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"As a father you shall be to me": Examining the Anglo-Saxon Oath in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*

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“As a father you shall be to me”:

Examining the Anglo-Saxon Oath in J.R.R Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*

By

Brady Allen Kruse

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I express my thanks to my mentor Dr. Christopher Snyder for showing firsthand to me the lord-thane relationship.

Many historians have recognized the oath as a defining axiom of Anglo-Saxon society. Contrary to later chivalric oaths that were influential in feudal politics, the Anglo-Saxon oath operates on a deeper, more personal connection between lord and thane, encapsulating Anglo-Saxon virtues and forming a crucial piece in Anglo-Saxon culture. Law codes, literature, and history all reference the multi-faceted Anglo-Saxon oath.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, several Anglo-Saxon influences can be found, from names to the characteristics of his heroes, and including the Anglo-Saxon oath. Tolkien possessed a thorough understanding of the Anglo-Saxon oath and represented it in his work in a sense faithful to both the literary and historic understandings of it. In this thesis, I aim to conduct a thorough analysis of the representation of oaths in Anglo-Saxon society and the *Lord of the Rings*, contributing to the overall discourse on the Anglo-Saxon influence on Tolkien's body of work and how he draws from historical sources for literary purposes, through a close reading of the scene in which Merry offers his service to Théoden. I argue that the Anglo-Saxon oath is expressed through the intimate bond that the thane Merry feels to his lord Théoden. This influence further defines their relationship via a historical understanding of Tolkien's literary work, adding the more formally defined dimension of the oath to the already devout love and respect that Merry demonstrates towards Théoden.

Tolkien drew influence from many historic cultures for the *Lord of the Rings,* thus it is necessary to draw distinction between influences rather than accidentally blend them together, including later chivalric influences. In a parallel scene, Pippin offers his service to Denethor in a much more rigid, formal ceremony more reminiscent of a later chivalric oath. This scene serves a stark contrast to the oath taken between Merry and Théoden, augmenting Tolkien's

representation of the Anglo-Saxon oath through a seemingly similar, but in actuality strikingly different, pledge taken by Pippin to Denethor.

From a literary perspective, an examination of the Anglo-Saxon oath taken between Merry and Théoden contributes to the overall discourse of the complementary characters of Merry-Pippin and Denethor-Théoden. Thus far in the *Lord of the Rings*, Merry and Pippin have acted together, accompanying Frodo and rallying the Ents. When Pippin leaves for Gondor, however, their futures split and run in parallel. While their fates are relatively similar, the stories of Merry and Pippin feature meticulous differences that contribute to their overall literary characterization. Both hobbits pledge themselves to a lord, play a role in the Battle of Pelennor Fields, and, ultimately, are present for the deaths of their lords. Théoden and Denethor are represented in a similar fashion—both rulers are psychologically manipulated by Sauron, lose their sons to the forces of Mordor, receive a pledge of service from a hobbit, and die in the company of their new thane. However, while Théoden and Merry enjoy a paternal relationship and Théoden dies uplifted in glory by his subjects, Denethor and Pippin's relationship is overall impersonal, and Denethor dies in a frenzy of grief and confusion, likely killing his other son in the process if not for Pippin. These marked differences in characterization are archetypically demonstrated in their respective oath-taking scenes: Merry and Théoden creating an Anglo-Saxon bond based in kinship and love that continues for the rest of their relationship versus Pippin pledging fealty to Denethor in a rigid and cold ceremony that establishes their linked future.

In short, I am to examine the representation of the Anglo-Saxon oath in the *Lord of the Rings* and craft a literary argument on how this historical device shapes our perception of Merry and Théoden. The Anglo-Saxon oath relies on a strong personal devotion of a thane to a lord and

embodies the virtues of Anglo-Saxon culture. These deep relationships served a foundational role in Anglo-Saxon society, defining political structures and law codes. However, these oaths are significantly different than the prominently politically motivated chivalric oaths. Tolkien represents both in the *Lord of the Rings,* the Anglo-Saxon oath with Merry and Théoden and the chivalric oath with Pippin and Denethor. While the concrete plots of Merry-Théoden and Pippin-Denethor may be similar, the oath-taking scenes demonstrates the future nature of their relationships. Therefore, studying the Anglo-Saxon influence on the oath taken between Merry and Théoden contributes to the literary characterization of the two, using surviving Anglo-Saxon history and literature to set the foundation for their relationship and highlighting Tolkien's love for the Anglo-Saxons as a crucial piece in understanding the *Lord of the Rings*.

Literature Survey

Various scholars have drawn links between Tolkien and Anglo-Saxon culture with arguments that tend to be rooted in either language or replicated historical records. For example, Michael D.C. Drout argues that Tolkien intended to create the missing Anglo-Saxon mythology, writing "[t]he phrase 'a mythology for England' has been so closely associated with J.R.R. Tolkien's fiction…that by now it is a foregone conclusion that Tolkien intended for his literary works to create 'a body of more or less connected legend'" (Drout 229). Drout crafts this argument by drawing upon Anglo-Saxon language and history, noting similarities such as the Angle, Saxon, and Jute invasion led by Hengest and Horsa and the early Tolkien character Ælfwine's journey to the Elvish lands. Also in a relatively historical argument, Christopher Snyder points to the political structure of Middle-earth. Snyder draws similarities between the structure of Middle-earth—the several small kingdoms of Gondor, Rohan, and others—and the

Heptarchy of eighth century England. Further, Snyder notes that “a *bretwalda*…sometimes ruled as an ‘overking,’ as the King of Gondor once did with the kingdoms of the West,” mirroring such Anglo-Saxon *bretwaldas* as Rædwald and Alfred the Great (Snyder 53). In terms of language, numerous examples of Anglo-Saxon influence can be found in the *Lord of the Rings*. A philologist at heart, Tolkien frequently drew from Old English for names and words: Éomer translating to “excellent [with] horse,” Théoden to “lord of the people,” (Snyder 56) or Beorn being an Old English blend of “bear” and “man” (Shippey 31-32). Tolkien’s work is brimming with literary examples of Old English homage, but preeminently, they serve as a clear indicator of Anglo-Saxon influence on Tolkien.

While language and history are common tools for linking Tolkien and the Anglo-Saxons, some scholars have noted the similarities between the akin “war culture” of Middle-earth and the Anglo-Saxons. Pritha Kundu makes the general argument that “Tolkien’s own passionate and critical engagement with the war-literature of the Anglo-Saxons…has gone into the making of his ‘Middle Earth’” (Kundu 2). This war culture of the Anglo-Saxons is multidimensional and well-studied: the emphasis on weapons and armor (Snyder 53), the blending of myth and reality in historical events such as *The Battle of Malden,* and the heroic hubris embodied by Beowulf: “Beowulf’s pride and desire for winning personal glory…makes him refuse co-operation” (Kundu 6). However, for the purpose of this thesis, no cultural influence is more critical than the lord-thane relationship.

Tolkien scholars have also discerned the lord-thane relationship present in Middle-earth, but have yet to thoroughly examine oaths and the scene between Merry and Théoden. Kundu notes, “the relationship of Théoden with his men is drawn upon that of an Anglo-Saxon lord and his thanes” (10). Kundu recognizes that an Anglo-Saxon lord-thane relationship is not solely

practical but relies upon "their relationship [having] great degree of mutual affection and friendship" (8). Kundu focuses on the moral ideal of undying loyalty and the act of gift-giving associated with this relationship, and she uses these traits to paint a wide brush across Middle-earth, noting examples including Frodo-Sam and Gandalf-Théoden. Tom Shippey also writes on the lord-thane relationship, pointing to the respective allegiance-pledging of Merry to Théoden and Pippin to Denethor, noting that a lord-thane relationship certainly exists but with general cultural differences (Shippey 98-99).

While previous scholars such as Kundu have focused broadly on the mirrored characteristics of the lord-thane relationship in Tolkien's work, I look specifically at the oath. While the lord-thane relationship is an *effect* of this oath, I argue that the act of taking an oath in and of itself is remarkable and denotes Anglo-Saxon influence, in terms of both utility and literary description.

While many scholars have written on Tolkien's Anglo-Saxon influences, relatively few have specifically addressed the oath, and those that do apply a fairly loose definition of oaths throughout the *Lord of the Rings*. John Holmes performs a thorough examination of oaths in the *Lord of the Rings*, based on the understanding of oaths referenced in Tacitus's *Germania*. In his essay, Holmes employs a linguistic argument to justify the importance of the oath, arguing that oath-takers are enticed to keep their oaths under fear of extremely harsh repercussion. Further, Holmes blurs the line between an oath of devotion taken between a lord and thane and a simple promise, using Gollum as an example: once bound by the oath [to help Frodo], Gollum does not, in fact, strive to break it, but instead…find[s] a way to destroy Frodo and Sam without violating his oath" (Holmes 254). In a slightly different argument, George Clark argues that Tolkien employs the oath as a heroic character-building device. Clark recognizes the loyalty associated

with an oath, even if this commitment leads to certain death, writing on Bilbo and his agreement to join the dwarves in *The Hobbit:* "[a]ccepting the letter, like making a formal vow, binds Bilbo to a venture that might cost him his life….Bilbo Baggins, like a hero of old, sets out…his commitment to the adventure sealed by a contract as binding as a heroic oath" (Clark 42).

Both of these arguments, however, treat the Anglo-Saxon oath *less* as a binding kinship, a deep emotional loyalty, even through death, between a lord and a thane, and *more* as a general promise that would incur harsh promises if broken; both also employ the oath as a *heroic* characteristic, used to create Anglo-Saxon protagonists who place similar emphasis on the keeping of their vows. My argument differs in a few slight ways. I argue that oaths are not restricted to only heroic characters in moments of development or virtue, but are present as a daily aspect of life, especially those made between lords and thanes. Thus, a true Anglo-Saxon oath in the *Lord of the Rings* acts as *both* a deep personal vow between a lord and thane *and* a secondary political understanding of servitude or alliance between individuals, much more profound and societally impactful than a simple promise.

Historical Understanding of the Oath

In this section, I utilize Anglo-Saxon records to create a working historical definition of the oath. This historic oath is canonized in the surviving Anglo-Saxon literature, used later in a literary argument comparing literary understandings of the oath in surviving Anglo-Saxon written work to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. I argue that Tolkien's work represents the Anglo-Saxon oath in *both* its literary identity *and* its historical understanding. Thus, I analyze historical sources as well.

Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* one of the earliest records of Anglo-Saxon history, provides an account of the intense mutual respect and devotion that the Anglo-Saxons undertook an oath with. Bede recounts the history of the interaction between the King of East Anglia Redwald and Prince Edwin, who would later become king himself, sometime in the early seventh century. Edwin and Redwald's interaction begins with a diplomatic oath: "[Edwin] came to Redwald and asked him for protection against the plots of his powerful enemy. Redwald gave him a ready welcome and promised to do everything he asked" (Bede 126). Here, Bede grants us a very simple definition of an Anglo-Saxon oath. Rather than treaties or threats, the oath serves as the basis for alliance and protection between powerful individuals, in this case, a king and a prince. Regardless, Edwin's enemy, Ethelfrid, upon hearing of this agreement, sent heavy bribes and threats of war if Redwald do not kill Edwin. Redwald, at last, agrees. Bede continues:

> This plot was discovered by a loyal friend of Edwin, who went to his room early one night…[and] warned him of the king's wicked intentions….Edwin replied: "Thank you for your goodwill. But I cannot act as you suggest. I cannot be the first to break the agreement that I have made with so great a king, who has so far done me no harm nor shown any hostility towards me. If I must die, I would rather die by his hand than by a hand less noble. (Bede 126)

Upon learning of his betrayal, Edwin does not deny that he has been betrayed, but instead insists that he cannot be the first to break his agreement with the great king. While this oath was initially made for tactical reason—protection of the prince from King Ethelfrid—there exists a

profound respect between the two oath-takers, a devotion strong enough that it maintains despite leading to imminent death. Of course, one prince's loyalty is not indicative of an entire Anglo-Saxon culture of oaths. Bede's recount of history continues with a second visit by Edwin's loyal friend:

> You can now cast aside your cares and sleep without fear; for the king has had a change of heart. He now intends you no harm, and means to keep the promise that he made you…it was unworthy in a great king to sell his best friend in the hour of need for gold, and worse still to sacrifice his royal honour…. (Bede 128)

Redwald keeps his oath, but notably not in the face of physical retaliation or threats against him. Redwald notes that the absolute worst consequence of oathbreaking is the sacrificing of his "royal honour" (Bede 128). Here, Bede touches briefly upon the morality associated with oaths—loyalty between oath-takers is seen as an extremely prominent virtue in Anglo-Saxon society, and the oath serves as the basis for it.

Of course, this is not to say that oathbreaking did not carry harsh penalties when it occurred, further demonstrating the importance of the oath. Bede briefly mentions one of Edwin's sons Eadfrid who, after making a vow to the warrior Penda, was "subsequently in breach of a solemn promise put…to death during the reign of Oswald" (Bede 140). Bede provides another account of oathbreaking later. The kings Oswy and Oswin are waging war on each other. Oswin, realizing he is outmatched, hides in the house of the nobleman Hunwald. Then, "Hunwalrd betrayed Oswin…to Oswy, who amid universal disgust, ordered his commander Ethelwin to put them both to death" (Bede 165). Despite *benefitting* from Hunwald's

betrayal, oathbreaking is seen as such a dishonorable offense that Oswy has both his combatant Oswin *and* the betrayer Hunwald put to death.

These historical accounts from Bede paint a complex and multifaceted picture of the oath. Formally, the oath acts as the basis for political relationships in the absence of formal treaties. The oath also serves as a legal basis, being used to justify putting someone to death. Most importantly, the oath is closely tied to honor. Gregory Laing notes, "the oath, therefore, exists at the intersection not only of a legal structure dependent on truth, but also a system of morality" (28). Edwin and Oswy's actions seem to suggest that, while the legal punishment for breaking an oath is severe (usually being executed), the moral corruption associated with oathbreaking is *even more* influential. Oswy's disgust and Edwin's devotion demonstrate that death is an afterthought compared to being seen as a traitor to an oath.

However, Bede's accounts of oaths tend to be personal accounts between rulers who are already associated, which not all oaths were made between. Recall, Redwald refers to Edwin as his "best friend" (Bede 128). Is there, then, a difference between betraying one's friend and betraying one's lord? Furthermore, are oaths truly a *foundational* piece of Anglo-Saxon society, or simply used in Anglo-Saxon stories as a heroic trait inspired by extraordinary instances of devotion?

Linguistically, the word thane provides historical context for oaths and indicates the more concrete exchange of goods or services that occurs between oath-takers. Thane, in modern English, is translated from *thegn* (Wright 45). The precursor to the *thegn* was the *gesith,* replaced by *thegn* around A.D. 750 (Loyn 530). Per H.R. Loyn, "*gesith* was used in two senses in the early eighth century, namely, that of a retainer and that of a holder of an estate" (Loyn 530). In addition, *gesiths* were often placed in charge of military forces in their region (536). In the latter

eighth century, *thegn* emerges as the active term for a personal retainer of a king. However, *thegn* takes on the additional meaning of "a man connected to a superior by a personal bond…who would normally be engaged in active and energetic personal service" (Loyn 544). Loyn adds that *thegn* often, but not unilaterally, involves military service (545). Other scholarship on *thegns* denotes a land-owning requirement. Denis Sukhino-Khomenko quotes a surviving Old English legal tract*, "*if a layman prospered so that he had fully five hides of his own property…he was worthy of a thegn's rights ever after. [A thegn] afterwards might represent his lord in various obligations with his initial oath and handle his litigation, wherever he must" (26). There is certainly then a political exchange behind thaneship—land ownership, military power, even an elevated social status in return for military or personal service to a lord (Sukhino-Khomenko 30). Bede and other historical accounts, however, demonstrates that these tangible incentives for thaneship are secondary to the kinship felt between a lord and thane.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records an account involving Cynewulf and his thanes that again shows that tangible incentives are secondary to a thane's love for their lord, even showing that thanes would willingly die for their lord. Cynewulf's rival Cyneheard traps Cynewulf at *Meretun* and kills him, which alerts Cynewulf's surviving thanes. Per the *Chronicle*, "[t]hen by the woman's outcry, the king's thegns became aware of the disturbance and ran to the spot, each as he got ready. And the atheling [Cyneheard] made an offer to each of money and life; and not one of them would accept it. But they continued to fight until they all lay dead" (*ASC* 757 A.D.). Later, more of Cynewulf's thanes arrive: "[a]nd then the atheling offered them money and land on their own terms….Then they replied that no kinsman was dearer to them than their lord" (*ASC* 757 A.D.). After Cynewulf's death, his multiple thanes—not simply a single dear friend—refused to betray their lord on two distinct occasions, many of them dying with their lord. Again,

while Cynewulf and his thanes' alliance entailed military service, kinship and loyalty are the most prominent aspects of their oath. Richard Abels provides more historical evidence of oaths in the vow taken between King Alfred and the Danes, suggesting that oaths were a uniquely Anglo-Saxon concept that later meshed with Christianity: "the pagan vikings [sic] must have appeared untrustworthy in the extreme to the English. How could one deal with a foe to whom oaths were only words?" (149). Alfred resolves the issue and further demonstrates the intense devotion that oaths commanded, even intertwining with religious beliefs: "[a]n oath was necessary to bind the enemy with supernatural fetters….To bind heathens one needed something that they believed sacred" (149).

Various other oaths are mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, often with diplomatic motivations rather than purely a pledge of service, but nonetheless founded in mutual respect: oaths for peace between nations, such as those sworn to King Alfred by the thane Ceolwulf (*ASC* 878 C), an oath that a surrendering king would be baptized (*ASC* 879 C) or an alliance between lords, "the kings met at Alney and established their friendship there with both pledge and with oath" (*ASC* 1016 C,D,E). While the formal oath of service between a lord and a thane is perhaps the most customary example of Anglo-Saxon oaths, oaths are demonstrated in a wide variety of agreements and were a foundational piece of Anglo-Saxon society.

A scholars' examination of surviving Anglo-Saxon law codes is evidence for the incredibly ingrained nature of oaths in Anglo-Saxon society, both culturally and legally. Frederick Pollock alludes to the oath in his survey of historic evidence: "[s]ome of the so-called laws are merely semi-official or private compilations, but their formal profession of an authority they really had not makes no [sic] difference to their value as evidence of what the compilers understood the customary law to have been" (31). Pollock also writes, "[a]n ordinance of

Æthelstan treats a 'lordless man' as a suspicious if not dangerous person; if he has not a lord who will answer for him, his kindred must find him one," suggesting that an oath to a lord was the ordinary, not the exception (34). Oaths are further discussed in a review of the Anglo-Saxon judicial institutions for freemen, "[the] [o]ath was the primary mode of proof, an oath going not to the truth of specific fact, but to the justice of the claim or defence as a whole" (Pollock 43). Laing agrees with this assertion, "the judicial oath comprises the most significant collection of oath-taking in regard to both the frequency of usage and the authority of the oath within the legal process" (33).

Thus, I arrive at a historic definition of the oath. An oath was a foundational piece of Anglo-Saxon society, serving as a basis for both legal proceedings and political structure. Typically made between lords and thanes, the oath formally enacts an exchange of political goods, oftentimes acts such as military service, autonomy over land, and personal retainment. More importantly, however, an oath depends upon a strong sense of kinship between oath-takers, and thus serves as a benchmark of personal morality: loyalty to a lord through an oath is the utmost virtue in Anglo-Saxon society, and the honor sacrificed in oathbreaking is typically considered worse than the actual punishment of death. Oaths and their associated principles of character are critically important to Anglo-Saxon culture and are represented throughout their surviving literature.

Merry and Théoden's Oath

With a historic understanding of the oath now established, I move to the literary and begin analyzing Tolkien's work through this historical lens. In particular, I will closely examine the relationship between Théoden and Merry, especially so the essential, albeit short, pledging of

service by Merry to Théoden shortly before riding to Gondor's aid in the chapter "The Passing of the Grey Company." Merry has been separated from Pippin not long before, splitting their joint storyline and now continuing in parallel, complementary fashion.

Rohan as a whole is extremely reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon culture. In a letter, Tolkien, while discussing the accents of the Rohirrim, notes "[t]he Rohirrim no doubt (as our ancient English ancestors in a similar state of culture and society) spoke….," implying that his depiction of the Rohirrim is directly influenced by the Anglo-Saxon ancestors of the English (*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* No. 193). Naturally, the connection between the Rohirrim and the Anglo-Saxons is established at the very first glimpse of Rohan. Shortly before meeting Théoden in "The King of the Golden Hall," Aragorn "chant[s] softly in a slow tongue….*Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing? / Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing? / …They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow;"* (Tolkien, *LOTR* 508). This song quickly establishes the dark atmosphere surrounding Rohan while echoing an *ubi sunt* motif from *The Wanderer,* an elegy from the Exeter Book: "[w]here has the horse gone? where is the rider? where is the giver of gold? / Where are the seats of the feast? where are the joys of the hall? / ….How the time passed away, slipped into nightfall as if it had never been!" ("The Wanderer" 92-96). Particularly of note is *The Wanderer'*s and Aragorn's mention of a missing horse and rider, implying that this similarity is not coincidental.

In Théoden's great hall, Tolkien begins presenting Théoden as a prototypical Anglo-Saxon lord, similar to those such as Hrothgar in Beowulf.. Shippey makes arguments on Théoden's Anglo-Saxon influence in the design of his chambers, writing, "[i]t has a mosaic floor and painted pillars. Its most obvious feature, though, is the 'Many woven cloths' on the walls,….All these features echo the hall of King Hrothgar in *Beowulf*." (99). In addition, the

company is told by Hama, "[h]ere I must bid you lay aside your weapons before you enter," (Tolkien, *LOTR* 510), exactly the same procedure as seen in *Beowulf* when Beowulf and his company are given instructions to, "move forward / to meet Hrothgar, / in helmets and armour, / but shield must stay here and spears be stacked / until the outcome of the audience is clear," (Heaney 395-398). Michael R. Kightley provides a linguistic argument for Théoden as an Anglo-Saxon lord. When discussing with the guards of Rohan, one mentions, "[i]t is the will of Théoden King that none should enter his gates, saves those who know our tongue and are our friends" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 508). While King Théoden would be the expected placement of his title, Théoden King is reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon texts, for example "Æbelwine ealdorman" (Kightley 126). Furthermore, "Théoden" itself translates to "lord" or "protector of the people" (Kightley 126). The similarities between Théoden and Anglo-Saxon lords are numerous: his military experience reflecting King Alfred's "innovative spirit that were to make him a great warlord and king" (Abels 124); his sword eventually returning "firmness and strength…to his thin arm," (Tolkien, *LOTR* 517); the mirrored scenes of Théoden's funeral with Beowulf's (Porck 67); and Aragorn's description of him as "a gentle heart and a great king [who] kept his oaths" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 869), to name a few.

In terms of oaths, it is clear that Théoden enjoys both formal allegiance from his thanes as well as a personal devotion from them. Théoden is frequently referred to as "master" or "dear lord", but the allegiance of his thanes runs deeper than reverential titles. Kightley draws an interesting comparison between the doorward Háma and his counterparts in Beowulf. Háma, while bound by Théoden's orders, is *more* concerned with his lords' wellbeing, going against his orders in an act of care for his lord in an act of virtuous disobedience: "'I understood that Éomer was to be set free…Yet, since he was free again, and he a Marshal of the Mark, I brought him his

sword as he bade me.' 'To lay at your feet, my lord,' said Éomer" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 517). According to Kightley, Háma is not alone in his virtuous disobedience: "Háma arming Éomer in the belief that it is in Théoden's best interests is an exaggeration of the duty of a guard to evaluate a situation in anticipation of the well-being of his lord, as expressed by Wulfgar and Hrothgar's coast guard" (128). The coast guard claims, "[m]y job is to watch the waves for raiders, / any danger to the Danish shore," and expresses doubt at Beowulf's claim of being able to defeat Grendel, "'[a]nyone with gumption / and a sharp mind will take the measure / of two things: what's said and what's done,'" before ultimately allowing them to pass despite his doubts (Heaney 242-243, 287-289). Wulfgar, too, is flexible in his performance of his lord's orders. Wulfgar is tasked with intercepting those seeking an audience with Hrothgar, yet he immediately takes Beowulf's message to Hrothgar pleading, "do not refuse them, but grant them a reply" (Heaney 367). Based on the historical understanding of the Anglo-Saxon oath, while following orders is important, an overall consideration for the lord's wellbeing reigns supreme. Thus, while both Háma and his counterparts Wulfgar and the coast guard break their lord's orders, they do so out of a belief that defying their lord's orders will ultimately benefit the lord, what I consider to be virtuous disobedience. For Háma, this is the belief that Gandalf can break the magic possessing Théoden, for Wulfgar and the coast guard, it is the hope that Beowulf can defeat Grendel. Regardless, oathbreaking still entails a certain, in this case relatively minor, punishment: "'Call Háma to me. Since he proved untrusty as a doorward, let him become an errand-runner. The guilty shall bring the guilty to judgement', said Théoden" (516). Théoden cannot reward oathbreaking, but is merciful to his disobedient thane, knowing that Háma meant only to act in consideration of his lord. Through Háma, among many other Rohirrim throughout the *Lord of the Rings*, we see the characteristic markings of an Anglo-Saxon oath to a lord.

However, oaths were not always strictly made between a lord and thane; oaths could also create alliances between kingdoms, as also seen in the *Lord of the Rings*. We see an example of an oath made between Rohan and Gondor later through Théoden's response to The Red Arrow of Gondor. Hirgon pleads, "indeed our case is desperate. My lord does not issue any command to you, he begs you only to remember old friendship and oaths long spoken, and for your own good to do all that you may…" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 799). This scenario reads similar to the opening of *Beowulf,* Hrothgar suffering through Gendrel's "lonely war" (Heaney 164) and the subsequent aid from the Geats through Beowulf and his plan "to sail the swan's road and search out that king, / the famous prince who needed defenders…" (Heaney 200-201). Beowulf again invokes the notion of allegiance between nations in his dialogue with the coast guard: "'[w]e belong by birth to the Geat people / and owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac… / We come in good faith to find your lord / and nation's shield, the son of Halfdane… / We have arrived here on a great errand / to the lord of the Dane's." (Heaney 260-271). An examination of Tolkien's letters shows that this similarity is not accidental nor meant to suggest a strictly political alliance between Gondor and Rohan: "Grendel is an enemy who has attacked the centre of the realm….This is something quite different and more horrible than a 'political' invasion of equals….[C]ompared with [Grendel] even the long politically hostile Danes and Geats were Friends, on the same side," akin to the invasion of Mordor fostering a friendship between Rohan and Gondor (*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* No. 183). With Rohan and Gondor, we see another example of Anglo-Saxon oaths in Théoden's actions, coming to aid and honoring his oath through a sense of loyalty to Denethor.

Moving to the oath-taking scene between Merry and the lord Théoden, the general nature of Merry's relationship to Théoden is extremely akin to the Anglo-Saxon lord-thane relationship. Shippey briefly touches upon the pledge between Merry and Théoden, "the hobbit offers his

sword to the man, who accepts it and returns it…Merry's action is spontaneous, prompted only by 'love for this old man', and it is received in the same spirit….There is no doubt about the binding quality of what has happened, but it takes few words" (Shippey 98). Indeed, we see this kinship foreshadowed shortly before the oath is taken. Merry exerts humility in his status as the Grey Company departs for Minas Tirith: "'[d]on't leave me behind!' said Merry. 'I have not been of much use yet; but I don't want to be laid aside….I don't think the Riders will want to be bothered with me now. Though, of course, the king did say that I was to sit by him when he came to his house and tell him all about the Shire.'" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 773). Merry recognizes his inability in battle, yet finds value in personal retainment to Théoden, even if that action is simply storytelling about the Shire. Merry continues to faithfully serve Théoden until Théoden's death, including the same virtuous disobedience displayed by Háma—Merry pleads to join Théoden as he leaves for battle, "'[b]ut why, lord, did you receive me as a swordthain, if not to stay by your side?" before sneaking along regardless with the help of a fellow thane of Théoden (and later receiving Théoden's forgiveness for his disobedience) (Tolkien, *LOTR* 804). Service to Théoden, then, becomes Merry's most important role, according to Colleen Donnelly, "[further] enhanc[ing] the theme of fealty through the sheer number of characters who are defined by their loyal service" (Donnelly 21).

Keeping with Anglo-Saxon literary tradition, Merry displays humility and finds heroic purpose through service to his lord. Merry reiterates his devotion in his dialogue with Théoden and recognizes that service to him is now his most prominent role, "'I am afraid I am only in everybody's way,' he stammered; 'but I should like to do anything I could, you know'" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 777). Keith Taylor, when describing Anglo-Saxon heroes, argues that "most Anglo-Saxon epic heroes achieve their status because they overcome a series of obstacles despite others' low

expectations of them" (Taylor vi). Furthermore, though typically classified as Middle English, Taylor makes an argument for an Old English reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, "given this peculiarly "English" notion of the heroic ethos, I believe that Sir Gawain's own inglorious reputation…is the stuff of which the earliest English heroes were made….Gawain's troubled reputation shows him to be of Arthur's retainers the knight with the greatest 'heroic potential'" (Taylor 100-101). With this Anglo-Saxon interpretation of *Sir Gawain,* I argue that Merry, as an Anglo-Saxon "hero" who must defy expectations through his oath to Théoden and recognize his "heroic potential," is framing himself in the same way as Gawain at the start of *Sir Gawain.* Gawain pleads to his uncle Arthur to accept the challenge on his behalf, saying that "save your blood in my body I boast of no virtue; / and since this affair is so foolish that it nowise befits you / …accord it then to me!" (Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 30). Gawain, in a translation by Tolkien, notes "I am the weakest, I am aware, and in wit feeblest, / and the least loss, if I live not" (Tolkien 29). Arthur accepts Gawain's request in an act of kinship, "he lovingly relinquished it, and lifting his hand / gave him God's blessing, and graciously enjoined him" (Tolkien 30). By the end of story, through his challenge with the Green Knight, which was itself inspired by the love of his lord, Gawain is instead praised as "Gawain the bold" and welcomed lovingly by his king (Tolkien 96-97). A similar development is made with Wiglaf. The inexperienced thane, while fighting the dragon, "display[s] his inborn bravery and strength," and is later referred to as "that thane unequalled for goodness" (Heaney 2966, 2720). In Tolkien's work, Merry experiences a similar rise. Due to his fierce devotion to Théoden, Merry plays a critical role in the Battle of Pelennor fields, assisting Éowyn to kill the Witch-king and later knighted for his actions: "'what of the king's esquire, the Halfling? Éomer, you shall make him a knight of the Riddermark, for he is valiant!'" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 868). In

these examples, the Anglo-Saxon "heroes" are meek to begin, before recognizing their heroic potential through an oath made to, and actions inspired by a love for, their lord.

In the dialogue between Merry and Théoden, there is much ado with weapons, swords, and other pieces of war equipment; while, formally, Anglo-Saxon oaths usually implied military servitude, weapons and armor are also representative of the gift-giving nature of Anglo-Saxon oaths. Appropriately, Théoden immediately accepts Merry's offer of service, followed quickly by the bestowing of gifts fit for a hobbit. Théoden tells Merry "'I have had a good hill-pony made ready for you….Is there gear of war in this place, Éomer, that my sword-thain [sic] could use?'" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 777). Tolkien alludes to the symbolic sword, as well as a purposeful use of the word "thain." In the prologue of the *Lord of the Rings,* Tolkien writes that "Hobbits took the land for their own, and they chose from their own chiefs a Thain [sic] to hold the authority of the king that was gone" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 5). In English linguistics, "thain" serves as a linguistic intermediary between the "theyn" and the modern "thane" (Welna 4). Thus, the use of "thain" is two-fold: one, it follows the tradition of Middle-earth in establishing a connection between a Hobbit "thain" and a king, and two, it alludes to the now antiquated tradition of oaths that Théoden is rightfully familiar with. Gift-giving is hinted at throughout Anglo-Saxon literature: in *The Wanderer*, the speakers laments the loss of his "giver of gold," (92); *The Dream of the Rood*'s speaker says that the Lord's thanes "adorned me with gold and silver" (76); *The Seafarer* relates "so generous of gifts" with "so loyal lord" (189) within a stanza; Wiglaf refers to Beowulf as his "ring-giver" (Heaney 2635) and "gold-giver" (2652) and notes how Beowulf "made me these lavish gifts-- / and all because he considered us the best / of his arms-bearing thanes" (2640-2642). Taking what has been established about the kinship involved in an Anglo-Saxon oath, the Anglo-Saxon literature suggests that gift-giving is not the primary motivator in

pledging oneself to a lord, but is an important aspect, nonetheless. It is also worth noting that this gift-giving tends to be reciprocal; the thane "gifts" his sword—representing military servitude and loyalty—while the lord gives physical gifts through gold, armor, or weapons. We see further proof of this in *The Battle of Maldon*. The speaker writes "[b]earing his spear. His heart remained heroic / As long as he might hold broad sword and shield. / Now that the time had come for him to fight / Before his lord, he duly kept his vow," poetically creating a symbolic connection between one's vow to his lord and one's ability to hold their sword ("The Battle of Maldon" 59). Thus, Théoden's bestowing of military gifts keeps with Anglo-Saxon tradition, both literally and symbolically.

Linguistically, Tolkien references *Beowulf* in his description of weapons in this scene. Éomer admits that there is no suitable weapons or armor for a hobbit, to which Merry offers his: "'I have a sword,' said Merry, climbing from his seat, and drawing from its black sheath his small bright blade'" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 777). While Merry's offer of his sword was symbolic and he quickly received it back from Théoden, Tolkien appears to be adapting from a literal exchange of weapons found in *Beowulf.* Merry's Barrow-blade is described as, "long, leaf-shaped, and keen, of marvelous workmanship, damasked with serpent-forms in red and gold" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 145). Beowulf, too, receives the sword Hrunting as a gift: "at that moment of need was of no small importance: / the brehon handed him a hilted weapon, / a rare and ancient sword… / [t]he iron blade with its ill-boding patterns / had been tempered in blood" (Heaney 1456-1460). There exist similarities between the two blades, primarily the "ill-boding patterns" featured on both and a figurative connection to blood. Both blades, as well, are offered in spontaneous servitude to a great lord. Thus, Tolkien appears to be mining from an Anglo-Saxon tradition of gift-exchange: the loving lord bestowing gifts of consideration upon his thane and the

thane offering his sword, sometimes for literal use, but more often representative of military service and devotion in battle as seen in *Beowulf*.

Merry then engages in a short ceremony of service with Théoden, similar examples of which are found in Anglo-Saxon poetry and tradition. Tolkien writes, "[f]illed suddenly with love for this old man, he knelt on one knee, and took his hand and kissed it. 'May I lay the sword of Meriadoc of the Shire on your lap, Théoden King?' he cried. 'Receive my service, if you will!'" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 777). While this ritual may initially seem similar to a chivalric homage ceremony, with kissing and the kneeling of a vassal before a lord, (Major 509-510), I argue that this ceremony takes inspiration from Anglo-Saxon texts. I will discuss specifics of the chivalric ceremony in Chapter 4, but note the spontaneous nature of Merry's actions, the loving acceptance by Théoden, and the informality of the exchange as key differences. Gale R. Owen writes that, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, "the mutual pledge…was the occasion for a public ritual," and points to a key passage in *The Wanderer* as evidence (62). In *The Wanderer,* the speaker recollects a similar ceremony: "[h]ow in his mind it seems that he embraces / And kisses his liege lord, and on his knee / Lays hand and head, as when he formerly / Received as a retainer in the hall / Gifts from the throne" ("The Wanderer" 177). While it is certainly possible that Tolkien is blending cultures in this short act by Merry, the kneeling before a lord and kissing of hands when taking an oath certainly derives at least partially from the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

Théoden also blesses Merry which, at first glance, may seem more Christian than Anglo-Saxon; however, examples of blessings by lords can be found in Anglo-Saxon history and literature, especially so the blessing of weapons. Théoden expresses his gratitude to Merry, "'[g]ladly will I take it,' said the king; and laying his long old hands upon the brown hair of the hobbit, he blessed him…'Take your sword and bear it unto good fortune!'" (Tolkien, *LOTR*

777). The word "blessed" is of particular interest here. Many of the blessings of the Anglo-Saxon liturgy are in the Christian tradition, which Théoden is certainly not practicing here (Bedingfield). However, digging into the Pagan tradition of the Anglo-Saxons discovers that this was not always the case. In the Pagan tradition of the Anglo-Saxons, kings possessed the power to make blessings of good fortune. In one example, William Chaney writes, "[i]ndeed, 'mildness of the seasons' and 'abundance of crops' are still among the blessings which rest 'in the king's righteousness' that the Christian Alcuin described to King Aethelred in 793 A.D." (274). Furthermore, Weapons and religion were often intertwined, clarifying why Théoden specifically blessed Merry through his sword. Owen writes, "ritual may have been demanded by the religious cult of that tribe….the burial of a man with his spear may reflect the cult of Woden…he would need that weapon in the next life" (67). Heinrich Härke provides a similar argument, noting that, while spears were the most common, a wide variety of weapons were included in the Anglo-Saxon burial rite (25). The Anglo-Saxons certainly exhibited some sort of metaphysical belief in weapons. This belief goes beyond the afterlife and funeral rituals, however, and "blessed" weapons can be found in use by heroes in Anglo-Saxon literature. As quoted before, Beowulf receives a "rare and ancient sword named Hrunting," (Heaney 1458) that is later said to have "fabulous powers" (although these powers ultimately fail against Grendel's mother) (Heaney 1528). The most prominent influence for Théoden's blessing, however, can be found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Arthur relinquishes the Green Knight's challenge to Gawain: "[Gawain] readily uprose and directly approached, / Kneeling humbly before his highness, and laying hand on the weapon; / and he lovingly relinquished it, and lifting his hand / gave him God's blessing, and graciously enjoined him" (Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 30). This scene is extremely akin to Théoden's blessing—the thane kneeling, the lord laying hand

upon the mighty weapon, then the lord applying a blessing to the thane via the weapon and its use. Unfortunately, one cannot ignore that Arthur gives a *Christian* blessing while Théoden decidedly does not. However, one also cannot ignore the previously examined evidence: one, there is undoubtedly prominent Christian and later medieval influence in *Sir Gawain,* but beneath that layer lies a strong foundation of earlier Anglo-Saxon ideals, including the notion of a lord blessing a thane through their weapon; two, I have established that Anglo-Saxon lords frequently bestowed *both* later Christian and early Pagan blessings; three, there exists a strong Anglo-Saxon belief, demonstrated through the surviving literature, in the metaphysical properties of weapons. Thus, Théoden's blessing of Merry's sword is rooted in Anglo-Saxon tradition.

The term "father" in this scene bestows upon Théoden a role often served by Anglo-Saxon lords for their thane. Reading the closing lines of the scene: "'As a father you shall be to me,' said Merry. 'For a little while,' said Théoden" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 777). "Father" is an unusual term for Merry to use—Merry, an adult hobbit, has just pledged his loyalty to the king of Rohan through an Anglo-Saxon oath, yet does not use a more fitting term such as "lord" or "king." Tolkien's use of "father" here is purposeful and supplements the Anglo-Saxon oath that Merry has just taken, introducing a deeply hidden and interesting element: the role of executor. Anglo-Saxon oaths are binding until death, sometimes even leading directly to it. But after their demise, Anglo-Saxon literature suggests that lords continue to be responsible for handling their thanes' affairs. Beowulf, in his last words before his battle with Grendel's mother, speaks to Hrothgar:

> 'Wisest of kings, now that I have come
>
> to the point of action, I ask you to recall
>
> what we said earlier: that you, son of Halfdane

and gold-friend to retainers, that you, if I should fall

and suffer death while serving your cause,

would act like a father to me afterwards.

If this combat kills me, take care

of my young company, my comrades in arms

And be sure also, my beloved Hrothgar,

To send Hygelac the treasures I received…' (Heaney 1474-1483)

Merry, when taking his oath to Théoden, is in a very similar position as Beowulf, believing that he is about to depart for a battle that he very well may not return from. In addition to the gift-giving, kinship, and pledges of service, Théoden now accepts the handling of Merry's affairs in case of his death, just as Hrothgar for Beowulf, through the usage of the word "father". Of course, multiple translations of *Beowulf* exist, and the odd usage of "father" could be a contextual mistranslation or disagreement. I turn to Tolkien's own translation of *Beowulf* and find the same usage: "if I should at thy need lay down my life, that thou / wouldst ever be to me when I was gone in father's stead" (Tolkien, *Beowulf* 1232-1233). Tolkien's use of "father" here is intentional and further demonstrates the oath Merry makes as Anglo-Saxon.

In both the *Lord of the Rings* and the Anglo-Saxon literature, lords frequently die by their thanes' side and enjoy a final conversation with them, formally ending the oath taken between the two. For both Merry and Wiglaf, they are at their lord's side when their lord is wounded in battle and exchange final words with their lord before their death. Both lords make something of a eulogy and final acceptance of their death to their thanes. Théoden makes a speech to Merry: "'[m]y body is broken, I go to my fathers. And even in their company I shall not now be

ashamed. I felled the black serpent. A grim morn, and a glad day, and a golden sunset!'" going so far as to reference an ancestral afterlife (Tolkien, *LOTR* 842). Beowulf, in a much longer speech, lists his accomplishments to Wiglaf, "'[f]or fifty years / I ruled this nation. No king / of any neighbouring clan would dare / face me with troops… . / All this consoles me, doomed as I am and sickening for death; / because of my right ways, the Ruler of Mankind / need never blame me when the breath leaves my body" (Heaney 2732-2742). Beowulf also references a Pagan ancestral afterlife, "[f]ate swept us away, / sent my whole brave high-born clan / to their final doom. Now I must follow them'" (Heaney 2814-2816).). Both lords request some form of remembrance from their thanes as well. Théoden adopts a modest approach, telling Merry, "[l]ive now in blessedness; and when you sit in peace with your pipe, think of me! For never shall I sit with you in Meduseld, as I promised, or listen to your herb-lore'" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 843). Beowulf, in his brazenness, tasks Wiglaf with the creation of a glorious barrow along the coast that might "'be a reminder among my people'" (Heaney 2805). Tolkien seemed to disapprove of Beowulf's *amour propre,* devoting a brief dialogue in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* to a slight mocking of him by Beorhtnoth's thanes: "'Beorhtnoth we bear not Béowulf [sic] here / no pyres for him, nor piling of mounds; / and the gold will be given to the good abbott'" (Tolkien, *Tolkien Reader* 12). All the same, Tolkien recognized the importance of bestowing some form of legacy unto a thane by a lord. Whereas Beowulf is concerned with a glorious funeral pyre, Théoden bestows Merry with a monument fit for a hobbit—the simple act of smoking his pipe. Through Théoden's final words, Tolkien demonstrates the lasting nature of the Anglo-Saxon oath, continuing to and even *past* the death of the lord.

Though their interactions are few and the length of Merry's service is short, Tolkien saturates their dialogue with literary references to the Anglo-Saxon oath, demonstrating both the

historical nature of Anglo-Saxon oaths and its literary representation. Through the oath Merry makes to Théoden, we see a typical Anglo-Saxon example of a lord-thane oath of devotion, from the deep feeling of kinship to the symbolism involving weapons to service and remembrance stretching far past the physical ending of the relationship. Understanding the historical basis for this relationship develops the characters and joined stories of Merry and Théoden, altering the literary discourse about the two through a historical lens and contributing to the overall understanding of Tolkien's influences.

Pippin's Pledge to Denethor

In parallel to Merry and Théoden's oath, there is another pledge of loyalty undertaken by Pippin to Denethor, albeit drawing from chivalric culture rather than the Anglo-Saxons. Many Tolkien scholars are quick to loop the Merry-Théoden and the Pippin-Denethor pledge into the same category, such as Donnelly: "[t]hrough Merry's service to Theoden [sic], Pippin's to Denethor, and Legolas's and Gimli's to Aragorn, Tolkien enhances the theme of fealty through the sheer number of characters who are defined by their loyal service" (Donnelly 21). Others, however, recognize the dichotomy between the two, such as Shippey: "[t]wo obviously contrasted scenes are the two in which first Pippin and then Merry offer their service to Denethor and Théoden respectively" (Shippey 98). I tend towards Shippey's view and, while speaking on Anglo-Saxon oaths, find it beneficial to detail the contrasting nature of the two scenes more thoroughly. Pippin and Denethor's pledge is much more reminiscent of a later chivalric oath, and through a brief examination of the scene, Tolkien's depiction of the Anglo-Saxon oath is further defined by contrasting it with this medieval oath of fealty, highlighting the boundary between the two.

Whereas Anglo-Saxon oaths are based in kinship and loyalty, medieval oaths are significantly more formal and ceremonious; these oaths tended to be more political in nature than the Anglo-Saxon oaths, made between lords and vassals as a key piece of the feudal system. Kenneth Pennington provides a brief definition of feudal oaths and their obligations:

> [O]aths were employed to cement bonds between lords and vassals in various ways. These ceremonial gestures of allegiance also offered reassurance to lords who were competing for hegemony that their rivals would respect their possessions and holdings…providing for the protection of their persons and property" (Pennington 93).

As for primary sources, Fulbert of Chartres writes on fealty in "On Feudal Obligations":

> He who swears fealty to his lord ought always to have these six things in memory; what is harmless, safe, honorable, useful, easy, practicable…. he should faithfully counsel and aid his lord, if he wishes to be looked upon as worthy of his benefice and to be safe concerning the fealty which he has sworn…. The lord also ought to act toward his faithful vassal reciprocally in all these things. ("On Feudal Obligations: 1020")

Homage, therefore, is reciprocal in nature and entails political gain for both the vassal and the lord, lessening the importance of kinship between the two. Christopher Berg and Melanie Shaw write "homage evolved into a means of securing more wealth. In order for a vassal to acquire more benefices, he must pledge homage to several lords. The personal bond shared between lord and vassal was thus diluted" (6).

The chivalric oath entailed ritualistic ceremony and formality, represented in the *Lord of the Rings* in the scene between Pippin and Denethor. Pippin's oath to Denethor is one of fealty, "'[h]ere do I swear fealty and service to Gondor,'" and Denethor's response, "'I will not forget it, nor fail to reward that which is given: fealty with love…'" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 756). Shippey points out a few prominent differences in the overall tones of the scene, "Pippin's offer has more complex motives: pride, and anger at the 'scorn and suspicion' in Denethor's questioning" (Shippey 99). In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Boromir dies protecting Merry and Pippin from orcs. Shortly before Merry pledges his allegiance to Denethor, he recounts the death of Boromir to Denethor, "'[h]e died to save us, my kinsman Meriadoc and myself…though he fell and failed, my gratitude is none the less'" (Tolkien 755). In addition to pride and anger, Pippin seems to view his service to Denethor as a formal exchange of military service—Boromir to himself and Merry, Pippin therefore to Denethor in Boromir's stead. Pippin later alludes to this transaction: "'[l]ittle service, no doubt…yet such as it is, I will offer it, in payment of my debt'" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 755-756). These multifaceted and complex reasons for service are *vastly* different than Merry's simple "love for this old man" (Tolkien 777). Denethor's response is equally cold. Opposed to the loving acceptance of Théoden, Denethor responds with, "[a] pale smile, like a gleam of cold sun on a winter's evening, passed over the old man's face…'Give me the weapon!' he said" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 756). Denethor then proceeds with the ceremony of fealty, telling Pippin, "'I accept your service….Swear to me now!'" (Tolkien 756). Gandalf explains the ceremony to Pippin, "'[t]ake the hilt,' said Gandalf, 'and speak after the Lord, if you are resolved on this,'" followed by Pippin's oath of fealty to Gondor. (Tolkien 756). Also of note is the ritualistic statement of titles. Instead of the simple "Théoden King," Denethor is known as "Denethor son of Ecthelion, Lord of Gondor, Steward of the High King" (Tolkien 756). Whereas

Merry's oath to Théoden is short and informal, the ceremony between Pippin and Denethor is rigid and procedural, complete with harsh commands of service from Denethor and the symbolic holding of the sword by Pippin.

In Pippin's oath, we see the reciprocal nature of the feudal oath, made tactically for social or political gain. While the Anglo-Saxon oath does imply an exchange of gifts or service, these incentives are secondary to the kinship between a lord and thane. Furthermore, the Anglo-Saxon lord-thane relationship is more flexible in nature—it exists as a general agreement of service and concern for the wellbeing of the lord, rather than strict expectations (such as Háma and Merry's disobedience out of their love for Théoden). The feudal oath, however, defines exactly what is expected of both the vassal and the lord. Pippin explicitly states his duties in his oath and Denethor cites his responsibilities as a lord, rewarding "fealty with love, valour with honour, oath-breaking with vengeance" (Tolkien 756). With this line, Denethor also introduces the concept of retribution. Shippey notes this as well, "Denethor's is not without an element of threat…far removed from Théoden's [response]. It is probably fair to say that the scene between Merry and Théoden makes much the better impression, kindlier, more casual, and with more concern" (Shippey 99). Oathbreaking in the Anglo-Saxon culture was understood to be met with punishment if broken, but never expected and stated at the taking of the oath. Fulbert of Chartres provides a historical definition of the lord-vassal relationship that also demonstrates this reciprocal nature and exchange of services: "[h]e who swears fealty to his lord ought to always have these six things in memory; what is harmless, safe, honorable, useful, easy, practicable," before defining each of these terms ("On Feudal Obligations"). He continues by clarifying the lord's obligations, "[t]he lord also ought to act toward his faithful vassal reciprocally in all these things…if he should be detected in the avoidance of or the doing of or the consenting to them,

[it] would be perfidious and perjured" ("On Feudal Obligations: 1020"). Pippin and Denethor state their duties in a similar, formal exchange of services, rigidly outlined from the start of their relationship and vastly different than an Anglo-Saxon oath of service.

The general tones of the respective scenes are in stark contrast to each other, further augmented by historical accounts of chivalric oaths that Tolkien appears to be borrowing from. With historic evidence of feudal oaths as less personal and more political, I propose that Pippin and Denethor's oath is thus medieval in nature. Through this contrast, the oath between Merry and Théoden is further highlighted as Anglo-Saxon. More importantly, these oath-taking scenes assist in a literary understanding of the parallel relationships of Merry-Théoden and Pippin-Denethor: the former is full of love and kinship, the latter is cold and impersonal. As the *Lord of the Rings* continues, the fates of these characters are tied to their respective oath-taking scenes.

Conclusion

Although oaths have been discussed in the *Lord of the Rings*, previous scholarship tends to lump prominent examples together: Frodo and Gollum, Aragorn and Gandalf, Denethor and Pippin, and Merry and Théoden. While such virtues as honor or trustworthiness are clearly encouraged by Tolkien and exhibited in his characters, I argue for a more nuanced interpretation of oaths in Tolkien's body of work—one that distinguishes between a *promise* and a true *oath*. To this end, I have specifically examined the Anglo-Saxon oath and its representation in the *Lord of the Rings,* done by a close reading of the oath-taking scene between Merry and Théoden. This scene is critical for the characterization of their future relationship; thus, studying the Anglo-Saxon influence on their oath contributes to the literary discourse on the *Lord of the Rings,* further defining these characters and their intertwined fates.

Shown through historical evidence, such as Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the Anglo-Saxon oath serves as the foundation of Anglo-Saxon culture, defining a system of honor-based morality, appearing throughout Anglo-Saxon law codes, and maintaining the political structure of their society. As opposed to a promise, the oath is a lifelong devotion of service or alliance based almost entirely in kinship. While gift-giving and personal retainment are incentives of the oath, nothing is more important than a genuine love between the oath-takers. Oaths can be made between friends or between lords, however, the most distinguishable Anglo-Saxon oath is the one taken by a thane to their lord. I argue that the lord-thane oath is faithfully represented in modern literature by Tolkien's depiction of Merry and Théoden.

Tolkien borrows from a variety Anglo-Saxon literature in his crafting of this relationship. Through language, poetry, aesthetic, and examples of servitude, Tolkien establishes Théoden as a quintessential Anglo-Saxon lord. With the intricacies of the oath-taking scene, the dialogue between Merry and Théoden is bursting with Anglo-Saxon literary influence, featuring such purposeful writing as Merry's presentation of his ancient weapon and the peculiar word choice of "father". Even in Théoden's death, Tolkien presents the conclusion of Merry's oath as heavily rooted in Anglo-Saxon tradition, demonstrated by Théoden's final requests to his faithful thane.

Tolkien also presents a clear contrast of the Anglo-Saxon oath via the medieval oath taken by Pippin to Denethor. Whereas Théoden is a loving and considerate king, Denethor is aloof and impersonal, requiring ceremony and promising an appropriate exchange of services in Pippin's pledge of fealty. These kings suffer a similar fate, losing their sons and dying during the Battle of Pelennor Fields. However, while Théoden dies with his devoted thane and is exalted in glory by his people, Denethor dies in a confused frenzy, spreading grief and horror among his

allies. In these parallel stories, the oath-taking scenes serve as a basis of literary understanding, therefore, it is necessary to understand their markedly different influences.

Tolkien, a scholar of Old English, saturates his literary work with Anglo-Saxon influence—previous scholarship has studied this influence linguistically through names and thematically through his heroes. I thus present another feature of the Anglo-Saxons to the scholarly discussion of influence on Tolkien's work, one that I believe Tolkien was especially fond of: the Anglo-Saxon oath. Kinship, loyalty, honor, and love abound between and amongst the heroes in the *Lord of the Rings*, but no instance is more peculiarly and intentionally Anglo-Saxon than the oath passionately taken by the lowly, humble hobbit Merry to the great, Anglo-Saxon lord Théoden. Merry receives a father, and we, as readers, witness firsthand an expertly crafted modern representation of the heartfelt relationship between a lord and their thane.

Appendix 1: Merry's and Théoden's Oath

"The king was already there, and as soon as they entered he called for Merry and had a seat set for him at his side. 'It is not as I would have it,' said Théoden; 'for this is little like my fair house in Edoras. And your friend is gone, who should also be here. But it may be long ere we sit, you and I, at the high table in Meduseld; there will be no time for feasting when I return thither. But come now! Eat and drink, and let us speak together while we may. And then you shall ride with me.'

'May I?' said Merry, surprised and delighted. 'That would be splendid!' He had never felt more grateful for any kindness in words. 'I am afraid I am only in everybody's way,' he stammered; 'but I should like to do anything I could, you know.'

'I doubt it not,' said the king. 'I have had a good hill-pony made ready for you. He will bear you as swift as any horse by the roads that we shall take. For I will ride from the Burg by mountain paths,not by the plain, and so come to Edoras by way of Dunharrow where the Lady Eowyn awaits me. You shall be my esquire, if you will. Is there gear of war in this place, Eomer, that my sword-thain could use?'

'There are no great weapon-hoards here, lord,' answered Eomer. 'Maybe a light helm might be found to fit him; but we have no mail or sword for one of his stature.'

'I have a sword,' said Merry, climbing from his seat, and drawing from its black sheath his small bright blade. Filled suddenly with love for this old man, he knelt on one knee, and took his hand and kissed it. 'May I lay the sword of Meriadoc of the Shire on your lap, Théoden King?' he cried. 'Receive my service, if you will!'

'Gladly will I take it,' said the king; and laying his long old hands upon the brown hair of the hobbit, he blessed him. 'Rise now, Meria- doc, esquire of Rohan of the household of Meduseld!' he said. 'Take your sword and bear it unto good fortune!'

'As a father you shall be to me,' said Merry.

'For a little while,' said Théoden." (Tolkien, *LOTR* 777)

Appendix 2: Pippin's Pledge to Denethor

"Then Pippin looked the old man in the eye, for pride stirred strangely within him, still stung by the scorn and suspicion in that cold voice. 'Little service, no doubt, will so great a lord of Men think to find in a hobbit, a halfling from the northern Shire; yet such as it is, I will offer it, in payment of my debt.' Twitching aside his grey cloak, Pippin drew forth his small sword and laid it at Denethor's feet.

A pale smile, like a gleam of cold sun on a winter's evening, passed over the old man's face; but he bent his head and held out his hand, laying the shards of the horn aside. 'Give me the weapon!' he said.

Pippin lifted it and presented the hilt to him. 'Whence came this?' said Denethor. 'Many, many years lie on it. Surely this is a blade wrought by our own kindred in the North in the deep past?'

'It came out of the mounds that lie on the borders of my country,' said Pippin. 'But only evil wights dwell there now, and I will not willingly tell more of them.'

'I see that strange tales are woven about you,' said Denethor, 'and once again it is shown that looks may belie the man – or the halfling. I accept your service. For you are not daunted by words; and you have courteous speech, strange though the sound of it may be to us in the South. And we shall have need of all folk of courtesy, be they great or small, in the days to come. Swear to me now!'

'Take the hilt,' said Gandalf, 'and speak after the Lord, if you are resolved on this.'

'I am,' said Pippin.

The old man laid the sword along his lap, and Pippin put his hand to the hilt, and said slowly after Denethor:

‘Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor, and to the Lord and Steward of the realm, to speak and to be silent, to do and to let be, to come and to go, in need or plenty, in peace or war, in living or dying, from this hour henceforth, until my lord release me, or death take me, or the world end. So say I, Peregrin son of Paladin of the Shire of the Halflings.’

‘And this do I hear, Denethor son of Ecthelion, Lord of Gondor, Steward of the High King, and I will not forget it, nor fail to reward that which is given: fealty with love, valour with honour, oath- breaking with vengeance.’ Then Pippin received back his sword and put it in its sheath.” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 755)

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