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There and Back Again: Tolkien and the Greco-Roman World



Imprint

Universität Potsdam 2022

Historisches Institut, Professur Geschichte des Altertums
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam (Germany)
<https://www.thersites-journal.de/>

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ISSN 2364-7612

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Layout and Typesetting

text plus form, Dresden

Cover pictures:

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Published online at:

<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol15>

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The Fall of Two Cities: Troy and Gondolin

Abstract Vergil was a fundamental source of inspiration for Tolkien, not only when writing the *Lord of the Rings*, but also at the beginning of his “world-building”. *The Fall of Gondolin*, written in 1916, was modeled upon the *Aeneid*, whose second book shares many similarities with the description of Gondolin’s last day. For instance, the attack that seals the fate of the city takes place during a feast in both works, whereas both protagonists (Aeneas and Tuor) leave wives and sons to fight the enemy and witness deaths of their kings (Priam/Turgon). Other analogies include the *topos* of the fall of the tallest tower of the city as well as the scenes of Creusa/Idril clasping the knees of her husband and begging him not to go back to the battle. Tolkien chose the *Aeneid* as his main model because, in his opinion, the *Aeneid* and *The Fall of Gondolin* evoked the air of antiquity and melancholy. Vergil’s nostalgia for a “lost world” conveyed in the *Aeneid* greatly resembles the nostalgia pervading both Tolkien’s writing and life.

Keywords Tolkien, Reception of Vergil, *Aeneid*, Troy, Gondolin

1. INTRODUCTION

Middle-earth was born in a hospital bed shortly after the Battle of the Somme when a sick signaling officer of the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers, who had achieved First Class Honours in English at Oxford, wrote about the fall of an imaginary city after an epic battle between its besiegers and the besieged.¹ The officer's name was John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and his tale, hastily drafted in pencil in two school exercise books, marked the beginning of one of the most famous fictional universes of the twentieth century.²

The plot of Tolkien's first story, especially as far as its end is concerned, sounds familiar to all classicists: a famous city is suddenly attacked by an enemy, and falls after a siege, but a handful of inhabitants manage to flee, while their leader and his descendants found town(s) and kingdom(s) bound to rule over most of the (Middle-)Earth. In spite of these evident analogies with Troy and the fate of its exiles, the relationship between the *Aeneid* and *The Fall of Gondolin* has received little attention by scholars, who prefer to focus on Vergilian echoes in the *Lord of the Rings*. The few who have investigated this topic usually point out a only little parallels and similarities without carrying out a systematic study of the role that Vergil played at the dawn of Tolkien's mythology: they have not pondered over the reason why a young man who started his university career by reading Classics but then devoted himself wholeheartedly to Old English and Comparative Philology decided to shape his first story after the second book of the *Aeneid*. The present paper will cast some light on these issues as well as address a few aspects of Tolkien's literary *Weltanschauung*.

Some points of methodology are now necessary. Source criticism in Tolkien's writings (and indeed in the works of every ancient and modern author) requires a few steps in order to obtain reliable and meaningful results. As Jason Fisher has indicated, this process can be summarized by three questions: "Could Tolkien have known a source? And assuming he could have known it, and did indeed use

1 The final version of this paper was prepared during my time as a research fellow at the DFG-Kollegforschergruppe, Migration und Mobilität in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter at the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen. I would like to thank Mischa Meier, Steffen Patzold, and Sebastian Schmidt-Hofner for inviting me to participate. I am grateful to anonymous reviewers of *Thersites* for their useful comments.

2 The most complete biography of Tolkien is still Carpenter (2000), especially 17–106 for his life up to 1918. The years of the First World War are covered in detail by Garth (2003) who offers important chronological information.

it, what did he do with it? And how does the knowledge of this source help us to understand or appreciate *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or whatever work we are investigating?”.³ The first point will be addressed in Chapter 2, the second in Chapter 3 and the third in Chapter 4. Of course, reception studies cannot limit themselves to intertextuality, even when based upon a text-to-text approach, since any process of imitation involves both transformation and interpretation.⁴ Therefore, due attention should be given to how Tolkien modified situations, expressions and images possibly taken from another work in order to adapt them to his fictional universe.

Before addressing the first point, however, a few textual remarks on *The Fall of Gondolin* and its place within Tolkien’s works may be useful. As is widely known, Tolkien worked on his mythology throughout his entire life, continuously adding, changing, or removing characters and episodes. Among his major fictional works only *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were published during his lifetime, whereas all other Middle-earth books, starting from *The Silmarillion*, have been edited by his son Christopher Tolkien (1924–2020), who used his father’s drafts, notes, and sketches to give shape to one of the most intricate and detailed fictional realms of the Modern Age.

The textual history of *The Fall of Gondolin* starts during the Great War. Tolkien himself offers a few clues about the time when he began composing it. In a letter to W.H. Auden, who had reviewed *The Fellowship of the Ring* in the *New York Times Book Review*, he wrote that “the first real story of this imaginary world almost fully formed as it now appears was written in prose during sick-leave at the end of 1916: *The Fall of Gondolin*, which I had the cheek to read to the Exeter College Essay Club in 1918”,⁵ although Christopher Tolkien remarks that the story was in fact read on 10 March 1920 and not in 1918.⁶ On 30 June 1955, Tolkien sent a letter to the Houghton Mifflin Co., his American publisher, arguing that “*The Fall of Gondolin* (and the birth of Eärendil) was written in hospital and on leave after surviving the Battle of the Somme in 1916”.⁷

3 Fisher (2011) 36. See also Hardwick (2003) 5.

4 Willis (2018) 41–54.

5 *Letters* 215 (§ 163, 7 June 1955).

6 See *Letters* 445–446 (note 163.5).

7 *Letters* 221 (§ 165).

After forty years, recollections were not always precise, as shown by a letter that Tolkien wrote in 1964, where he states that he started working at “*The Fall of Gondolin* [...] during sick-leave from the army in 1917”.⁸ Three years later, the uncertainty about the years becomes evident when he writes that “Eärendil became a character in the earliest written (1916–17) of the major legends: *The Fall of Gondolin*”.⁹ According to Christopher Tolkien, his father wrote him in 1944 that he “first began to write the History of the Gnomes in army huts, crowded, filled with the noise of gramophones”,¹⁰ yet John Garth convincingly argues that none of the *Lost Tales* can be dated to the months that Tolkien spent in France, since life in trenches and dugouts was far too dangerous and noisy to find the concentration necessary to sketch such an elaborate story.¹¹

It may be that Tolkien began to think about *The Fall of Gondolin* during his stay in France, where he possibly wrote down a few names and ideas, and then composed the story after he came back to England. In October 1916, Tolkien caught the so-called trench fever, a disease transmitted by body lice that was quite common during the Great War, and by 9 November he was at Birmingham University Hospital,¹² where he remained for less than a month. On 2 December, he was declared unfit for service and sent home to recover,¹³ where he enjoyed the company of his wife Edith until the end of February 1917 when a medical board found that his health had slightly improved. Therefore, he was sent to a convalescent hospital for officers in Harrogate, Yorkshire, and then dispatched to the Humber Garrison at Thirtle Bridge in April.¹⁴

Tolkien’s chronological inaccuracies are not surprising: *The Fall of Gondolin* was written in late 1916 and/or early 1917, many decades before he wrote the letters in which he mentions it. In his published letters, he always states that he began the story during his sick-leave – therefore, neither in France nor at Thirtle Bridge. On this basis, we can infer that *The Fall* was composed between

⁸ *Letters* 345 (§ 257, 16 July 1964).

⁹ *Letters* 386 (§ 297, draft of a letter to a certain Mr. Rang, written in August 1967).

¹⁰ *FG* 21.

¹¹ Garth (2003) 186.

¹² Garth (2003) 200 and 205.

¹³ Garth (2003) 207.

¹⁴ Garth (2003) 231–234.

November 1916 and April 1917, in all likelihood by the end of February 1917. The letter to Houghton Mifflin is quite important, since it is likely that Tolkien was able to remember, even forty years later, whether he started shaping his mythology in a hospital bed or at home together with his wife. This leads us to conclude that the first draft of *The Fall of Gondolin* was possibly written (or at least begun) in November 1916 at Birmingham University Hospital.

Unlike other episodes of his mythology, the tale of Tuor never underwent drastic changes. As Christopher Tolkien remarks, “Gondolin and Nargothrond were each made once, and not remade”.¹⁵ The textual history of *The Fall of Gondolin* begins with a manuscript titled “Tuor and the Exiles of Gondolin”, contained in two school exercise books, in all likelihood written in November (and possibly December) 1916 during sick-leave. This version, which is usually called *Tuor A* (the name used by Christopher Tolkien in the *Lost Tales*), was later extensively corrected and overwritten, but without altering the main elements of the story. From the revised and overwritten version of *Tuor A*, Edith Tolkien made a fair copy (*Tuor B*) possibly in 1919–1920, when her husband was working at the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Then Tolkien emended it quite heavily, focusing almost entirely on style and leaving the narrative unchanged. Not all emendations were made at the same time, but most of them were most likely written before he read the tale at the Essay Club of Exeter College in the spring of 1920. There is also a typescript (*Tuor C*) which breaks up when Tuor arrives in Gondolin and therefore does not include the pages dealing with the fall of the city. The text transcribed by Christopher Tolkien (and used in this article) is that of *Tuor B* in its final form.¹⁶

Leaving aside all subsequent versions which do not cover the actual fall of the city, Tolkien dealt briefly with the last days of Gondolin in the *Sketch of a Mythology* (1926),¹⁷ then in the *Quenta Noldorinwa* (1930), of which two versions survive (*Q I* and *Q II*). Christopher followed the text of the latter when editing this work.¹⁸ However, the differences between these two versions need not concern us here, since they have no relevance for the study of *The Fall of*

¹⁵ FG 18.

¹⁶ BLT2 146–147. See also FG 21–23. The text of *The Fall of Gondolin* can be read in BLT2 144–220 (§ 3) = FG 37–111.

¹⁷ SME 40–42 (§ 16) = FG 120–127.

¹⁸ SME 168–178 (§ 16) = FG 128–144.

Gondolin. The *Quenta* is the main source of the *Silmarillion*, which was edited by Christopher after his father's death in order to offer a comprehensive overview of the history and mythology of Middle-earth. While all material and most of the text come from Tolkien, it was his son who arranged them in a chronological sequence, chose what version should be included if different ones existed, and removed a few minor inconsistencies. The narrative of *The Fall of Gondolin* that we can read in the *Silmarillion* is a mere summary of Tolkien's tale,¹⁹ not unlike the *Sketch of a Mythology* and the *Quenta Noldorinwa*,²⁰ and is of limited interest for the present paper. Tolkien never revised his tale substantially, therefore any study of its intertextual relations or models should examine the text of *Tuor B* as edited by Christopher in the *Lost Tales* and then reprinted in *The Fall of Gondolin*.

2. TOLKIEN AND VERGIL

Tolkien knew Latin language and literature very well.²¹ His mother began to teach him Latin when he was four years old and he immediately liked the language.²² As customary for pupils who attended a private school in the early twentieth century (in his case, King Edward's School at Birmingham), Tolkien studied the classics from a very young age. Latin and Greek were the backbone of the curriculum and often received more attention than English. Tolkien himself writes that, while at school, he "spent most of [his] time learning Latin and Greek [...] the chief contacts with poetry were when one was made to try and translate it into Latin".²³ Thanks to Oronzo Cilli's careful study of Tolkien's library, we now know that, by 1907 at the latest, Tolkien owned Arthur Sidgwick's

¹⁹ See *Sil* 285–294 (§ 23).

²⁰ Another very brief mention of the end of Gondolin can be found in *The Earliest Annals of Beleriand*, which were written shortly after the *Quenta*, see *SME* 368–369 (year 207).

²¹ For a comprehensive overview of Tolkien's classical education, see Williams (2021). See also Swain (2007), and Librán Moreno (2015) 48–50.

²² Carpenter (2000) 29; Williams (2021) 4. See also Librán Moreno (2007).

²³ *Letters* 213 (§ 163, 7 June 1955).

edition of the works of Vergil and that he had it with him while studying at Exeter College.²⁴

At King Edward's, teachers and pupils held an annual debate entirely in Latin and Tolkien took part in at least three of them. In 1909, he played the role of a haruspex, in 1910, the part of a Greek ambassador (speaking in Greek), and in 1911, the part of a senator called T. Portorius Acer Germanicus. A brief summary of the debates was published in Latin on the *King Edward's School Chronicle*, and the debate of March 1911 was summarized by Tolkien himself.²⁵ A few months later, he went to Oxford to study Classics after being awarded an Open Classical Exhibition to Exeter College. In all likelihood, Tolkien attended E. A. Barber's lectures on Vergil.²⁶ His first years were not outstanding, since he devoted more energy to university activities (such as the Essay Club, the Dialectical Society, the Debating Society, or rugby matches) than to the study of Homer and Cicero. However, he also developed a sharp interest in Comparative Philology, Finnish, and Old English, which led him to abandon Classics and begin to read English at the beginning of the 1913 summer term.²⁷

This brief biographic overview shows that Tolkien undoubtedly had a good knowledge of Vergil and the *Aeneid* when he wrote *The Fall of Gondolin* at twenty-four. By that point, he would have been studying Latin for almost twenty years. It is likely that the history of the fall of Troy was one of the first episodes of Roman mythology that his mother taught him. Hence, it would be far from surprising if Tolkien had learned of Aeneas before he ever heard of Beowulf or Sigurd. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that Classical mythology mattered more than Norse or Old English legends for his fictional universe. However, we have to take into consideration the fact that, by late 1916, Tolkien had been seriously studying these subjects for less than three years, whereas he had been learning Latin for almost twenty years. It is beyond question that the *Nibelungenlied* or *Beowulf* exerted a strong influence on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; yet, we should stress that Tolkien wrote these works in the 1930s

24 Cilli (2019) 298–299 (n° 396–397). See also Williams (2021) 8. The edition is: P. Vergili Maronis *Opera*, with introduction and English notes by A. Sidgwick, 2 voll., Cambridge 1897.

25 Hammond (1993) 345; Garth (2003) 18–20. The text of the *acta senatus* written by Tolkien can be read in *King Edward's School Chronicle* 186 (March 1911), pp. 26–27. It has been reissued with a commentary by Cristini (2021).

26 Williams (2021) 14.

27 Carpenter (2000) 71.

and 1940s as a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford who had been investigating these legends academically for more than two decades. On the other hand, *The Fall of Gondolin* was composed two years after leaving the faculty of Classics. For these reasons, it should not be assumed that, at the very beginning of Tolkien's writing activity, Norse mythology played a much more prominent role than his background in Classics.

With these points in mind, we should turn our attention to references to Vergil detectable in Tolkien's works. Most unfortunately, his letters have been edited only partially, although they could offer important insights into his models. However, available evidence still offers several clues on the importance of Vergil to Tolkien's reflections on literature. In a letter to Robert Murray (1925–2018), a Jesuit friend, Tolkien implicitly compares *The Lord of the Rings* to “Homer, or Beowulf, or Vergil, or Greek or Shakespearean tragedy” while speaking of large-scale works of art that are “founded on an earlier matter which is put to new uses”.²⁸ This brief quotation has much relevance to the present study for two reasons. First, Tolkien mentions only five authors or works, three of them Classical. Vergil is mentioned shortly after the *Beowulf*, which Tolkien studied for most of his life, and this alone shows the high regard in which he held the Roman poet. Then, Tolkien states that the works of these authors “are founded on an earlier matter which is put to new uses”, exactly like his own books. In all likelihood, Tolkien did not intend to point them out as his models, but he admits that *The Lord of the Rings* had been composed in a similar way.²⁹

His famous essay *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* includes some significant mentions of Vergil.³⁰ Tolkien writes that *Beowulf* “succeeded admirably in creating in the minds of the poet's contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with a deep significance. [...] This impression of depth is an effect and a justification of the use of episodes and allusions to old tales”. He then points out that a “similar effect of antiquity (and melancholy)” can be found in the *Aeneid*, especially when Aeneas reaches Italy, and quotes

²⁸ *Letters* 201 (§ 156).

²⁹ See also Williams (2021) 22: “This statement does reveal a consciousness of how his work could be seen as a continuation in the tradition of those great Classical epics and tragedies which drew on lost tales”.

³⁰ It was a British Academy lecture delivered on 25 November 1936, and published one year later in the *Proceedings* of the Academy, see Hammond (1993) 3; Pantin (2014) 152–155.

Aen. 7.204.³¹ Every reader of Tolkien's works cannot but agree that a similar sense of antiquity and melancholy pervades his works too, especially *The Fall of Gondolin*. Immediately afterwards, he exclaims: "Alas for the lost lore, the annals and old poets that Vergil knew, and only used in the making of a new thing!"³² Again, Tolkien dwells on "earlier matter which is put to new uses" in association with Vergil. The focus here lies on two aspects of the process of literary creation: the sources and the new stories originating from them with Vergil becoming a case study.

It would be misleading to use these few excerpts to reconstruct Tolkien's comprehensive attitude towards the imitation of previous authors, but the quoted passages clearly indicate that Vergil played a prominent role when Tolkien wrote about the genesis of great works of literature and claimed that putting earlier stories to new uses was a fundamental part of fashioning every new tale. Interestingly, Tolkien does not linger on intertextuality in itself or the purpose of re-using previous authors, and focuses instead on the story's newness. Intertextuality is not a learned game between philologists or a kind of riddle for readers.³³ It is only the framework which enables a writer to build something new and ancient at the same time: new because it was never written or imagined before, and ancient because it gives an impression of antiquity and melancholy, as it will be argued more extensively in Chapter 4.

It is now instructive to take a closer look at Vergilian echoes in Tolkien, leaving aside *The Fall of Gondolin* for the time being. During the last four decades, scholars of Tolkien's writings have been finding plenty of allusions to (or reminiscences of) the *Aeneid*.³⁴ Although a few of these allusions are slightly far-fetched, many characters, stories, and situations in Tolkien's work undoubtedly evoke those of Vergil, either intentionally or not. For instance, Morse devotes a whole booklet to the similarities between a few characters of the *Lord of the*

³¹ MC 27. See also MC 46, note 21: "In fact the real resemblance of the *Aeneid* and Beowulf lies in the constant presence of a sense of many-storied antiquity, together with its natural accompaniment, stem and noble melancholy. In this they are really akin and together differ from Homer's flatter, if more glittering, surface".

³² MC 27–28.

³³ Tolkien's own attitude towards a strictly philological *Quellenforschung* is famously critical. See MC 120: "We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled" (quotation taken from Dasent [1859] xii).

³⁴ For an overview, see Barella (2007).

Rings (Frodo, Aragorn, Denethor) and Aeneas or Dido,³⁵ whereas Obertino investigates the relationship between Aeneas' descent to the underworld and the journey through Moria in *The Fellowship of the Ring*,³⁶ and Librán Moreno argues that the iconography of the star borne on a ruler's brow as a symbol of royalty is taken from the *Aeneid*.³⁷ According to Sundt, Vergil's *Georgics*, and especially the verses on Orpheus and Eurydice, exerted a considerable influence on the tale of Beren and Lúthien, while Jordan argues that the pastoralism of Tolkien's hobbits is reminiscent of Vergil's *Eclogues*.³⁸ More generally, the relevance of the Trojan myth to Tolkien's fictional universe has been demonstrated by Livingston,³⁹ while Pace (and, more recently, Newman and Scolari) pointed out several echoes of Vergil in *The Lord of the Rings*.⁴⁰

It is beyond doubt that, in many cases, Tolkien simply used archetypal situations universally found in most ancient, medieval, and early modern Western works of literature; yet, his education, his early academic career, and the mentions of Vergil, which are present in his works, indicate that these analogies should not be dismissed as mere coincidences, since Tolkien, just like many young men who attended a private school in the first decade of the twentieth century, had been "brought up in the Classics".⁴¹ His attitude towards myth and literature was forged by a constant and careful reading of Greek and Roman authors, who exerted a strong influence on his works. Since contemporary scholarship has devoted a growing attention to Vergilian memories and reminiscences in the works that Tolkien wrote when he had been teaching Anglo-Saxon for decades, it is now time to investigate what role the *Aeneid* played at the very beginning of his fictional universe, just three years after Tolkien had abandoned Classics to study English Language and Literature.

35 Morse (1986). See also Anzinger (2010).

36 Obertino (1993). See also Whittingham (2008) 123–153, and Makins (2016).

37 Librán Moreno (2015).

38 Sundt (2021); Jordan (2021).

39 Livingston (2013).

40 Pace (1979); Newman (2005); Scolari (2019). See also Parry (2012), and Scolari (2016).

41 *Letters* 172 (§ 142).

3. THE FALL OF TROY AND THE FALL OF GONDOLIN

By Tolkien's own admission, the tale of Gondolin (and especially its end) resembles that of Troy. Near the end of *Tuor B* he writes that "glory dwelt in that city of Gondolin of the Seven Names, and its ruin was the most dread of all the sacks of cities upon the face of Earth. Nor Bablon, nor Ninwi, nor the towers of Trui, nor all the many takings of Rûm that is greatest among Men, saw such terror as fell that day upon Amon Gwareth".⁴² His son Christopher remarks that "the original text of *Tuor A* had *Babylon, Nineveh, Troy, and (probably) Rome*".⁴³ This brief catalogue of the most famous sacks of cities is the starting point for studying the main classical model that influenced *The Fall of Gondolin*: namely, the second book of the *Aeneid*.

At first sight, it seems that Tolkien could not have been unaware of the similarities between his story and Vergil's narrative of Troy's last night. Yet, we should keep in mind that he might have drawn "on Classical material without being conscious, or even without even wanting to be conscious, of this borrowing", as Williams points out.⁴⁴ For a man who had been studying Vergil and Classical mythology since early childhood, certain situations and images constituted a fundamental part of his cultural background, and in all likelihood they had become so deeply embedded within him that using them was no longer perceived as an intentional allusion or imitation but rather as an indispensable narrative device. Therefore, I will not linger on the aims of Tolkien (for now) but only on the similarities between *The Fall of Gondolin* and the *Aeneid*, regardless of their putative intentionality (which will be addressed in the next chapter).

Quite a few analogies between *The Fall of Gondolin* and the *Aeneid* have already been pointed out by Greenman (1992), Bruce (2012), and Freeman (2021); yet, they have missed a few significant parallels and included episodes or passages that only show a superficial resemblance.⁴⁵ Therefore, I will briefly survey

⁴² *BLT*2 196 = *FG* 111. See Spirito (2009) 192–193; Bruce (2012) 103–104; Freeman (2021) 132–133.

⁴³ *BLT*2 203, see also *FG* 267.

⁴⁴ Williams (2021) 25.

⁴⁵ If Greenman (1992) or Bruce (2012) have dealt with an episode or passage, the notes below will mention the page(s) in question. Freeman (2021) does not analyze the passages in depth but offers only a very brief survey, focusing instead on *pietas/estel* in Tolkien's writings.

the points of contact between the two works, listing them according to the order in which they appear in *The Fall of Gondolin*:

1. The first analogy concerns the background of the story, since the fall of both cities is ultimately caused by the desire for a woman, Helen and Idril. However, Paris manages to reach his goal and this leads to the War of Troy, whereas Maeglin betrays his people in order to be able to lay his hands on Idril but fails.⁴⁶
2. Both Aeneas and Tuor marry a daughter of the king (Creusa and Idril) and are fathers of children who play a fundamental role in the mythology of Rome/Middle-earth.⁴⁷ Their descendants found empires bound to rule over most of the known world, that is, Rome and Númenor.
3. The protagonists (Aeneas and Tuor) live in a house that is not located in the center of the city, which enables their families to avoid the first fightings.⁴⁸
4. In both stories a female character (Cassandra and Idril) understands the treachery that will doom her city (respectively, the Trojan Horse and Maeglin's betrayal), but she is not believed.⁴⁹
5. Both Troy and Gondolin are attacked when the inhabitants are celebrating a moment of joy: respectively, the departure of the Greeks and the feast of the Gates of Summer.⁵⁰
6. The Trojan horse resembles Morgoth's beasts of iron, both carrying warriors in their bellies, but these are indebted to WW1 tanks and flame-throwers too, and are much less important to the plot.⁵¹

⁴⁶ See Greenman (1992) 5

⁴⁷ See also Greenman (1992) 5.

⁴⁸ Verg. *Aen.* 2.299–300, and *FG* 60.

⁴⁹ Verg. *Aen.* 2.246–249, and *FG* 65. See Greenman (1992) 5.

⁵⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 2.250–267, and *FG* 72. See Greenman (1992) 6; Bruce (2012) 107.

⁵¹ Verg. *Aen.* 2.13–20 and *FG* 79. See Greenman (1992) 5, Bruce (2012) 107, and Freeman (2021) 136–137. Cf. especially Verg. *Aen.* 2.50–53 (*Laocoon sic fatus validis ingentem viribus hastam / in latus inque feri curvam compagibus alvum / contorsit. Stetit illa tremens, ute-*

7. The fate of the sons of Hector and Tuor could have been similar, since Astyanax is flung from the walls of Troy by Pyrrhus, and Maeglin tries to cast Eärendil into the fire burning under Gondolin's walls, but ultimately falls over himself.⁵² However, this scene is more reminiscent of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* than of the *Aeneid*, since Vergil does not describe the death of Astyanax in detail.⁵³

8. Tuor carrying Echtelion on his shoulders is clearly reminiscent of Aeneas carrying old Anchises while leaving Troy.⁵⁴

9. There is a certain resemblance between Panthus' famous sentence *fuimus Troes, fuit Ilium et ingens gloria Teucrorum* ("We were Trojans, this was Ilium and the mighty glory of the Teucrians") and Turgon's "Great is the fall of Gondolin".⁵⁵ Surely, the wording is different, but they both seal the fate of the city with a lapidary phrase, and the presence of the adjective *ingens*/great in both cases is telling.

10. The most evident analogy is perhaps the behaviour of Creusa and Idril, who clasp the knees of their husbands to prevent them from joining again the battle when all hope is lost.⁵⁶

11. Both Aeneas and Tuor are eyewitnesses to the death of their kings. Moreover, Turgon dies after Morgoth's dragons crush the base of his tower, the tallest building of the city, and throw it down, whereas Aeneas brings down Troy's highest tower in an attempt to stop the Greeks from breaking into the palace of Priam.⁵⁷

roque recusso / insonuere cavae gemitumque dedere cavernae) and FG 79 ("the engines and the catapults of the king poured darts and boulders and molten metals on those ruthless beasts, and their hollow bellies clanged beneath the buffeting").

52 FG 81–82. See Greenman (1992) 5.

53 See Bruce (2012) 108.

54 Verg. *Aen.* 2.707–710, and FG 87–88. See Greenman (1992) 6.

55 Verg. *Aen.* 2.325–326, and FG 92.

56 Verg. *Aen.* 2. 671–678, and FG 96. See Greenman (1992) 5–6.

57 Verg. *Aen.* 2.460–467, and FG 96.

12. Aeneas comes back to his house while looking for Creusa, and finds it destroyed by fire; in a similar way, Tuor and Idril take a last look at their house while fleeing, and see it cast down and burning.⁵⁸

A questionable parallel is the role of treason in both stories, since Maeglin, Turgon's nephew, hardly resembles Sinon.⁵⁹ It is true that both cities fall because of treachery, but the betrayal itself is quite different. Another doubtful similarity is the presence of trees in Priam's palace and in front of Turgon's tower, which seems to be a mere coincidence.⁶⁰

There are also notable differences. For instance, the narrator of the fall of the city is Aeneas himself in Vergil and the bardic figure of Littleheart, son of Bronweg, in Tolkien.⁶¹ Idril plays a much more active role than Creusa, and there is indubitably a certain romanticism in Tolkien which is absent in Vergil.⁶² Moreover, Morgoth stands for the absolute evil, whereas the Greeks are treacherous and cruel, but by no means demonic characters. The background of Vergil and Tolkien's stories is therefore different: the former depicts the most famous of many wars that have pitted a city against another in the ancient world, whereas the latter relates an episode of the eternal conflict between the good and evil. However, these (and many more) dissimilarities are normal in works written in very different cultural contexts and should not take our attention away from the many parallels between the two works, which now need to be explored more carefully.

⁵⁸ Verg. *Aen.* 2.756–759, and *FG* 98.

⁵⁹ See Greenman (1992) 5; Bruce (2012) 106–107.

⁶⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 2.513 and *FG* 54–55. See Greenman (1992) 6.

⁶¹ Greenman (1992) 4 questionably considers this an analogy.

⁶² See for instance *FG* 96–97: immediately after seeing the ruin of the Tower of Turgon, Tuor “lifted and kissed her [Idril], for she was more to him than all the Gondothlim”. Compare with Verg. *Aen.* 2.559–563: after witnessing the death of Priam, Vergil describes Aeneas' thoughts as follows: *At me tum primum saevus circumstetit horror / obstipui; subiit cari genitoris imago / ut regem aequaevum crudeli vulnere vidi / vitam exhalantem, subiit deserta Creusa / et direpta domus et parvi casus Iuli.*

4. ANTIQUITY AND MELANCHOLY AT THE BEGINNING OF MIDDLE-EARTH

Once the “earlier matter” that Tolkien borrowed from Vergil has been illustrated, it is time to address the “new uses” to which it has been put by him. Of course, according to the internal chronology of Tolkien’s mythology, the fall of Gondolin is not the first episode, but it is the first complete story written in his imaginarium. It is possible that, by the time of writing *The Fall*, Tolkien already had in mind plots of quite a few other first-age tales; still, we cannot take this for granted and have to work with what we know of his writings and life before December 1916 in order to avoid teleological misconstructions. Up to now, only a few (partial) explanations of Tolkien’s use of Vergil have been offered.

Greenman is mostly concerned with the Aeneadic pattern of escape and does not linger on Tolkien’s aims, pointing out a few analogies and differences between him and Vergil. In contrast to that, Bruce pays more attention to how and why Tolkien reshaped the *Aeneid*. According to him, “in the battle with Gondolin, Tolkien gives us heroes who embody the Germanic ‘heroic spirit’ with its ‘creed of unyielding will’”.⁶³ Bruce draws attention to the Germanic and Christian undertone of *The Fall of Gondolin*, arguing that “the story moves toward a reconciliation first of body with soul, and then of body and soul with the divine”, since Tuor stands for the physical and Idril for the spiritual, whereas Eärendil and Elwing reconcile the peoples of Middle-earth with the Valar. In conclusion, if Vergil dealt with arms and the man, Tolkien is more interested in a soteriological tale aimed at offering salvation to the inhabitants of Middle-earth.⁶⁴

However, the alleged “Northern courage” shown by Tolkien’s heroes is often hardly distinguishable from the *virtus* of Vergil’s characters, as Freeman convincingly remarks,⁶⁵ and Bruce’s Christian-Platonic interpretation of Tolkien’s mythology is unlikely, since such an elaborate allegory is foreign to Tolkien’s literary tastes. When writing to Milton Waldman in 1951, he is quite explicit in stating that his works should not be considered as allegories: “An equally basic passion of mine *ab initio* was for myth (not allegory!) and for fairy-story, and

⁶³ Bruce (2012) 109.

⁶⁴ Bruce (2012) 112–114.

⁶⁵ Freeman (2021) 139–143.

above all for heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history, of which there is far too little in the world (accessible to me) for my appetite. [...] I dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory”.⁶⁶ More convincing are Bruce’s remarks on the power of selfless love, which is present also in the *Aeneid*, but here the reason of state (often) prevails.

Freeman examines how Vergil’s concept of *pietas* influenced Tolkien works, especially the *Fall of Gondolin*.⁶⁷ He rightly downplays the importance of “Northern courage” and correctly highlights the Christian undertone of Tolkien’s first story. Yet, his attempt to show that Tolkien’s concept of *estel* owes much to Vergil’s *pietas* is not entirely convincing. Of course, several analogies and similarities do exist between these two concepts, but Freeman fails to properly address the topic of intentionality. Did Tolkien intend from the start to borrow Vergil’s *pietas* and use it in *The Fall of Gondolin*, or do we find parallels simply because the tale of Tuor and Idril is modelled upon the *Aeneid*? I suspect that the second reconstruction is correct, since Tolkien heartily disliked allegory and was above all interested in myth, not in moral or didactic literature. It is possible that he combined a few elements of Vergil’s *pietas*, the Northern indomitable will, and Christian *pistis* in order to create the virtue of *estel*, but it was a completely unintentional process, which tells us precious little on the reasons why Tolkien decided to establish his fictional universe with a tale echoing the *Aeneid*, a question that shall now be addressed.

We have already seen that Tolkien did not intend to hide his main source of inspiration, since he mentioned Troy quite explicitly at the end of *The Fall of Gondolin*. His brief catalogue of cities (Bablon/Babylon, Ninwi/Nineveh, Trui/Troy, Rûm/Rome) holds relevance for another reason – it allows us to cast some light onto Tolkien’s subcreative activity at the very beginning of his writing

⁶⁶ *Letters* 144–145 (§ 131). See also a letter to Stanley Unwin sent in 1947: “Of course, Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth. So that the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully intelligible story is an allegory. [...] But the two start out from opposite ends. You can make the Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like [...]. But that is only because all power magical or mechanical does always so work” (*Letters* 121, § 109). The draft of letter 181 to Michael Straight (*Letters* 232, January or February 1956) is even more explicit as far as *The Lord of the Rings* is concerned: “There is no ‘allegory’, moral, political, or contemporary in the work at all”. See also Tolkien’s foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*: “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence” (*LotR* xxiv).

⁶⁷ Freeman (2021).

career. The four cities he lists can be traced back to two different archetypical literary “universes”: the Bible (Babylon and Nineveh) and the Classical mythology and history (Troy and Rome). When Tolkien decided to put into writing his ideas about a fictional universe that he had been pondering for a few years, he might have started with a vaguely Biblical story (imitating, for instance, the Exodus) or with a more ‘historical’ narrative (reminiscent of the birth of Rome). He chose instead to begin from the end (metaphorically speaking), that is, from a story focused on the fall of a city, therefore neither on a people (as in the Bible) nor on a long war (*Iliad*), a quest/return (*Odyssey*), nor the founding of a city or kingdom (e.g. Romulus and Remus).

The Northern World is notably absent from Tolkien’s catalogue of cities, and episodes of Norse mythology are never openly acknowledged. This cannot be a coincidence, since he could have mentioned – for instance – Worms, Attila’s palace, Asgard, or Heorot. I believe that the Northern World was intentionally left out by Tolkien when mentioning Gondolin’s illustrious predecessors because the *Völsunga Saga* or *Beowulf* did not belong to the past of his fictional mythology, but to its present, or better still to alternative present(s). Tolkien aimed to create a new (Northern) mythology, much more detailed and consistent than the few old Germanic tales that have come down to us, and he obviously took advantage of the *Aeneid*, just as Vergil had used Homer for his own purposes. His goal was to create a synthesis of Classical, Biblical and Northern myths to give birth to a fictional universe which may be compared to that of the Greek and Roman heroes.

In a letter to Milton Waldman (late 1951), Tolkien admits: “I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish (which greatly affected me); but nothing English”. He then goes on by writing that “once upon a time [...] I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story [...] which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country”.⁶⁸

The myths of all cultures are set in a more or less remote past, and Tolkien was well aware that the few surviving English legends take place in a fictional Medieval universe. Therefore, he had to choose a Medieval setting, not a Classi-

68 *Letters* 144 (§ 131).

cal or Biblical one, if he desired to create a new mythology for England. As it has already been noted, according to Tolkien an important part of every story was an effect of antiquity and melancholy, which could not be obtained by alluding to the *Nibelungenlied* or *Beowulf*, since these were perceived to belong to timelines that were roughly contemporary with (albeit alternative to) Middle-earth. The only logical choice was to create a Medieval fictional universe independent from Norse myths and whose origins were reminiscent of the Classical world.

So far, the discussion focused exclusively on the reasons why Tolkien chose a Classical and not a Germanic or Norse archetype for *The Fall of Gondolin*. It is now time to focus our attention on the *Aeneid*. As I have already argued, Tolkien had quite a few alternatives at his disposal when he began his first tale on Middle-earth. The *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and several episodes of the Bible offer a wealth of models which can be easily borrowed when starting a fictional universe. However, we should not forget that Tolkien attached equal importance to antiquity and melancholy, more specifically to a kind of nostalgia for a “lost world”, be it Valinor, Gondolin itself, the First Age, Númenor, or Gondor in its heyday. It is very difficult to feel such an emotion when reading Achilles’ deeds or Ulysses’ voyages. A few books of the Bible do have similar undertones, but the expulsion from the Garden of Eden or the fall of Jerusalem are difficult to reconcile with a new mythology, not least because Tolkien believed that “myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary ‘real’ world”.⁶⁹

Vergil’s *Aeneid* represented a perfect alternative, since it did convey an effect of both antiquity and melancholy and it was a convenient beginning for a new mythology, as it left ample space to narrate the past of Gondolin and the deeds of its exiles. This explains why Tolkien chose to model his narrative upon it, and indicates the intentionality of the analogies with Vergil, which would have been meaningless if unintentional, because they would not have transmitted any sense of antiquity. It would be pointless trying to analyze Tolkien’s psychology half a century after his death, but we may conjecture that certain traumatic events, such as the death of his father and mother, his move from Sarehole to Birmingham, the forced separation from Edith, and the First World War, exerted a strong influence on his personality, and that he felt a certain affinity with the

⁶⁹ *Letters* 144 (§ 131). See also *MC* 153: according to Tolkien, fairy-stories should satisfy “the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death”.

plight of Aeneas. The fall of Troy provided Tolkien with a model rich in antiquity, which was fundamental to give the necessary (internal and intertextual) depth to his fictional world, and at the same time not devoid of melancholy, which was an important ingredient of the life of Tolkien himself.

5. CONCLUSION

There is one last analogy to be considered, which tells us little on the genesis of *The Fall of Gondolin* but can shed some light onto the personality of Tolkien. Both he and Vergil circulated only two major works and left unfinished what they regarded as their most important literary creation, then published by others. The *Aeneid* and all tales of the First Age (including *The Fall of Gondolin*) never went beyond the stage of draft, although parts of them had already been read aloud in front of a few friends, and received warm praise. Varius and Tucca, as well as Christopher Tolkien, slightly edited them and ultimately published an unfinished version, containing half-verses or half-stories. Not unlike Vergil, Tolkien paid an obsessive attention to details and was unwilling to circulate works that were less than perfect, thereby entrusting his heirs with the responsibility to decide their fate. Clearly, this did not exert any influence on a young officer who was writing about a new Troy in a hospital bed, but we should always consider that the *Aeneid* and all Tolkien's First-Age stories are the product of both their authors and their editors: without the latter, we would never have read them.

Turning back to *The Fall of Gondolin*, the previous pages have shown that Tolkien knew Vergil very well, he had been studying his works since childhood, and he used the *Aeneid* as a model when writing his first Middle-earth story. The last days of Gondolin are modelled upon the fall of Troy, since the plot, the depiction of the characters, and the general sense of antiquity and melancholy pervading both works are quite similar. Tolkien did not slavishly follow his model but inserted into his tale a number of elements drawn from the *Aeneid*, which enabled him to start his mythology with a story that was at the same time old and new, Classical and Medieval, epic and "fairy". As Fisher correctly remarks, intertextuality in itself runs the risk of becoming a pointless exercise of erudition if it cannot add anything to our understanding of a work. This paper has indicated the importance of recognizing the *Aeneid* as the main source of *The Fall of Gondolin*, since the choice of this work as a model casts light on Tolkien's

ideas on literature at the very beginning of his “sub-creation” of Middle-earth and on the role of antiquity and melancholy in his writings.

The end of a city or civilization often marks the beginning of a new one, and both Númenor and Eärendil’s voyage to Valinor (as well as Morgoth’s defeat) would have been impossible without the death of Turgon and the destruction of Gondolin. Tolkien was a devout Catholic, and he was surely aware that this succession of events was somewhat reminiscent of Christ’s Passion, which was ultimately necessary in order to offer salvation to humankind. In other words, *The Fall of Gondolin* touches upon – without intentionally dealing with – theodicy, the “problem of Evil”, and its seeming paradoxical necessity to arrive at the triumph of Good.⁷⁰ These were concepts quite close to the life and writings of Tolkien. Without the death of his mother, he would never have moved to Mrs Faulkner’s home and met Edith Bratt; without the trench fever, he would have remained in France and possibly died shortly afterwards, like many of his friends; without Gollum’s final aggression, Frodo would not have destroyed the Ring. I doubt that this kind of consideration consciously exerted some influence on *The Fall of Gondolin*, but we cannot rule out the possibility that the choice of the *Aeneid* as a model was also due to the resonance of his plot for Tolkien, who was well aware that “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (*Jn* 12.24).

⁷⁰ See *Letters* 280 (§ 211, to Rhona Beare, 14 October 1958): “The problem of evil, and its apparent toleration, is a permanent one for all who concern themselves with our world”. Cf. also Shippey (2000) 242: “Tolkien indeed built the concept of the *felix peccatum* into his own mythology”. This is clearly indicated by *TNoME* 216: “The weakest and most imprudent of all the actions of Manwë [...] was the release of Melkor from captivity. From this came the greatest loss and harm: the death of the Trees, and the exile and the anguish of the Noldor. Yet through this suffering there came also, as maybe in no other way could it have come, the victory of the Elder Days: the downfall of Angband and the last overthrow of Melkor”.

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Suggested citation

Cristini, Marco: The Fall of Two Cities. Troy and Gondolin. In: *thersites* 15 (2022): There and Back Again: Tolkien and the Greco-Roman World pp. 1–24.

<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol15.200>