lost One Ring because he was "meant to find the Ring" (I:188). Frodo accepts the errand to Mt. Doom that is "appointed" for him (I:354). Saruman's vying for mastery of Middle-Earth contributes to the pushing of Sauron's hand, eventually sealing evil's doom.

Aragorn in particular remarks repeatedly that, since passing the Argonath and returning to the land of his sires, "All that I have done today has gone amiss" (II:18). But without his apparently flawed decisions, Merry might never have appeared on the Battle of the Pelennor Fields to aid in the Nazgul chief's defeat. Were it not for the odd interplay of Providence and free choice, all Middle-Earth would have been lost. So then true-hearted courage may cooperate with Providence (*wyrð*) to bring *eucatastrophe*, the "good turn," the "happy ending."

Yet Boromir, though "true-hearted," falls to evil for the same reasons as his father Denethor: pride, desire for power, and impatience with others' role in *wyrð*. Boromir and Denethor believe that all victory depends on their courage, on their self-mastery, on their wisdom and on their prowess. Neither Boromir nor Denethor can grasp the folly of hiding, or of using, Sauron's Ring; only the "folly" that would "throw it away" (I:516). Each fails to cooperate by turns with *wyrð*. They wish to usurp a place in the Ring's fate rather than receive their part. They wish to claim and win renown for themselves (all in the name of Gondor) rather than lay down their lives in furtherance of the higher duty: the errand that has been appointed (and by one higher than Elrond). And though Boromir defers for a while to Aragorn, each will take only his own counsel, believing his role in saving Gondor to be the pivot-point and linchpin of all resistance.

Aragorn, in contrast, lays his life down for the Hobbits: "If by life or by death I can save you, I will" (I:233). His loyalty is wider than to Gondor alone; as he tells Eomer, "I serve no man, but the servants of Sauron I pursue into whatever land they may go" (II:43). Aragorn serves all free peoples by his tireless opposition of the enemy.

Gandalf, as well, lays down his life for the Fellowship on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm. Like Christ, Gandalf bore himself in humility, loyalty and the greatest love for all free peoples under the care of his labors. Selflessness is the quality that binds courage and loyalty to fate -- the willing cooperation with Providence -- and keeps Aragorn and Gandalf from falling to fatalism, as did the despairing Denethor.

Pride dealt Denethor a long, and at last telling, blow. His long and secret desire to rule as a king and not a steward first set him on that dark path.

Denethor, like Boromir, saw his duty as the highest good-but dependent solely upon his own prowess.

"You think, as is your wont, my Lord, of Gondor only," said Gandalf. "Yet there are other men and other lives, and time still to be. And for me, I pity even his [Sauron's] slaves."<sup>23</sup>

It is a mistake to study too closely the arts of the enemy. Like Saruman, Denethor falls in trying to wrest knowledge and cunning from the very thought of Sauron, a match too great for any free being alone. He is misled by Sauron's own devices. Seeking mastery rather than aid, command rather than counsel, he despaired of victory when no hope in strength remained.

.....

Tolkien could not ignore the power of the Northern battle-ethic, the courage and fierce loyalty ofthane for lord. But as a Christian, neither could he leave untouched the pagan's bleak prospect for the afterlife.

In his mythopoeic creation of a secondary world, Tolkien engendered a true community of free peoples. Elves, dwarves, men, ents, hobbits -- even old Tom Bombadil -- stand united to serve the *wyrd* of Iluvatar (wittingly or no) under the Valar's regency. After all, all are Erusen, children of Eru; and to serve the good of the free peoples is to serve the will of Iluvatar Himself.

#### NOTES

- 1 III:93. References to the text of *The Lord of the Rings* are in the format of volume and page number for the first edition of the Ballantine paperback: Roman numeral I for *The Fellowship of the Ring*, II for *The Two Towers*, and III for *The Return of the King*; Arabic numbers for pagination.
- 2 J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984), p. 23.
- 3 J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories" in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984), p. 144.
- 4 Philippians 4:8 (New International Version).
- 5 III:286.
- 6 J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984), pp. 18,22.
- 7 Quotations below from *Beowulf*, *Finn and Hengest*, and *The Battle of Maldon* will not be attributed by line number. Translations are the writer's, with help in *Finn and Hengest* from J.R.R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode*, ed. Alan Bliss (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1983), p. 147.
- 8 Pagan Greek proverb cited in 1 Corinthians 15:32 (New International Version).
- 9 Emphasis is the writer's.
- 10 J.R.R. Tolkien, "Oferrmod," Part III in "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtelm's Son" in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1968), p. 20 (A).
- 11 I recommend Dick West's Mythcon XVIII paper, "Turin's Oferrmod: Heroes Are Dangerous to Have

Around," which discusses the fated character of Turin Turambar ("turin umbartanen") in the settings of *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales*. I will here confine my remarks to references in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

- 12 Robert Boenig, "Tolkien and Old Germanic Ethics," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, General Fantasy and Mythic Studies*, Winter 1986, p. 10.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 I:429, 428.
- 15 I:430.
- 16 II:433.
- 17 II:434.
- 18 III:141.
- 19 III:141.
- 20 King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius, ed. W.J. Sedgfield (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 128 [Shippey's translation].
- 21 T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), p. 114.
- 22 Randel Helms, *Tolkien and the Silmarils* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 46.
- 23 III:105.

## Mythlore Art Portfolio

Over the years *Mythlore* has published a large amount of highly praised fantasy artwork. Few people are inclined to cut up their issues of *Mythlore* in order to frame these pieces for their walls. Therefore, *Mythlore* has begun a series of portfolios reproducing various pieces on quality paper suitable for framing. A limited number of portfolios are now being offered containing copies signed and numbered by the artists.

Signed portfolios are \$25.00.

Unsigned portfolios are \$15.00.

Included in the first portfolio are the following pieces:

- "Meditation of Mordred" (Williams) by Sarah Beach (from *Mythlore* #39)
- "Trothlight at Cerin Amroth" (Tolkien) by Paula DiSante (from *Mythlore* #45)
- "The Mistress of the Silver Moon" (MacDonald) by Nancy-Lou Patterson (from *Mythlore* #21)
- "Till We Have Faces" (Lewis) by Patrick Wynne (from *Mythlore* #39)

Each portfolio comes in a folder with Patrick Wynne's "Triskelion" (from *Mythlore* #35) printed on the cover. The artwork is reproduced on 9"x12" sheets. Please specify whether you want a signed or unsigned portfolio. Suggestions for future portfolios are encouraged, as they are designed for members' enjoyment. Send your order to: Orders Dept., 1008 N. Monterey St., Alhambra, CA 91801.

LETTERS, continued from page 54

"A happy vicar I might have been  
Two Hundred years ago..."

and, as Peter Schakel points out, he chose to be buried in a graveyard. A closet Anglican? Who knows what might have happened had he not died early of T.B.? If he had lived to meet Lewis in, say, 1958?