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# Masculinity in Tolkien

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"He is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy." (1)

## Introduction

In a review of *The Return of the King* published in the *Observer* in 1955, Edwin Muir criticizes that "all the characters are boys masquerading as adult heroes [...] and will never come to puberty [...]. Hardly one of them knows anything about women," (2) and similar observations have been made by critics over time. Yet can Tolkien's portrayal of masculinity truly be reduced to such a simple formula? Are his men all simply "boys" or, as other critics argue, simplistic good heroes, a romanticized version of the medieval knight who fights a dragon to win the princess in the end?

As Simone de Beauvoir points out, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him" (3) – yet man is not simply that which is the norm, all that which is not female. Instead, as Judith Butler reminds us, masculinity is not essence but performance, and masculinity has been performed in different ways during history and changing cultures (4).

In this series of essays based on my MA thesis, I argue that despite Tolkien's often conservative views when it comes to sex and gender, a closer look at how masculinity is performed in his works actually shows the social criticism hidden within: the rejection of the heroic code and the search for a hero and a masculinity which is built on love and loyalty, not the excess of courage and pride that can be found in many of his mythological and literary sources.

In this first essay I look at what constitutes masculinity in one of Tolkien's main sources of inspiration, Anglo-Saxon literature; later, I will discuss how he criticizes this heroic code by his portrayal of the costs of pride. In further essays, I will explore the concept of Chivalry which Tolkien describes in his essay on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and show how this chivalrous masculinity is criticized and rejected in his fiction. Furthermore, I will examine Tolkien's conception of 'good' and 'bad' kingship, and afterward look at Tolkien's war experiences and how these might have shaped the portrayal of his hobbit characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. At last, I will look at contemporary, queer readings of Tolkien's portrayal of masculinity which try to deconstruct the conservative heterosexual matrix of his world.

## Anglo-Saxon Masculinity: The Heroic Code

Anglo-Saxon masculinity is most often summarized in the Germanic "heroic code", which regulates the life of the heroes found in Old English poetry (5). As Wormald points out, contemporary scholars have abandoned the term as unhelpful, as it gives the impression that what was in fact but a social ethic held the importance of a law. According to his argument, the values of the heroic code were binding only insofar as that they portrayed a behavior which the socially dominant class approved of as fitting for a warrior (6). Yet while the heroic code is no legally binding, clearly delineated code of conduct, it nevertheless describes the heroic behavior

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that was expected of the protagonists of Anglo-Saxon poetry, and it is proclaimed in Beowulf in the following verses:

'Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better  
to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.  
For every one of us, living in this world  
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can  
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,  
that will be his best and only bulwark. [...]' (7)

In fact, the entirety of the Beowulf poem can be read as a description of this heroic code which regulated the lives of Anglo-Saxon men. "That was one good king" (8) is what is proclaimed right at the beginning in the description of Shield Sheafson, and his life serves as an example of the life a hero should lead, starting with a mysterious origin, the many victories he won during his life, and at last the glorious burial in a boat with treasures, accompanied by songs to commemorate him. This description of a life governed by the heroic code is paralleled by Beowulf's life with his childhood full of impossible deeds, his coming to Hrothgar's court to slay Grendel and his mother, and at last the glorious death he finds in his battle with a dragon.

The authoritarian structure of the Anglo-Saxon society is revealed in Old English poems like *The Wanderer*, whose narrator remembers times when he received "the kind advice of his beloved lord" (9), an advice and a comfort which he misses after his lord's death. An exiled warrior like in *The Wanderer* needs to find a new lord to serve, otherwise he will never be able to share his thoughts and his fears, as his honor forbids him to voice them to others. He has lost his friends and kinsmen, for he sees his memories of them as "floating spirits" (10). It is highly probable that they will have died in the same battle as his lord, as the heroic code asked of them. Only if another lord accepts him into his service will he once again be able to know friendship amidst the war-band among fellow warriors.

Thus it follows that a warrior's role in society is solely defined by his ties to lord and kin (11). In a warrior community defined by this heroic code of conduct, a man without a lord is without identity.

### **Reciprocal Loyalty**

The Anglo-Saxon warrior ideal can be divided into three important features: reciprocal loyalty between retainer and lord, revenge obligation, and the duty to win glory especially in the face of defeat.

Loyalty between retainer and warlord shows in the way that for his service in battle, a warrior is rewarded by his lord with rings and torcs of gold as well as with public recognition for his heroic deeds. In the Old English poem *The Wanderer*, the exiled warrior remembers "fair twisted gold", "receiving gifts of treasure" and "recognition in his mead-hall" (12). In *Beowulf*, the lord of a nation is referred to as "ring-giver" and "treasure-giver" (13), Hrothgar "doled out rings and torques at the table" (14), and Beowulf is rewarded by Hygelac with "a gold-chased heirloom" (15). Furthermore, Beowulf embodies the loyalty which a warrior should show his lord by returning with the treasures he has been gifted with, after he has slain Grendel and his mother, to give them to his king in turn (16).

### **Revenge Obligation**

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The revenge obligation is twofold and refers to both the warrior's kin and the warrior's lord. It is a loyal retainer's duty to revenge his lord by killing those responsible for his death, or – if that proves impossible - to fight to his own death in the attempt of revenge. In *Beowulf*, we find this when Beowulf takes revenge for the death of his king Heardred: "In days to come, he contrived to avenge the fall of his prince [...]. The feud was settled on a comfortless campaign when he killed Onela" (17).

In *The Wanderer*, this part of the heroic code is illustrated by the exile's memory of how he buried his "lord's remains in darkness of the earth". He appears to have lost his lord in a battle which he himself has survived, instead of dying the heroic death at his lord's side which the heroic code asks of a man. He "often had to tie in fetters [his] own troubled spirit", which shows the guilt that plagues him at the thought of his lord's death. His failure to protect his lord, or to at least die a valiant death at his side, has left him with "heart's wounds" of self-blame for being unable to do what the heroic code – and with it society – asks of him.

Phillpotts argues that revenge in Anglo-Saxon society was never caused by mere passion or temptation. Instead she points out that most often, it was "a deliberate sacrifice of wealth, happiness, even of personal honor, in order to fulfil an obligation which might be the holiest of all" (18). By giving revenge a holy quality, it reaches a state where it should supersede all other codes of behavior asked for by the heroic ethos (19). Thus, if a retainer is thrust into a situation where he has to decide between loyalty to his lord and loyalty to his kin, it follows that even at such a high, personal cost the heroic code asks that he chooses lord over kin. This hard duty is the aspect which Phillpotts sees as most fascinating and identifies as a central theme of Anglo-Saxon poets. She argues that if a hero is forced to choose between two choices, both with evil outcomes, this conflict is what reveals the heroic character (20). True perseverance can only be shown when the outcome is doomed either way, and it is the only way true, immortal glory can be achieved in the songs of the scop.

To illustrate this, Phillpotts points to the story of Ingeld in *Beowulf*, for Ingeld is forced to choose between peace brought about by marrying his enemy's daughter, and his duty to react to the insult of Danish nobles wearing heirlooms of Ingeld's people, which the Danes had won in earlier fights. Beowulf foretells that despite the proposed wedding, "on both sides the oath-bound lords / will break up the peace, a passionate hate / will build up in Ingeld and love for his bride / will falter in him as the feud rankles" (21). In the end, the revenge obligation takes the greatest importance, and despite a wish for peace and even feeling love for his bride, Ingeld knows that he cannot live with the insult of not having taken revenge, which would forever tarnish his reputation even in memory after his death.

Tolkien shares this view, and in his lecture on *Beowulf* characterizes the old heroes as "men caught in the chain of circumstance or of their own character, torn between duties equally sacred, dying with their backs to the wall" (22). He argues that the main theme of *Beowulf* is to showcase "man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in time" (23). To be a man in Anglo-Saxon culture means to be perpetually in a state of war, and if it is not a war against an enemy king, there is still no peace for a warrior, for he is always aware that his final enemy, time, will at last defeat him, for there is no escape from that fate.

Perhaps one of the most telling sentences in Tolkien's *Beowulf* lecture is when he declares that "[*Beowulf*] is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy" (24). Unlike Ingeld, *Beowulf* is not torn between loyalties, or thrust into a conflict because of love, and thus according to

Tolkien he is not truly the kind of hero one would expect in a heroic lay. He needs no supernatural ancestry to make him into a hero, for Tolkien claims that in this fatalistic worldview where kings and champions will inevitably be defeated, the courage which makes a man step forward and fight regardless is that which truly makes a man a hero.

Yet this statement can also be read in another way: it is tragic to be a man in the Anglo-Saxon warrior society, which is also often characterized as a shame culture (25). In this shame culture, the heroic poetry itself is of high importance. As Lambert and Lambert point out, due to the oral culture of Anglo-Saxon society, events need to be recorded in song in order to be remembered at all, for if something is not remembered, it ceases to exist (26). An example of the high importance of song can be found in the poem *Widsith*, for as the traveling minstrel reminds the lord whose employ he seeks, "he gains praise, he has lofty glory under the heavens" (27). While such glory can only be gained in battle, it has to be transformed into song by a minstrel in order to become the lofty glory that will last even after death. In such a way, the value system of this shame culture is perpetuated with all its expectations of how a heroic man ought to behave: "Having heard heroic songs, Beowulf performs a heroic deed. When the hero has performed a heroic deed, a heroic song is composed commemorating it and urging others to perform similar deeds" (28).

What a man does, how he acts is clearly defined in the heroic code. In this perception of gender, we once again find but the choice between two evils. A man can conform to what the heroic code asks of a warrior, to show more loyalty to his lord than to his kin, and to find glory in battle and most probably end his life in a heroic death which will give him a chance of being remembered in song. His other choice, to not conform to what is expected of a man by his society, would mean shame, as the character of Unferth in *Beowulf* shows. Beowulf can reprimand him and shame him by pointing out that Unferth never fought a fight that compares to those Beowulf fought, and that he was never "much celebrated for swordsmanship or for facing danger on the field of battle" (29). He can insult him unchecked by Unferth's friends or Hrothgar, his lord, because Unferth has not taken up a sword to fight Grendel, while according to the heroic code, Unferth should have had the courage to unflinchingly find death at Grendel's hands in exchange for the glory it would bring him.

### Courage

The third feature of the Anglo-Saxon warrior ideal is courage, for, as Phillipotts points out, for the Anglo-Saxons "the quality of a man is not known until he is sore beset, either by defeat in battle or by being placed in a situation in which he must do violence to his sense of right" (30). It is a man's duty to win glory in battle, especially when victory is impossible. The heroic code demands courage even in the face of defeat, and in fact in *Beowulf* it is stated that "often, for undaunted courage, fate spares the man it has not already marked" (31).

Yet even for a man already doomed, courage must be shown no matter how dire his situation. This is why Beowulf chooses to fight the dragon without the help of his men, to increase the glory he will win from this show of courage, in the same way as he won more glory for battling Grendel with bare hands:

'I had a fixed purpose when I put to sea.  
As I sat in the boat with my band of men,  
I meant to perform to the uttermost  
what your people wanted or perish in the attempt,

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in the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfil that purpose,  
 prove myself with a proud deed  
 or meet my death here in the mead-hall.' (32)

In another Anglo-Saxon poem, *Cynewulf and Cyneheard*, (33) when Cynewulf is killed by Cyneheard, Cyneheard makes "an offer to each [i.e. Cynewulf's warriors] of money and life; and not one of them would accept it. But they continued to fight until they all lay dead" (34). Later, more of Cynewulf's warriors return, and are offered lands and gold if they will take Cyneheard for their lord instead. Yet the heroic code forbids such an action, for Cynewulf's warriors have sworn an oath to serve him, and so they reply that "no kinsman was dearer to them than their lord, and they would never serve his slayer" (35).

In *The Wanderer*, a different sort of courage can be seen in the exile's stoicism. He is forced to leave his former home and the security and warmth of the mead-hall after the death of his lord. While he travels through snow and ice, without the protection of his former lord he is at danger from both the elements and other hostile war-bands. Yet still the exile meets this danger with courage, for "a weary heart cannot oppose inexorable fate" (36). The heroic code does not allow him to complain about his misfortunes to another, and so he can only utter his complaints in a lonely monologue. Men "jealous of their reputation" (37) have to hide their fears lest they be branded as a coward, as Unferth is in *Beowulf*.

### **The Heroic Code in *The Silmarillion***

There can be found many similarities to the Anglo-Saxon warrior society of *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer* in *The Silmarillion*. Especially in the tale of the Noldor and their rebellion and long fight in Middle-earth, it seems that the men as well are solely defined by their role as warriors. The example of Fëanor especially shows how the warriors' ties to kin and lord are of the utmost importance. He is described as "the mightiest in all parts of body and mind" (38), yet he is also the first elf to threaten another with a blade. That it is his half-brother Fingolfin whom he threatens shows that there is a political dimension to their quarrel. Later on, Fingolfin forgives his brother with the words that in future, "thou shalt lead and I will follow" (39), which is reminiscent of the oath of fealty a warrior swears to his lord.

A further example of the high importance of loyalty for the people of the Noldor can be found in the story of Finrod and Beren. It illustrates how great a similarity the society of the Noldor bears to the Anglo-Saxon warrior society, which becomes most obvious in Finrod's dealings with the tribes of Men: "But Felagund dwelt among them and taught them true knowledge, and they loved him, and took him for their lord, and were ever after loyal to the house of Finarfin" (40). Here as well we now find a society where a lord rules over men, and where his protection and wisdom is paid for with loyalty. Indeed, the great significance of this oath of fealty and the responsibility it engenders in both sides, lord and warrior, is made apparent in the person of Bëor:

But when after a year had passed Felagund wished to return to his own country, Bëor begged leave to come with him; and he remained in the service of the King of Nargothrond while his life lasted. In this way he got his name, Bëor, whereas his name before had been Balan; for Bëor signified 'Vassal' in the tongue of his people. (41)

The importance which is here given to the aspect of fealty could hardly be higher – as in Anglo-Saxon society, a warrior is defined by his bond to his lord, here as well the entire identity of a



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man is characterized by his fealty and loyalty to his king. With the change of name, it is made apparent that he has been transformed into something else. He is not merely a Man who has sworn an oath of fealty to an Elvish king, his entire identity has been subsumed by that oath.

The Noldor soon also begin to impose the authoritarian structure of their society onto the tribes of men whom they take into their service:

But after a time the Elf-kings, seeing that it was not good for Elves and Men to dwell mingled together without order, and that Men needed lords of their own kind, set regions apart where Men could live their own lives, and appointed chieftains to hold these lands freely. They were the allies of the Eldar in war, but marched under their own leaders. Yet many of the Edain had delight in the friendship of the Elves, and dwelt among them for so long as they had leave; and the young men often took service for a time in the hosts of the kings. (42)

While the Men who came west into the realms of the Elves already seem to have been organized in tribes, there is little said about their structures of society. Yet as the quote makes obvious, whatever structure governed the tribes before is subsumed by the model of of elvish society, who order the tribes of Men according to the structure of their own warrior society. It is the Elf-kings who appoint the chieftains of Men, and who give them lands to hold in a clear parallel to the feudal system with lords who grant their vassals land in exchange for their oaths of loyalty and service. Thus it is also for these Men of Middle-earth, who, it is explained, might march under their own leaders, yet in turn those leaders owe loyalty to the Elf-kings and are their allies in war.

A further illustration of this, and an example of the power Tolkien grants to loyalty and the keeping of oaths in his work, can be seen in the story of Barahir, who rescues Finrod during a battle. In gratitude, Finrod "swore an oath of abiding friendship and aid in every need to Barahir and all his kin, and in token of his vow he gave to Barahir his ring" (43). Finrod here takes the place of the 'ring-giver', the lord of the heroic poems, and the oath of friendship and aid he swears shows a great similarity to the wisdom and protection a lord would give his war-band.

Furthermore, when at last it is time for Finrod to redeem his oath, another favorite theme of the Anglo-Saxon poets is taken up, the conflict between being loyal to one's oath (in the Old English poems, usually the oath to one's lord, yet here the oath to a vassal instead) and being loyal to one's kin. It is Barahir's son Beren who comes to Finrod at last and asks his help in reclaiming the Silmarils. By his oath, Finrod is sworn to give him the aid he asks for, yet at the same time, those who want to see Beren dead and reclaim the Silmarils for themselves are his kin, his cousins Celegorm and Caranthir. Finrod, like many an Anglo-Saxon hero, is now forced to choose between two evils. Due to a premonition he knows that should he help Beren, he will find his death – yet he has sworn an oath to aid him, and due to the constrictions the heroic code imposes on him, he needs to keep it. The other choice open to him would be to place his loyalty to kin before his loyalty to the oath – he would be an oathbreaker, yet he knows that the Silmarils themselves are cursed, and by showing loyalty to his kin that doom would ensnare him and certainly bring about his death as well, as it has for so many of his people already.

Finrod chooses between two evil outcomes, but as Phillipotts has pointed out, it is exactly this choice which reveals the character of a man. Finrod makes a heroic choice, he chooses to keep his oath even at the cost of his kingdom, his kin and, in the end, his life, and when all of his

warriors desert him but for ten men, he speaks like a true hero out of a heroic lay when he proclaims that "your oaths of faith to me you may break, but I must hold my bond" (44).

The third facet of the heroic code, the revenge obligation which Phillipotts describes as a "deliberate sacrifice of wealth, happiness, even personal honor" (45), is striking in its great similarity to the foolhardiness of Fëanor and his ill-considered oath, with which he doomed his entire people. Yet from the viewpoint of Anglo-Saxon society, there is more to his doomed oath and rash actions than just an impassioned need for revenge. As Phillipotts reminds us, vengeance is accorded such a high importance in Anglo-Saxon poetry because it threatens the very foundations of the Anglo-Saxon warrior society. Without a higher court or institution which would punish someone who committed a crime, revenge is the only way an affected individual can right a committed wrong (46).

Fëanor as well cannot trust a higher institution to right the murder of his father. The 'higher powers', the Valar, cannot be trusted to right the wrong that was done, as they were the ones who pardoned Melkor instead of keeping him imprisoned. Seen in such a way, it becomes apparent that Fëanor is not driven solely by vengeance, but also by the obligation to revenge a man who was both his king and his father. For this, he will face "the wrath of the Valar and the evils of the road, that he might see the hour of his vengeance", and thus, as Phillipotts has pointed out, sacrifice both happiness and honor to fulfill his revenge obligation.

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