

CUTLER, COLIN J., M.A. Turning Back the Tides: The Anglo-Saxon Vice of *Ofermod* in Tolkien's *Fall of Arthur*. (2016)  
Directed by Dr. Amy N. Vines. 26 pp.

Tolkien's *Fall of Arthur* has at its heart the theme of *ofermod*, a theme which appears throughout Tolkien's criticism and creative work. In his essay "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," he argues that the Anglo-Saxon word *ofermod* in the poem *The Battle of Maldon* condemns the warband's leader for an over-reaching pride which places his men in desperate straits. There has since been much ink spilled on the precise meaning of *ofermod*, with several scholars taking exception to Tolkien's interpretation of the word.

In its survey of the critical debate, this paper conducts a study of the word and its derivatives in various Anglo-Saxon texts, taking the *Microfiche Concordance to Old English* as its starting point. After weighing in on the critical debate surrounding *ofermod*, I then trace Tolkien's creative use of the theme in both his tales of Middle-Earth and his pastiche of "The Battle of Maldon" to establish the patterns of its temptation, attraction, use, and effect in his work before analyzing these same patterns as driving motivations for the characters in *The Fall of Arthur*.

CUTLER, COLIN J., M.A. *The Neighbors in the Village: Frost's Debt to Dante, Longfellow, and James in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."* (2016)  
Directed by Dr. Anthony J. Cuda. 18 pp.

Frost's much-anthologized and often-quoted "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" has received much critical attention for its formal characteristics and ambiguity. This paper, however, establishes its connections to Frost's first volume of poetry, *A Boy's Will*, and his interaction with Longfellow, Dante, and William James.

The refrain to Longfellow's "My Lost Youth" providing the title, *A Boy's Will* exploits and complicates the images of roads, woods, and wind that Longfellow's poem employs. After discussing Longfellow's poem and Frost's further development of those images throughout *A Boy's Will*, this paper traces Frost's complicated interaction with Dante's images of stars in the same volume before weaving all of these threads together as they reappear in "Stopping By Woods on Snowy Evening." Finally, I explore how Frost's well-documented philosophical debt to William James is apparent in the formal and imagistic stasis of the poem's last verse.

TURNING BACK THE TIDES: THE ANGLO-SAXON VICE OF *OFERMOD* IN  
TOLKIEN'S *FALL OF ARTHUR*

AND

THE NEIGHBORS IN THE VILLAGE: FROST'S DEBT TO DANTE,  
LONGFELLOW, AND JAMES IN "STOPPING BY WOODS  
ON A SNOWY EVENING"

by

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Approved by

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For Bonnie Libby:

The friend and mentor who set me (and many others) on this course before she sailed.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by COLIN J. CUTLER has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TURNING BACK THE TIDES: THE ANGLO-SAXON VICE OF *OFERMOD* IN  
TOLKIEN'S *FALL OF ARTHUR*

J.R.R. Tolkien was deeply concerned with the vice of pride in leaders; whether in the characters of Turin or Isildur, it is pride that drives them to grasp at the personal power that then twists them and drives them to their doom. Tolkien traces this theme in Anglo-Saxon poetry, as well: in his critical pastiche “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” (1953), he discusses both the king Beowulf and the earl Beorhtnoth of *The Battle of Maldon* as Germanic chieftains who succumbed to the allurements of personal glory and by their *ofermod* fell in battle, leaving their people defenseless against their enemies, whether dragons or Danes. The recently published Tolkienian work, *The Fall of Arthur*, takes a Celtic subject, but at its core is this same Germanic concern: Arthur crosses the sea to fight the Saxons “for a last assay of pride and prowess,” is encouraged in this “folly” by Mordred, and eventually loses his kingdom, which he has left defenseless against enemies both foreign and domestic. Fred Robinson argues that disloyalty was, for the Anglo-Saxon warrior caste, the worst of vices, perhaps worse than pride (436)—in my view, the two were tied very closely. Pride in a subordinate was treason, but overwhelming pride in an Anglo-Saxon leader was disloyal because disastrous for his soldiers—many of whom were family.

Tolkien writes in “Homecoming” that “*ofermod* is in fact always a word of condemnation. In Anglo-Saxon verse the noun occurs only twice, once applied to

Beorhtnoth, and once to Lucifer” (“Homecoming,” 22, n.6). Some scholars have disagreed with Tolkien’s understanding of *ofermod* as a word necessarily of condemnation, suggesting that there is a different understanding of the term in an heroic context as opposed to a sacred. In this paper, I will engage with Tolkien’s critical understanding of *ofermod*, other critical understandings, and discuss the use of the word and its derivatives throughout Anglo-Saxon literature, focusing especially on the little-noted occurrence of the term in the Anglo-Saxon translation of Boethius. I will then trace Tolkien’s creative use of the theme in both his tales of Middle-Earth and his pastiche of *The Battle of Maldon* to establish the patterns of its temptation, attraction, use, and effect in his work before tracing these same patterns in *The Fall of Arthur*, establishing his use of primarily Anglo-Saxon concerns to drive his use of a Celtic hero. The discussion is significant because it adds a hitherto overlooked contemporary use of *ofermod*, roughly contemporary and parallel to that of the Maldon poet, to the ink-spilling that has raged in response to Tolkien’s thesis in a way that helps clinch Tolkien’s point. This paper also develops the theme as one of Tolkien’s major concerns, not just in the *The Tale of the Children of Hurin* or *The Lord of the Rings*, but in one of his earliest begun but most recently published works.

*The Battle of Maldon*, an eleventh-century poetic retelling of a battle fought in 991 AD between the Saxons of Essex and an invading Viking force, played a large enough role in Tolkien’s creative imagination to warrant both a scholarly article and a creative pastiche, which were published together in *Essays and Studies* in 1953 as “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son.” He first outlines the tactical situation in

*Maldon*: With two armies drawn up on opposite sides of a ford across the Pante River, the Vikings first try to force the passage, then taunt Beorhtnoth into allowing them across for an equal meeting of their forces. The Saxon duke allows them to cross the causeway; after he falls in battle, some of his men flee, but most of them fight to the death beside the body of their lord. Tolkien focuses on Beorhtnoth's decision to allow the Vikings across the causeway as the deciding moment of the tragedy: "this act of pride and misplaced chivalry proved fatal" ("Homecoming" 4). In the article, Tolkien differentiates between the heroic code and the chivalric code—the first is rooted in duty outside of oneself, the latter in the glory one receives from one's actions. He describes Beorhtnoth's *ofermod* as a pride akin to *hubris* that goes beyond legitimate glory-seeking to being a reckless endangerment of the soldiers for whom he's responsible. In the pastiche, too, Tolkien has his characters comment on this fault, describing him as "Too proud, too princely! But his pride's cheated" and "needlessly noble" (*Homecoming* 14).

Tolkien refocused contemporary scholarship from the heroic statements of Beorhtnoth's retainers after his death to their leader's motivation that put them into their final desperate situation:

The *Battle of Maldon* has usually been regarded [...] as an extended comment on, or illustration of the words of the old retainer Beorhtwold ["Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens"(5)]...the first expression of the northern heroic spirit, Norse or English...yet the doctrine appears in this clarity, and (approximate) purity, precisely because it is put in the mouth of a subordinate. ("Homecoming" 19, 20)

In other words, heroism is tied to duty, not to danger. Tolkien argues instead that the poem's narrative hinge is the commentary on Beorhtnoth's decision: "*ða se eorl ongan for his ofermode alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode*, 'then the earl in his [*ofermode*] actually yielded ground to the enemy'" ("Homecoming, 20).

In differentiating between Beorhtwold's statement and Beorhtnoth's motivation, Tolkien establishes the difference between what he calls the heroic and chivalric codes. While the heroic code "would direct a man to endure even death unflinching, *when necessary*" [emphasis mine], the chivalric code drives "a man beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess" (20). It is this excess on the part of Beorhtnoth that Tolkien condemns. He makes a further distinction between a desire for glory on the part of a soldier and one with responsibility, however, enlisting Beowulf as his example: Beowulf's wrestling with Grendel was acceptable when he had no subordinates or responsibilities, but "the excess persists, even when he is an old king upon whom all the hopes of a people rest" ("Homecoming" 21). His critical argument is that the *Maldon* poet has penned "lines in fact of *severe* criticism, though not incompatible with loyalty" ("Homecoming" 22, emphasis original) in describing Beorhtnoth's decision as based on *ofermod*. This was a shift in critical emphasis from the heroism of Beorhtnoth's retainers—which Tolkien maintained—to the foolishness of Beorhtnoth as a leader. This stance was not only novel in its time, but also controversial, and led to a wide range of scholars taking up battle positions on either side of the line.

Tolkien further develops this point in the creative pastiche. A verse dialogue written in alliterative meter, the pastiche section of "Homecoming" follows two servants

sent to find Beorhtnoth's dead and mutilated body. When they find it and are carting the remains back to the Abbey of Ely, Torhthelm comments on the lack of bodies upon the causeway. Tidwald, the elder of the two servants, responds that Beorhtnoth was "too proud, too princely...so keen was he to give minstrels matter for mighty songs./ Needlessly noble...Well, doom he dared, and died for it" ("Homecoming 14). Here Tolkien puts his own concerns, following his interpretation of the *Maldon* poet's, into Tidwald's voice, and Torhthelm's response suggests the impending consequence with an ominous line, "from the North need comes again:/wild blows the wind of war to Britain." War has come and will come again, but their leader and his warriors have fallen, due to his vanity, leaving the poor to be "robbed/ and lose the land they loved and toiled on,/ They must die and dung it" ("Homecoming" 15).

While the retainers' loyalty to their lord and each other was the central motivation to their heroic effort (Robinson 436), admirable regardless of their leader's wisdom, and portrayed as such, Tolkien complicates our reading of the poet's commentary by refocusing us on the *ofermod* of the leader, over and against the romanticized heroism imagined by critics from the decades prior to the First World War (Robinson 427), a war which had horrified the world with the sheer magnitude of death. Beorhtnoth's warriors are heroic in their stoic embracing of a do-or-die position, but they were placed in that position needlessly—in Tolkien's view, the poet admires the heroism of Beorhtwold and his fellow warriors while simultaneously criticizing Beorhtnoth for his *ofermod*.

Not all scholars have agreed with Tolkien's understanding of the word or of his understanding of the heroic tradition, however, including his own successor at Leeds,

Tom Shippey (West 236). Gneuss's encyclopedic essay catalogs the different interpretations of the word in translations of *The Battle of Maldon*: interpretations range from "magnanimous and over-confident" (Gordon) to "pride and self-reliance" (Ker) (119). Shippey especially takes Tolkien to task, arguing that the Germanic heroic tradition delights in such moments of excess, citing Cynewulf's charge on Cyneheard in the 755 AD entry of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: "One must conclude that those who passed on the story of Cynewulf took a certain delight in the king's sudden decision that life counted for nothing against the furious hatred he felt for his ambusher" ("Boar and Badger" 222). He also cites the *Waldere* fragment (with references to the complete Latin *Waltharius*) as an example of a hero maintaining a position of safety, but with the inclination to "rush out to his death" (225). He notes, rightly, the parallels between these situations and Beorhtnoth's, of "this image of the man in the doorway, poised between two necessities" (225, 226). However, he then extends this argument beyond saying that an Anglo-Saxon audience would have found this situation compelling to say that the poet therefore could not have meant *ofermod* to condemn Beorhtnoth's decision, instead interpreting it as "brave" (227).

Faced with these competing understandings of *ofermod*, I took to the *Microfiche Concordance of Old English* to catalog the uses of the word and its derivatives. The vast majority of uses come from monastic rules, homilies, and the Psalms, warning against it as a vice right next to being "*druncengeorn ne beo he to slapol ne beo he to micel aete*"—"eager to drink...too sleepy...eager for too much food" (Theodosius of Orleans in *Microfiche Concordance* 316) or exhorting parishioners "*Ne beon ge ofermode ne to*

*weamode ne to niðfulle ne to flitgeorne...*—“do not be *ofermode* nor too dispute-minded, nor too malice-full nor too eager for dispute” (Wulfstan, Homilies, in *Microfiche Concordance* 315). It is often used to translate the Latin *superbus*, which is, simply, overbearing pride.

Its non-clerical uses, on the other hand, are rare. The first Tolkien mentions: the *Genesis B* manuscript, whose original A. N. Doane dates by its language to the late ninth century or early tenth (49), uses it in describing Lucifer: “*deore waes he drihtne urum ne mihte him bedyrned weorðan þæt his engyl ongan ofermod wesan. Ahof hine wið his herran.*” (208). Pauline Alama translates this latter part as “[God’s] angel began to be *ofermod*, raised himself against his master,” pointing out also that “other compounds with *ofer-* suggest that the prefix may refer to the relative position of two entities, rather than the magnitude of a single entity” (83). In other words, to say that one is *ofermodig* is not to say that they have a great amount of *mod*, but that they are over and beyond a proper amount of *mod*. This is further supported by the Christian association of Lucifer with his discontent at his own glory, his desire to rival his creator’s, and by the directional implication of *ahof*—“to raise.” That is, Lucifer had more *mod* than was fitting, and his prideful attempt to raise himself up against his creator was treason; this understanding of *ofermod* is in agreement with Tolkien’s in *Homecoming*, and he develops it in his creative work, as well.

Other non-clerical uses are revealing. The entry for 750 in the Chronicle D reads “*Her Cuðred Waestseaxna cyning gefeagt wið æðelhun þone ofermodigan ealdormann*” (*Microfiche* 321)—“Here Cuthred, king of the West Saxons, fought with Aethelhun, that

*ofermodigan* ealdorman.” Just as Lucifer did, Aethelhun rebels against his rightful lord, and the Chronicler ascribes this rebellion to his *ofermod*. Orosius, also, compares Babylon’s acceptance of servitude to Cyrus of Persia to Rome’s being freed from the rule of the Tarquins: “*þara unryhtwisestana cyninga, þara ofermodgestana, þe mon haet Tarquinie*”—“of the most unrighteous kings, and of the proudest, who people called Tarquin” (Hosaka, 73). In these examples, we see that, while a rebellious subordinate can be described as having *ofermod*, a ruler who ignores the good of his people can be as well. Tarquin re-appears elsewhere in the Old English corpus as the exemplar of an *ofermodig* king, in the instance of *ofermod* and its derivatives that is most relevant to Tolkien’s point.

Perhaps the most important instance of *ofermod* goes unmentioned by Tolkien (he only references in “Homecoming” its instances as a noun in verse) and other critics of his interpretation, but it is highly suggestive for two reasons. First, it uses the same word in describing a leader who is careless of his subordinates, a parallel to Tolkien’s interpretation of *Maldon*. Second, it not only uses the same word, but the same grammatical structure in describing the situation. The West Saxon translation of Boethius’s sixth-century *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (*On the Consolation of Philosophy*), dating to the mid-tenth century (Irvine and Godden x), describes Tarquin, last king of Rome, in terms that are both clearly disapprobatory and also parallel in their grammatical structure to the later phrase in *The Battle of Maldon*. Though Boethius’ treatise was a philosophical work, not a heroic one, it is also not a strictly religious text, and it does specifically address the roles of leaders and their use of power, and discusses

*ofermod* within that context. It is therefore the most relevant comparison to the instance in *Maldon*, supporting the idea that *ofermod* means an excess of glory-seeking, or overwhelming pride.

The eighth prose section of *Consolation* is a treatise on the right uses of power. The section's central point is that power does not make one great; rather, one's greatness lies in oneself, and is evidenced by the right use of what power one has. Boethius's speaker both addresses the reader directly and also gives examples from history. She begins by speaking of the power that belongs to the secular world, translated to Old English from the Latin with the dative *thisse worulde*: “*For þaem anwealde ge eow woldon ahebban up oð ðone heofen gif ge meahten*” (“On account of that power you mortals would like to raise yourselves up to heaven if you could.”) (Irvine and Godden 83). The verb translated “to raise” is the same used of Lucifer in *Genesis B*: *ahebban* is the infinitive, *ahof* is the past tense (ME: “to heave, hove”). The sense is then hammered home with the examples of the Gothic king Theoderic (the post-Roman Gothic ruler of Italy, in whose prison Boethius first penned the *Consolation*) and Nero, who “*ealle ða ricu þe him under bioð oððe awer on neaweste forslean and foheregian*”—“destroy and ravage all the kingdoms that are under them or anywhere near by” (Irvine and Godden 83)

Boethius then turns to “*Torcwines dagum þaes ofermodan cyninges*”—the days of Tarquin the *ofermodig* king—for his next example. Tarquin is deposed, and the “kingly name” of Roman rulers ended, “*for his ofermettum*” (*ofermettum* is the dative form of *ofermetto*, a feminine variant). Boethius continues the story: the very rulers who

deposed Tarquin were then driven out *for hiora* (“their”) *ofermettum*. Within the previous context of his discussion of power and its destructive force under bad rulers such as Theoderic and Nero, the Anglo-Saxon translator clearly intends *ofermod* to describe Tarquin’s and the consuls’ prideful misuses of power. This strengthens Tolkien’s point that it is a word of “severe criticism” and his argument that we should read it as such in *Maldon*.

“*Ofermod*” appears in a similar construction in both the Old English Boethius and in *Maldon*, suggesting a similarity in meaning and understanding for the original audience. Though “*for*” is used in the Boethius translation to indicate an external cause rather than an intention—the Roman council (OE *witan*) removes Tarquin because of *his* “*ofermettum*,” as opposed to Beorhtnoth clearing the bridge because of his own *ofermod*—the structure is parallel: “*for his ofermettum*” in Boethius, “*for his ofermode*” in *Maldon*, both taking the dative (*ofermetto* is a feminine variant on *ofermod*). While there is not enough evidence to say that this phrase is a poetic commonplace, nor that the *Maldon* poet was familiar with the Old English translation of Boethius, the Boethius translator’s use of the phrase and the word, precisely within the context of a treatise on a ruler’s responsible use of power, is strong evidence of how we should approach the *Maldon* text as well. Not only was the Boethius translator a close contemporary to the *Maldon* poet (the two works were penned about sixty years apart), their common themes and grammatical choices suggest an agreement in usage.

In “Tolkien and ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth,’” Shippey argues further that Tolkien’s interpretation is an “act of parricide” and a rejection of the Germanic heroic

tradition (337), attributing Tolkien's reticent impulse to a reaction against the "self-consciously Nordic or Germanic attitudes in Nazi Germany" (337). Here is where he overreaches, however—Tolkien clearly distinguishes between the heroic tradition of bravery in the face of necessity and the "chivalric" excess of glory-seeking ("Homecoming" 20). He also distinguishes between the bravery and glory-seeking of a single fighter without responsibility, which would more clearly parallel the circumstances of Shippey's allies, Cynewulf and Waldere, and the excess of a leader seeking glory without regard to his responsibilities: "Yet [Beowulf] does not rid himself of his chivalry, the excess persists, even when he is an old king upon whom all the hopes of a people rest" ("Homecoming" 21). Further, Shippey misidentifies Tolkien's object of criticism as Nazi Germany, when Tolkien clearly has in mind the Victorians and their chivalric ideals. Tolkien's praise of Beorhtnoth's followers comes with a sly glance at Tennyson's heroic poetry:

Their part was to endure and die, and not to question, though a recording poet may fairly comment that *someone had blundered*....It is the heroism of obedience and love not of pride or willfulness that is the most heroic and the most moving; from Wiglaf under his kinsman's shield, to Beorhtwold at Maldon, down to Balaclava, even if it is enshrined in verse no better than *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. ("Homecoming" 22-23, emphasis mine)

Tolkien had in mind here not the nationalistic excesses of Nazi Germany (though he certainly rejected these, as well), but the chivalric excesses of the jingoistic Victorian slogans used by British leaders in recruiting and justifying the reckless waste of life in the Great War trenches. In this passage, Tolkien gives a scathing back-hand to Tennyson's

“Theirs not to reason why,/ Theirs but to do and die” at precisely the same moment he is exalting the heroism of the Germanic warrior. He is not rejecting heroism, but a callous leadership that would take advantage of it.

I agree with Tolkien that the *Maldon* poet’s use of *ofermod* indicted Beorhtnoth for his decision rather than glorying in it, without diminishing the heroism of those who served under him. Though Shippey argues well that a heroic culture will find compelling the tension between glory-seeking and wisdom, that is not to say that such a culture will always err on the side of glory-seeking, nor that they will have nothing disapproving to say of those who do, especially if their people are put in unnecessary danger by it. Besides Tolkien’s description of the dramatic tension between the heroic and chivalric codes—between devotion to duty and devotion to personal glory, the contemporary textual evidence supports his thesis, as well. By the time *The Battle of Maldon* was written in the early eleventh century, *ofermod* and its derivatives had already acquired a resonance of prideful over-reaching of one’s proper responsibilities, and this is therefore how we ought to take it in that poem.

Besides his pastiche on an Anglo-Saxon work (and his development of the Celtic tale), the theme arises in the most tragic of Tolkien’s tales of Middle-Earth, the *Narn i Hîn Hurin*, or Tale of the Children of Hurin. Uncharacteristically for Tolkien’s oeuvre, the bright spots of love offer only a false relief to the gloom, as they end up being lit into fires of destruction—Turin loses Finduilas, remains unconscious of Nellas’s love for him, and his marriage to Niniel is an unwitting case of incest. While this is, on the one hand, thanks to Morgoth’s curse on Hurin’s family, events are also driven by the pride of

several characters, especially Turin and his mother, Morwen. Both John Garth, in his *Tolkien and the Great War*, and Richard C. West, in “Turin’s *Ofermod*,” approach the story through Turin’s pride. Where Garth sees it as heroic, however, West sees it as symptomatic of *ofermod*. The text and appendices to the story in *Unfinished Tales* support West’s reading and establishes the tale of Turin as yet another story Tolkien developed to address the theme of *ofermod*.

First, a brief summary of Turin’s tale, from the *Unfinished Tales*: after Hurin, his father, is captured in the Battle of Unnumbered Tears, Morgoth curses his family: “Upon all whom you love my thought shall weigh as a cloud of Doom, and it shall bring them down to darkness and despair” (Tolkien 67). After hearing of the defeat, Morwen sends Turin to Thingol, king of the elves of Doriath, where he is raised a warrior and fights with Beleg in the northern marches of the kingdom. After an altercation with one of Thingol’s liegemen, he flees, expecting to be outlawed, and lives for several years in exile until Beleg brings him news of Thingol’s pardon. The *Silmarillion* tells of his involvement in the fall of the elven kingdom at Nargothrond, before he returns to Doriath to confront Brodda, the chieftain who dispossessed his family, and then goes to Brethil after killing Brodda, to hang up his sword and live in peace among the people there. He there meets and marries his sister, known now as Niniel; when the dragon Glaurung threatens the people of Brethil, Turin goes out to slay him. Glaurung’s death reveals the truth that Niniel is actually Nienor, Turin’s sister, and her child is his son. This revelation is only atoned for in suicide—first Nienor’s, then Turin’s.

In *Tolkien and the Great War*, John Garth casts Turin's pride within the context of Tolkien's portrayals of heroism in war, in which Tolkien stood apart from most of his contemporaries' disillusionment in the wake of World War I: "Turin's dogged struggle against fate sets the seal on the heroic status he achieves in combat. Fate may laugh at his efforts, but he refuses to be humbled" (Garth 304). This echoes Tolkien's own description of Germanic heroism in "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth," as "uttermost endurance in the service of indomitable will" (20). While it is true that Tolkien rejected the complete disenchantment of war that many of his contemporaries embraced, Tolkien is also clear that Turin's actions, heroic in themselves, brought tragedy not on himself alone, but on those around him. Turin is several times contrasted with leaders who take more care for their people than themselves, and his mother's pride, too, is implicated in the family's downfall.

Christopher Tolkien's appendices to this narrative reveal several notes by his father that further accentuate this point: though Turin is overcome by the pain of Glaurung's venom and the spell of his gaze in the main text, Tolkien's notes portray another encounter between them that is reminiscent of Beorhtnoth and the Viking at the Maldon bridge. In Tolkien's notes, Glaurung taunts Turin with refusing to reveal his face from behind the Dragon-Helm that protected him in battle. Turin, "being thus taunted, in pride and rashness... thrust up the visor and looked Glaurung in the eye" (*Unfinished Tales* 155). Just as Beorhtnoth succumbs to the goading of the Viking chieftain and thereby yields to him the land that protects him and his people, so does Turin give up his own protection for the sake of a taunting enemy.

Tolkien goes further in another note, contrasting Turin with a leader who represents Tolkien's ideal heroism in leadership. Orodreth, king of Nargothrond, holds back those in his kingdom who, fired by news of Turin's successes, would go forth to join him at Amon Rudh in open battle against Morgoth's forces. Tolkien writes of Orodreth that "he was a wise lord, according to the wisdom of those who considered first their own people" (*Unfinished Tales* 153). This approbation echoes what Tolkien writes of a heroic leader in "Homecoming": "the lord may indeed receive credit from the deeds of knights, but he must not use their loyalty or imperil them simply for that purpose" ("Homecoming" 24). Orodreth was not to be taunted out of the safety of the hidden kingdom, despite those who sought glory in battle. His reticence was not due to fear, but to care for the good of his people in a situation that could only lead to disaster if they moved rashly and pridefully in a search for glory.

Turin was not alone in his pride, however, and Tolkien is careful to handle this. The portion of Tolkien's narrative that follows Morwen, Turin's mother, further traces the thread of pride that dooms the family. While both Garth and West discuss Turin's *ofermod*, Tolkien places the initial threads of the family tragedy in Morwen's hands. Though Hurin had told her to flee Dor-lomin if the battle was lost, she refused for several reasons. She was pregnant with her third child and hoped that Hurin might return. These are both reasonable concerns, and Tolkien handles them as such. However, she also held back from action because of an aristocratic sense of pride: she "would not yet humble her pride to be an alms-guest...the first strand of the fate of Turin was woven" (*UT* 70). This separation was Turin's first sorrow, but she maintained her pride even when Melian

invited her to join her son in Doriath: “Morwen would not depart from her house, for her heart was yet unchanged and her pride still high...This was the second sorrow of Turin” (75). Besides the psychological effect this had on her son, in refusing to abandon her home for the Girdle of Melian, her coming into Doriath was delayed past Turin’s time there.

When she then went forth to search for him in the Nargothrond, against the advice of Thingol and Melian, she also refused the pleadings of Nienor for her to return: “she could not overcome her pride, and would not seem thus...to be led back by her daughter, as one old and doting” (UT 115). When Glaurung then came upon the party, Nienor was overcome by his spell and Morwen disappeared. With Morwen gone and Nienor never having met her older brother, the stage was set for the final tragedy of Turin and Nienor’s incest, resolved only by their suicides after all was revealed. Thus was the doom of Morgoth on Hurin’s family accomplished—enabled by the pride of each member.

The *Unfinished Tales* also expands on Isildur’s fall to the temptation of Sauron’s ring, and attributes it to his pride. Though the *Lord of Rings* doesn’t deal in his motivations besides saying the ring is precious to him, “The Disaster of the Gladden Fields” records Isildur’s recognition of his inadequacy to use the Ring, and also his pride in ever thinking that he could. As the Orcs descend upon his company, his son asks Isildur if he would take up the Ring and use it to “cow these creatures and command them to obey you” (UT 273). Isildur responds that he cannot wield it and that “My pride has fallen.” When his same son urges him to flee to preserve both the Elendilmir and the

Ring, Isildur pleads, “Forgive me, and my pride that has brought you to this doom” (*UT* 274).

Having established *ofermod* as one of Tolkien’s primary creative concerns across his corpus, we come now to tracing it throughout *The Fall of Arthur*. An early work of his, most of it was probably written prior to 1934 (Flieger, 214). Though it is only a thousand lines, and the ink-spilling set off by his discussion of *ofermod* in the *Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* was not come for another twenty years, the prominence of the pride in the narrative establishes the theme as a pressing concern to Tolkien that he would develop throughout his lifetime. The first few lines focus the reader’s attention on the theme, and the four main characters—Arthur, Guinevere, Mordred, and Lancelot—each suffer from *ofermod* in one respect or another. Each of these four main characters sets the stage for the final tragedy through their pride—Guinevere starts the chain in her desire to manipulate and possess Lancelot, Lancelot continues it as he succumbs to the pride of serving his lady, Mordred capitalizes on the adulterous situation in his own lust for power and sex, and Arthur, in his *ofermod*, yields his land to Mordred in his desire for far-off glory. Throughout the narrative, the tides continue turning, and the height of the human actors’ hubris is portrayed by the repeated motif of their attempting to master the masterless seas.

The first seventeen lines focus the reader on Arthur’s adventure eastward, and also immediately bring pride to the reader’s immediate attention in four different ways. First is the second sentence (line 5): Arthur sails “the tides of time to turn backward”—a hopeless and hubristic effort. The next phrase addresses pride by its negative result: “the

heathen to humble” (line 6); elsewhere, other proud opponents are set up to be humbled by power (I.189). In line 16, Tolkien attributes Arthur’s foray to his desire for “pride and prowess.” Though this could be understood neutrally and as a natural heroic desire, it is off-set by the previous phrase: “after long glory.” The grammar here is ambiguous: “so burned his soul/ After long glory” could be understood at first to simply mean that Arthur desired glory. But comparison with the preceding lines’ image of a man attempting to do summer’s work under autumn’s waning confirms that Tolkien intends the reader to understand the soul as having already achieved the height of its powers and now trying pridefully to extend it. The last example suggests that part of Arthur’s downfall is a return to the pagan heroic code: “to the proof setting/Will unyielding in war with fate.” These lines call to mind the passage from *The Battle of Maldon* that Tolkien was to later call “the first expression of the northern heroic spirit, Norse or English” (“Homecoming” 20): “*hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, mod sceal þe mare þe ure maegen lytlað.*” Tolkien translates this as “Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens” (5) and interprets it as “the clearest statement of the doctrine of uttermost endurance in the service of indomitable will” (20). Though this might initially seem a positive argument for Arthur’s motivations, we must be careful to note that Tolkien sees this as heroic only for the warriors bound by loyalty and duty: “the doctrine appears in this clarity...precisely because it is put in the mouth of a subordinate... personal pride was therefore in him at its lowest, and love and loyalty at their highest” (“Homecoming 20). For Arthur, Tolkien might use the same criticism he reserved for Beorhtnoth: “the king wished for glory, or for a glorious death, and courted disaster.

There could be no more pungent criticism in a few words of ‘chivalry’ in one of responsibility than Wiglaf’s exclamation [in *Beowulf*]:... ‘by one man’s will many must woe endure” (“Homecoming” 24).

The drama begins *in media res*; Guinevere and Lancelot have already committed adultery, the fellowship of the Round Table broken with Lancelot’s rescue of her, and Lancelot exiled. Arthur is in the autumn of his reign. But the narrator’s commentary draws us back to the beginning of this series of events, Guinevere’s desire to possess Lancelot during the height of Lancelot’s glory and Arthur’s reign. The narrator’s portrayal of Guinevere is remarkably unsympathetic. She finds gladness “in his great glory” (III.40), even though she has “great glory” of her own (III.38), a personal renown that becomes overshadowed as she seeks to possess Lancelot. The narrator marks Lancelot’s pride in his service to her (III.48, 49), but compares this service to Guinevere’s preference for “cold silver/or glowing gold” (III.49, 50). Between the service and the gold, Guinevere would rather have “what she alone treasured/darkly hoarded” (III.52, 53)—she’d rather have the gold. But when it comes to the man himself, “Fair she deemed him/ beyond gold and silver to her grasp lying.” This distinction is crucial. Though the service of a knight to his lady was the hinge-point of courtly romance (as the service of a knight to his lord was the hinge-point of Germanic heroism), she rejects this in favor of wealth, and she desires the man himself, therefore placing Lancelot in the position of having to choose between loyalty to his lady and loyalty to his lord. “Strong oaths they broke” (III.62), and with this sexual breaking of oaths, the fellowship of the Round Table was broken.

Verlyn Flieger notes the absence of Arthur's arch-nemesis, Morgan Le Fay, in Tolkien's version of the tale, and argues well that Tolkien conflates her character with Guinevere's. While "Guinevere is no sorceress" (Flieger 219), she is compared several times to the "fay-woman" (II.28, III.55, III.75, IV.71), and Flieger also points out the etymology of "fay"—besides coming from the French for "fairy," it is also related to "fate." Just as the Anglo-Saxon's *wyrd* descended in meaning from "goddess in control of fate" to the modern *weird*, "uncanny," so is the uncanny manipulation of the fay-woman on display in *The Fall of Arthur*. Though she has none of Morgan's specifically magical powers, Guinevere is driven by the desire for control. She scorns Lancelot when he repents of his sundering of the Round Table—insofar as he is divided in his loyalties to her and Arthur, she finds "her life's splendour" (III.101) more important. The narrator then describes her as "proud and scornful" (III.167) and finally portrays her as seeking to control fate through the minds of men: "as gladness waned/ danger weighed she in her dark counsel,/her hope in havoc, in her heart thinking/men's fate to mould to her mind's purpose." Her desire for control extends not only to the wills of men, but to their fates. Besides these references to Morgan Le Fay, which would explain the relentlessly unsympathetic portrayal, Guinevere is also compared to the traitor Mordred in their mutual desire to "master chance/and the tides of time turn to her purpose" (II.212, 213). Not only is she a seductress and a traitor, she is driven by pride, to boot. It is this pride that Tolkien uses to drive the tragedy, and it is Guinevere's fall to temptation that brings others down with her.

Tolkien cites pride as Lancelot's downfall, too, but much more subtly and sympathetically because driven by conflicting loyalties. Where Guinevere's pride was tied up in control of others, Lancelot's pride was in service to his lady and his king. It was when these loyalties came into competition that Lancelot fell and took the peace of the kingdom with him. These competing loyalties become a repeated motif in Lancelot's misery, being stated as the reason for his grimness when we first encounter him (III.15, 16) and repeated at the end of the drama in lines 140-141: "He lord betrayed to love yielding,/ and love forsaking lord regained not." Loyalty was the primary duty of the Anglo-Saxon warrior, and betrayal the highest sin; as Fred Robinson points out, "To Christians elsewhere, the primal sin of Lucifer was pride; to the Christian Anglo-Saxon it seems more often to have been disloyalty" (436). Tolkien skillfully combines these two into one—because of his pride, Lancelot ends by betraying his lord.

Lancelot is described twice as proud: In line 48, he is "proudly serving/ Queen and lady." Just prior, he is described mostly in superlatives: "noblest...most daring...all surpassing...fairest" (III.20-25), and this is contrasted with Gawain, who "envy...knew not" (III.32). Subtly, Tolkien uses this to undermine Lancelot's prowess as driven by, or at least resulting in envy. More importantly, Gawain's loyalty was undivided, as he "to his lord alone his love giving; no man nor woman in his mind holding dearer than Arthur" (III.36). Lancelot's penchant for glory and remaining unsurpassed and his loyalty to Guinevere then proves to be his downfall when she becomes unfaithful to Arthur and turns Lancelot's loyalty against him with her "tender poison" (III.61). When their breach of loyalty results in open war around the Table and the Queen, Lancelot kills

Gaheris and Gareth, thus ensuring Gawain's implacable hatred. This, in turn, forces Arthur to choose between the knight who has been steadfastly loyal to him, but is second in his force of arms, and his best warrior, who has betrayed him. Lancelot twice repents of his pride, which Tolkien cites along with his "prowess" as the means for "the rending of the Round Table" (III.89 and 119). This repentance becomes crucial to Lancelot's character, but Tolkien is consistent in his application of *ofermod* and its consequences to heroes, who are most vulnerable to its allurements.

Tolkien's repetition of "he lord betrayed to love yielding,/ and love forsaking lord regained not" casts Lancelot in the grey light of the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Wanderer," whose speaker repeatedly bemoans the loss of his lord. Unlike Canto I, which begins immediately with Arthur and his action, Canto III of *Fall of Arthur* opens with a description of a storm-tossed sea before re-focusing on Lancelot, watching the "heaving welter" (III.12) from high in his castle. This contrasts also with Canto II—though it begins with a similar scene of wind-wracked waves, the action remains focused at sea-level, as it follows the "fleet vessel/dark and dragon-prowed" (II.8) and the unnamed men aboard, who collectively meet their doom while Mordred sleeps. Lancelot, on the other hand, is "alone" (III.13), facing the sea, and we are quickly drawn into his psychological state—"Deep his anguish" (III.14)—and given the reason for it: "He his lord betrayed to love yielding,/ and love forsaking lord regained not" (III.16). Canto III then parallels the opening structure of "The Wanderer," which likewise opens with a solitary man on the sea before diving into his introspections.

*Oft him anhaga* (the lonely one) *are gebideð*  
*metudes miltse* (lord's mercy), *peah þe he modcearig*  
*geond lagulade* (sea-waves) *longe sceolde*  
*hreran mid hondum hrimcealde sae*  
*Wadan wraeclastas* (trudges with heavy step the way of [wretch's] exile).  
*Forþon wat se þe sceal his winedryhtnes*  
*Leofes larcwidum longe forþolian* (who must long forgo the lore-speaking of  
his loved friend-ruler).

I have translated the relevant phrases here: the result of Lancelot's pride is that he is now also an *anhaga*, having sailed back to Benwick over the *hrimcealde sae* (rime-cold sea), and is cut off from the counsels of his beloved lord.

Mordred's motivation, on the other hand, is simpler: he is envious of Arthur's power and lustful for Arthur's wife and is willing to take advantage of the tides' turning to acquire them both. As he says when he invades Guinevere's bower, "New tides are running in the narrow waters. False or faithful, only fearless man shall ride the rapids, from ruin snatching power and glory. I purpose so" (II.150-3). In envying Arthur's kingdom, he commits treason, and it is in this treason that Tolkien reveals his Luciferian pride, as well. Mordred is not explicitly described as prideful until the fifth canto, after he has already made his suit to Guinevere, made alliances with pagan kingdoms, seized Camelot, and been defeated at sea by Arthur's navy under Gawain. "On the land [Arthur] looked lofty shining. Treason trod there trumpets sounding in power and pride" (III.12-14); Tolkien explicitly connects treason with the lust for power and pride. This connection between treason and *ofermod* is parallel to the *Genesis B* poet's portrayal of Lucifer's rebellion (one of those instances of *ofermod* that Tolkien references in "Homecoming"). As Pauline Alama argues:

In *Genesis B*, Lucifer's *ofermod* is associated with raising himself up: “[God's] angel began to be *ofermod*, raised himself against his master” [“his engyl ongan ofermod wesán, ahof hine wið his herran”; 262-63]. He sins by trying to raise his *mod* over God. (Alama 83)

It is pride, then, that drives Mordred's envy and lust—the desire to over-rule his ruler.

Though he does not seek to change the tides of time, he does desire to use them to his own purpose. In an early passage on Guinevere, both she and Mordred (traitors both) are indicted for the same manipulation of the natural order: “Guinevere the fair, not Mordred only, should master chance and the tides of time turn to her purpose” (II.211-213).

This is a repeated trope in *The Fall of Arthur*—Arthur, Guinevere, and Mordred all seek to turn the tides, against nature. As Flieger points out, Tolkien is probably punning on the common root of “time” and “tide” in the “Germanic \**tidiz*, ‘division of time,’ in Old English, *tid* “time, season” (219). A later, Danish king of England once sat upon the shore to prove to his fawning courtiers that, though he could conquer men and lands, not even he, Canute, could turn back the tide. While the story is apocryphal, it would have been familiar to Tolkien and many of his British contemporaries, and would have found resonance in Tolkien's portrayal of kings and tides. Flieger misreads Lancelot, though, when she says that “Lancelot's hope that ‘times would change and tides alter’ (III, l.218) is a vain one” (219). At this point of the narrative, Lancelot has already repented his pride and is not hoping that “times would change and tides alter”; rather, his hope is precisely that they *do* change and alter, regardless of his opinion on it or anyone else's desire and jostling for control. Just as constant as the changing of the tides is the coming of morning from darkness: “Ever times would change and tides alter,/

And o'er hills of morning hope come striding/ to awake the weary, while the world lasted" (III.226-228); it is this certainty that gives Lancelot hope. Even though the "flood was passed" and the tides of Arthur's kingdom and Lancelot's glory were ebbing out, the sun still rises and nature goes on its way, regardless of kings and their kingdoms.

Arthur's last scenes are more ambiguous, but I would argue that he, like Lancelot earlier, sees a sea-change in his heart. The first canto begins with him faring forth, "the tides of time to turn backward" (I.5), setting in motion the tragedy of civil war that Guinevere's, Lancelot's, and Mordred's prideful faithlessness set up. He wins the passage of the sea, by Gawain's might, at high tide: "tide was turning...rocks robed with red rose from water" (IV.225). This victory won, however, he pauses. Where he could have tried again to turn the tides back to their height, he waits, rejecting "ruthless onset" and the "toll of death/ to pay for passage" for a passive acquiescence to the coming fate: "let us trust the wind and tide ebbing/ to waft us westward" (V.55-63). This is much more in line with a rejection of *ofermod* and a return to Tolkien's sense of the Germanic heroic code as opposed to the chivalric. Arthur has finally begun to recognize his responsibility to his people, sparing them a forlorn assault: "Now pity whelmed him/ and love of his land and his loyal people" (V.35). Arthur, too late, has come to accept the role that the tides of time play in the affairs of men, women, and kingdoms, but not before *ofermod* has undermined them all.

Whatever we think of Tolkien's interpretation of *ofermod* and its relation to the heroic code of the Anglo-Saxons—and I would contend that the extant literature supports his reading, at least of the Maldon poet, whose interpretation of events may or may not

have fit the actual warrior's code—it is at least clear that the scene made a deep impression on Tolkien and that *ofermod* was an overriding concern throughout his own work. A warrior could die gloriously in battle, and could seek out those situations when he had no other responsibilities—but a leader should not seek glory on his own account, and certainly not at the expense of his followers. Indeed, his contention is that, once placed in a position of authority, a leader's desire for glory is more likely to end in disaster than in the good of his followers, as Wiglaf's foresighted mourning of Beowulf illustrated.

He expands on this theme in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*, and he develops it also in the tales of the Children of Hurin, more or less explicitly in different versions. *Ofermod* is also the driving motivation in *The Fall of Arthur*—Guinevere's lust for Lancelot, Lancelot's desire for glory as opposed to Gawain's service to his lord, Mordred's treachery against his lord, and Arthur's own desire for glory beyond his own realm—all the actors succumb to the temptation of pride, which comes before the fall of kings and kingdoms both.

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THE NEIGHBORS IN THE VILLAGE: FROST'S DEBT TO DANTE,  
LONGFELLOW, AND JAMES IN "STOPPING BY WOODS  
ON A SNOWY EVENING"

Robert Frost's much-anthologized "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" represents the artist at the height of his powers. Published in the 1923 collection *New Hampshire*, which in 1924 received the first of Frost's four Pulitzer Prizes (Dreese 116), the poem is typical of Frost's ability to paint a complex scene in plain language and to draw out a moral while simultaneously leaving ambiguous his own stance and the speaker's action on the moral. Scholars have read "Stopping by Woods" as everything from a suicide poem (Meyers 180) to a philosophical masterpiece (Rotella 186), but it would be helpful to also connect its themes to those explored in Frost's first volume, *A Boy's Will*, published 10 years previous. The later poem relies on the same imagery of woods, road, and wind which are woven throughout *A Boy's Will* and receive especial attention in "Into My Own" and "Reluctance," the opening and closing poems of the volume. In turn, these images are informed by Longfellow's "My Lost Youth," from whose refrain Frost drew the title *A Boy's Will*. Another influence on word choice, imagery, form, and, ultimately, thematic significance is the opening of Dante's *Inferno*, particularly the Longfellow and Charles Eliot Norton translations, copies of which Frost owned (Serio 220). Norton's introduction, with its discussion of Dante's understanding of free will and its relation to reason and the divine, plays perfectly into Frost's ongoing

concerns with the nature and significance of human choice and is a helpful counterpoint to William James, whose “The Will to Believe” was also influential in Frost’s thinking on the significance of human choice.

I will first draw out the threads of woods, road, and wind imagery in *A Boy’s Will* against the warp of Longfellow’s poem; I will also make a brief detour into the volume’s star imagery, which will be significant to the later discussion on Dante. Afterwards, I will demonstrate the correspondence of “Stopping by Woods” to the earlier cycle of poems, outline its verbal and formal debt to Longfellow’s and Norton’s translations of *Inferno*, and show its thematic debt to Norton’s introduction and William James’s “Will to Believe,” thereby arguing that Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is concerned with not only the tension between social duty and individual freedom, but also with the more metaphysical concerns of free will and “treason to the heart of man.” Frost’s speaker neither makes his decision in the poem, nor does Frost mean for his reader to; rather the poem is focused on the significance of the moment of choice, without pushing us either down the road or into the woods.

Longfellow’s “My Lost Youth” clearly provides the title to Frost’s first volume (Monteiro 48) with the refrain, taken from “a verse of a Lapland song”: “A boy’s will is the wind’s will,/ And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.” Further, it establishes the wood and wind imagery that Frost is to later develop in his own poems. The speaker returns to “the beautiful town/ That is seated by the sea” before taking the reader down the memories of boyhood fantasies: running off to be a sailor, joining the army, or becoming a naval hero. These verses (third, fourth, and fifth) begin with “I

remember.” The second verse, however, begins with vision--“I can see the shadowy lines of its trees”--a vision which appears again in the 6th verse, immediately after these memories are finished: “I can see the breezy dome of groves,/The shadows of Deering’s Woods.” In the last verse, Deering’s Woods become the place where the speaker finds his “lost youth again,” and the woods themselves become the speaker of “the strange and beautiful song,” as “the groves are repeating it still: ‘A boy’s will is the wind’s will,/And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.’” This opposition between human action and the simple existence of the shadowed woods is captured in the opposition between the recollection and the active imagination—“I remember” in stanzas 3, 4, 5, and 7 v. “I can see” in stanzas 2 and 6. Both “remember” and “see” refer to the same action—“remembering”—but Longfellow twice uses the more vivid and metaphorical “see” to set up an opposition between his affective reactions to the memories. Even though the speaker is not actually present in the woods when he says “I can see,” he is most present in the memories when he imagines himself, not in the world of dutiful social interaction (the stanzas beginning with “I remember” refer to commercial shipping, the army, the navy, or school), but in the woods. The use of “groves” in stanzas 6 and 10, with the sacred connotations of the term, especially reinforces this connection of human inaction being the means for an otherworldly action on the poet. By saying “I can see” for “I remember,” Longfellow sets up the woods as the source of this supernatural vision.

Longfellow develops this idea beyond the woods with his wind imagery. Not only is the aimless “boy’s will,” with all its imaginative and unaccomplished possibilities, identified with the “wind’s will,” but the wind becomes the means of otherworldly

inspiration, as in the “breezy dome of groves.” Where the woods are the place for human inaction and imagination, the wind becomes the means for inspiration. Longfellow, however, presses beyond this statement and presents the converse, as well: human speech undermines the song. In only one stanza is the refrain described negatively. Stanza eight describes it as a “fatal song,” but only when it is associated with human speech: “There are things of which I may not *speak*... The *words* of that fatal song/Come over me like a chill.”

His experience with the people of his home town, too, is ambiguous, as “Strange to me now are the forms I meet” presents the human figures as simply “forms” devoid of personality, and it is the “native air” that returns him to an experience of the “pure and sweet,” even within the town. Finally, however, the culminating stanza takes us back into Deering’s woods, where the wind-blown “groves” transform the song into something “strange and beautiful.” The speaker’s imagination progresses from most alive when re-encountering the woods he can “see” in his memory, to more sterile when he “remembers” his plans for human action and glory. The song, too, becomes more progressively more ambiguous, elusive, and deadening when associated with human speech and construction, and more open and enlightening when left to itself. For Longfellow, then, the boy’s will is that which is open to possibility and imagination, not yet defined within the bounds of the spoken word or experienced action, but kept in the realm of “thought” and in the wild space of wind-blown woods.

We find these same themes and images running through Frost’s 1913 collection *A Boy’s Will* from the very first line of the very first poem: “One of my wishes is that those

dark trees” (*Boy’s* 11). Frost continues the oppositions that Longfellow set up and develops them throughout the volume through the eyes of both human and otherworldly speakers and their experience with each other. This culminates in the encounter of the speaker and Pan in “The Demiurge’s Laugh,” which should be understood as the dramatic and emotional climax of the volume, with “Reluctance” being the ambiguous and ambivalent resolution. In this section, I will trace how Frost develops his wood and wind imagery in *A Boy’s Will*, how it is informed by Longfellow’s poem, and how this interacts with Frost’s addition of road/highway imagery as indicating societal stricture and his complicated relationship with stars/asters throughout—his treatment of stars will be illuminating when we approach his interaction with Dante in “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

In the opening poem of *A Boy’s Will*, “Into My Own,” Frost refers both to Dante and Longfellow and immediately sets up an opposition between the woods and the road. Frost’s reference to “those dark trees” resonates with Longfellow’s “shadowy lines of its trees” and “shadows of Deering’s Woods,” as well as Dante’s “forest dark” (tr. Longfellow) or “dark wood” (tr. Norton; Monteiro 50). The reference to Dante is further cemented by Frost’s wish that the forest “stretched away unto the edge of doom.” “Doom” could be understood in either a temporal sense as the Last Judgment or in a more spatial sense as the entrance to Hell—the latter makes more sense, as Frost’s speaker is speaking in spatial terms of the woods’ depths: “Into their vastness I should steal away,/ Fearless of ever finding open land/ Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.”

Not only does the speaker place the open land and highway in opposition to the woods, he also discusses it as the means for non-human transportation, an image which will appear again in the horse-drawn conveyance of “Stopping by Woods.” The highway, though a means for relatively fast travel with heavy loads, also limits the poet to one track; it is this limitation that he rejects for the woods, trackless except for “my track.” Not only does Frost’s speaker refuse to follow a road that others have made, but he also refuses to be a leader of others on the road he has carved. Frost continues this theme in “Dream Pang,” where the apostrophized refuses to “in his footsteps stray” (*Boy’s* 33). The speaker “had withdrawn in forest” and desired to call out to the follower, but did not. This seems of a piece with his oblique declaration of desire that others follow him in “Into My Own”: “I do not see why...those should not set forth upon my track/ To overtake me.” The demurring of language in “I do not see why...those should not” emphasizes that, while he is not against being followed by others, he also refuses to draw them or guide them, for the same reason that he refused the road. They must find their own way through the woods, just as he did.

Just as Frost’s speaker both lacks and also refuses to be a Vergilian human guide, he also rejects the celestial guidance of the stars that is so important to Dante—the Dantean stars are the reflections of God’s love that give hope at the end of hell, destination at the end of purgatory, and union at the summit of paradise. One of Frost’s poems is dedicated wholly to the subject (“Stars”), and they also make an appearance in the aster (L. “star”) flowers of “A Late Walk” and “Reluctance.” “Stars,” subtitled “There is no oversight of human affairs” (*Boy’s* vii), both continues the wind imagery

and also rejects the idea that the heavens are concerned with “our fate.” Though the stars gather over the wind-blown snow and initially seem to do so in a volitional “keenness for our fate,” Frost then ties that image to a statue of Minerva “without the gift of sight.” Where Minerva was the “grey-eyed goddess” of wisdom, helper of heroes in Greco-Roman mythology, she as representative of divine wisdom is now blinded, too. For Frost, then, if there is celestial guidance, it is impassive or directionless, and again, man is left to make his own path.

In the poem immediately preceding “Stars,” moreover, Frost gives priority to human relationship and volition over celestial guidance. Whereas each major image of “A Late Walk”’s first three of verses is of death and decay, with a “headless aftermath” in the mowing field, a “tangle of withered weeds,” and “a leaf that lingered brown,” the speaker picks the “last remaining aster flower/ To carry again to you” in the last verse (*Boy’s* 17). Further, the only action with an object is the speaker’s. There are two sentences with direct objects in the poem. The “aftermath...half closes the garden path,” but this is after having been passively mown down. The only true actor in the poem, then, is the “I” who picks the aster. He has plucked the earthly symbol of celestial guidance and gives it away, with his intent in the giving unclear. In “Reluctance,” the aster re-appears, but *in absentia*: “the last lone aster is gone.” The speaker, too, has here lost his direction, as his “feet question ‘Whither?’” The stars are gone, their earthly reflections are gone, and now the speaker must decide his own movement.

Frost’s treatment of the wind, which makes its appearance at several crucial points in the poems of *A Boy’s Will*, serves also to undermine human artifice and any

orderly divine guidance. In “To the Thawing Wind,” Frost calls on the spring wind to “bring the singer,” but to “scatter poems on the floor;/Turn the poet out of door” (22). He thereby draws a distinction between the verbal artist and the writer, though with a charming ambiguity: “scatter poems” could be interpreted as the wind disturbing the poet’s work, or as a spring-time sowing, and “out of door” could either mean forcing the poet to an enjoyment of nature or into homelessness. Both strike at the same point—the proper inspiration of the poet is not within the confines of his “narrow stall,” but in nature. The image of scattered poems is repeated in “A Dream Pang”: “My song/ Was swallowed up in leaves that blew away.” While we could understand the “leaves” as “tree leaves,” the earlier poem would suggest we can also understand them as pages of a book. The setting-down of the song deadens it (as in Longfellow’s “fatal song”), and the wind responds by blowing it away. This idea receives its strongest treatment in “Pan With Us,” however. Pan’s pipes are wind instruments fashioned by artifice to play music; when he tosses them away, it is in rejection of this artifice as having “less of power to stir...than the merest aimless breath of air” (53). We see here yet another criticism of human *mimesis* in lieu of receiving direct inspiration and an embrace of the wind as a purifier of the will, even as it is itself will-less.

“Pan With Us” and “The Demiurge’s Laugh” complete this inversion, and “Reluctance” wraps up the images, tying back to the volume’s beginning with references to both “Into My Own” in its opposition of road and woods (“Out through the fields and the woods...I have come by the highway home,/ And lo, it is ended.”) and to “Pan With Us,” which is “about art (his own)” (*Boy’s ix*). In “Pan”—whose title seems to be a

perverse reference to the translation of Emmanuel, “God With Us”—the demi-god “stood...on a height,” and later lays himself to rest “and ravelled a flower” (52, 53). “Reluctance” repeats both the image and the word-choice: “I have climbed the hills of view” and “the oak is keeping/To ravel” (62). Finally, the poem after “Pan,” “The Demiurge’s Laugh,” both extends the classical allusion and also marks a shift in motion from the walking poems that follow “Into My Own”’s desire to “steal away” (17) to the final stasis of “Reluctance.” First, Frost gives a shift of perspective from Pan to an unnamed human speaker, and the reader is brought back into the “sameness of the wood” (54). The speaker is “running with joy on the Demon’s trail,” continuing the theme of motion and searching begun with “Into My Own” and developed in “Dream Pang,” and again refers to “Pan With Us” when he describes “a sleepy sound...the Demon arose from his wallow to laugh” (54). Pan, in the previous poem, had “laid him down on the sun-burned earth” (53), and the narrator picks up the thread with the demi-god rising from his slumbers. The speaker’s encounter with the old god and his laughter marks a shift in the entire volume, however: the speaker began by “running with joy,” “checked my steps” when he hears the laugh, and then “sat me against a tree” to close the poem. Of the five remaining poems in the volume, all have an immobile speaker, with any motion in the poem being an imperative of motion towards the speaker (“Come” in “A Line-Storm Song”) or in the past tense (“I have wended” in “Reluctance,” but “it is ended”)

We can then draw a number of broad conclusions on these symbols woven through *A Boy’s Will*, informed by Longfellow’s poem. The boy’s will is what drives

him into the forest and off the road. The forest is the place to leave social strictures and search for the divine, with its power both of independent will and also poetic inspiration—in the hard, classical, etymological sense of “breathing-in.” It is here he learns to hear the wind, but is still sometimes left with silence, as in “Now Close the Windows”—“not hear the wind,/ But see all wind-stirred” (55)—or “Reluctance”—“no longer blown” (62). In rejecting the stars as a guide, the speaker also rejects celestial guidance. He lacks a human tutor and declines to be that active tutor to others, though he doesn’t mind their following him (“Dream Pang”). It is significant that, though he rejects the celestial Minerva, he does not reject all of the otherworldly. The speaker does pursue Pan, the satyr. This, though, is a hunt—Pan does not offer him assistance along the way. Roughly, then, the trackless forest is the place where Frost’s speaker goes to seek out the earthly divine, encounters it and learns thereby the “wind’s will,” but also loses both direction and motion and is left at the static point of choice or indecision. “Stopping by Woods” picks up these same threads and weaves them back together.

Before tracing the similarities of *A Boy’s Will* and “Stopping by Woods,” however, I would like to first establish the influence of Dante on Frost’s imagery. Frost owned 4 copies of the *Divine Comedy*—his copy of Charles Eliot Norton’s prose translation and two copies of Longfellow’s verse translation were published well before “Stopping by Woods” (Seiro 220). At least one other poem in the *New Hampshire* volume shows a clear Dantean influence in its form and in its imagery, “Fire and Ice,” while both having contemporary resonance and also dealing with larger metaphysical issues (Seiro 218). Like “Fire and Ice,” “Stopping by Woods” has both verbal and formal

references to Dante—both are a modified *terza rima*. The *Comedy*'s rhyme structure was *aba bcb cdc ded*, etc., while “Stopping by Woods” has an extra line prepended in a *aaba bcb cdc dddd* structure—Frost's variation is significant, which I will discuss after establishing some of his thematic concerns.

The Dantean images continue in “Stopping by Woods.” The most obvious is the woodst themselves, which are “lovely, dark, and deep,” resonating with the “dark wood” of Norton's translation of *Inferno*. As Monteiro points out (50), Norton's footnote on the line reads, “The dark wood is the forest of the world of sense.” This fits with Frost's use of “lovely” as belonging to the human world of sense experience (echoing his lines in “Birches” that “life is too much like a pathless wood” and “Earth's the right place for love”). The second and third distinctive images of Frost's poem are obvious in their absence in “Stopping by Woods”—the road and stars. While a road is never explicitly mentioned in the poem, the speaker is riding a horse-drawn carriage and, not having yet trespassed onto the villager's property, is obviously on a road of some sort. The stars are also not mentioned—as it is a snowy evening, they are probably obscured by the clouds, limiting the speaker's view to earth. The speaker therefore lacks “that planet's rays/Which leadeth others right by every road” (*Inferno* I.17, 18). The speaker's placement on a road echoes the reluctance of *A Boy's Will* to be found on “a highway where the slow wheel pours the sand” (“Into My Own”) and despair at finding himself having “come by the highway home” and with that, his journey “ended” (“Reluctance”). Here, he may be older, but he is still caught in the choice between man-made road and trackless woods. The absence of the stars continues and modifies the sense of loss in the

“last lone aster” (“Reluctance”) and the active rejection of celestial guidance in “Stars”—though they are there, they are “blinded” by the intermediary clouds and the speaker does not find them worth mentioning.

Frost’s use of the wind in “Stopping by Woods” should be read within the context of the wind imagery in *A Boy’s Will*, and it also develops further Longfellow’s opposition of the “song” to “words.” Not appearing until the 12<sup>th</sup> line, it is an “easy wind,” which could be tied to the “breeze” of Longfellow’s poem or “the merest aimless breath of air” of “Pan With Us.” This connection is tightened by its opposition to speech and artifice. First, it follows a question: “to ask if there is some mistake,” and therefore can be considered a sort of answer. Though the question is the horse’s and therefore wordless, it is understood to be a question, and the wind to be an answer. Further, that the bells are the means of “asking” ties to the artifice of Pan’s pipes. The horse’s bells are man-made—though the animal does not have or use human words, he uses man-made implements “to ask if there is some mistake.” As in Longfellow’s poem and “Pan With Us,” the answer does not come in words or definite statement, but with the mere sound of the wind, with its infinite possibilities of meaning. The answer to the question cannot be found in words.

On the other hand, while much has been made of the woods in the poem, there is surprisingly little discussion about the lake on the speaker’s other side—after all, the horse finds it strange to stop “between the woods and frozen lake.” But this lake, as one of only two clear images which would give the speaker’s location, should be crucial to our reading of the poem. There is a clue to its significance in Dante and in Frost’s earlier

poetry. The very opening scene of Longfellow's *Inferno* contains the distinctive image of "my heart's lake" (l.20). Norton has a similar image, with "lake of my heart" (2). This is not the only lake, however. There is another, and a frozen one at that, in the *Inferno*: in Canto XXXII, Dante and Vergil reach the frozen central circle of hell, the circle of the "accursed traitor" (XXXII.110). Longfellow's translation describes "underfoot a lake, that from the frost the semblance had of glass, and not of water" (XXXII.23, 24) and Norton also renders it as a "lake" (216).

The last verse of the last poem of *A Boy's Will* shows Frost, too, concerned with treason:

Ah, when to the *heart of man*  
Was it ever less than a *treason*  
To go with the drift of things,  
To yield with a grace to reason,  
And bow and accept the end of a love or a season? (*Boy's* 63, emphasis mine)

The frozen lake of "Stopping by Woods" continues this concern with the Dantean image of a frozen lake of the heart and with it, the *contrapasso* of stasis for treachery. This is not Dante's treachery against God or the state, however. In the context of Frost's earlier work, however, it is a treachery against the self. Though Frost's speaker directs our attention to the woods, his location between the woods and the frozen lake is significant in this light. There are two equally startling ways of interpreting this image: either the speaker is considering fleeing to the woods (and the possible passage through hell) as an escape from the road and his prior treachery to himself, or—what I find more plausible—he has already psychologically passed through the woods and is now between

them and the frozen lake. That is, he is already in Hell, or at least its wind-swept vestibule, where those are kept who refused to make a choice for Heaven or Hell (*Inferno* III.35-39)—or in Frost’s Jamesian sense, those who went “with the drift of things,” and refused that human duty of making a choice.

This going “with the drift of things” is further reinforced by the formal characteristics of the poem. Serio has noted that Frost employed a modified *terza rima* in “Fire and Ice” (Serio 218), a poem which also contains clear imagistic references to Dante and was published in *New Hampshire*, the same volume as “Stopping by Woods.” A look at the rhyme scheme of “Stopping by Woods” reveals a differently modified *terza rima*: *aaba bccb ccdc dddd*. Though he does not connect it to Dante, Rotella does note that the rhyme scheme has a “narrative thrust that tempts us to see the speaker move on (even though he does not), just as too much insistence on the poem as stranded in the present tense falsely makes it out as static” (187). While Rotella’s caution against trying to pin one meaning to Frost is well noted, his reading of the rhyme repeated over four lines as a release seems counter to Frost’s repetition also of an entire line--the somnolent droning of “miles to go before I sleep.” A better reading of the last verse, with its sudden smash of the *terza rima* against a wall of four rhymed lines, is as reinforcing the stasis of the lake and the narrator’s choice. The twining rhymes of *terza rima* would lead the reader to expect the rhyme scheme to move on, and the rider with it, but Frost denies us this. Instead, we are left at a moment of both poetic stasis, of psychological indecision at the moment where a decision is most required.

Interestingly, excising a line of each stanza to make it fit the *terza rima* structure gives a poem that is grammatically correct, structurally parallel, and focused solely on the speaker, with all other active personalities removed from the poem. I propose that the lines lost would be “His house is in the village, though,” “My little horse must think it queer,” “He gives his harness bells a shake,” and the repeated “And miles to go before I sleep.” Removing the placement of the neighbor in “the village” allows the possibility of otherworldly ownership, and changes the reader’s focus from his location to the lack of action on the part of the woods’ owner: “He will not see.” This is an echo of the sightless Minerva from “Stars,” and could be read as a reiteration that “There is no oversight of human affairs” (*Boy’s* vii). Removing the horse makes the infinitives “to stop” and “to ask” parallel to the first stanza’s “to watch” and turns them both to phrases of purpose with the speaker as subject. That is, the speaker is stopping to watch—to look, to “see” as in “My Lost Youth”—“to stop without a farmhouse near”—isolated from human company—and “to ask if there is some mistake,” presumably of the uncaring cosmos. While it is doubtful that Frost intended this formal possibility—and his stated delight in the aural qualities of the two lines “He gives his harness bells a shake/To ask if there is some mistake” suggests that he did not (Pritchard 164)—this would be a reading that further intensifies the speaker’s pondering of an existential moment of decision and his reaction to it.

This reading is of a piece with Frost’s broader concerns discussed elsewhere—lacking divine guidance, the significance of the human will at the moment of decision. Rotella (172) and Monteiro (49) both argue that Frost was influenced by William James

and his “Will to Believe”: “whereas Longfellow had invoked Providence to account for acts performed and actions not taken, Frost calls attention only to the role of human choice.” James states his thesis as follows:

*Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passionate decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (James 11, emphasis original)*

Further, it is likely that Frost had in mind the following passage from Norton’s introduction to his *Comedy*: “The cornerstone of Dante’s moral system was the Freedom of the Will; in other words, the right of private judgment with the condition of accountability...this liberty is to be attained by the right use of reason” (Norton xvii) These two conceptions of will are both addressed in “Reluctance,” and Frost is clearly more Jamesian in his thinking, particularly rejecting the idea that “liberty is to be attained by the right use of reason,” as “yield[ing] with a grace to reason” is precisely the “treason...to the heart of man” (*Boy’s* 63) that leaves the speaker of *A Boy’s Will* reluctant and lost. In the end, lacking good reason in either direction, one must simply make a decision, according to James—failing to do so is the point at which one loses the truth and is himself lost. This is in contrast to the teleological conception of the will in Dantean theology. Where the Catholic view gives an end to the will’s choices by which it ought to make its decisions (love, which is incarnated in Christ and leads to God) and also has a high view of reason (which can get Dante the Pilgrim to the edge of the world

and the heavens), James's and Frost's view is more self-sufficient. In the more rationalistic tradition, there are natural and accessible signs that point out the right way; for James and Frost, there are not. As Savoie says of Frost's "The Road Not Taken," "there is virtually no physical difference between the two roads" (19); there, as in "Stopping by Woods," any meaning is imposed after the choice is already made. James gains the rhetorical insistence of his argument from precisely this precariousness. *The Will to Believe* argues that "the desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence" (24-25 in Savoie 20), and Frost echoes this sentiment at times: "You're always believing ahead of your evidence" (Lathem, in Savoie 20). He pursues this contrast to its end in *A Boy's Will*. In "Stopping By Woods," he captures the dramatic tension of free will in a silent universe.

Other authors have noted Frost's debt to Dante in *New Hampshire* and to Longfellow in *A Boy's Will*, but "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" should be tied back to *A Boy's Will* and seen against the backdrop of both Dante and Longfellow. Longfellow's "My Lost Youth" establishes the opposition of human action and speech to the sacred stillness of woods and groves and the inspiration of the wind. *A Boy's Will* continues this exploration, while adding road imagery and Dante's star imagery. Frost explores the significance of the human will while further developing his imagery of woods, road, and wind. By rejecting celestial imagery, and lacking human guidance (and refusing to give it), Frost's speakers find themselves caught in the moment of decision where they must make the Jamesian "passional decision." Rejecting the Dantean "accord of the will of man with the will of God" (Norton xvii), they are left to make their own

path or to keep the road that people have already carved out. In “Stopping by Woods,” Frost uses both the earlier development of these images and the formal characteristics of the poem itself, with its ending of an already halting modification of the Dantean *terza rima* in a static quatrain of repeated rhyme and a completely repeated line, to take his readers with the speaker to exactly that moment of decision between the frozen lake and the woods where he may be lost, but may yet live.

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