



BOOK REVIEW:

*Germanic Heroes, Courage, and Fate:
Northern Narratives of Tolkien's
Legendarium*

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Gallant, Richard Z. *Germanic Heroes, Courage, and Fate: Northern Narratives of Tolkien's Legendarium*. Walking Tree Publishers, 2024. ISBN: 978-3-905703-49-8.

Scholarship comparing Tolkien's work to the medieval sources that inspired him is a well-established sub-set of Tolkien studies. Richard Z. Gallant's *Germanic Heroes, Courage and Fate* aims to take this subject in a bold new direction by using Tolkien's "theory of Northern courage" as a guide to how Tolkien adapts medieval notions of heroism into his legendarium. Gallant defines the theory as "the dark, despairing melancholy and stout refusal to give up in the face of certain defeat" and marks it as "the common, unifying thematic thread running throughout the narratives of the Eldar, Edain, and Dunedain" (2). While Tolkien never stated that he directly applied this theory to his work, Gallant's argument hinges on "the theory of Northern courage" as a pervasive, subtextual throughline. In tandem with "Northern courage" is *wyrd*, the Anglo-Saxon conception of "fate" that Gallant defines as something that "represents what is done and the consequences of what is done, rather than what is preordained to happen" (171). The monograph has a chrono-narratological structure, beginning with the Elves of the First Age as the *exemplum* for "Northern courage" in Arda and then progressing into reactions to the *exemplum* by later Ages and other Peoples. This structure is then sub-divided into chapters that focus either on individual characters, such as Fëanor, Galadriel, and Aragorn, or chapters with a focus on the theory and associated concepts, such as divine Authority as both spiritual and narratological power,

wyrd and the role of the historian as *wyrdwriteras*, and the relationship between “Northern courage” and the Atlantean material of the *Akallabêth*.

Gallant’s main goal is to present how Tolkien works these concepts into his legendarium as a cohesive narrative and to provide references to historical influences. There are three levels of discussion at work in *Germanic Heroes*. First, Gallant examines what is in the legendarium and Tolkien’s written references to “Northern courage” and “Germanic” heroism, as they connect to Elvish culture. Second, he maps out historical touchstones for comparison and discusses how these theories relate to texts such as *Beowulf*, Alfred’s *Boethius*, and the *Hildebrandslied*. The third, and most pervasive throughout the text, is the level of Gallant’s own opinions on how the prior two interact to craft an image of the “Germanic” legacy of heroism present in Tolkien’s writing.

Based on this description, Gallant’s appropriation of the “theory of Northern courage” back into the legendarium situates it as the perceived singular, decisive thesis of Tolkien’s works. However, Gallant’s discussion adds copious terms that complicate the argument being made in the monograph. The main issue here is the range of terms being employed without defining these terms as they are being introduced to guide the reader. The clearest example of this is *doom*, which may refer either to doom-as-destruction or doom-as-fate. While *doom* is introduced in chapter two “Original Sin in Heorot and Valinor,” it does not receive a proper definition until the following chapter, “The Dance of Authority in Arda,” where Gallant clarifies that it is doom-as-fate, per Tolkien’s use of the word. Still, throughout the text he continues to use both definitions interchangeably, adding unnecessary ambiguity. There are also examples of words created for the purpose of the argument that, while a strong effort, add context that is discordant to what Gallant intends. An example of this is *Noldorization*, a play on *Romanization* that is introduced in chapter five, “The Noldorization of the Edain.” The intention is to show how Noldorin culture influences the Edain in the First Age, and therefore passes on “Northern courage” but its linguistic connection to *Romanization*, a process that relied on the conquest of other peoples and subsummation of other cultures into the Roman Empire, produces an image very different from the light-handed, trickle-down effect that Gallant labels as *Noldorization* (79-80).

Despite this, many terms are used with their historical context intact – such as *wyrd*, *exemplum*, and *ethos* – and referenced clearly and effectively for an academic audience. Particular focus is given to defining “Germanic,” a term that can be problematic for medieval scholarship outside of its linguistic use. In chapter one, Gallant effectively marks out four traditional uses of the term and provides strong analysis for the merits and detriments of each: the historical and ethnographical, the literary, the heathen and pagan, and the literary-ethnographic. The final use, literary-ethnographic, is meant to refer to Tolkien’s understanding of the “Germanic” and provides the foundation for the types of sources that the monograph compares to the legendarium material throughout its discussion. The “theory of Northern courage” is Tolkien’s conception of heroism in “Germanic,” and particularly Norse, literature, and so Gallant chooses sources, he states, that include “the ethical code of Germanic heroes in Anglo-Saxon, Old High German, and Old Norse fiction” (23). Though he refers to “heroic poetry” that tells of the Migration Period of the Germanic peoples, his range of sources is wider, including Anglo-Saxon religious and philosophical

texts, Icelandic family sagas set at the turn of the millennium, and historical texts relating to these “Germanic” figures.

Gallant’s textual analysis is strong, especially his discussion of the Alfredian *Boethius* and its understanding of *wyrd* in Chapter 3, and the comparisons between Aragorn and Charlemagne in Chapter 10. Both chapters provide a new and interesting perspective on Tolkien’s legendarium and the relationship to its medieval predecessors. These are clearly sources that Gallant knows well and he builds a strong thesis around them, but many of the sources central to the “theory of Northern courage” actually seem somewhat lacking or ill-fitting for the research being conducted. For example, there are multiple references to *Hrafnkels saga*, an Icelandic family saga that is not set in the Migration Period, nor does it have characters that can be considered “heroic.” Yet it is one of the pillars of Gallant’s definition of “Germanic” heroism, and because of this he includes them in his discussion of the “theory of Northern courage.”

This is ultimately the main weakness of the monograph, which, it could be argued, misunderstands the nature of the “Germanic” hero and how Tolkien’s legendarium reacts to that concept of heroism. Gallant views the character of Fëanor as the first and quintessential example of “Northern courage” amongst the Eldar, but also the progenitor of sin and *wyrd* amongst the Noldor. Because of this, the character becomes his central point of comparison to medieval heroes, embodying “the raw negative aspects of the heroic” (25). However, the “heroes” Gallant compares are Weyland the Smith and Gunnar of the Niflungs, with further references to Grendel from *Beowulf*. While all three are complex and worthwhile characters in their own right, it would be remiss to call any of them “heroes.” In addition to this, Gallant does not mention any characters that may be deemed quintessential heroes of the Northern world, such as Sigurðr the Dragon-Slayer, Dietrich of Bern, or even Beowulf himself. As a result, the monograph presents Tolkien’s perception of the “Germanic” heroic material to be far more pessimistic, and therefore disingenuous, than the medieval originals Tolkien would be drawing from. While this does support the “theory of Northern courage” outlined in the first chapters, this picking and choosing of sources to fit the theory rather than assembling the theory based on what is found in the sources unfortunately makes the argument feel somewhat forced.

The tendency for this kind of argumentation is only exacerbated as the topics move away from the Eldar to discuss how the “theory of Northern courage,” through its Noldorin origins, affects the Edain and later Men. This is a strong angle to approach the whole of the legendarium, to establish the patterns throughout the Ages and Peoples of Arda as originating from the same heroic ethos, but it has the side-effect of obfuscating non-“Germanic” elements. The best example of this is in chapter six, “Discontinuity of Heroic Ethos,” which focuses on the downfall of Númenor. Gallant’s main argument in this chapter is that “there does not appear to be anything ‘Germanic’ about the narrative’s mood and tenor” because it is based on Plato’s Atlantean material (99). However, a cursory glance between the “theory of Northern courage” and the *Akallabêth* raises a question about that conclusion: if Númenor is doomed to be destroyed by the consequences of its own free will, much like Fëanor, then why are they not examples of “Northern courage,” too?

Ultimately, Gallant attempts a bold re-evaluation of the Tolkien material and makes a valiant effort to trace a theme shared by every Age of Arda. His book has the potential to open up further research into the topic of relating “Germanic” heroic tropes and literature to Tolkien’s legendarium. However, this effort to tie every main theme to the “theory of Northern courage” and *wyrd* is also the weakness of the overall monograph. The seeming unwillingness to expand beyond a pre-conceived idea of “Germanic” heroism that results from this approach is a major drawback. Unfortunately, the book seems to show elements of an approach of going in with one’s working theory and argument already fully formed and forcing Tolkien’s work and sources to comply with them, rather than examining what the texts themselves are saying. A simpler, looser approach with well-defined terms could have produced a more argumentatively sound monograph to examine what is actually written in the legendarium rather than what Gallant wants to be there. The book has been praised by fellow Tolkien scholars in the Foreword and Introduction (Tom Shippey and Thomas Honegger, respectively) as a piece that will be readable for both academic and lay audiences alike. However, it seems that this book is best suited to Tolkien scholars with an established medieval background, as they will be the most equipped to work through the rougher patches of Gallant’s theories to find the stronger aspects within.

Biography: Natalie Hopwood is a PhD candidate at the University of Leeds. Her thesis is an intertextual analysis of encounters with dragons, dwarfs, and the undead in Old Norse legendary and romance sagas. Her secondary research niche is the reception of medieval literature in popular culture. She has previously published on the emotions of *draugar* in Icelandic sagas and has an upcoming chapter on Jack Kirby’s use of Norse mythological imagery in twentieth century comic books.