



Volume 30 (2015)

**The Lay of Baldor: a Play for Voices
John Wm. Houghton**

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The Lay of Baldor: a Play for Voices¹
John Wm. Houghton

Dramatis Personae

Narrator A

Narrator B (*may be combined with A*)

Brego, *King of the Mark of Rohan*

Baldor, *his son*

Ælfward, *an Earl*

A Statue

Barahir, *a bard from Gondor*

Narrator A

Listen! We tell tales of the Riddermark,

The brave Rohirrim and their bold deeds.

Wrapped in a darkness from Dwimordeme,

South to the slaughterfield they suddenly came,

Helpers of Gondor in a grim battle.

Eorl the Young all outstripped

In strength and in fierceness, Frumgar's brave son,

Leod's child, the Lord of Éothéod.

To him the Stonelanders' Steward surrendered

Mountains and fields full of good pasture,

¹ Earlier versions of this play were performed at the International Medieval Congress (2009) and at Mythcon (1987). This *jeu d'esprit* is, obviously, "fan fiction," and that in at least two senses: the characters, situations, and internal allusions are taken directly from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, while the idea of a play in (mostly) alliterative verse is itself indebted to Tolkien's "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beohtelm's Son." Students of Old English verse will note that I have frequently allowed myself patterns of alliteration not permitted in the original form.

Swearing great oaths on the grave of Elendil.
 So likewise Eorl, Leoding mighty,
 Swore in return the Riddermark's help,
 Northmen's long spears in Sunlending's need.

Narrator B

Eorl King ended his life
 Fiercely in battle with folk of the East;
 Then when his lich was laid with honor
 In a high barrow outside his burgh,
 Brego his son seized royal power,
 Took for his wergeld the Wold deep in blood
 Of men from the East able in war.
 Many he slaughtered, scattered the others,
 And ruled then in peace Rohan the green.

Narrator A

Soon he sought strongholds safe from the Easterlings,
 Fastnesses fit for the Frumgar-folk,
 And the *mearas*, their mighty horses.
 One day he searched south along Snowbourn
 And saw the great stair at Starkhorn's foot,

A path leading upward that Púkel-men made.
Turn on turn the trail twisted,
Writhing upward like a worm's way,
And at every doubling a demon stood guard,
A grim goblin hewn of grey stone
And older far than all the works
The Stonelanders raised for their realms' safety
At Hornburg and Orthanc, the Isengap's gateposts.

Narrator B

Then Brego the Bold with Baldor his son,
The Leodings' lords, led up their horsemen:
All of their éored rode up the way.
They were the first of Frumgar's folk
To dare the dread of the demon-men's path—
Though others had seen it, silent and somber,
None dared to climb it: the King gave these heart.
Steep was the way and their steeds slowed,
Even the fleet-hoofed Felaróf's foals.
Then at the top the trail turned eastward
To rise between walls of weathered stone,
The Starkhorn's roots, rent for a road.

Soon the cleft opened into an upland
A mountain field full then of flowers,
Purple and blue like broad lakes in summer,
Mail-backed fish-mothers that mirror the sky.
Ferien-feld the Frumgarlings named it—
Field of the mountains, fresh in that morning.

Between standing stones set in two straight lines,
Eastward the road ran, not to the sunrise,
But to a pitch-black wall with pines at its feet:
That was the Dwimorberg, dark haunted mountain.
Then spoke the King to his companions.

Brego

King's men and riders of the Mark of Rohan,
Which ones among you, eager for glory,
Will grasp now at a great name,
And follow me further through this fair field
To that dark mountain wall amid those dim pines?

Narrator B

All of the éored were eager to follow
 To fall, if the need was, defending their King
 From men or from demons in Dwimorberg's wood.
 But Baldor the Marshal mocked the men, saying:

Baldor

Fame's eager suitors seek a fickle lover.
 Father, are we two not Frumgar's sons,
 Sons, too, of Eorl eager for battle?
 What is the danger of demons or men
 We cannot meet with might of our own,
 Or flee if we must on Felaróf's foals?
 Why should we trust in ten dozen men
 And not in our own strength with spear and sword?

Brego

Often has folly overcome wisdom
 In hearts of the mighty, Marshal of Rohan.
 And this father sees that fame's suitors
 Can seek for her favors on Felaróf's foals
 As well as on any other white horse.

Baldor

No man should quarrel with king or with father;
But where counsel is wanting, councilors speak.
It may be that glory gleams at this trail's end,
The stone fingers lead to fame's darkling home.
But if, in those pines, praise can be gotten,
Should we not earn it for Eorl's house,
Rather than share it with all your shield-thanes?
Every good king grasps at glory
Like ruddy gold; like gold he gives it
Freely to followers, friends from the war-play:
But it is his, bought before given,
Just as each present was earned in the past.
A king without glory to give to his swordsmen
Has no more hope of holding his realm
Than a gold-giver whose gold has been spent.
Others may come and make themselves kings,
Taking the places of powerless men.

Narrator A

Then the King's face flashed with his anger,
But Ælfward his earl, wise in his counsel,
Spoke, lest the Leoding lash out at his son.

Ælfward

All know the fame of Frumgar's son Eorl
 And ballads are written of Wold-master Brego:
 What more glory might be gained
 Among all the men of Middle-earth?
 Nevertheless, King, kinsman of each of us,
 If it be your wish, we will wait here,
 While you and the Leoding learn what the trees
 Hide in their shadows at sharp Dwimorberg's feet.

Brego

Stay, then, my friends, and follow me, Marshal,
 If you can ride like a king's son!
 Onward, Cuheafod! Come if you can!

Narrator B

And while he yet spoke, he spurred on Cuheafod,
 Felaróf's foal, and flew down the path,
 His rage written clearly in wrathful riding.
 Then Baldor followed his father the King,
 But overtook him only when Brego

Reined in his steed beside the last rock,
 A wide stone post placed in the road
 To mark its end at the edge of the wood.
 Quick to sorrow, the son spoke sadly:

Baldor

Lord and Sire, Son of Eorl,
 Forgive me, I beg you, the flying words
 That rashly left my lips' barrier.
 Your fame is great, guardian of Rohan,
 And will not fail in your folk's heart.
 Nor do I hope to hold your rule
 Till many long winters have withered these grasslands
 And many bright springs brought forth these blooms.
 I did not mean that I might wrench
 Away the reins this realm obeys.
 Rightly did Ælfward reckon your glory,
 Frumgarlings' shepherd: show it in mercy.
 Father, I pray thee: forgive me, thy son.

Brego

Baldor, my son, beloved and firstborn,
 Thy movéd father forgave thee all

Before thou couldst ask: for eager is love.

But, Marshal of the Mark, you must abide

The King's doom as well as the word of your father:

That doom must be deemed in deep-ditched Edoras,

In the King's courts, and with the King's Council.

And yet men may hope for mercy there, too.

But now to our work: what shall we find

Farther along in forest's shadow?

Baldor

Nothing on horseback, herdsman of Rohan:

If we go on, we go on our feet.

Brego

That is well said: but we go warily.

Narrator A

And so they unhorsed them and spoke to their steeds,

Bidding them wait there (as they would do,

Being Felaróf's foals), then fared on by foot.

The Frumgarlings crossed the forest's edge,
Followed a dim path through the deep shadows.

Dimholt men call the darkling glen
Through which they walked, wise in their caution,
Where needles lay thick and netted branches
Shut out the sun. Straight they went eastward
Taking a trail the trees had not grown on,
Though no man living had marked the way.
At length the two came to a cleared circle
Where Dimholt met the dark Dwimorberg,
The haunted mountain. A high arch pierced
That black stone wall, and weird signs
Were set about it, though season on season
Of frost and sun-fire had faded the markings.
Seated beside it was the statue-stiff shape
Of a kingly man of mighty frame,
But shrunken as if overshadowed by age.
Then Brego's son spoke to his sire:

Baldor

What can lie here closed within
The black strength of this stone wall?

Brego

The dark doorway and who delved it,
Piercing the Dwimorberg to its deep heart—
I cannot read these riddles aright.
It may be the key that is closed within,
As they say worms will swallow their tails.

Baldor

If so, our keen swords are keys enough,
And if we knock sharply, we surely will enter.

Narrator A

And speaking so, he strode ahead,
To move the door, if might could do so.
As if from the ground a great voice rang out
And warned them in Westron:

Statue

The way is shut!

Narrator B

Then they saw clearly the statue lived still,
But he stared ahead and said again:

Statue

The way is closed: you cannot pass.
The dead made it, the dead keep it,
Until the time foretold for their freedom.
You cannot pass the Paths of the Dead.

Narrator B

He spoke, and fell forward, face down in the dust.
Brego's strong son sprang to his aid
And, turning him, felt for his heart's beating.

Baldor

Father, his chest is chill as the rock
And even now grey grows in the skin
Of his face as if flesh were fading to stone.

Brego

Come away, son: this is some craft,
Some wizard's cunning we cannot ken.
Leave the man now, lest his fate take thee.

Baldor

Father, would you leave his lich to feed wolves?
I will bear it hence to bury with honor.

Narrator A

So Baldor the strong bestrode the body
As if to shoulder the shadow-grey form.
He stretched down his arms and strained at the weight,
Struggled to lift what lay there beneath him,
But it was deep-rooted in Dwimorberg's rock
And would not be moved for all of his might.

Brego

See now the sign: your strength is useless.
Be ruled by wisdom, though willful in war-play,

And come away now, King's man and councilor:
It is yours to let be when your lord calls you.

Narrator A

So he spoke and his son, unspeaking,
Like a cursed man came from the body,
And thus at length the leaders returned
To faithful Ælfward and the éored;
Stern was the King, kinsman of Eorl,
But black was the mood of Brego's son,
As if Dimholt's shadows had darkened his heart.
Then as the night rose they rode to their homes.

Narrator B

Now when the Ring-giver had raised the roof beam
Of high Meduseld, his mighty hall,
The Frumgarling gave a feast in its honor,
Fed many folk in the fair place
With fine breads and meat and mead and dark beer,
And then shapers, shield-song's masters,
Sang of the deeds done in days gone by,
How Leod's son, lusting for battle,

Came to the succor of the Sunlending host,
Or how Fingolfin grim in his fury
Set star-bright sword in splendid combat
Against the dark god and Grond his hammer,
Seven times wounding the world-shaking giant,
Until at the last he lost his life,
Bent by the buckler that bore down upon him,
Trapped by the new-delved trenches around him,
Crushed by a heel as heavy as mountains;
And even then Finwë's son fought like a true prince,
And razor-sharp Ringil raked at the foot
Of Morgoth the Baleful, mighty, dark, Vala.
Then to Thangorodrim Thorondor, ancient
King of the Eagles, came in great haste,
And bore away southward the broken body.

Narrator A

So sang the Riddermark's masters of lore,
Then Barahir, brave bard from the Stoneland,
Sent by the Steward, stood up to sing,
And used a strange stanza Sunlenders favor
To raise a lament for the lost King.
His tale began in the time of Frumgar.

Barahir

Frumgar was still in the wilds of Rhovanion when Angmar, the Witch King,
Warred with the Kingdom of Arthedain, eager to vanquish the remnants of Arnor:
Such was his strength that Arvedui's armies were broken and Fornost
Fell to its foes from the East. In that winter the King held the dwarf mines
Far in the mountains, but hunger compelled him to go to the Lossoth,
Dwellers on ice, and to beg food. There he was lost in the shipwreck,
Arthedain's last king, last of the Dunedain kings of the Northland.
North with the spring came the armies of Gondor, carried in tall ships,
Led by Eärnur, the son of Eärnil the King-by-Election.
Landing in Lindon, this Captain of Gondor took counsel with Círdan,
Planned a campaign for the conquest of Angmar the realm and its Witch King,
Sending to Elrond, the Master of Rivendell, messengers, grey elves
Skilful in woodcraft and cunning to slip through the traps of the Ringwraith.
Son of the herald who pled for the aid of the Valar in battle,
Elrond was eager to give aid himself, and he sent out horsemen,
Led by Glorfindel, to join with the forces of Gondor and Lindon
When they arrived at the city of Fornost Erain, where the Witch King
Kept state, throned in Arvedui's palace. Thus eastward and westward
Allied avengers of Arnor converged on the Fortress of Fornost.

Aiming to crush this alliance before it could trouble his conquests,
Angmar dispatched great forces to battle on Evendim's lake shore,

Blocking Eärnur and Círdan before they could join with Glorfindel.
Wisely expecting that he might attack while they seemed to be weak, the
Captains had kept ten troops of their horse to the east of the hills. When
Battle was joined, this reserve rode north. As the Nazgûl's
Army was losing control of the field and grew careless, the horsemen
Burst from their hiding and fell on them, doing great slaughter and routing
Most of the enemy. Some fled back to the home of their dark lord,
Carn Dûm. These few Eärnur the Captain pursued with his riders,
Chasing them eastward and northward until they were nearing the Ringwraith's
Castle, and there overtaking the cowards. Eärnur might even
So have been vanquished, his troops being weary: but then from the east came
Valiant Glorfindel with Rivendell's fresh spears. Trapped once again, the
Soldiers of Angmar were slaughtered, its army destroyed, to the last orc.
Then, though, the Witch King turned to the battle himself: and the great dread
Wrapped like a mantle around him was stronger than hundreds of spearmen,
Putting to flight all the men of the West he encountered in riding.
Straight through the press to the Captain of Gondor he rode in his fury,
Shrieking his threats, yet Eärnur the Prince felt small fear of the Nazgûl;
Steady as rock he awaited the King. But the dread of the Ringwraith
Fell on his horse and it bolted, bearing him far ere he calmed it.
Laughter that seared to the marrow and tore at the heart in its hopeless
Mocking of everything living and beautiful poured from the black shape,
Laughter as cruel as that of his master the Lord of the One Ring.
Then, as he triumphed, Glorfindel the Golden, who fought with the Balrog

High in the mountains while Gondolin burned, and defeated the demon,
Though at the cost of his own life—now this Glorfindel, reborn, came
Riding a white horse, down on the Nazgûl, shade of a mere man.
Seeing him, Angmar took flight and escaped in the shadows of nightfall.

Noble Eärnur by then had returned and was eager to follow;
Calmly Glorfindel restrained him and said, as one granted a vision,
“Do not pursue him! He will not return to this kingdom, for far off
Yet is his doom, nor will man’s hand bring on his fall.” But Eärnur
Thought on his anger and pride, and the elf-lord’s words did not move him.
Nor was the pride of the Witch King less, and the loss of his kingdom
Filled him with hatred for Eärnil’s son, so that, years in the future,
When he was Lord of the Sorcerer’s Tower and Chief of the Nazgûl,
Still he sought ways of destroying Eärnur, the Captain of Gondor,
Even if Gondor itself should escape him, unscathed by his plotting.

So when Eärnil the King died, placing the crown in his son’s hands,
Messages came to the Tower of Guard from the Valley of Morgul
Calling Eärnur a craven and challenging him to a duel.

Then was the new King wrathful and ready to rise to the Ringwraith’s
Challenge, but the Mardil the Steward restrained him from trusting the Witch King,
Devious servant of Sauron who followed the treacherous Morgoth,
Both of them traitors to Eru the Blesséd, the Father of All Things.

Seven years passed and Eärnur the Captain grew restless with statecraft.

Taking no wife and preferring the field to the court and the palace.

All this Angmar observed from his Tower, and polished his old plot,

Trusting to time and the malice of Gorthaur his master to wear down

Even the powerful counsels of Mardil Voronwë Arandur.

Then at an opportune time he repeated his challenge,

Once again calling Eärnur a coward, and claiming as well that

Now age sat on the crown-circled brow of the Dotard of Gondor,

Leaving him feeble and helpless to take up the challenge to combat,

Even if he had the courage to do so. Vainly then Mardil

Spoke to his master of duty, rehearsed all the ruses the Witch King

Used to ensnare men, told of the dooms of the heroes who took arms

Singly against all the powers of Morgoth or Sauron the Wolf-lord—

Húrin still fighting when all of the men of his family lay slain,

Royal Fingolfin defying the hammer of Melkor the dark god,

Even Gil-Galad and mighty Elendil when fighting as allies.

Nothing his Steward could say would dissuade King Eärnur.

Leaving the crown of the sea-kings safe in the lap of his dead sire,

Royal Eärnur, with only a few of his fellows beside him,

Rode from the City of Guard to the Gates of the Morgul tower:

Trusting to strength and to honor, he went forth, never to come back.

Five hundred winters have passed and the Kingdom of Gondor is still ruled

Wisely and well by the Stewards who even now act in the King's Name.

Narrator A

So Barahir sang, bard of the Stoneland,
Making the king's fate keen in men's minds,
Piercing their hearts with pride's hazards.

Narrator B

But one of the heroes who heard the shaper,
And not the least of the lords in that hall,
Marked in the song no message of warning:
He only heard of honor overcome,
Of valor in arms vanquished by craft.

Baldor

How can we sit, safe in this hall,
And sing of the loss of such a lord,
Without being stirred to strike some new blow
Against the darkness that doomed the King?

Narrator A

And Ælfward spoke, answering Baldor:

Ælfward

Six thousand moons have seen Minas Ithil
Marred with the sign of the Morgul skull;
A thousand score suns have stately set
On Minas Anor, now the Tower of Guard.
Who has found strength to strike at that darkness
In the age that has passed since Eärnur was lost?
Who even has found a fit field for battle
With loathsome Angmar the Lord of the Dead?
Have we not heard how high-born Glorfindel
Saw that the Nazgûl never would perish
At any man's hands, not even a hero's?
Why then should we hope that honor once lost
To the black Dwimmerlaik can be redeemed?
Should we not think that honor still ours
Which darkest treachery takes by deception?
I do not think ours is the time
When the Witch King will pay wergeld for Eärnur;
Nor will the wise wish to repeat
The folly of that king's final encounter
With evil in all of its ancient power.

Narrator B

So he spoke, and the speech burned
Hot as a brand in Baldor's breast.

Narrator A

Then the King spoke, son of Eorl:

Brego

Ælfward, my shield-thane, wise is your counsel
And you think deeply on darkling questions.
Brave are the hearts and bold are the spirits
Met for this meal 'round Meduseld's fire:
All would be loath to leave unavenged
Betrayal of kinsman, of king or of lord;
Yet I hope none is so haughty-minded
That he would abandon blood-oaths and duty
Vainly to wrestle with the vile Ringwraith.
You have well shown us how we should reason,
Balancing grim debts against dark deceit.
We must hold back the mighty horror,
But it is not ours to overthrow him.

Narrator B

Thus all men could see the King had well read
The thoughts of Baldor, brave and beloved,
And would forestall, if somehow he might,
The lust for glory of the Leoding,
Making his words and his wise counsels
Reins, bit and bridle for Baldor the Bold.

Narrator A

But the wyrd of Melkor mastered the King's word,
And in his pride the Prince chose
Rather to follow his fame than his father.
So he stood up, sun-bright his harness,
Knightly his bearing, ignoble his speech:

Baldor

Now are my young eyes open and I see
How quickly the demons darken our counsels
Once we first feel the forfeits of age.
Would we not call the councilor craven
Who bade his king break off a battle

Because he had found the foeman was faithless?
 Or who could love a lord who loathed
 To struggle against a stronger force,
 To lay down his life for love of glory
 With cheerful heart, though hope be lost?

Narrator B

Even then Ælfward worked to keep peace:

Ælfward

Leoding, glory grows both in battle
 And in a ring-giver's raising a roof beam,
 Building a high hall to house his thanes,
 Shepherding wisely a wide-spreading flock.

Baldor

Yet "sheep grow like shepherds and shepherds like sheep"—
 So slowly the herdsman sinks into the herd
 But hauberk and helm, and hand strong in battle,
 And heart that defies the dark, doom, and death,
 Not wasting in dotage but daring the war play—

These make a man, these make a master.

These I will have, or will have nothing.

You called loathly Angmar the Lord of the Dead,

Yet he rules in Mordor, many leagues hence,

While here in the Riddermark, realm of Eorl,

There is a wood where the word of our king

Is nothing before the name of the dead.

At Dwimorberg's base a door stands closed

Barred fast to me and to Brego the King.

The dead made it, and the dead keep it,

And I, for one, deem that the Dwimmerlaik's work

Or that of his master, the man-hating spirit.

It may be this hall has not the heart

To strike for the honor of Eärnur King,

Or drive from our mountains the darkness that mocks us:

But I cannot sit here, safe at this table.

I must go out from Meduseld's splendor

And will not come back to the King's Council

Until I have passed the Paths of the Dead.

Narrator B

He spoke so, and strode from the hall,

Forsaking at once his father's heart

And the King's hearth, heedless of warmth
Of fire or of friendship. His fate was upon him
As he left men's knowledge and night took him in.

Narrator A

No man dared stop the Marshal of Rohan,
Unless at the bidding of Brego his father.
Yet he did not speak, though some said later
That tears filled his eyes as they followed his son:
But he sat as still as a stone statue.

Culver, Indiana, 15 May 1987