

"Thus Wrote Pengolodh": Historical Bias, Its Evidence, and Its Implications in *The Silmarillion*

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Presented at the Tolkien at UVM Conference
University of Vermont – Lafayette Hall
7 April 2017

IT IS A WELL-KNOWN FACT that J.R.R. Tolkien presented his legendarium as a pseudohistory, complete with a cast of loremasters and a mode of transmitting key historical texts. As I've studied this aspect of his work over the years, I've become increasingly conscious – sometimes to the point of awe – at the pervasiveness and depth of the pseudohistorical devices he employed. It is one thing to name-drop the occasional loremaster or allude to an imagined oral tradition. Many authors do that, in an attempt to create the illusion of depth that Tolkien valued so much. But Tolkien's creation of a pseudohistory reminds me of a sentence from *The Silmarillion*, about the Valar: "And [Arda] might seem a little thing to those who consider only the majesty of the Ainur, and not their terrible sharpness; as who should take the whole field of Arda for the foundation of a pillar and so raise it until the cone of its summit were more bitter than a needle; or who consider only the immeasurable vastness of the World, which still the Ainur are shaping, and not the minute precision to which they shape all things therein" (7). Tolkien excelled, of course, at creating what he termed "vast backcloths" of imagined history, but he also manipulated language and point of view in subtle ways to create that sense of depth and historicity.

Tolkien always envisioned his legendarium as part of a living tradition, passed on across hundreds if not thousands of years. Critical consensus has typically favored what Tolkien called a "Mannish" mode of transmission.¹ In this mode, the myths and stories of *The Silmarillion* are written, translated, redacted, and presented by Númenórean loremasters, not the Elven loremasters--namely Pengolodh--whom Tolkien had placed at the heart of his invented tradition for thirty years. The Númenórean mode of transmission reflects Tolkien's stated intention during work on the *Silmarillion* during the late '50s and early '60s. "It is now clear to me," Tolkien wrote in a document collected in *Myths Transformed*, found in *Morgoth's Ring*, "that in any case the Mythology must actually be a 'Mannish' affair. ... What we have in the *Silmarillion* etc. are traditions ... handed on by *Men* in Númenor and later in Middle-earth (Arnor and Gondor)" (370, emphasis in the original). He later wrote, in the same collection of texts, "'It has to be remembered that the 'mythology' is represented as being two stages removed from a true record: it is based first upon Elvish records and lore about the Valar and their own dealings with them; and these have reached us (fragmentarily) only through relics of Númenórean (human) traditions ...'" (401). This leaves uncertainty as to who, exactly, wrote the texts we know as *The Silmarillion*. Were these Elven texts translated by Númenóreans, without

¹ See, for example, Douglas Charles Kane, *Arda Reconstructed: The Creation of the Published Silmarillion*.

commentary? Or, as many critics seem to imply, does the change in the mode of transmission suggest that, in *The Silmarillion*, we hear the stories of the Eldar told in Númenórean voices?

Before I present my data on bias, it is essential to establish *who* is telling the story. I've no doubt that Tolkien intended to revise the mode of transmission--I just don't think he actually *did* it, leaving this so-called "Mannish" mode in the same murky, ambiguous state as the radical cosmological revisions he pondered at the same time. He also failed to effect these revisions to his cosmology in any consistent, meaningful way and for the same reasons as he also never effected the revisions to the framework or mode of transmission: to do so cuts to the very bones of the story and is not lightly undertaken. A Númenórean perspective on Elven texts is necessarily going to be very different than that of Ælfwinë.

Looking at the stories themselves is where I'll begin to show that any intention toward a Númenórean mode of transmission never touched the point of view of the *Quenta Silmarillion*, which remained Elven, and specifically Pengolodh's for most of the text. The second phase of what is called the *Later Quenta Silmarillion* in the *History of Middle-earth* series, again in *Morgoth's Ring*, was written around the same time as Tolkien began pondering the Númenórean revision. Notably, Tolkien removes all mentions of Pengolodh--who was present in the first draft of the same text--which has been suggested by me and others as a potential indicator that Tolkien meant to minimize or even eliminate Pengolodh's role in the process of transmission.

But there's not much evidence beyond that surface change, and the point of view of this document remains distinctly Elven. Verlyn Flieger noted that, since myths are culture-centric, "The attitude of each [people] toward death is bound to be different" and further identified death as "the major ... dividing line between [Tolkien's] two peoples" (*Interrupted Music* 45-46). Yet Tolkien never undertook revisions on this point in the *Silmarillion* materials. Death remains a gift in *Silmarillion* and, where Mortals are concerned, largely a mystery. Mortals clearly see it differently; this is a distinctly Elven perspective. Furthermore, in the *Later Quenta Silmarillion*, he *adds* eschatological material in the form of the "Statute of Finwë and Míriel." Again, this represents an Elven point of view.

It is impossible to imagine a Númenórean writer penning Elven history and representing this strictly Elven point of view. The Númenóreans are a culture defined by--and whose downfall was predicated upon--an obsession with death. Any writings originating with them, whether or not they are about the Elves, must necessarily reflect this key cultural characteristic.

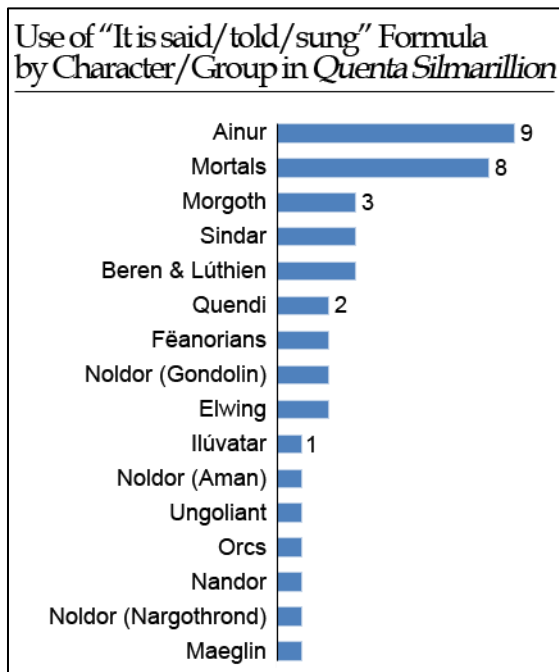
But this is why the change to a Númenórean rather than Elvish tradition requires bone-deep revisions. It is one thing to strip a text of all mentions of its erstwhile Elven loremaster. It is quite another to tinker with the deep metaphysical machinery that drives a central conflict of the story.

Christopher Tolkien elected not to include an explicit metafictional framework for the published *Silmarillion*, eliminating, for example, any reference to the loremaster who wrote or translated a particular text. This allowed him to avoid making a definitive decision on the question of an Elven or

Númenórean mode of transmission. *The Silmarillion*, however, is replete with references both direct and subtle to the sources from where the narrator's information comes. I took a closer look at these references with a mind to ascertain what I could of the narrator's sources, especially gaps in the authoritative information to which he had access, to see what these references revealed of the narrator.

The gaps in authoritative information are particularly revealing about the narrator's identity. There are times when the he *implies* a source of information but omits any further detail about who exactly provided this information. This suggests that the narrator lacks eyewitness knowledge but also doesn't know the source or doesn't believe the source carries enough authority to warrant identification. The narrator generally uses three phrases to signal this: *it is said*, *it is told*, and *it is sung*. These phrases remind me of when my middle school students can't remember where a particular fact came from and attempt to hide their ignorance behind a vague phrase like "People say." They recognize that they need a source but aren't actually sure who that source is. This vague phrase seems to function similarly. Combined, the three phrases *it is said*, *it is told*, *it is sung* are used more than forty times in *The Silmarillion* without further detail about who is saying, telling, or singing. As I began to focus on their use, I noted a pattern behind *when* they were used, compared to when the source was identified.

The data to the right shows that the narrator tends to avoid identifying his source when referring to specific groups of characters. The two groups where the narrator most often lacks an authoritative source are the Ainur and Mortals, but some of the groups where the formula is used far less often also make my point equally well. The Quendi of Cuiviénen and the Nandor are infrequently mentioned in *The Silmarillion*, yet the formula is used for these groups even in those few mentions where it is barely employed for groups like the Sindar and Noldor who are constantly discussed. When it is used for the Sindar and Noldor, furthermore, it is often used in situations where the narrator would necessarily have lacked reliable knowledge, such as a private conversation between two people or a character's thoughts. These data suggest that the narrator is not a Mortal but most likely Noldorin or Sindarin, the groups about whom he seems to possess the most authoritative sources.



Now one could correctly make the argument that *The Silmarillion* was not composed as a single text but is a compilation of pieces taken from texts written over the span of decades. However, if Tolkien had seriously endeavored to make revisions reflecting a change from an Elven to a Númenórean tradition, these changes would likely reflect in the second phase of the *Later Quenta Silmarillion*, a rewrite of *Silmarillion* material embarked upon *after* Tolkien wrote the note declaring the tradition a "Mannish affair." Tellingly, the second phase incorporates some of the radical cosmological revisions

he pondered at the same time, referring to the "dome of Varda," but in no way suggests a change in point of view (Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring* 286). At the broadest possible level, Tolkien added texts--namely "The Statute of Finwë and Míriel"--that are impossible to imagine as written by a Númenórean. At the minute level, his use of the *it is said/told/sung* formula shows that the narrator possessed eyewitness knowledge or an authoritative source for material about the Eldar but not other groups of characters.

This leads me to conclude that, no matter Tolkien's *intentions*, his actual writings retained Pengolodh as a narrator, even when given the chance to make revisions during the second phase of the *Later Quenta Silmarillion*. And Pengolodh is an interesting choice for a narrator, commenting broadly on the First Age despite spending most of it cloistered inside the hidden city of Gondolin. *The Silmarillion* says of Gondolin: "Shut behind their pathless and enchanted hills ... tidings of the lands beyond came to them faint and far, and they heeded them little" (288). *Quendi and Eldar* says of Pengolodh specifically that he "collected much material among the survivors of the wars ... concerning languages and gesture-systems with which, owing to the isolation of Gondolin, he had not before had any direct acquaintance" (*War of the Jewels* 397). It seems a reasonable assumption that he'd be equally naïve of the history of peoples other than his own and, eventually, of the Doriathrim refugees. Tolkien seems to be deliberately setting up the bulk of the *Quenta Silmarillion* tradition to be told by a narrator who is shockingly uninformed about all but a tiny portion of what transpired in the era and people of which he writes.

Nor does Gondolin strike me as exactly an intellectually permissive environment. Turgon its king is described in *The Shibboleth of Fëanor* as "unappeasable in his enmity for Fëanor and his sons"--not without reason, of course, but I have to question whether Pengolodh had access to perspectives other than those of his king (and the kinds of people willing to shut themselves in under that king's rule for their foreseeable future) or whether he would have been allowed to represent those perspectives even if he did (*Peoples of Middle-earth* 345).

Alex Lewis, in a 1992 paper presented at the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference, first suggested historical bias in *The Silmarillion*. Lacking access to the later *History of Middle-earth* volumes that treat the issue of the loremasters more fully, Lewis concluded that *The Silmarillion* reflects the bias of Elrond: showing distinct favoritism toward Gondolin and Doriath--and antipathy towards the Fëanorians--because of his parents. Lewis makes a good case for Elrond as the source of bias, but Pengolodh fits those biases even better and is a documented source for many of the texts that Lewis identified as partisan.

I had accepted *The Silmarillion* as biased--and authored in the main by Pengolodh--for many years before encountering Lewis's work because this was a prevalent idea in the Tolkien fan communities where I spent most of my time discussing and writing about *The Silmarillion*. Last year, I sought to see whether I could quantify this bias. Lewis analyzes passages from the text to find bias, sometimes claiming that certain characters or groups of characters received more attention than others and using this as an indicator of bias. I was curious if this claim could be supported statistically.

Following Lewis's lead, I considered a relative lack of detail as an indicator of negative bias. I looked at four different measures, using the *Quenta Silmarillion*. The first and simplest measure looked at how many times key characters were mentioned in the *Quenta Silmarillion*; references in the "Index of Names" were not counted. The number of times the narrator mentions a character seems a reasonable mark of the narrator's interest in that character. In addition, characters whose points of view and motives received deep analysis would likely receive more attention from the narrator than those whose points of view are ignored and motives unexplored.

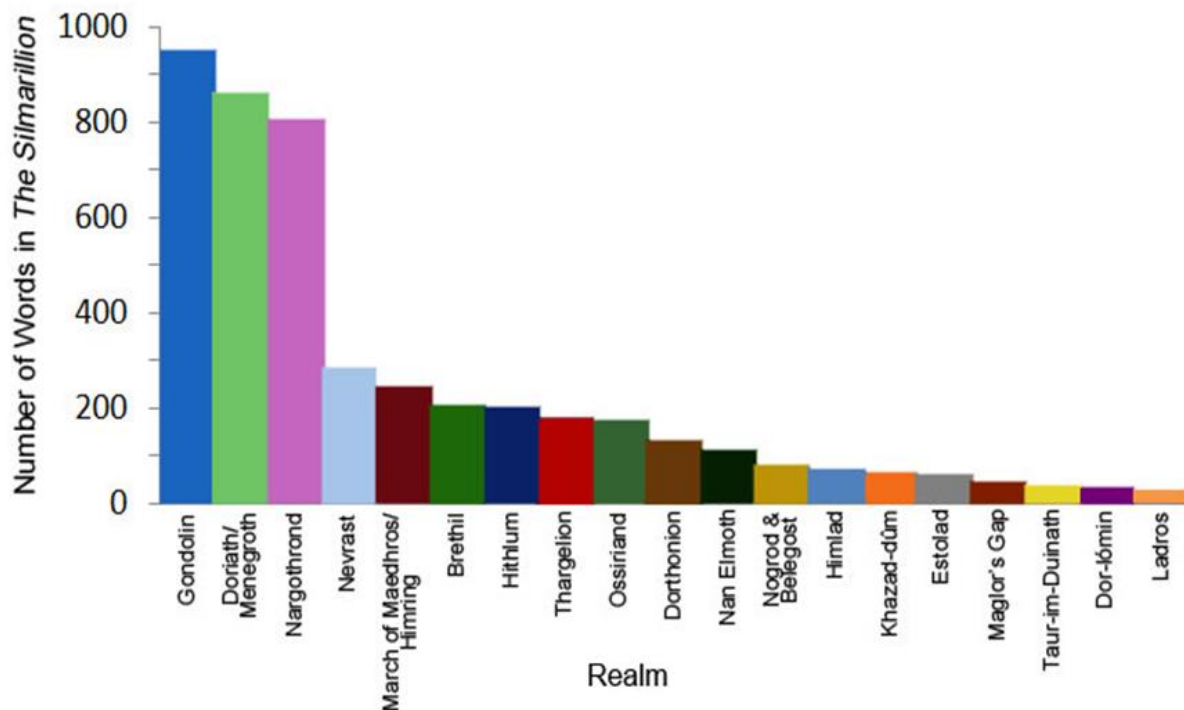
I'd like to focus on the ten most-mentioned characters, using the data to the right. Only one character--Fëanor--is not associated in some way with Gondolin or Doriath or someone who receives special affection from Turgon, in the cases of Fingolfin and Finrod. None of the sons of Fëanor make the top-ten list, and when they are mentioned, the narrator relishes recounting their misdeeds while glossing over their assets and accomplishments. These results show a strong preference for Gondolin and Doriath: the expected preferences of one who grew up in Gondolin and mingled with the Doriathrim refugees at the mouth of Sirion. Or: Pengolodh.

| Character | Mentions |
|-----------|----------|
| Fëanor | 208 |
| Túrin | 202 |
| Thingol | 178 |
| Beren | 146 |
| Lúthien | 137 |
| Húrin | 115 |
| Turgon | 112 |
| Fingolfin | 98 |
| Finrod | 96 |
| Melian | 95 |

Next, I looked at the establishment of realms, one of the most important activities in the *Quenta Silmarillion*, a text that includes an entire chapter on who went and built what where. Achievement of a culturally and aesthetically rich settlement that is safe from the enemy appears to be a strong metric of a particular character or culture's success in the mind of the narrator. Lewis noted discrepancies in the amount of time the various realms in *The Silmarillion* are given relative to each other; I attempted to quantify his claim by counting the number of words used to describe different realms in the *Quenta Silmarillion*, producing the data on the following page. Once again, the narrator shows bias and toward Gondolin and Doriath, the realms receiving most of his attention. In third place is Nargothrond: another hidden realm and belonging to Turgon's friend Finrod.

The fourth most-mentioned realm is particularly notable: Nevrast, a realm of only glancing importance in *The Silmarillion*. Nevrast is the kind of place you include in Tolkien pub trivia when you're trying to stump everyone but the deep nerds, but the narrator lingers on it more than he does even the realm of the heroic King Fingolfin. Pengolodh, of course, was born in Nevrast, and it is probably one of the few places he can describe from memory.

Number of Words Used to Describe Realms in *The Silmarillion*



It's important to note here the realms that *don't* get mentioned very often: those of the Fëanorians. Accustomed as we are to seeing *The Silmarillion* through Pengolodh's eyes, it's worth taking a step back and considering what these realms truly represented. The realms of the sons of Fëanor occupy the geographically vulnerable stripe of land that offers easiest access to Beleriand by the forces of Morgoth. Even Pengolodh admits that Maedhros chose his realm because, even after prolonged torture at the hands of Morgoth, he was "very willing that the chief peril of assault should fall upon himself" (*Silmarillion* 128). The same isn't said of his brothers, but one needs only to look at a map of Beleriand to make that inference. The sons of Fëanor formed the bulwark between Angband and those splendid realms upon which the narrator of *The Silmarillion* lavishes his attention. That the Fëanorian realms were largely annihilated after the surprise attack of the Battle of Sudden Flame is proof of that peril. But the narrator of *The Silmarillion* says almost nothing about them. We don't know what, if anything, they built. We don't know anything about their people. We may know something about their natural features but, otherwise, they are a literal and literary blank on the map. This omission is difficult to pardon as anything but bias: an unwillingness to learn about or discuss the homelands of one's enemies, even when those enemies provide a layer of protection that suggests a need for reparation, or courage at the least.

Battles are another important recurring type of event in the *Quenta Silmarillion*, and I turn there next. Especially among the minor battles, the number of words used to tell of them and the way they are described again suggests bias against particular characters.

Several battles occur in the text that function to maintain peace and yet are unnamed and in fact devalued by the narrator of *The Silmarillion*. Major actors in these devalued battles are the Fëanorians

and Fingon, a character whom multiple measures in my study showed as the surprising recipient of bias from the narrator, show in the chart to the right. Fingon is Turgon's brother, but of course, he is also one of the few characters acknowledged as

maintaining friendship with the Fëanorians. The battles in which Fingon took the lead are so devalued--not only glossed over but presented in negative terms despite their positive outcomes--that I was forced to name them myself: the Not-Great Battle and Battle 4.5. "This was not reckoned among the great battles," says the narrator about the battle that ensured that "there was peace for

| Battle | Major Characters Involved | # Words |
|--|--|---------|
| First Battle of the Wars of Beleriand | <u>Denethor</u> , <u>Thingol</u> | 336 |
| Battle-under-Stars | Fëanor, Sons of Fëanor (especially Celegorm) | 268 |
| Glorious Battle | <u>Fingolfin</u> , Maedhros | 193 |
| The Not-Great Battle | Fingon | 169 |
| First Attack of <u>Glaurung</u> | Fingon | 110 |
| Battle of Sudden Flame | Angrod, Aegnor, <u>Bregolas</u> , Barahir, Finrod, Fingon, <u>Fingolfin</u> , House of Hador, Sons of Fëanor (especially Maedhros) | 1166 |
| Battle of <u>Brethil</u> | <u>Beleg</u> , <u>Halmir</u> | 159 |
| Battle 4.5 | Círdan, Fingon, <u>Galdor</u> , <u>Húrin</u> | 208 |
| Fifth Battle (<u>Nirnaeth Arnoediad</u>) | <u>Beleg</u> , Fingon, <u>Gwindor</u> , Haladin, House of Hador, <u>Huor</u> , <u>Húrin</u> , <u>Mablung</u> , <u>Maeglin</u> , Men of <u>Bór</u> , Men of <u>Ulfang</u> , <u>Naugrim</u> , Sons of Fëanor (especially Maedhros), <u>Turgon/Gondolindrim</u> | 3313 |
| War of Wrath | Eärendil, "Fathers of Men," <u>Finarfin</u> | 939 |

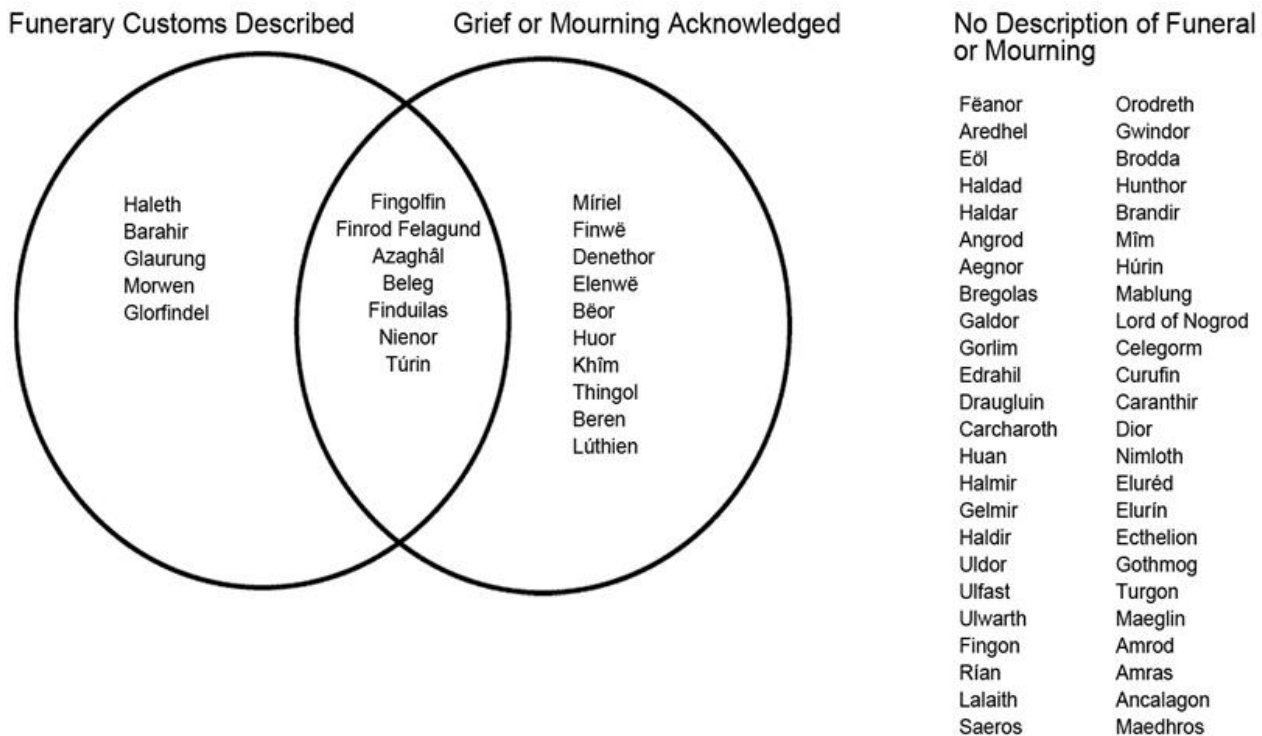
many years, and no open assault from Angband" (133). Similarly, Fingon's decisive removal of Glaurung as a threat for many years is given scant attention: barely 100 words and many of those spent describing how Fingon *almost* lost. The Battle-under-Stars--one of the most decisive victories by the Noldor in Beleriand--is described by Lewis as "dismissed in seventeen lines" and "subtly devalu[ing] Fëanor's courage by insinuating that it was a fit of battle fever or berserker action" (162).

In contrast, the small battles won by the Sindar are not similarly qualified. The first battle fought by Thingol and Denethor is the fourth longest in the *Quenta Silmarillion*. The Battle of Brethil is small but nonetheless named--but Beleg of Doriath is one of its chief actors.

The battles that receive the most attention are those that were lost. One can conclude from this that Pengolodh was a pessimist who enjoyed dramatizing the failures of his people or, more likely, that those battles most heavily involved participation from those closely associated with Gondolin, Doriath, and Nargothrond. Every battle that receives more than 300 words in the text involves characters associated with at least one of these kingdoms.

Finally, I looked at perhaps the most common type of event in the *Quenta Silmarillion*: death scenes. Seventy named characters meet their ends in the pages of the *Quenta Silmarillion*, itself a remarkable statistic. Counting words proved to be ineffectual: Death scenes are so often entangled with surrounding plot events that deciding what counts and what doesn't foiled my attempts at quantifying death scenes as I did character mentions, realms, and battles. Instead, I looked at funeral customs and which characters are identified as receiving mourning, a funeral rite, or both. This information is presented on the next page.

Funerary Customs and Grieving in the *Quenta Silmarillion*



A few observations come immediately to mind. Those who receive funerals in the text, mourning, or both are--with the exception of Glaurung and Khîm--positively depicted in the text and characters of significance. The list of those for whom no funeral or mourning is described comprises enemies and minor characters for whom one would not expect much attention in the narrative, including all members of groups for whom the Sindar and Noldor generally felt enmity.

Also included are all of the Fëanorians. Fëanor's death scene, in particular, glaringly omits any mention of an emotional reaction on the part of his sons. Likewise, if the sons of Fëanor memorialize or grieve for their fallen brothers in some way, it is not mentioned. Here, we also see the emergence of bias against the family of Aredhel. Eöl and Maeglin--obvious enemies of Gondolin and, therefore, Pengolodh--are treated similarly to the Fëanorians. The effect of these omissions is to deny the most normal and empathetic of emotions--grief--to characters for whom Pengolodh may have possessed a vested interest in depicting as lacking such relatable human emotions.

What does it mean that *The Silmarillion* is biased, as I hope that I've showed that it is? At the very least, I believe it begins to reveal the full extent of manipulations Tolkien undertook to provide that sense of depth: to return again to the *Silmarillion* quote about the Valar, not just the immeasurable vastness of his imagined history but the minute precision at which he worked to subtly communicate this. I believe it also brings implications for interpreting the text, inviting the question of how near Pengolodh--or Rúmil or Bilbo or any of the fictional loremasters--approximated Tolkien's own views of what the reader was to take from the stories of Middle-earth.

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