

Tolkien's Uses of Classical and Medieval Heroic Traits

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In J.R.R. Tolkien's *Silmarillion* and *The Children of Húrin*, Tolkien has created heroes who have traits of both classical and medieval aristocratic warrior-hero narratives, and in doing so presents an ideal hero as well as qualities that lead to a trajectory of failure.

In the examined works of Tolkien, Beren is the closest to an ideal hero. Beren at first goes through heroic 'credentialing,' proving his worth as a hero both by killing enough Orcs, as the narrator says, that they "fled rather at the rumour of his approach than sought him out" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 193), as well as by successfully going to "the Hidden Kingdom, where no mortal foot had yet trodden" (193). Heroic credentialing occurs in both classical epics as well as later tales, for example in the travels of Odysseus and quest of Gilgamesh for the cedar, Beowulf's tale of his swimming race (Heaney 1.530-606), his slaying of Grendel (l. 744-820) and Grendel's mother (l. 1492-1650), and Yvain's battle with the knight at the fountain (Chretien 811-955). Beren then meets Luthien, and his becomes a narrative most closely resonating with heroes of medieval courtly romance. His quest is not for glory or treasure for himself, but rather because of his love for the female elf, to win the permission of Luthien's father to wed her. Though Beren has the opportunity to simply live with Luthien without going back to earn her father's approval, he follows the rules of decorum and strives to complete his quest (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 208-209). Tolkien shows the behavior of Celegorm in contrast to Beren, as upon seeing Luthien Celegorm takes her captive and plans to "force Thingol to give her hand" (204). Celegorm's behavior towards Luthien and his treacherous intent towards Felagund, the king, lose him the loyalty of the hound Huan, who then follows

Beren instead. Beren is successful in his quest because he is not seeking the Silmarils for himself, and so escapes the curse on the treasure. He is also not too proud to accept the help of Luthien when confronting Morgoth, though he tried to leave her behind for her safety. Without her aid, he would have failed.

Beleg is also presented as having many heroic traits, though they are traits of the heroic companion. He is “strong, and enduring, and far-sighted in mind as well as eye, and at need he was valiant in battle” (141), all qualities of a strong leader, as he directs the defense of the north-marshes from the attacks of Orcs. He becomes a mentor to Túrin, teaching him how to fight (Tolkien, *Hurin* 81). He volunteers to seek out Túrin and invite him back to Doriath out of love for him (96), and gives him counsel on many occasions. Even when Túrin goes against his counsel to return to Doriath, Beleg “came back to Túrin, yielding to his love against his wisdom” (139). His decision to follow Túrin instead of his own judgment is similar to Enkidu’s decision to follow Gilgamesh in the quest for the cedar tree even when he thought it would end in failure (Gilgamesh II.243-256). Because of his decision to stay by Túrin’s side, and to follow when Túrin is captured, Beleg is killed by his friend’s hand.

Tolkien also presents two protagonists, Fëanor and Túrin, whose narrative has a trajectory of failure through the traits of possessiveness and pride. Both protagonists are stubborn. The narrator says of Fëanor, “Few ever changed his course by counsel, none by force” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 65). Similarly, Túrin in several occasions ignores or refuses the counsel of his friends, as with Beleg above and later the advice of Gwindor (Tolkien, *Hurin* 165), and even of the vala Ulmo (173), instead persisting in his plans. Fëanor most clearly begins his trajectory of failure when he creates the Silmarils and begins to love

them “with a greedy love” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 71). His possessiveness of them makes him hide them deep underground, far from the sight of others. He will not give them up even to save the Trees of Valinor, and when he learns they have been taken he swears a “terrible oath...vowing to pursue with vengeance and hatred to the ends of the world...whoso should hold or take or keep a Silmaril from their possession” (90). This oath is enough to hold himself and his children captive to it for the duration of their lives, but his actions have an even worse consequence. After they slay the Teleri for use of their ships, they are cursed by Mandos. The curse together with the oath cause the death, treachery, and failure of Fëanor and his children.

Though Túrin does not suffer from the possessiveness that drives Fëanor, he does suffer from great pride which leads to his failure in many enterprises. He suffers from overconfidence that leads to his failure in several fights with Morgoth, when Amon Rûdh is overtaken and when Nargothrond falls. In both times, he is warned that Morgoth will create a force greater than his own and was only using feints to give him confidence, but Túrin does not heed the advice. In both cases, his folly leads to the death of most of the community he inhabited. Túrin’s pride prevents him from returning to Doriath, where he might have been reunited with his mother and sister and avoided later misfortunes.

Túrin, as the protagonist of the longest work, shows other heroic traits from classical and medieval warrior heroes, both positive and negative. As with Beren, he goes through a period of hero credentialing. Túrin possesses many of the positive traits of Odysseus. Like Odysseus, he has charisma. Similar to how Odysseus meets with and gets gifts from several kings in the *Odyssey*, Túrin rises several times in the book to positions of power and influence. Túrin also proves himself physically stronger and more capable

when confronted by the warriors, similar to Odysseus's encounter with the Phaiakians. He rules the outlaws through *comitatus* rather than through force or right. He invites the others to either take him as their captain, let him leave, or fight him (Tolkien, *Hurin* 106). The men decide to have him lead, Algund calling him, "The best man among us" (106). However, Túrin displays many negative heroic traits from earlier works as well. He is forgetful, similar to Yvain, as he cannot remember Nellas, an elf friend from his youth, though he spent much time with her. He also is oblivious to the moods of those around him, from the love of women to the anger and hurt of his friends. Mim betrays him through jealousy of Beleg's close companionship and counsel of Túrin, a position which he used to hold, eventually betraying the man. Gwindor turns from a friend to an enemy when Túrin earns the love of his betrothed and his position on the king's council. These traits contribute to Túrin's eventual doom.

Through the four characters, Fëanor, Beren, Túrin, and Beleg, Tolkien demonstrates his definition of a hero, both idealizing traits and criticizing others. In their narratives, all four die because of a doom attached to them or those they love. Their traits, for good or ill, aren't enough to change their fate. However, though they all die, in their fates Tolkien shows the results of both positive and negative heroic traits.

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