Introduction
The Past in the Heroic Tradition

I. Part One – An Account of the Argument

Although the modern origins of high fantasy may be traced back to the romance novels of William Morris from the turn of the twentieth century, or to the Conan-cycle novels of Robert R. Howard written in the 1930s, it was around the 1950s that high fantasy emerged as a definable, autonomous subgenre of modern fantasy fiction. Not long thereafter, in the 1970s, the first attempts were made at providing a workable definition of the new phenomenon[1] – the first coming in a 1971 essay by the American author Lloyd Chudley Alexander, entitled *High Fantasy and Heroic Romance*. Alexander's definition already contains all the crucial elements by reference to which this particular kind of fantasy writing has been defined ever since. As the defining characteristics of the genre, Alexander mentions the creation of an autonomous, fully distinct fictional world, a strong reliance upon recourse to a "mythological" layer in the created reality, an indebtedness to the literary tradition and conventions of genres such as the epic and the romance, through which the heroic mode had been customarily expressed, and an elusive propensity to address certain special "areas of feeling" (Alexander 1971) which are expressible

[1] For more context on the fantastic literature of the period, see Mendlesohn/James 2012: 61-74.

in no other genre in quite the same way. Indeed, the reliance on the creation of a secondary world with a premodern, medievalised setting and imagery, as well as adherence to a number narrative patterns which emerge in the context of the epic and the romance, has resulted in the related term of "heroic fantasy" being also applied in the context of the most recognisable examples of high fantasy texts.[2] This is, no doubt, a simple consequence of the fact that high fantasy depends on the conventions and setting for the heroic literary tradition to achieve the "high" scope of aesthetic an ethical reference.

The clearly definable character of high fantasy is testimony to a uniform aesthetic and ideological outlook shared by the bulk of the authors whose work served to define the normative and stylistic boundaries of the genre, and by the expectations of the audience who chose to grant their attention to this newly emergent literary tradition. It may be said that at the origins of the genre lay an impulse to distance oneself from the confines of the nineteenth century aesthetics of formal realism, which may have elevated the newly refined genre of the novel to the rank of the major form of literary expression, capable of handling the fine detail of the individual psychology and the sophisticated context of social interaction, but which also rid itself of the apparatus to address the higher, more spiritual aspects which contribute to the fullness of human existential experience. Thus it appears that what lies behind Alexander's reference to the unique "areas of feeling" is an echo of the Tolkienian notions of Recovery, Escape and Consolation, which denote the destined aims of literary composition in the fantastic mode designed to terminate in the spiritually uplifting sensation of the *Eucatastrophe*.

Thus, avoiding the avowedly narrowed scope of the formal realist fiction on the one hand, and the chaos and decadence of modernism and postmodernism, on the other, high fantasy has always drawn both inspiration and formal instruction from the genres through which profound existential topics were once expressed. By drawing

[2] Shippey uses the term in reference to Tolkien in his *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Shippey 2001: 320), while the nature of the term's relation to the genres of the epic and the romance is further explored in Honegger 2010: 61-69, who also uses the term "heroic fantasy" throughout in relation to Tolkien's work.

upon the literary legacy of the epic and the romance, high fantasy became shaped and defined by its contact with the literary and cultural heritage of the European Middle Ages, which is in itself a reflection and consequence of the fact that it is through contact with the medieval culture that the most intimate and immediate relation may be achieved, in the modern-day environment, with the heroic literary tradition. Whether in the context of a warm appreciation, as is the case for J. R. R. Tolkien, or C. S. Lewis, or a subversive appropriation, as, for instance, the case would be for Poul Anderson, the medieval context has become one of the most vital cornerstones of literary composition within the genre of heroic fantasy because it is through this historical context that the heroic literary tradition makes the most direct contact with modern European culture.

Furthermore, the way in which this context finds its way into the literary texture of modern high fantasy and is manifested therein is by no means limited to the conscious use of medieval epic or courtly romance conventions, or the recreation of a medievalised, pre-modern setting for the fictional secondary world, where the main action of a narrative takes place. What a more profound, organic contact with the culture of the Middle Ages will entail, in the case of the literary works of the most outstanding merit, is a creative dialogue with the fine detail of medieval aesthetic decorum and some of the most fundamental aspects of the human cognition and psychology, which defined the specificity of the medieval period against the context of the antecedent and the subsequent periods in the complex cultural history of human civilisations.

Consequently, one may say that the general perception of the nature and distinct quality of high fantasy has, for the most part, remained unchallenged and no major reformulation of the genetic characteristics of this type of fantasy has ever been necessary. Thus, while the terms "heroic", "high" or "epic" fantasy have all been used by various scholars over the last four decades to denote the genre in question, they have been, for the most part, interchanged in reflection of which aspect of the genre a particular analysis was most directly concerned with. Typically, the genre has been called "epic", or 'heroic fantasy" when the aspect of the medieval heritage is perceived as the most crucial, while the term "high fantasy" seems

to invariably bring to the fore the genre's customary reliance on the fully immersive secondary-world setting.[3]

As such, heroic fantasy functions in the contemporary critical perception, as well as commercial market context, as a distinct, recognisable genre of fantasy fiction, alongside the related genres of comic fantasy, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and historical fantasy. Also, some critics have sought to draw a more systemic parallel between the concept of "high fantasy" and the inevitable terminological equivalent of "low fantasy" (i.e. Wolf 1986: 67). The narratives included within this definition would typically feature an intrusion of fantastic elements upon a realistic setting, which would correspond to, or mirror, the primary reality. As such, low fantasy would not make use of the concept of the secondary world and it would also be based on an implicit assumption that the fantastic elements are essentially marked as a negative, corrupting influence on the primary reality. If so defined, low fantasy narratives would indeed constitute the polar opposite of the philosophy implicit in high fantasy fiction, which seems to have never fundamentally departed from the Tolkienian idea of the ennobling potential of fantastic imagery.

Thus, subsequent generations of critics honed Alexander's definition by further refining its constituent elements. Thus, for instance, much valuable normative work has since been conducted on the nature and character of the secondary world. It could in fact be argued that it was the birth of the classic Tolkienian heroic fantasy that redirected the focus of the critical perception from seeing fantasy as a subordinate mode of expression in contemporary realist prose (as it was effectively treated by the likes of Tzvetan Todorov or Rosemary Jackson[4]) to treating it as an autonomous literary genre with a distinct tradition, poetics and aesthetic philosophy.

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[3] Compare the use of the terms by Wolfe (2012: 19), Kaveney (2012: 216), or Butler (2012: 118). See also the respective entries in Gary K. Wolfe's *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Wolfe 1986: 31, 52).

[4] Meaning, of course, specifically, Todorov's 1973 *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* and Jackson's 1981 Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion. Compare here the diverging contemporaneous approach adopted in Lin Carter's 1973 *Imaginary Worlds* (passim.), or in the subchapter on Tolkien's *On Fairy Stories* in Colin N. Manlove's *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (1975: 158-170).

Thus one finds an extended discussion of Tolkien's reformulation of the mythical patterns already in A. C. Petty's 1979 *One Ring to Bind Them All: Tolkien's Mythology*, while J. H. Timmerman in his 1983 *Other Worlds: The Fantasy Genre* provided an incisive discussion of the creative practice involved in designing the fantastic secondary world, followed by a discussion of the Tolkienian concept of the secondary world in the light of Tolkien's own work. Of similar character is E. Little's in-depth discussion of Tolkien's use of the secondary world models in his 1984 *The Fantasts* (Little 1984: 13-38). Next, Ann Swinfen, in her *Defence of Fantasy*, systematised the term "secondary world" against other forms of fantasy literature (1984: 75-99). Of the later critical statements on the topic one would surely need to mention C. Manlove's discussion of Tolkienian tradition of the secondary world fantasy in his 1999 *The Fantasy Literature of England* (Manlove 1999: 37-63) and F. Mendlesohn's 2007 publication *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, which proposes a reformulated, four-category classification of fantasy, whereby the typical setting of the majority of high fantasy texts would come under the term "immersive fantasy" (2008: 59-113), although the critic suggests that *The Lord of the Rings* should be treated as an example of *portal fantasy* (Mendlesohn 2008: 2).

Most recently, Mark J. P. Wolf's seminal work *Building Imaginary Worlds* seeks to redefine the traditional concepts of "subcreation" and secondary world in the context of the new imaginative possibilities offered by contemporary technological developments, which integrates traditional forms of textual creativity in the sphere of the new social media. Wolfe's discussion of the topic constitutes an attempt to introduce a normative categorisation of the creative autonomy of the fantasy world based on the fictional world's relation with the empirical consensual outlook on the primary reality (Wolf 2012: 20-51).

The most comprehensive joint scholarly effort at applying Wolf's outlook to the Tolkienian philosophy of the secondary world has undoubtedly been the 2019 volume *Sub-creating Arda* (ed. Fimi and Honegger) which seeks to extend the normative framework of Wolf's theory to tackle issues such as the creation of various aspects of the fictional space in the textual narrative, or such aspects like focalisation, or the role of the tradition of language and culture.

Similarly, the question of the indebtedness of high fantasy to the heroic tradition has been the subject of much critical discussion in the course of the last four decades. The use of the heroic mode and the medieval literary tradition was already discussed in the earliest academic publications concerning the work of Tolkien. W. H. Auden explored the topic already in his 1962 essay *The Quest Hero*, and the issue was further referred to throughout the 1960s and 1970s criticism of Tolkien (see, for instance, Evans 1972: 58-90, Carter 1969: 96-133). Then, during the 1980s, the role of the heroic tradition in the work of Tolkien was the cornerstone of such seminal publications as T. Shippey's *The Road to Middle-earth*.

Over the last three decades, the growing scholarly interest in the way in which Tolkien's work aspired to reconnect with the heritage of the heroic literary tradition has resulted in the publication of a number of outstanding studies on the topic. Among these, one need mention T. Shippey's 2001 *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, or his 2007 collection *Roots and Branches*, as well as J. Chance's 2001 *Tolkien's Art: A Mythology for England*, or the collections *Tolkien and the Invention of the Myth* (2004), R. Rorabeck's *Tolkien's Heroic Quest* (2008), M. Dickerson's *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in the Lord of the Rings* (2003), E. M. Stephen's *Hobbit to Hero: The Making of Tolkien's King* (2012), M. Simonson's *The Lord of the Rings and the Western Narrative Tradition* (2008), V. Flieger's *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien's Mythology* (2005) and *A Question of Time: J. R. R. Tolkien's Road to Faërie* (1997). Other important works in this particular strand of Tolkienian studies are undoubtedly the ones which explore the specifically medieval dimension of the heroic tradition. Among these one may mention A. Amendt-Raduege's *"The Sweet and the Bitter": Death and Dying in J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*, G. Clark and D. Timmons's collection *J. R. R. Tolkien and his Literary Resonances* (2000), and J. Chance's collection *Tolkien the Medievalist* (2003), or S. D. Lee, Stuart and D. E. Solopova's *The Keys to Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature Through the Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien* (2005).

It is becoming apparent that the main achievement of the understandably much more recent and still relatively modest critical tradition of studies concerned with the work of George R. R. Martin

has already been successful in laying foundations for the author's recognition as a major contributor to the modern high fantasy tradition. In the wake of the critical analysis of many key aspects of George R. R. Martin's artistic vision, the recognition of the complexity and scope of the author's work in the genre of high fantasy, as well as his ability to develop a serious dialogue with literary legacy of the medieval heroic tradition is gradually, but steadily, becoming more universal. Of the critical works concerned with the work of George R. R. Martin, the most relevant are C. Larrington's *Winter is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones* (2016), C. P. Jamison's *Chivalry in Westeros: The Knightly Code of A Song of Ice and Fire* (2018) and S. Carroll's *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* (2018).

The present volume aims to make a modest contribution to this critical tradition. It deals with the work of the two arguably most significant of modern fantasy authors, whose achievement has been to create a complex body of associated texts which collectively develop a literary vision of an autonomous, immersive secondary world where the conventions of modern fantasy fiction are employed in a dialogue with the heroic literary tradition. The specific tradition which constitutes the most direct focus of the analysis here is the culture of the High Middle Ages, as reflected in the literary tradition of the Middle-English romance and epic literature.

While the scope and textual complexity of the respective fictional world are essentially compatible, the divergent cultural background and differing attitudes of J.R. R. Tolkien and George R. R. Martin result in contrastive approaches the two authors take towards various aspects of the medieval tradition in creating their respective literary visions.

The general idea for this volume, therefore, is to present a comprehensive assessment of a continuum of aspects of the medieval literary and cultural legacy in the context of which the work of the two authors relates to the medieval heritage immanent in the genre of heroic fantasy. The aim for the volume is to explore facets of the medieval heritage which either have hitherto not been tackled in criticism, or which may benefit from contact with methodologies and approaches that are either newly developed, or have not previously been invoked in discussions of the topic in question.

This general design is meant to reflect a certain underlying philosophy regarding high fantasy's relationship with the medieval tradition which is adopted throughout, and which is inspired by Egbert J. Bakker's conception of the "epic remembering". In his study of the ways in which the process of remembering and active recollection is manifested in the Homeric epics, Bakker writes about memory being "medially and therefore historically contingent" (Bakker 2008: 65). He further defines the mode by which memory functions in oral, heroic societies as "the collective mentality of a society that places fundamental authority in a remote past and considers […] the records of the achievements of the ancestors that is codified in the epic tradition, to be the model for excellence in the present. In such a mentality, epic is traditional because it has to remember, evoke, a part that is different from the audience's present-day world" (Bakker 2008: 66). Within this context Bakker proceeds to define the act of remembering within the heroic textual tradition as an intuitive, quasi-ritualistic act of re-enactment, an "activation of memory" which "is not just physical, […] but also mental or spiritual […]" (Bakker 2008: 71). The epic remembering is thus a present state of active recollection of the past in a currently performed activity. The present volume aims to perceive the secondary-world creation in modern high fantasy as an act of remembering and active recalling of the past literary and cultural tradition in a way which is parallel to the conception discussed by Bakker. Within this understanding, modern fantasy texts constitute acts of reliving the tradition of the past in the process of the successive unveiling of the narrative action. Consequently, the relationship of the modern texts with their medieval antecedents is activated not solely through acts of direct, conscious and deliberate influence realised in the form of intertextual, or metatextual correspondences or references, but it also incorporates relations created by the cultural and literary tradition being remodelled or channelled into new forms, in the process of the juxtaposition of the different cultural backgrounds, literary traditions or mental and cognitive habits of the epochs and civilisations separated in diachronic and synchronic sense. Just like the medieval civilisation found its own unique reformulation of the heroic tradition, which reflected the specific cultural context of the epoch

where the modes of cultural interaction typical of the oral and the literate society remain in a dynamic process of constant interaction throughout the period, so modern high fantasy is constantly, though sometimes inadvertently, engaged in a cultural process whereby the cultural heritage of the past is redefined and reformulated in the dynamic context of the present. The aim of the present argument is thus to discuss a number of different aspects where one may trace forms of relationship between the medieval cultural traditions and modern high fantasy fiction.

Therefore, the focus of the analysis moves progressively through various layers of literary composition. It starts with a discussion of the overtly intertextual references to the medieval literary tradition. Hence, although the consecutive chapters are united in their concern with the hierarchy of aspects in which the medieval tradition asserts itself in the work of the two fantasy authors, they are also designed as a sequence of largely autonomous, methodologically distinct studies, reflecting the variety of areas which offer themselves for discussion in the context of these two complex secondary worlds.

First, as a sort of overture, or prelude, to the subsequent analysis, within this introductory chapter we will briefly examine the continuity of tradition between the medieval literary texts belonging to the heroic tradition and the work of Tolkien and Martin, based on the example of one particular motif. Namely, this is the motif whereby, during a pause in the sequence of the events of the plot, the protagonists take a backward reflective look to re-establish and re-evaluate their mental connection to momentous deeds, events and personages, whose impact upon the textual present determined the characters' perception of the significance of the past.

The aim of this initial section is to stress how close and continuous the link is between the medieval narrative tradition of heroic literature and the work of Tolkien and Martin, and how important the medieval heritage is in terms of determining the narrative style and decisively influencing the characters and nature of the secondary worlds created by the two respective authors.

Subsequently, in the first fully analytical chapter (Chapter I), an attempt is made to extend the argument by presenting an account of the way in which Tolkien and Martin seek to recreate, within their

respective secondary worlds, the mythical layer of cultural reference which plays such a decisive part in the heroic literary tradition of the epic and the romance. Chapter I takes a more systemic look at the way in which the heroic legacy of a particular culture is resident in the body of myths which preserve the consciousness of the past and is reflected in its literary tradition. It further examines how the medieval understanding of the concept of myth is reflected and transformed in the fiction of Tolkien and Martin. After an overview of the way myth functions in the partly oral environment of medieval culture, there follows an in-depth discussion of one corresponding myth in the work of the two respective authors. Specifically, we examine in detail the role and character of two closely compatible heroic myths functioning within the two respective secondary worlds: the myth of Elendil, the High King of Arnor and of Gondor and of Nymeria, Princess of the Roynar and the Queen of Dorne. The overall aim is to discuss the impact of the mythical layer upon the fictional reality of the narrative, in both the emic and etic dimensions, i.e. as an element determining the perception of fictional secondary world by the characters involved in the main progress of the narrative, and as an element conditioning the perception of the secondary world by the primary-world audience of the text.

In terms of the methodology adopted for the analysis, the aim is to make more extended and direct use of the analytical methods developed in the context of anthropological and socio-historical studies of oral, or partly oral, traditional cultures. Thus the argument seeks here to augment and reinforce the traditional Lord and Parry approach of oral-formulaic studies as practiced in the medieval context in the work by Mark Amodio (1994; 2004), M. Borroff (1962), and E. B. Vitz (Vitz 1999) with the anthropological approach developed in cultural socio-cultural studies by W. J. Ong (1995), Jan Assmann (2008; 2015), Aleida Assmann (2013), Paul Connerton (2006), and Eric A. Havelock (1986). A very vital part of the adopted methodology is here to establish a connection between this critical tradition and the scholarly work on the cultural context of the medieval approaches to textuality as developed in the work of R. Morse (Morse 1991), W. Ryding (1971) and M. Carruthers (1992). The methodology adopted throughout this volume thus seeks to incorporate the

traditional close-reading approach to textual analysis within the larger context of current forms of cultural studies. Importantly, the critical approach represented by Jan and Alida Assmann has not hitherto been applied to textual analysis within English-language literary criticism.

The second analytical chapter is concerned with the question of how the medieval literary tradition affects the way in which a modern fantasy text forms the key elements of the imagery and the setting of the fictional, secondary world. Chapter II takes the motif of the forest as an example and examines in detail its function in the Middle English literary tradition, before tracing the continuity of motifs and narrative perspectives concerning the presentation and function of the forest in the work of Tolkien and Martin.

The argument is here maintained in the critical tradition developed by the scholarly work concerned with the medieval context of the motif of the forest (e.g. C. Saunders 1993 and A. Classen 2015). No less important here is the critical legacy of studies concerned with the role of Nature in general, and specifically the forest, in the work of Tolkien. The argument is here immensely indebted to publications by M. Dickerson and J. Evans (2006), H. Conrad-O'Brian and G. Hynes (2013), V. Flieger (2000; 2003), L. Campbell (2011), and S. Jeffers (2014).

The aim of the argument is here to provide a comprehensive discussion of the role played by the motif of the forest in the two respective secondary worlds in the context of the most recent critical tendencies in ecocriticism. Consequently, the analysis introduces a methodological distinction between the following terms:

- "forest environment", which means the forest as an element of the spatial setting of the narrative,
- "forest habitat", which denotes the forest as an element of the fictional world perceived from the point of view of the characters of the narrative and interactive with them, and lastly
- "forest ecosystem", which refers to the forest as an autonomous agent in the narrative, which possesses individual identity and fulfils a role akin to that of other living entities, including characters belonging to typically "rational" species.

The aim is thus to perceive the forest not solely as an element of the setting (as has hitherto been most common), but as an organism

with a distinct identity independently interacting with other characters of the narrative reality. The overriding concern of the argument at this point is to trace how the medieval literary tradition affected the conception of the forest in each of these three isolated aspects.

The third and final chapter is concerned with the medieval heritage on the cognitive level. The first section presents how medieval literary composition is determined by the specificity of the contemporaneous perception of the aural space (like, for instance, the function of sonic perspective in the creation of the fictional space) and how it affects both the lexical and the aesthetic aspect of literary composition. Then a detailed discussion of the same element of the work of Tolkien and Martin seeks to juxtapose them against the medieval literary context.

The methodology adopted in this chapter stems from the classic work on the issue of the cultural context of human space cognition by A. Guriewicz (1973), P. Zumthor (1993) and J. R. Martin (1977). Again, the approach represented by these scholars has not hitherto been applied in a wider sense in English-language critical studies. The aim is to renew critical interest in the ground-breaking work done by these scholars, which focuses on the issue of the medieval perception of space. The argument developed in Chapter III transposes the findings arrived at by this particular school of literary and cultural criticism onto the medieval aural perception, the concept of acoustic space and the function of the sonic perspective. Such a widening of the methodological approach opens up a completely new perspective in the study of a most vital element of medieval cognition. It allows us to reformulate our understanding of how the cultural and cognitive propensities of the medieval mind which relate to aural sensation affect the key aspect of literary composition within texts created during the period. Furthermore, it enables us to trace how the textual specificity of the medieval texts in this key aspect may have affected modern narratives which remain in intertextual, or metatextual, contact with the medieval tradition. Alternatively, it allows us to observe how the pre-modern setting of contemporary high fantasy work differs in character from the medieval models by virtue of being based on a divergent mode of the aural space perception.

The focus of Chapter III is thus concerned not with direct or indirect influences of any form, but with tracing out cultural analogues. Consequently, it seeks to analyse how literary texts created in the modern epoch, where the prevalent modes of cognition differ markedly from those obtaining in the medieval period, develop the aural space of narratives which function in the context of a medievalised setting modelled on the conventionalised setting of medieval narratives. Thus the context of the medieval tradition is here treated as providing an augmented analytical depth which opens up a new perspective on the character of this particular element of the artistic design and individual specificity of the secondary worlds of modern fantasy. Consequently, the aim of Chapter III is to introduce a new methodological dimension into the study of both medieval culture and the modern phenomena relating to medievalism.

All in all, the various stages of the argument conducted within the present volume aim to contribute to a comprehensive and flexible picture of the possible forms in which the medieval cultural and literary heritage may interact with modern literary texts belonging to a genre which remains indebted to that heritage and continues to function in reference to that context. The aim throughout the argument is to apply a flexible methodological apparatus in order to account for the distinctive nature of the medieval heritage as a vital aspect shedding new light on the work of authors whose output has shaped and defined the modern genre of high fantasy.

Part TWO – The Backward Look

As a prelude to the discussion of the various forms of cultural continuity which link the particular aspects of literary composition by which the work of J. R. R. Tolkien and George R. R. Martin invokes the complex, interrelated layers of literary tradition to be found within the European medieval civilisation, we shall first make a few remarks about how the overt attitudes and understanding of the past functions within the texture of classic literary texts of the heroic tradition.

Our journey effectively begins at the meeting point of the oral and literate worlds, in the verses of *Beowulf*. Here, as we witness some of that overwhelmingly intimate and ever-present sense of the legacy of the past which defined the ancient oral civilisations being gathered and framed in the historical finality of the written composition, we find the fulcrum against which our discussion of the sense of the past in the subsequent literate heroic traditions may be comfortably anchored. As Professor Tolkien himself observed in his study of the poem, the story we follow here functions at the crosscut between a legend steeped in the marvellous and the orally perpetuated history of the ancient households of the Teutonic peoples of Northern Europe around whom the communal sense of identity and the perception of cultural continuity had been developed (Tolkien 2014: 205–207).

It is thus a sense of the organic link with the legacy of the heroic past that takes the story of the young nephew of the king of the Geats, who sets out to confront a humanoid monster who nightly invades the royal mead hall of the neighbouring King Hrothgar, the story of an old king dying after a victorious confrontation with a dragon, which, recklessly awakened, prowls continually upon his subjects, and elevates it to embody the communal perception of heroic grandeur. This form of perception is abstracted out of, and validated, by the tribal society's experience of history. It is in this way that the story enters the epic register forged by generations of oral performers before its descent into the fixed locality of the manuscript.

Thus it is against the conceptual framework which the society has developed for the expression of the heroic, and which is enshrined in the catalogued reservoir of the formulae woven intricately through the fabric of the poem in systems of formulaic distribution, that the greatness of the epic hero is measured. It is in this context that each individual story is tested, as it is given expression by being cast into a pattern of formulaic phrases and themes.

Among these numerous themes which collectively facilitate the progress of the oral heroic narrative we will find one which takes advantage of the momentary suspension of the narrative to allow the characters upon whose shoulders the weight of the heroic action is bestowed to take a look back to measure their deeds against the

achievements of their predecessors, now enshrined in oral memory of the communal legend.

In these rare moments of historical insight the heroic pathos becomes evoked from the narrative in the wake of an explicit confrontation between the immediate, dramatic exigencies of characters and their equivalents in the fortunes of the legendary heroes of the past, whose noble deeds have come to stand as a paragon of heroic achievement. In this way it is through the link with the past and with the communal history that the protagonists' identity is determined in a heroic text.

Thus, amid the robust merrymaking at the feast in King Hrothgar's hall called after young Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, the accomplished bard unveils before his audience the story of Sigemund – a heroic warrior known also from the Volsung saga[5]:

Hwílum heaþorófe hléapan léton
on geflit faran fealwe méaras
ðaér him foldwegas fægere þúhton
cystum cúðe. Hwílum cyninges þegn
guma gilphlæden gidda gemyndig
sé ðe ealfela ealdgesegena
worn gemunde word óþer fand
sóðe gebunden· secg eft ongan
síð Béowulfes snyttrum styrian
ond on spéd wrecan spel geráde,
wordum wrixlan· wélhwylc gecwæð
þæt hé fram Sigemunde secgan hyrde
ellendaédum: uncúþes fela
Wælsinges gewin wíde síðas
þára þe gumena bearn gearwe ne wiston
faéhðe ond fyrena búton Fitela mid hine,
þonne hé swulces hwæt secgan wolde
éäm his nefan swá híe á waéron
æt níða gehwám nýdgesteallan;
(*Beowulf*, 864–898).

[5] For a more extensive and in-depth context on the heroic dimension of Beowulf see the study by S. Gwara, to which the present study is greatly indebted, see Gwara 2008; 12- 34; 59-134; 311- 349.

The heroic tale of Sigemund's[6] defeat of the dragon is conjured up out of the reservoir of traditional stories for a number of reasons. Most immediately, of course, because it corresponds in terms of its narrative character and celebratory tone to the mood of the occasion. Yet because one event links here across history with another, each time when a suitable occasion arises for the recounting of the heroic deeds of the past, the present endeavour is measured against the standard of hardship and glory encoded in the heroic song.

Thus recalling the story of the son of Sigemund provides the ultimate proof of the noble quality of Beowulf's contest and victory, but also a challenge to his identity and a warning against succumbing to the weaknesses against which the heroes of the past had to contend. Hence it constitutes the ultimate compliment towards the guest, because to live up to the standard of the mythical past constitutes the ultimate praise that may be bestowed upon the hero of the present occasion. In this way the present heroic identity of the young nobleman is articulated through an echo of the past. In this way the mythical past is once again validated in its role as a paradigm of nobility and, by reaching out to the myth, the present cases of outstanding achievement may be elevated to the timelessness that is only reachable by abstracting the heroic quality out of the accumulated weight of the past.

Just as the present needs myth to provide a measure of greatness, so is myth paradoxically only able to preserve its timeless character through constant feedback from the present reality. As one justifies and rejuvenates the other, it is through this symbiotic relationship that the cultural continuity of the community is manifested and perpetuated. In this way, the consciousness of the past enhances the glory of the present achievement, but it also elevates the experience of suffering, failure, defeat and death out of the seemingly pointless squalor it may seem to represent in the narrow context of individual life. To relive the former glories of one's life and the lives of the great ones before us at the moment when the final tragedy seems to envelop and swallow up one's lifetime achievement offers a consolation

[6] The account provided here by the bard differs from the later versions of the story appearing in Old Norse mythology, where the killing of the dragon is attributed to Sigemund's son, Sigurd.

which bestows a heroic quality on individual tragedy, as it too echoes against its precedents in the heroic past.

Consequently, in the final verses of *Beowulf*, when the old king of the Geats is dying of the wounds he received in the confrontation with the dragon, he recalls the times of his youth spent in the hall of King Hredel:

Fela ic on giogoðe guðræsa genæs,
orleghwila; ic þæt eall gemon
Ic wæs syfanwintre, þa mec sinca baldor,
freawine folca æt minum fæder genam;
heold mec ond hæfde Hreðel cyning,
geaf me sinc ond symbel, sibbe gemunde;
næs ic him to life laðra owihte,
beorn in burgum, þonne his bearna hwylc,
Herebeald ond Hæðcyn oðde Hygelac min.
Wæs þam yldestan ungedefelice
mæges dædum morþorbed stred,
syððan hyne Hæðcyn of hornbogan,
his freawine flane geswencte,
miste mercelses ond his mæg ofscet,
broðor oðerne blodigan gare.
Þæt wæs feohleas gefeoht, fyrenum gesyngad,
hreðre hygemeðe; sceolde hwæðre swa þeah
æðeling unwrecen ealdres linnan.

Beowulf, 2426–2443.

Here the personal memory becomes sucked in and swallowed up into the great treasure hoard of heroic stories to which the story of Beowulf will now be added and through which its longevity and continued significance will be henceforth ensured. The fact that the young Beowulf learned the art of military strategist, loyal vassal and feudal leader from the personal example of renowned kings such as Hredel or Hygelak positions his life in the continuity of heroic endeavour which stretches way back to the foundations of the communal identity and the feudal social order.

Another vital element which will become ever more important as, moving in time towards the High Middle Ages, we see the exigencies

of the individual life beginning to function less in the context of the "wyrd" and becoming more the domain of Divine Providence, is the tropological function of the example of the past. As the eschatological glory of the ultimate felicitous climax of history at the end of time emerges to balance the mythical aura of the grandeur of the past, so the struggles of personal life will be henceforth perceived and justified as individual contributions to the universal ethical struggle which constitutes the cornerstone of the Christian vision of history. Yet, although the Christian perspective may frequently provide the overruling justification and impetus behind the individual heroics, the ancient practice of seeking a defining context for the examples of personal achievement and personal tragedy in the precedents of the past never truly loses its significance in any major literary text whereby the tradition of heroic literature is carried on during the high medieval period.

Such is the case in the arguably most heroic of all Middle English literary texts – the alliterative *Morte Arthure*.[7] As this poem is in a defining way indebted to the formulaic tradition of oral poetics through which the heroic literary tradition had once found its first classic articulation, it will come as no particular surprise that the elegiac theme finds its expression in the poem in a familiar sounding scene where a doomed, aging monarch confronts his legacy against the greatness of the past as the poem's underlying context emerges to explicitly confront its protagonist. Thus, when King Arthur undertakes his final, desperate sea voyage as he struggles against time to return to England to face the rebellion of Mordred – his royal nephew and designated caretaker of the feudal administration – he experiences in his sleep an allegorical vision where the universal history blends with a premonition of his own imminent defeat and death.

The vision is ushered in through a description of a hostile wilderness from which the dreamer flees into a landscape reminiscent of the contemporaneous courtly dream allegories, with images replete with natural fertility and the soothing tranquillity of a cultivated natural enclosure. Into this setting descends the goddess of Fortune

[7] On the epic tradition in the alliterative *Morte Arthure* see Rondolone 1994; 207-240; Hartwood 1994: 241-287: Davenport 2004: 210-237.

– the standard high medieval allegorical embodiment of the inherent instability of earthly existence – equipped with the indispensable Wheel:

About sho whirled a wheel with her white handes,
Overwhelm all quaintly the wheel, as sho sholde;
The rowel was red gold with real stones,
Railed with riches and rubies ynow;
The spekes was splented all with speltes of silver,
The space of a spere-lenghe springand full fair;
There-on was a chair of chalk-white silver
And checkered with charbocle changing of hewes
Upon the compass there cleved kinges on row,
With crowns of clere gold that cracked in sonder;
Six was of that settle full sodenlich fallen,
Ilk a segge by himself and said these wordes:
'That ever I regned on this roo me rewes it ever!
Was never roy so rich that regned in erthe!
When I rode in my rout rought I nought elles
But rivaye and revel and raunson the pople!
And thus I drive forth my dayes whiles I drie might,
And therefore derflich I am damned for ever!

Morte Arthure, 3260–3277.

As the allegorical vision of the earthly history unveils before the inward eye of the dreaming monarch, we will surely observe that, instead of a tangled history of the early feudal societies, the reference point for the communal orientation in the past is now the hierarchical, linear scheme which organises and classifies the whole of the universal history in relation to Christian eschatology. The idea of the inherent fickleness of the *Rota Fortunae*[8] had already become the focus of the staple complaint in the times of classical antiquity, arguably finding its arguably most eloquent treatment in Boethus' *Consolation of Philosophy*. By the turn of the fourteen century, when *Morte Arthure* was composed, it had long replaced the concept of the *wyrd* as a conceptual projection of the idea of fate. By this time also

[8] For more background see Robinson 1946: 207-216.

the supposed instability of the sublunary world becomes the specifically local consequence of the original sin while the seemingly erratic meanders of history are not yet incorporated into a meaningful pattern of the universal eschatological scheme. As all normative patterns had during the period been treated as indicative of the underlying order of the whole of Creation and were consequently eagerly sought after, it will come as no surprise that the apparently senseless reality of the inherent instability of earthly power structures may be nevertheless related to a pattern which reinforces the idea of an eschatological progress of history and this is found, in *Morte Arthure,* in the idea of the Nine Worthies.[9] The greatly popular contemporaneous scheme, which sought to normalise the whole of the medieval historical perspective into a traditionally threefold pattern, superimposes a design of harmony and proportion upon the universal history and consequently links the past, the present and the future into a linear sequence, the ultimate significance of which may be only fully perceived from a vantage point located outside the progression of time. Against this perspective, the sense of individual heroism consists in contributing to the Providential design for the progress of history, which provides the final context for whatever the individual performs in the interest and honour of his household, his kingdom, his overlord or his friends. In this way the Providential role that has been bestowed upon King Arthur is to stand beside Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon to provide the Christian triad of chivalric exemplars to complete the progress of earthly history, which contributes to the fulfilment and ultimate vindication of the Divine scheme for mankind. Thus, although the transitory nature of the individual achievement of Hector, Judas Maccabeus, or King Arthur remains the inescapable consequence of the wound the Creation received in the garden of Eden, the personal valour and heroism still finds its lasting significance and meaning as a minute contribution to the grand eschatological plan. It is then against this context that Arthur's impending tragic fall is to be seen as heroic and his story is a fit matter for a heroic narrative:

[9] For more on the background see Huizinga 1922: 72.

For-thy Fortune thee fetches to fulfill the number,
Als ninde of the noblest named in erthe;
This shall in romaunce be redde with real knightes,
Reckoned and renownd with riotous kinges,
And deemed on Doomesday for deedes of armes,
For the doughtiest that ever was dwelland in erthe;
So many clerkes and kinges shall carp of your deedes
And keep your conquestes in cronicle for ever.

Morte Arthure, 3438-3445.

The one vital circumstance which becomes apparent on the examination of the two major examples of the medieval heroic narrative which stand, respectively, at the beginning and the end of the progress of the medieval literate culture as it has descended to us, is the continued presence and relevance of the idea of the tradition of the past to the contemporaneous genres within which the heroic mode was expressed. It may be observed here how the momentous ideological shift in the way the idea of the past was conceptualised which medieval culture had undergone in between the composition of *Beowulf* and *Morte Arthure* did nothing to obliterate, or lessen, the strong and intimate link which the medieval heroic literary tradition possessed with the concept of the past, and of history, as a reference point for the immediate narrative and the basic texture of the given work's poetics. Hence the continued presence of the narrative motif where the grandeur of the heroic action is enhanced by the suspension of the dramatic progress of the basic plot and the protagonist may take time to pause and confront the reflection of their present situation against the context of whatever may be gauged compatible with the communal experience of the past.

It will take no particular discernment to relate this narrative motif to a specific scene in *The Lord of the Rings*. Having separated from Faramir, Frodo and Sam follow the path of their desperate quest aimed at the Mount of Doom in the depths of Mordor – a path that will take them presently to the lair of Shelob and the fortress of Cirith Ungol. Taking advantage of a rare moment of respite from the trials and tribulations of the quest, Sam Gamgee diverts his much battered companion with an extended reflection on the role and place of their present quest in the long and tangled history of Middle-earth:

'Yes, that's so,' said Sam. 'And we shouldn't be here at all, if we'd known more about it before we started. But I suppose it's often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end.

{…}

Beren now, he never thought he was going to get that Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours. But that's a long tale, of course, and goes on past the happiness and into grief and beyond it – and the Silmaril went on and came to Eärendil. And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We've got – you've got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?'

'No, they never end as tales,' said Frodo. 'But the people in them come, and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later – or sooner.'

Two Towers, 931-32.

The frame of the secondary world in which the story operates extends here in time as well as in space and its most vital purpose is to resurrect and reinterpret the textual and the ideological aura which the sense of contact with the past once conjured up in texts belonging to the heroic literary tradition. The whole idea is here to create a viable frame of reference to arrive at a tangible and intimate sense of a context with the telescoped heritage of a heroic part whereby history rolls back until it loses itself in myth in its ascent towards the core values which provide the meaning and the sense of purpose to the civilisation and culture one is born to be part of. The sense of individual achievement is clearly perceived here as ultimately crystallized beyond individual experience. Its final value will be arrived at in its communal perception, whereby it will be juxtaposed against the

bulk of the received tradition which interprets and conserves historical legacy in the form of conventionalised narratives, the function of which is to abstract the ethical import of the individual exertions of valour with which the heroes of the past seek to measure themselves against the dramatic demands of their historical time.[10]

Indeed one of the pivotal functions of the narrative frame of the secondary world is to provide the audience with a universally accessible template of a heroic past whose validity is never compromised in a conflicting multiplicity of divergent, or discontinued, traditions. In this way the model of the secondary world offers an escape from the ideological and ethical entanglements of modern experience within which the multiplicity of approaches towards the idea of historical heritage customarily renders a subjectivized and relativized vision of the past, shorn of the grandeur of an unquestioned heroic achievement which would reverberate across the telescoped perception of history which the record of the present time bequeaths to future generations.

Hence it might be said that, in Tolkien, the secondary world frame is designed to rejuvenate and revitalise the narrative patterns by means of which the myth abstracts core values out of the experience of history. It is then at the level of these core ethical values that the only point of contact is achieved between the ontologically autonomous secondary world and the primary reality within which its audience is submerged. It is the close compatibility of these values which bestows the final justification of validity upon the fictional secondary world narrative, as it constitutes proof of the underlying unified source of all Creation.

In the Tolkienian narrative model, the unquestioned veracity of the unified historical record, helped to a significant degree by the presence of an immortal species whose cultural continuity exceeds anything encountered in the primary reality, serves thus to anchor the individual achievement against the assured reference point provided by the communal experience of the past. The past thus becomes the mirror in which the present may find itself reflected and evaluated

[10] Compare also the complimentary argument in Amendt-Raduege 2018: 113-115.

and the narrative model where the fictional reality is constructed as an autonomous secondary world is but a new mode for the expression of this underlying relationship.

Yet the sense of the past immanent in the fully immersive secondary world model may also become a vehicle for conveying at once the grandeur and the hopelessness of the individual tragedy through recourse to the telescoping presence of the past. It is this sense of echoing doom that lies behind the incarnation of the same narrative motif in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Here we encounter Robb Stark, the doomed King in the North, whose fate it becomes to lead a desperate mutiny of a renegade northern province of the feudal kingdom as it spreads across the continent of Westeros which lies at the heart of Martin's secondary world. As this unexpected role is thrust upon the young nobleman exerting his capabilities beyond his years and experience, Robb Stark begins to enjoy success beyond all expectations before becoming entangled in a calculated game of feudal power politics in the wake of his misjudged, impulsive marriage. In an attempt to regain the loyalty of a notoriously fickle, and unsettlingly powerful, vassal house which has taken offence at his breaking of a marriage agreement, the young king heads for the Frey stronghold of the Twins for the celebrations of the nuptials of his maternal uncle, Lord Edmure Tully, which are meant to appease the proud Lord Walder Frey, the head of the house.

Before Robb Stark dies in a treacherous plot arranged for the occasion by Lord Frey as part of a shrewd and calculated intrigue concocted for political gain, he stops on his way, which takes him through the plains of the Riverlands in the company of his mother, at a weathered tomb containing the remains of a ruler of an ancient kingdom of the race of the First Men, who once inhabited Westeros:

> They reached Oldstones after eight more days of steady rain, and made their camp upon the hill overlooking the Blue Fork, within a ruined stronghold of the ancient river kings. Its foundations remained amongst the weeds to show where the walls and keeps had stood, but the local smallfolk had long ago made off with most of the stones to raise their barns and septs and

holdfasts. Yet in the center of what once would have been the castle's yard, a great carved sepulcher still rested, half hidden in waist-high brown grass amongst a stand of ash.

The lid of the sepulcher had been carved into a likeness of the man whose bones lay beneath, but the rain and the wind had done their work. The king had worn a beard, they could see, but otherwise his face was smooth and featureless, with only vague suggestions of a mouth, a nose, eyes, and the crown about the temples. His hands folded over the shaft of a stone warhammer that lay upon his chest. Once the warhammer would have been carved with runes that told its name and history, but all that the centuries had worn away. The stone itself was cracked and crumbling at the comers, discolored here and there by spreading white splotches of lichen, while wild roses crept up over the king's feet almost to his chest.

It was there that Catelyn found Robb, standing somber in the gathering dusk with only Grey Wind beside him. The rain had stopped for once, and he was bareheaded. "Does this castle have a name?" he asked quietly, when she came up to him.

"Oldstones, all the smallfolk called it when I was a girl, but no doubt it had some other name when it was still a hall of kings." She had camped here once with her father, on their way to Seagard. Petyr was with us too...

"There's a song," he remembered. "'Jenny of Oldstones, with the flowers in her hair. "'

"We're all just songs in the end. If we are lucky." She had played at being Jenny that day, had even wound flowers in her hair. And Petyr had pretended to be her Prince of Dragonflies. Catelyn could not have been more than twelve, Petyr just a boy.

"Here lies Tristifer, the Fourth of His Name, King of the Rivers and the Hills." Her father had told her his story once. "He ruled from the Trident to the Neck, thousands of years before Jenny and her prince, in the days when the kingdoms of the First Men were falling one after the other before the onslaught of the Andals. The Hammer of justice, they called him. He fought a hundred battles and won nine-and-ninety, or so the singers say, and when he raised this castle it was the strongest in Westeros." She put a hand on her son's shoulder. "He died in his hundredth battle, when seven Andal kings joined forces against him. The fifth Tristifer was not his equal, and soon the kingdom was lost, and then the castle, and last of all the line. With Tristifer the Fifth died House Mudd, that had ruled the riverlands for a thousand years before the Andals came."

A Storm of Swords, II, 60-61.

Again the moment of the hero's reflection which pits him against the context of history and the past comes against the backdrop of impending doom. But the momentary suspension of the dramatic course of events allows here for no uplifting of spirit by the reassuring touch of the Providential frame of history. The young hero confronts here a vision of the past which seems to convey a message of inherent futility of any noble endeavour with a place in the communal memory being a transient and inessentially inadequate compensation for the yawning gap of personal tragedy which is thrust on some by the currents and turns of history. The story of the forgotten King Tristifer in fact mirrors closely the one of King Robb himself as the death of the King of the North will also spell an end to the attempts of the rebellious province at political emancipation and ushers in a long period of hardship and servitude. This link is further reinforced by the fact that the Starks are the only baronial house in Westeros that descends from the race of the First Men. Thus, in Martin's secondary world, no objective Providential frame saves the grandeur of the heroic endeavours of the past from the processes of gradual decay which are as much a part of the life of various human communities as the erosion of the runes on the tombstone of King Tristifer which render then incomprehensible are an unavoidable circumstance in the operation of the elements of nature. In this context, the prospect of "becoming a song" constitutes a meagre gratification for the tragic fate met in the heroic struggle of life and the suffering incumbent upon it. Within this scheme, the heroes of the past become ultimately crushed by the mechanism akin to the operation of Fortune's merciless Wheel, but they find no place in normative patterns streamlining the historical context into one ideologically unified global order.

Yet, the past is still here the mirror which provides the ultimate context against which the characters' heroic exertions will be pondered on and judged. In this internally focalised text, it becomes the audience's part to be invested with the role of the receptacle for communal memory and thus it is still against the context of the late King Tristifer the Fourth that Robb Stark's own tragic end will be construed. The sense of the past is here encoded in the repetitiveness of historical tragedy and in this it seems to echo the desperate thoughts of Shakespeare's Richard II, uttered in his final soliloquy:

Thoughts tending to content flatter themselves
That they are not the first of fortune's slaves,
Nor shall not be the last; like silly beggars
Who sitting in the stocks refuge their shame,
That many have and others must sit there;
And in this thought they find a kind of ease,
Bearing their own misfortunes on the back
Of such as have before endured the like.
(*Richard II*, V,5, ll. 22-30).

Thus the consolation of the past is here not found in the reiteration of the enduring dimension of history, but, conversely, by linking the repeated examples of the existential tragedy of individual lives into a pattern emerging through the audience's ability to evoke a sense of solemn grandeur from the brittleness of all human endeavour.

Yet the existential pathos which Robb Stark finds at the grave of King Tristifer is also rooted in the medieval sense of heroic tragedy and, although it is not essentially compatible which what we find in Tolkien, it also derives ultimately from the tradition exemplified by Beowulf and King Arthur.

Thus, irrespective of what individual vision defined the aesthetic and ethical outlook of a particular author or period, it may be seen that the consciousness of the interaction between the present and the past has constituted one of the most essential, abiding constituent elements of literary composition in the genres which made use of the heroic mode, and it is in this vital aspect that the organic link between the modern genre of high fantasy and its medieval antecedents manifests itself most strongly. The aim of the following argument shall be to trace the various aspects in which the medieval literary and cultural legacy has been reinterpreted and reinvigorated in the two most outstanding examples of modern high fantasy.