
Seafaring Heroes and Villains: The Role of the Sea in Tolkien's Legendarium

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Much as the narrator declares in the opening words of one translation of *The Seafarer*: "This tale is true, and mine. . ." (Raffel 10). I claim responsibility for various conjectures made in this presentation, noting that I have not had the formal preparation of many luminaries in the field of Tolkien scholarship presenting at this conference. I would consider myself more than a hobbyist and less than a trained scholar, but over the last ten years I have devoted a great deal of time to the study of Tolkien's work, which has included, in particular, writing seventy biographies of Tolkien's characters for the Silmarillion Writers' Guild.

Today I want to begin by pointing to influences of the sea and seafarers as represented in Tolkien's legendarium. We know that Tolkien did not care for the idea of literary critics commenting upon a writer's work by looking at his life and personal history. In a much-cited passage from a 1958 letter, Tolkien wrote, "I object to the contemporary trend in criticism, with its excessive interest in the details of the lives of authors and artists. They only distract attention from an author's works" (Tolkien, *Letters* 288). He, however, took the trouble to explain for us, more than once and in some detail, what he had hoped to achieve in the creation of his mythical history. He must have understood that with those words he had not only given the reader and the critic additional information with which to appreciate his work, but a certain license to examine other possibilities. Tolkien explains that he strove to achieve a particular tone and quality in his tales that would be

somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our "air" (the clime and quality of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe; not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East), and, while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things), it should be "high," purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land long steeped in poetry. (97)

With hints like that, many scholars have felt compelled to look upon Tolkien's life and attempt to ferret out more precise sources. John Garth in his book *Tolkien and the Great War*, after only the briefest of apologies, sought to do this at great length. He notes an influence that many others have explored: "It is the affirmation of an early love for the Northern languages and literatures that will always fire his imagination" (Garth 4).

Nowhere is this more obvious than in Tolkien's creation of his most memorable fictional mariners and exiles, his shipwrights and explorers, the majority of whom are developed in his great back-story unpublished in his lifetime—*The Silmarillion* and its various drafts, re-drafts, and related narratives. Most of the characters I intend to talk about today are, to one degree or another, imbued with a similar sense of longing and regret to that which is found in the protagonists of the robust Northern epics Tolkien loved and studied throughout his life.

The Silmarillion Writers' Guild Reference Library

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My own primary interest as a fledgling Tolkienist lies in the study of *The Silmarillion*. In fact, one of my ongoing disappointments in exploring the current body of Tolkien scholarship is the degree to which its writers have more exclusively focused their attention upon *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit*. My taste leads me to return again and again to *The Silmarillion* for a fuller understanding of those more popular and much more widely read and studied works.

I first learned to love Tolkien when I was a student at UC Berkeley in the early 1970s. Faced with the contradiction between the popular enthusiasm for Tolkien on the part of my peers and the near universal dismissal of Tolkien's fiction by my professors, I approached his opus warily at first, but never entirely defensively. *The Lord of the Rings* was too epic in its scope, its characters too compelling, and its world too rich and real for me to long deny its power. My generation was nothing if not rebellious, and a few fusty English professors, however esteemed, were not enough to spoil the intensity of our excitement with our discovery of Tolkien's epic.

Most people with more than a casual interest in the critical study of Tolkien have encountered the poet W. H. Auden's series of reviews in *The New York Times*, printed at the time of the American publication of each new volume of *The Lord of the Rings*. In his review of *The Return of the King*, Auden writes:

To begin with, no previous writer has, to my knowledge, created an imaginary world and a feigned history in such detail. By the time the reader has finished the trilogy, including the appendices to this last volume, he knows as much about Tolkien's Middle Earth, its landscape, its fauna and flora, its peoples, their languages, their history, their cultural habits, as, outside his special field, he knows about the actual world. (Auden, "At the End")

When I initially encountered *The Lord of the Rings*, I was reading Old English texts for the first time. I also read Chaucer in the original, while studying the requisite complete works of Shakespeare, and more than a smattering of the Classics. I brought all of that (along with Milton's *Paradise Lost*, of course) to my own engagement with Tolkien. The typical reader, as well as the writer or scholar, always carries their own baggage with them to any work that captures their imagination. As Tom Shippey notes in *Author of the Century*, "Myths are what is always available for individuals to make over, and apply to their own circumstances, without ever gaining control or permanent single-meaning possession" (192).

Ida Gordon, one of the most respected translators of *The Seafarer* (who collaborated with Tolkien and her husband E. V. Gordon on that work and numerous others) echoed what my professors at UC Berkeley had opined over a decade earlier. In his article "An Industrious Little Devil," Douglas Anderson cites a 1982 letter written by Gordon: "I have very little interest in the Tolkien of *The Lord of the Rings*. In my opinion that side of him robbed us of a very fine medieval scholar who might have done so much more work of lasting value" (24). One might conclude, in studying the influence of Tolkien's scholarship and his "day job" upon the creation of his own mythology, that a choice between Tolkien the scholar or the creator of myth is a specious one, both impossible and unnecessary.

Looking at Tolkien as a Young Man

When one seeks influences upon Tolkien, an examination of his earliest education is useful. Roger Schlobin, known for his commentary on fantasy and science fiction, wrote that as "[a]n extraordinarily well-read scholar, Tolkien brought a large hoard of reading and knowledge to any

task, be it fiction or nonfiction. In some source studies, paths of transmission are difficult to identify; in Tolkien's case, they are far too easy" (71).

One often reads of Tolkien's boyhood fascination with words, his play with invented languages, and his later development into a mature philologist during his years at Oxford. It is striking how in his *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, one may gain precise insights into Tolkien's inspiration dating back to the education he received as a child and a young man. There, in the opening pages of this unfinished work, we read that its youthful protagonist

went to school and went on learning Latin. . . . Also he learned Greek. . . . He began to learn other languages, especially those of the North: Old English, Norse, Welsh, Irish. . . . But [he] liked the flavour of the older Northern languages. He got to know a bit about linguistic history of course . . . sound-changes were a hobby of his, at the age when other boys were learning about the insides of motor-cars. . . . The languages he liked had a definite flavour—and to some extent a similar flavour. . . . in some way related to the languages and myths told in [those] languages. (39)

To assert that Tolkien's description here is semi-autobiographical is perhaps to draw too weak a comparison. We are all familiar with Tolkien's admiration for what Auden referred to as the "'barbaric' poetry of the North" (Auden, *Certain World* 22-4). Finnish, for example, contributed to Tolkien's construction of his earliest versions of what would become the Elven language most widely known as Quenya (the Elvish Latin of the late First Age through the Third Age—the period of *The Lord of the Rings*). Tolkien describes this obsession with Finnish in a 1955 letter to Auden: It was like discovering a complete wine-cellar filled with bottles of an amazing wine of a kind and flavour never tasted before. It quite intoxicated me; and I gave up the attempt to invent an 'unrecorded' Germanic language, and my 'own language' – or series of invented languages – became heavily Finnicized in phonetic pattern and structure. (Tolkien, *Letters* 214)

The most obvious influence upon Tolkien's treatment of the sea in his writings points to the North as well. Although objecting to the concept of allegory in his work, Tolkien admits in a letter to Herbert Schiro that to insist that "there is no allegory does not, of course, say there is no applicability. There always is" (262). Nicholas Perkins' introduction to the anthology *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination* contains a salient reference to a contribution within that book that discusses both form and content within Tolkien's work relating to Anglo-Saxon sources:

In her essay, Maria Artamonova details Tolkien's serious play with his own compositions in Old English, modelled on the densely written, variant texts of pre-Conquest annals. Experimenting both with language and mythologies to write 'for an Anglo-Saxon audience' in the twentieth century, Tolkien's Old English texts form a significant foundation for his later narratives of Middle-earth. (5)

This fascination with the old Northern epics manifests itself in Tolkien's childhood in what is perhaps his first effort to create a fictional tale and reverberates well into his young adulthood:

His attempt to write a story, involving a "green great", dragon, took place at about the age of seven, when he started to compose one based on the tale of Sigurd and the dragon Fafnir. He didn't continue with it, and wrote no more such tales for many years; but he "desired dragons with a profound desire" (*Bio*, 23; TL, 40). At King Edward's School he came into contact with *Beowulf*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in their original tongues. And in his last year at school, he encountered the *Kalevala* in W. H. Kirby's translation (*Bio*, 46, 49). (Noad 34)

Maria Artamonova, in the same article referenced above by Perkins, further explains that, although Tolkien eventually abandoned the "original identification of England with Faërie, the Lonely Isle of the Elves, also known as Tol Eressëa" that he retained within his work the "pivotal role played by the Anglo-Saxons." She notes that they play the part of "mediators, of messengers and travellers who came into contact with the strange inhabitants of the lands beyond the Sea." The recurrence of sea-longing within Tolkien's narrative was "to a great extent based on the Old English elegies such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*" (Artamonova 73-74).

Miranda Wilcox emphasizes Verlyn Flieger's comments on the impact of the Anglo-Saxon elegies of the Exeter Book as well (137). Flieger explains that "Tolkien extends the historical tradition of Old English seafaring in general and of the literary tradition of *The Seafarer* in particular into his own writing" (Flieger, *Question of Time* 162). Wilcox further notes that "[i]n the 1930s, Tolkien started a new story, 'The Lost Road,' in which the Eriol/Elfwine figure reappears as a dreamer, sailor, and time traveler from northern Somerset c. 915, who most literally embodies the Seafarer as a character" (137).

An amusing and evocative 2012 *New Yorker* article written by the magazine's chief archivist Erin Overbey describes a presentation to the Brooklyn Tolkien Society in the 1960s given by W. H. Auden, who studied Old English under Tolkien at Oxford. Overbey describes how Auden told the assembled Brooklynites that "Tolkien's work wasn't just rambling juvenilia; it was part of a literary tradition of reinterpreting ancient archetypes to create a modern mythology." Overbey goes on to note that "the rambling nature of Tolkien's universe is part of what drew those nerdy Brooklyn students to his work. We love to think about the dorky minutiae. . . ." She further opines, and most of us would agree with her, that "[t]hese elements aren't distractions; they're the magical details that elevate Tolkien's books." She asserts that readers "may come to Tolkien for the Milton-esque struggle between good and evil, but they stay for the fresh mushrooms and the Elvish."

For many, like me and my closest collaborators of *Silmarillion*-obsessed nerds, it's less the mushrooms and the homely Hobbits and more the glamorous, doomed rebels of the Noldor and their Quenya nicknames that have ensnared us. *The Shibboleth of Fëanor* anyone? A core of old-hands within the Silmarillion Writers' Guild shares my attitude of "bring on the minutiae of Tolkien's world." Overbey writes that Auden regaled his "rapt audience" in Brooklyn with details of the Professor's fascination with "the whole Northern thing." Auden said that for Tolkien "the north is 'a sacred direction.'"

Sea-longing

Verlyn Flieger also observes that Tolkien's narrative links relating to the sea are highly reminiscent of the Old English poem *The Seafarer*:

In connection with the mention of Ælfwine, two phrases in old Edwin's final, summary paragraph are of particular significance, and their relationship to the mood and even the language of *The Seafarer* is unmistakable. "*Now we sit in the land of exile*" and "*longing is on us*."

It is this longing that engenders the wanderlust of all of Tolkien's far-traveled characters, of whom there are many. Yet however the particular story is conceived, whoever the particular character is, in whatever work he occurs, the destination of every such traveler

is always some version of another world, whether it lies beyond Bree or in Númenor or in the Uttermost West. (Flieger, *Question of Time* 162)

The characters that I will discuss in this presentation are largely from *The Silmarillion*, with the notable exceptions of Legolas and Círdan the Shipwright, whom readers will recognize from *The Lord of the Rings*. I was initially drawn to the topic of exilic longing by the poignancy of the tales of the émigré Noldor, who are initially desperate to travel outside of their gilded cage in Valinor where a paternalistic Valar seek to hold them. Later, their yearning becomes one of looking backward toward the land of the Valar from which they believe they have been forever banished. This combination of longing and wanderlust also characterizes the Sea-Kings of Númenor looking west toward Elvenhome in fascination with and respect for—or, more dangerously for some, in envy of—Elvish learning (technology), culture, and the Elves' quasi-immortality. Accordingly to Jane Chance, the sea represented for these characters

a 'transcendent bridge' between the mortal and the immortal. Because the sailors in both narratives [those of Tolkien and the Northern epics] are not depicted as arriving at their final ports, both remain fixed eternally in the text between the misery of mortality and the hope of future joy. This moment of simultaneity records a glimpse of the experience of exile in both medieval and Tolkienian worlds. (8)

Recurrent themes and archetypes in Tolkien's fiction include the states of longing and exile referenced above, as well as the chronicles of a series of travelers, questers, explorers, and notably seafarers. The cognizance of loss and unsatisfied yearning, however, pervades his fictional universe.

Yet however the particular story is conceived, whoever the particular character is, in whatever work he occurs, the destination of every such traveler is always some version of another world, whether it lies beyond Bree or in Númenor or in the Uttermost West. Writ large, the destination is Faërie, the world for which Tolkien longed all his life, the realm of imagination in which his vital creative life was lived. Whoever he is, the traveler is one who not only travels far but who—in one way or another—travels away from the world of ordinary humanity, the land of those (himself among them) whom Tolkien saw as exiles (Flieger, *Question of Time* 163).

In a recent *Mythlore* article, Jose Rosegrant examined this enchantment with the sea and the pervasive, mournful quality it brings to Tolkien's fiction, concluding that "Enchantment and loss intertwined for him in the seductive call of the waves." Most readers first encounter Tolkien's concept of "sea-longing" in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien reached into his own vast backstory to enhance, as well as add mystery, breadth, and depth, to his famous sequel to *The Hobbit*. He milked his decades' worth of material when writing *The Hobbit* also, but used this material most brilliantly to intensify and enhance the sense of time, place, and history within *The Lord of the Rings*. If any reader was able to skim over Elrond speaking of the Elder Days in "The Council of Elrond" chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring* without being overwhelmed by awe and curiosity, I'd have to question if that person had a soul.

For a first-time reader of Tolkien, Elrond's breathtaking words echo with the poignancy of vast ages of heroism and suffering, pointing to the richness and depth of this world. The reader is struck that beneath the current story lays a splendid history of times gone by: vast, broad, and complex (and he is not wrong). Elrond explains how his memories of the Elder Days reach back into the First Age of Arda, noting that "Eärendil was my sire, who was born in Gondolin before its fall; and my mother was Elwing, daughter of Dior, son of Lúthien of Doriath. I have seen three

ages in the West of the world, and many defeats, and many fruitless victories" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 237).

I knew from that moment that I needed that untold back-story and, despite Tolkien's claims of the futility of the exercise, I wanted to see the bones of that soup. (The reference here is to Tolkien in "On Fairy-Stories" wherein he writes, "By 'the soup' I mean the story as it is served up by its author or teller, and by 'the bones' its sources But I do not, of course, forbid criticism of the soup as soup" [Tolkien, *Fairy-Stories* 332].) By the time we near the end of *The Return of the King* we have uncovered tantalizing glimpses of much of Tolkien's larger world as well as many of those bones.

Legolas

No sailor—although he does eventually build a ship and sail—Legolas suffers from that yearning for the sea and the desire to sail to the West found in the accounts of seafarers in *The Silmarillion* and echoing the tales of their literary precursors. The following passage must sound achingly familiar to students of *The Seafarer*:

To the sea, to the sea! The white gulls are crying,
The wind is blowing, and the white foam is flying.
West, west away, the round sun is falling,
Grey ship, grey ship, do you hear them calling,
The voices of my people that have gone before me?
I will leave, I will leave the woods that bore me;
For our days are ending and our years failing.
I will pass the wide waters lonely sailing. (Tolkien, *Return of the King* 252)

I, for one, can't look at it without seeing "Seafarer" stamped upon it in big red letters. Wilcox says, "Like the *Seafarer*, Legolas suffers heart-wrenching pain at the thought of leaving Middle-earth, but the desire to seek the land beyond the lapping sea waves burns bright in his breast" (147).

When one leaps from background and influences to storyline and characters, one can say that the specifics of Tolkien's narrative flow out of his inspirations. As C. W. Sullivan puts it in his essay "Tolkien the Bard: His Tale Grew in the Telling," "[t]he focus on the North not only gave Tolkien the structure, details, and rhetoric of his story but, in an interesting way, may have given him the overall tone or sense" as well (17). Nowhere would one say this is more valid than in the tales surrounding the *Silmarillion*-based sailors and sea-lovers. Tom Shippey points out that Tolkien, in his tales of various mariners, "repeatedly quoted some lines from the genuine Old English poem 'The Seafarer' about the longing to go to sea, which he expanded with lines of his own invention" converting "the sea-longing into longing to cross the sea" (287).

Círdan the Shipwright

In specifically addressing the characters whose stories are developed in *The Silmarillion*, *The Histories of Middle-earth*, *Unfinished Tales*, and in the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*, one does well to start near the chronological beginning of Tolkien's tales of the Eldar. Círdan may have been (although the texts do not confirm this) among the Elves who awakened at Cuiviénen on an inland sea far in the east of Middle-earth. He is certainly the first sailor and shipbuilder among them. He is somewhat of an anomaly among the Elven mariners of Arda. Whereas most

of them as individuals are protagonists at some point in the big story, Círdan is more of a supporting actor. Yet his role is large. He plays a substantial role throughout the entire history of the Elves in Middle-earth. I'll take the liberty of quoting myself here from my own biography of Círdan on the Silmarillion Writers' Guild website:

At the advent of the First Age, his people may be found on the west coast of Beleriand, where he ruled as Lord of the Elves of the Falas, establishing settlements and engaging in shipbuilding and sailing. Círdan is also a party to the struggle against Sauron in the Second Age, holding, for a time, one of the three great Elven rings. And, after the triumph of the free peoples of Middle-earth at the end of the Third Age, he captains the last ship which leaves from the Grey Havens to sail to Elvenhome. (Oshun, "Círdan")

The account of Círdan in *The Peoples of Middle-earth* describes his first glimpse of the sea at end of the long trek of the Eldar across Middle-earth, from Cuiviénen to the sea. He heartbreakingly missed the opportunity to travel with the last of the Teleri to be ferried to the West. He determines to make the trip to the Undying Lands in his own ship. But he is warned by the Powers that he has not yet the skill, although he someday will. But, more importantly, the hint contained therein is that he has tasks in Middle-earth which no one else can fulfill. And fulfill them he does. One is hard-pressed to think of a battle or struggle in which Círdan did not play a significant role (Tolkien, *Peoples* 386).

The point, however, about Círdan is that he did not escape that sea-longing and nurtured a long-delayed desire to reach Elvenhome, despite uncounted trips ferrying others. While he is the first of those seafarers who loom large in all of Tolkien's narratives—the first chronologically in the overall history of Middle-earth and the first encountered by most readers when they pick up *The Lord of the Rings*—he is not the first conceived by Tolkien. That honor would fall to Eärendil.

Eärendil the Mariner

Tolkien himself wrote in great detail in a long draft letter of the significance of his character Eärendil: "*Earendil* became a character in the earliest written (1916-17) of the major legends: *The Fall of Gondolin*, the greatest of the 'Half-elven', son of *Tuor* of the most renowned House of the Edain, and *Idril* daughter of the King of Gondolin" (Tolkien, *Letters* 386). Even those who do not remember his entire story well might recall Eärendil as the father of Elrond and Elros, the half-Elven mariner who sailed the night sky and became the favorite star of the Elves and Men of Middle-earth. He is the hinge-pin who links the stories of the Silmarils and the heroic battles of the First Age against the Dark Vala Morgoth to *The Lord of the Rings*.

In my SWG Character Biography of Eärendil, I emphasize that he represents more the hero as voyager and explorer than the hero as warrior and combatant, although he does play an important role in the War of Wrath. I note therein that "the warrior hero is more often characterized principally by pride and a culturally determined definition of honor, whereas the voyager hero is motivated by curiosity about the unknown and/or the challenge presented by the seemingly impossible" (Oshun, "Eärendil"). Like all of Tolkien's true seafarer heroes, however, Eärendil *cannot* stay home. He is definitely one of those hardcore yearners for the sea. Eärendil concludes that without aid from the land of the Valar the Elves and Men of Middle-earth, despite incredible sacrifices and courage, will lose their war against Morgoth. So, although it is forbidden, he sails westward to seek assistance.

One of the earliest versions of Eärendil the Mariner's tale, containing a draft of the poem of Earendel, is published in *The Book of Lost Tales 2*. The verses conclude with a tone of heartrending yet understated melancholy:

Then he glimmering passed to the starless vast
As an isled lamp at sea,
And beyond the ken of mortal men
Set his lonely errantry,
Tracking the Sun in his galleon
Through the pathless firmament,
Till his light grew old in abysses cold
And his eager flame was spent. (271)

Tuor

Backtracking chronologically in Tolkien's fictional history, we encounter Tuor, who is the father of Eärendil and the grandfather of Elrond and Elros, and as such, is one of the founders of that famous bloodline of the half-Elven. For my purpose here, I want to limit myself to Tuor's sea-longing and the elements of his story reminiscent of those present in the Anglo-Saxon elegies. He is born in a landlocked portion of old Beleriand into the most noble of the houses of Mortal Men (the House of Hador). The people of the House of Hador are described as being "quick to wrath and laughter, fierce in battle, generous to friend and to foe, swift in resolve, fast in loyalty, joyous in heart" (Tolkien, *War of the Jewels* 224). But despite his noble roots, Tuor is not raised in privilege. His people have been all but eliminated by the devastating destruction of the aftermath of the Battle of Unnumbered Tears. Notwithstanding the bitter circumstances of his youth, Tuor is one of the happier sorts within the cast of tragic figures of *The Silmarillion*. He endures and escapes thralldom; marries the beautiful princess Idril, daughter of King Turgon of Gondolin; and brings through her the great Golden House of Finarfin into the ancestry of the half-Elven.

In a stunning narrative sequence in the *Unfinished Tales*, greatly condensed in Christopher Tolkien's edit of *The Silmarillion*, Tuor is pushed and pulled by fate and direct interventions from one of the greatest of the Valar, the lord of seas and waters Ulmo. With Ulmo's guidance, Tuor wends his way ineluctably toward the hidden city of Gondolin (Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* 19-54). Tolkien notes in a letter that a visit from Ulmo "had set in Tuor's heart an insatiable sea-longing, hence the choice of name for his son [Eärendil, Quenya for 'sea-friend'], to whom this longing was transmitted" (Tolkien, *Letters* 386).

Most importantly, instead of being ruled by his fate (unlike his ill-fated cousin Túrin), Tuor listens to counsel and embraces it. He succeeds in delivering from Ulmo to Turgon a warning of the impending doom of his hidden city, which Turgon does not heed. Nonetheless, Tuor and Idril lead a significant group of survivors out of the fiery destruction of Gondolin. Among those is their son Eärendil, who will father the bloodline of Kings of Men of both Númenor and Middle-earth, the common antecedents of Aragorn and Arwen.

Vocabulary is important in keeping afloat this theory of the roots of Tolkien's seafarers, as is imagery. Wilcox writes how images of crying seabirds and sailing "occur in both the Old English poem [*The Seafarer*] and Tolkien's works with similar thematic implications" (138). The seven swans who lead Tuor cannot help but remind us of the references to seabirds in general and swans in particular in both *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. The themes of exile and passing beyond the reaches of the world are strongly represented in Tuor's story as well.

In the final mention of Tuor in the texts, we learn that he finally acts upon his persistent longing when he takes to the sea with Idril, never to be seen again. In *The Silmarillion* version of Tuor's story, in the aftermath of the fall of Gondolin, he built a great ship "and he named it *Eärrámë*, which is Sea-Wing; and with Idril Celebrindal he set sail into the sunset and the West, and came no more into any tale or song" (245).

Vëantur and His Grandson Aldarion (Tar-Aldarion)

Moving swiftly forward, I must jump ahead to the stories of the mariners of the island of Númenor. After the War of Wrath had freed Middle-earth from the grip of Morgoth, the Valar decided to settle the Men of Middle-earth on what amounts to an island paradise.

Among the early mariners and shipbuilders of Númenor—and the first to renew contact between the island of Númenor and the peoples of Middle-earth—Vëantur is crucial in leading to the Númenóreans' self-definition as a seafaring people and masters of the vast seas east of its island kingdom:

When six hundred years had passed from the beginning of the Second Age Vëantur, Captain of the King's Ships under Tar-Elendil, first achieved the voyage to Middle-earth. He brought his ship *Entulesse* (which signifies 'Return') into Mithlond on the spring winds blowing from the west; and he returned in the autumn of the following year. Thereafter seafaring became the chief enterprise for daring and hardihood among the men of Númenor. . . . (Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* 179-80)

The first settlers in Númenor did not venture outward but settled themselves into the business of establishing their cities, government, and means of supporting themselves. But like most peoples surrounded by the sea, they began first to map their island kingdom and then to make their first pioneering excursions. The pull of the sea is a strong one.

Six hundred years after the settlement of the island, Vëantur's predecessors have cultivated the maritime industry to the point that, when he reaches his full professional capacity, he is given an official position as Númenor's master of seafaring under his title of Captain of the King's Ships. The golden Age of Sail of the island of Númenor begins with early trips of exploration and scientific curiosity, a longing to see the home of their ancestors, and a desire to meet ancient Círdan, the greatest Elven shipwright, and King Gil-galad of the Eldar.

Vëantur's grandson Aldarion catches the sea fever from his grandfather. On his last trip to Middle-earth, Vëantur takes the young Aldarion with him. There is, however, one not-insignificant problem with Aldarion falling in love with the sea and these extended journeys. He is the heir to throne of Númenor and his father Tar-Meneldur seeks to school him in his future responsibilities, which he believes must necessarily render his seafaring son land-bound. But after that first trip, "Aldarion had become enamoured of the Great Sea, and of a ship riding there alone without sight of land, borne by the winds with foam at its throat to coasts and havens unguessed. . ." (Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* 183). This is a love and passion that he will hold for the rest of his life.

By the time of writing Aldarion's story, found in *Unfinished Tales, Aldarion and Erendis: The Mariner's Wife*, Tolkien has moved away from the quasi-archaic style of his earliest work, reminiscent of the Northern tales, and adapted a much more modern and novelistic style. It, however, retains the high or noble tone he sought to use in his writings and, significantly, emphasizes the plot element of the call of the sea, the compulsion to return to sea. Yet, it might almost be called "A Story of a Marriage." David Bratman summarizes that "[t]his moving

Númenórean story of marital discord shows neither side as fully right or fully wrong; it should put to rest any claims that Tolkien never created a fully realized female character" (78). In my biography of Erendis I note that

[a]mong Tolkien's infrequent romances, the story of Erendis is of the marriage of a beautiful young woman of lesser status to a highly born prince, in this case, heir of the throne and of the royal line of Elros—a much-used theme in fairytale romance. But this is no fairytale, containing just enough realism, despite the magical setting, to endear the protagonists to the reader. Erendis and Aldarion are both beautiful but too independent and strong-willed to earn themselves a classic denouement. (Oshun, "Erendis")

Bratman further notes that "Tolkien was at the height of his storytelling powers at the time he wrote *The New Shadow* and *Aldarion and Erendis*, and the completed portions of these tales move smoothly and compellingly. . ." (78).

Tolkien would probably roll over in his grave, perhaps not for the first time as a result of one of my many provocations, but I am reminded, despite the elevated tone so characteristic of the Professor, of the comic song, "The Captain's Wife's Lament":

The ship sailed into harbor
After fifteen months at sea
The captain hit the tavern
With his crew of fifty-three.

After drinking up their pay
They staggered through the town
But all the inns and public houses
Turned the sailors down.

The captain said "Fear not, me lads
You all can come with me.
I live just 'round the corner
And you all can stay for free." (Paul and Storm)

Erendis, however, like the Captain's wife in the song, was not impressed with mariners or their seafaring life. She wanted Aldarion to stay put and she refused to travel with him. She loathed the sea as much as Aldarion loved it and presented him with a whole series of arguments as to why he should go to sea, not the least among them ecological ones, telling him, not altogether tongue-in-cheek, that she feared he would deforest all of Númenor to make the masts for his ships. Interestingly, the courtship and marital issues between Aldarion and Erendis can seem reminiscent in subject with the story of Kjartan and Gudrun in the Icelandic *Laxdæla Saga*. Each tale features a self-determined woman, passionate in her attachment to a man and yet resistant to being dictated to by the man she loves. The men are in turn governed by an uncontrollable wanderlust, which is not conducive to compromise. Dimitra Fimi also, referencing Shippey, notes as well that "the tale of the Númenórean mariner-king Aldarion and his wife Erendis . . . seems to echo the story of Njǫrðr and Skaði in the *Prose Edda*" (Fimi, "Tolkien and Old Norse" 84).

Despite the interference of romantic love and marital difficulties, Aldarion nonetheless becomes the first and arguably the greatest of the Númenórean Sea-Kings, developing the maritime technology and culture further while renewing the long-severed connections to Middle-earth that will become crucial in the events up through the victory over Sauron at the end of the Third Age

and into the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* (Oshun, "Tar-Aldarion"). The waxing of the glory days of the Númenórean Age of Sail is perhaps best expressed in these words from the *Akallabêth* in *The Silmarillion*: "Above all arts they nourished ship-building and sea-craft, and they became mariners whose like shall never be again since the world was diminished; and voyaging upon the wide seas was the chief feat and adventure of their hardy men in the gallant days of their youth" (262).

One may assume that these ships developed by Vëantur, and further perfected by Aldarion, most probably differ from the lighter and smaller Swan Ships of the Teleri in Aman, which are presumably constructed for sailing in coastal waters. The great ships of the Númenórean golden Age of Sail would need to be stronger and larger, since they are capable of carrying heavy cargo and intended to be used for longer voyages. In a supportive review of the SWG Character Biography of Vëantur, pandemonium_213 puts forward the idea that Tolkien gives the reader fascinating glimpses into the seafaring capacity of the Númenóreans, which suggests "mariners who might surpass the Phoenicians and perhaps approach the great explorers of Spain, Portugal, and Holland during the 15th and 16th centuries (and maybe beyond)." Passages in *Aldarion and Erendis* lend to support to Pandemonium's supposition. One in particular mentions that "[t]he ships of the Númenóreans became ever larger and of greater draught in those days, until they could make far voyages, carrying many men and great cargoes" (Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* 185). Later in that same section, reference is made to Aldarion proposing to "find timber in Middle-earth" to build his great ships with their tall masts (185).

Tolkien wrote of the expanding maritime culture in Númenor that "being men of peace, their courage is devoted to sea-voyages. As descendants of Eärendil, they became the supreme mariners, and being barred from the West, they sail to the uttermost north, and south, and east. Mostly they come to the west-shores of Middle-earth. . ." (*Letters* 155). In the early years, the peoples of Middle-earth on balance received succor from the renewed connection with the island of Númenor. Before the Men of Númenor fell prey to their manipulation by Sauron, their trips to Middle-earth had increased and were followed by a period of both settlement and international trade, as well an exchange of expertise.

The Seafaring Villains (Ar-pharazôn and His Assault on the Land of the Gods)

Finally, under the growing influence of Sauron, which clouds their enlightened isle, the imperialistic appetites of the Númenóreans grew to such an extent that they began to exploit rather than aid the peoples of Middle-earth, after which they became, as noted in *The Silmarillion*, "proud men, eager for wealth, and they laid the men of Middle-earth under tribute, taking now rather than giving" (Oshun, "Vëantur"). This darkening of Númenor reached its peak—or more accurately, its uttermost depth—after Ar-Pharazôn assumed the throne.

In Númenor, the King's Men had developed a resentment of the Elves and the Valar and the Elven ships stopped visiting the island. Meanwhile, the schism widened between the ruling faction and the lords of Andúnië, called the Faithful and Elf-friends, who remained loyal to the Valar. The Faithful were persecuted and isolated, and the Elvish tongue which, by that time, they uniquely spoke was banned (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 266).

In an act of stunning arrogance and shortsightedness, Ar-Pharazôn—hearing Sauron had surfaced again in Middle-earth, calling himself the King of Men—determined to capture and enslave him. He set sail for Middle-earth with an armed force ready for war; confronting Sauron, he gave him the choice between open warfare and surrender. Equally arrogant but far more clever, Sauron—realizing that in his weakened state he would be unable to triumph in a pitched

battle against the Númenóreans—believed he could succeed through subtle manipulation. Tolkien asserts that this was no victory over Sauron by Ar-Pharazôn, explaining in a letter how Sauron "got free transport to Númenor! He naturally had the One Ring, and so very soon dominated the minds and wills of most of the Númenóreans" (Tolkien, *Letters* 279).

Upon reaching Númenor, Sauron won over Ar-Pharazôn and the majority of the Númenórean lords by means of superior shrewdness, obsequious flattery, and lies. Among those lords, only Amandil, the leader of the loyal Elf-friends of Andúnië, spurned the promises of wealth untold and eternal life, which Sauron claimed the Valar selfishly withheld from them. Sauron instituted a dark religion, which pointed to Melkor as its lord and claimed that Eru was an invention of the Valar as the means to control and subject the men of Númenor (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 263-281). Sauron's new religion involved human-sacrifice. The island paradise was turned into a land of darkness and tyranny: "[T]he fire and smoke went up without ceasing; for the power of Sauron daily increased . . . with spilling of blood and torment and great wickedness, men made sacrifice to Melkor that he should release them from Death. And most often from among the Faithful they chose their victims" (*Silmarillion* 273). Although their riches grew, the Númenóreans became ever more jealous of what they saw to be the privileges of the Undying Lands, which were denied them. As Ar-Pharazôn aged and his health failed, he became ever more aware of his mortality. Sauron fed the flames of his resentment and convinced him that he could only gain immortality by invading the land of the Valar (274).

Thus the fleets of the Númenóreans moved against the menace of the West; and there was little wind, but they had many oars and many strong slaves to row beneath the lash. The sun went down, and there came a great silence. Darkness fell upon the land, and the sea was still, while the world waited for what should betide. Slowly the fleets passed out of the sight of the watchers in the havens, and their lights faded, and night took them; and in the morning they were gone. (278)

Despite a moment of indecision when he reached the shore of Aman and nearly lost his nerve and turned back, Ar-Pharazôn disembarked and issued a challenge to the Valar. He "left his ship and strode upon the shore, claiming the land for his own, if none should do battle for it" (278). Finding none of the Eldar, all of whom had evacuated its slopes, the heavily armed Númenóreans spent the night encamped about Túna. Meanwhile, the Valar called upon Eru Ilúvatar, who

showed forth his power, and he changed the fashion of the world; and a great chasm opened in the sea between Númenor and the Deathless Lands, and the waters flowed down into it, and the noise and smoke of the cataracts went up to heaven, and the world was shaken. And all the fleets of the Númenóreans were drawn down into the abyss, and they were drowned and swallowed up forever. But Ar-Pharazôn the King and the mortal warriors that had set foot upon the land of Aman were buried under falling hills. . . . (279)

This mighty rending of the earth destroyed the Land of Gift and all of its inhabitants, except for those aboard some surviving ships of the Faithful, including among others Elendil and his sons, who escaped to Middle-earth. These survivors of the destruction of their island home went on to found the realms Gondor in the south and Arnor in the north (280).

Tolkien wrote many times of the origins of the drowning of Númenor or "the Great Wave." He described its influence upon him as a deeply seated mythical or "archetypal" image: "for many years I had a recurrent Atlantis dream: the stupendous and ineluctable wave advancing from the Sea or over the land, sometimes dark, sometimes green and sunlit" (Tolkien, *Letters* 361). In

addition to using this dream to inspire the Fall of Númenor, Tolkien gives the dream to Faramir in *The Return of the King*, wherein he describes it to Éowyn: "'Yes,' said Faramir, 'of the land of Westergondor that foundered, and of the great dark wave climbing over the green lands and above the hills, and coming on, darkness unescapable. I often dream of it'" (Tolkien, *Return of the King* 259).

Conclusion

The hope that sea-longing Tuor brought to the peoples of Middle-earth reaches well beyond the First Age, beyond the end of the great Battles of Beleriand against Melkor, and beyond his son Eärendil's sacrifice to win over the Valar and the forces of Aman and convince them to come to Middle-earth and unseat the dark Vala. It led unswervingly to the importance of the sea in the fates of his descendants. Finally, at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, his descendant Aragorn helps bring peace to Middle-earth by reuniting the long-sundered Númenórean kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor. It is significant that Aragorn acknowledges the legacy of his seafaring ancestors when he accepts the crown, with these words:

Et Eärello Endoreenna utúlien. Sinome maruvan ar Hildinyar tenn' Ambar-metta!

And those were the words that Elendil spoke when he came up out of the Sea on the wings of the wind: "Out of the Great Sea to Middle-earth I am come. In this place will I abide, and my heirs, unto the ending of the world." (Tolkien, *Return of the King* 265)

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Oshun's *Silmarillion*-based stories may be found on the [SWG archive](#).