

4-1-2021

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Healing Hands: J. R. R. Tolkien's Germanic Understanding of Medicine and Monarchy

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Hands of Healing: Tolkien's Germanic Understanding of Medicine and Monarchy in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract:

In *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien uses Aragorn's healing abilities to solidify his identity as the rightful king. While it is made clear that this ability to heal is a sign of kingship, it is never clarified from where this belief arose. There is no other lore in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Appendices*, or in *The Silmarillion* to suggest that healing hands were at all common among the kings of Númenor, Arnor, or Gondor, so the rhyme remembered by the old wife in the House of Healing may be surprising. Aragorn's abilities, however, do not surprise the people of , nor do they seem out of place to the reader, because while there is little narrative surrounding a history of healing kings in Númenor, there is certainly a clear need and desire for such a king both in Middle earth and in this world. Aragorn's identity as a healer-king is a response to man's longing to survive and to cast off the mortality of the younger, "follower" race of Middle earth. It also, however, hearkens back to the myth and tradition of this world. The need and desire for a king like Aragorn has been present in human hearts for thousands of years and has resulted in a tradition of healing kings in a number of cultures across Europe. Pagan Germanic, Celtic, and Norse traditions all point to a king descended from a god with special abilities including success in battle and healing hands. These myths conclude, however, that a healing king must also be a sacral king. J. R. R. Tolkien drew on a number of literary traditions in the crafting of his character Aragorn including Arthurian legend, and messianic symbolism. With a closer study of ancient Germanic history, however, it is clear that much of Aragorn's characterization as a healing king is drawn from a pre-Christian Gothic understanding of kingship and healing.

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Introduction

Aragorn's characterization as a king is drawn from a number of literary and historic sources on which many scholars seem to agree. He is a king in response to prophecy much like King Arthur. He is a kind of thane and wields a legendary sword much like Beowulf. He is tied to the prosperity of the land and people like the Fisher King in the Grail myth, he reunites a crumbling kingdom like Charlemagne, and he saves his people like a kind of Christ. One area of Aragorn's kingship that has not been explored, however, is his characterization as a healer-king. It is possible that scholars have ignored this part of Aragorn's kingship because it fits so easily into a Christ-like characterization. Is Aragorn's healing ability simply a continuation of the Christian parallels to Jesus Christ, or is Tolkien referring to something pagan? In this thesis, I will argue that, while J. R. R. Tolkien drew on a number of literary traditions in the crafting of his character Aragorn including Arthurian legend, the Beowulf tradition, and messianic symbolism, a closer study of ancient Germanic history will prove that Aragorn's characterization as a healing-king stems from a pre-Christian Gothic understanding of kingship and healing.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien uses Aragorn's healing abilities to solidify his identity as the rightful king. While it is made clear that this ability to heal is a sign of kingship, it is never clarified from where this belief arose. There is no other lore in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Appendices*, or in *The Silmarillion* to suggest that healing hands were at all common among the kings of Númenor, Arnor, or Gondor, so the rhyme remembered by the old wife in the House of Healing seems to have come out of nowhere. Aragorn's abilities, however, do not surprise the people of Middle earth, nor do they seem out of place to the reader, because while there is little narrative surrounding a history of healing kings in Númenor, there is certainly a clear need and

desire for such a king both in Middle earth and in our own world. Aragorn's identity as a healer-king is a response to man's longing to survive and to cast off the mortality of the younger, "follower" race of Middle earth. It also, however, hearkens back to the Gothic traditions of our own world, as the need and desire for a king like Aragorn has been present in human hearts for thousands of years and has resulted in a tradition of healing kings in a number of cultures across Europe. Pagan Germanic, Celtic, and Norse traditions all point to a king descended from a god with special abilities including success in battle and healing hands. These myths conclude, however, that a healing king must also be a sacral king. Why must Aragorn be a healing king? In this thesis, I will explain Tolkien's need for a healing, human king in Middle earth. I will then explore the historical basis for a healing king such as Aragorn, and finally, I will show how Aragorn reflects the Germanic kings of our own world in his kingship and healing while also fulfilling Gondor's need for a healing sacral king.

Literary Analysis

Concerning the origins of Aragorn's healing abilities, scholars seem to fall into three main camps. First, there are those who assert that Aragorn's healing ability is solely a reflection of Christ and Christ's healing miracles performed on earth. Second, there are those who draw a connection between Aragorn's healing abilities and the saint-like and legendary abilities of kings such as Arthur, Beowulf, Charlemagne, and King Oswald of Northumbria. Finally, some scholars associate Aragorn's healing knowledge of *athelas* with his age and skill as a Ranger amplified through his close relationship with the elves and that Aragorn has special knowledge, not special ability. In this literary analysis, I will explore these three camps, and will situate myself somewhere between the first two: while Aragorn is not based on a specific person in history or

myth, he is inspired by Germanic or Gothic kingship which also influenced the kings listed above.

Jonathan Padley's paper focuses on a Christological reading of *The Lord of the Rings*. Much of his essay explores the separation of Jesus's offices—prophet, priest, and king—between Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragorn respectively. In respect to Aragorn, Padley notes

Aragorn shares Christ's qualities of healing. It is a skill not just of basic medicine but also a healing of the soul. Éowyn, aware that he mends her broken heart, acclaims him as her 'healer.' Like Jesus, he heals both by word and touch. His healing is one that incorporates symbolic action: he takes Éowyn by the hand. Likewise, Jesus takes the sick by the hand, a raising action which carries connotations of the resurrection to life hereafter. (Padley 26)

This Christ-like healing suggests Aragorn to be the promised, messianic king who has come to save his people and reclaim the throne.

Padley is far from the only Tolkien reader to come to this conclusion. Padley references Dodig, in their master's thesis "Christian Elements in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Beowulf*" written in 2016 comments "Aragorn resembles Christ as a king and healer, but also with the power to rule over the dead" (Dodig 21). Alexander B. Koch in his paper "The Catholic Core of a Celebrated Composition" published by Marquette University in 2017 argues "[i]n addition to a king, Christ was mentioned numerous times as being a healer: curing blindness, diseases, and other ailments. The same goes for Aragorn: 'the hands of the king are the hands of a healer,' (*RK* 842)" (Koch 7). These comments about Aragorn's healing acting as a parallel for Christ usually come in passing. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that Aragorn's healing is, at some level,

messianic. In fact, it seems one of the easiest arguments to make involving Aragorn as a kind of Christ. In this camp, Aragorn heals because he is a type of Christ, and the messianic symbolism of healing—body and soul—is reflected in Aragorn’s healing of the body and spirit of his comrades. Aragorn also heals Gondor politically by restoring peace and removing oppressors similar to the Jewish beliefs surrounding the Messiah. Tolkien’s writings were heavily influenced by his Catholic beliefs, but while Aragorn is in some ways a Christ figure, his healing abilities cannot be credited solely to messianic tradition.

In many ways, Aragorn more closely resembles King David than Jesus Christ. Most importantly, Aragorn’s kingdom and reign of peace was not an eternal kingdom, but was, rather, a bright spot and a picture of what had been and what could be again. In *Letters* in May of 1964, Tolkien wrote

I did begin a story placed about 100 years after the Downfall, but it proved both sinister and depressing. Since we are dealing with Men, it is inevitable that we should be concerned with the most regrettable feature of their nature: their quick satiety with good. So that the people of Gondor in times of peace, justice and prosperity, would become discontented and restless — while the dynasts descended from Aragorn would become just kings and governors — like Denethor or worse. I found that even so early there was an outcrop of revolutionary plots, about a centre of secret Satanistic religion; while Gondorian boys were playing at being Orcs and going around doing damage. (*Letters* 344)

Tolkien wrote only thirteen pages of *The New Shadow*, but, in so doing, he made it clear that Aragorn’s kingship and the subsequent reign of his descendants, did not overthrow evil forever.

Aragorn's kingship may provide temporary political healing—much like that of King David—but it could not provide the lasting peace promised in messianic tradition.

In the second camp fall those who compare Aragorn's healing abilities to other kings or leaders of history and legend. Richard J. Finn in his article "Arthur and Aragorn: Arthurian Influence in *The Lord of the Rings*" compares Arthur and Aragorn's early lives with the elves. In Layamon's *Brut*, Arthur was born and taken by elves. These elves "'enchanted the child with magic most strong' among other blessings, including 'prince virtues most good'" (Finn 5). According to Finn, this upbringing is reminiscent of Aragorn's upbringing among the elves of Rivendell and Lothlórien. "In fact, Aragorn exemplifies elven virtues and beliefs by respecting and admiring nature, the ancient traditions of elves and men, the elven language, and healing lore" (Finn 5). In other words, elvish knowledge of nature passed to Aragorn through Elrond's teaching allowed him to see the virtue of *athelas*.

Finn also argues that the Grail cycle points to a "direct casual relationship between the wellbeing and health of the king/hero...and the fertility of his realm" (Finn 8). This fertility is the physical health of the land seen in Celtic and Germanic tradition. The "desolation of the land" is "rectified by the renewal of the kingship of the land by Aragorn, resembling the tie between the renewal of the king and the renewal of the land" in Grail tradition (Finn 8). This direct casual relationship, however, does not match with the specific and intense healing power that Aragorn exhibits towards his friends and subjects. Laura Gálvez Gómez in her PhD dissertation "The Arthurian World of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: a Reassessment" agrees with Finn's assessment and writes

[Aragorn] is described as a healing king and... he as to restore his authority...

specifically to the peace of men (Rohan and Gondor). In so doing, his Quest resembles the Arthurian myth of the Wasteland. In the Arthurian texts about the Grail, the Wasteland was “a land laid waste, often because of a wound inflicted upon its king. The wound can only be healed—and thus the land restored—by the chosen Grail knight. (Gómez 44)

These connections to healing of a king in Grail legend focus on the healing of the king himself as well as the healing of the physical landscape more so than the healing of others from illness.

While there are a number of parallels between Aragorn and Beowulf including their respective legendary swords, their thane-ship, and the unusually similar scenes of Beowulf’s arrival at Hrothgar’s hall and Aragorn’s arrival at The Golden Hall in Rohan, there is only minimal reference to healing in *Beowulf*. It essentially comes down to two words. Pritha Kundu in her paper “The Anglo-Saxon War-Culture and *The Lord of the Rings*: Legacy and Reappraisal” points this out. “Beowulf restored ‘health’ and good cheer to Hrothgar, sick with the attacks of Grendel which loomed over his people like disease. Beowulf removed the ‘disease’ and cured the land” (Kundu 10). Similarly, while there may be parallels between Charlemagne and Aragorn, the healing characteristic is limited to the political and the emotional.

King Oswald of Northumbria is certainly depicted as a healer, and Max Adams notes “He [Oswald] was the model for Tolkien’s Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*” (Adams 4). Healing appears in Oswald’s story after his death. After a brutal battle, Oswald’s head was buried in a community on Lindisfarne. His hands and arms were kept by Oswald’s brother Oswiu.

There is also something of the ancient Norse idea of dividing the sacral luck of the king on death into shares, each of which imparted some of that luck to those who possessed it.

In keeping the arms and the hands Oswiu was ensuring that some of his brother's luck passed to him; in donating the king's head to Lindisfarne he was aiming to ensure the continuing success of Aidan's [Christian] mission. (Adams 243)

Soon after Oswald's death, Bede records, there appeared incidences of healing associated with either the site of Oswald's death or with his remains. Oswald's situation provides a unique mixing of pagan blood magic with the early Christian church. It proves that this primitive belief in the magic of a king's blood did not simply disappear at the advent of Christianity. The healing touch of a king and a monotheistic religion, therefore, are not mutually exclusive.

Oswald and Aragorn share other similarities: they are both exiles reclaiming their rightful thrones, and they both helped rebuild their kingdoms after the collapse of a dominant civilization. While Adams made the assertion that Aragorn was inspired by Oswald, he does not attempt to flesh out this argument in *The King in the North*. One possible issue with the healing parallels between Aragorn and Oswald is the fact that all of the healing incidents surrounding Oswald were recorded posthumously by a historian with a decidedly Christian perspective. This last point, however, is immaterial as Tolkien would never have discounted the possibility of a miracle, especially from a Christian perspective. Still, the posthumous healing present in Oswald's story is very different from the personal and intimate healing by touch seen in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Some Tolkien readers may be tempted to dismiss Aragorn's healing ability as simply being an extension of his age, skill, and time spent with the elves. These opinions fall in the third camp. After all, when Aragorn could not fully heal Frodo after the incident on Weathertop, he took Frodo to Elrond for more effective healing. Connie Veugen categorizes Aragorn's

knowledge of *athelas* as a part of his Ranger skill and a result of his eighty-odd years living with the elves and learning from them. “Tolkien shows us Aragorn’s skills as a Ranger on the way to Rivendell. His knowledge of *athelas* (the name Kingsfoil is not given) could well be a part of these skills” (Veugen 186). Aragorn is familiar with elven lore, so Veugen asserts that Aragorn is able to better recognize the virtues present in the *athelas* plant.

There are several issues with this argument. First, I find it unlikely that a culture that has a poem about *athelas*’s healing abilities would not explore those abilities as far as they possibly could. A lore master with knowledge of the legend surrounding *athelas* would almost certainly be able to figure out its virtue. Secondly, Aragorn’s healing abilities are vastly different from Elrond’s healing ability. Elrond has a skill with which he treats the injured. He uses elvish medicine very similar to our concept of magic. The scenes from the “House of Healing” are vastly different. Aragorn simply crushes *athelas* in water and washes the patients’ hands and faces. Then, he calls them back from the edge of the shadow. Aragorn’s abilities are far outside the ordinary, but they are not the elven “magic” used by Elrond. While Aragorn is descended from an elvish line through his ancestor—and Elrond’s brother—Elros, his healing abilities do not appear to be tied to his elvish blood. Many men of Gondor who have Númenorean blood are described as fair and elvish in appearance. They do not, however, possess any unusual healing abilities. The unusual virtue is in Aragorn, not in *athelas*.

While there are many possible traditions influencing Tolkien’s depiction of Aragorn, there are more limited possibilities for Aragorn’s healing ability. The first camp argues that Aragorn’s healing abilities is a result of his messianic kingship and spirituality. The second points to parallels between Aragorn and specific individuals of literary or historical tradition such

as Arthur, the Fisher King, Beowulf, or King Oswald. The third camp is the only one that does not ultimately tie Aragorn's healing abilities back to his kingship, and I would argue that this is the furthest from the mark. Aragorn's healing ability is clearly associated with his kingship as stated by the herb wife and by Gandalf in the House of Healing. The very name of the herb Aragorn uses, "kingsfoil" suggests that it is known specifically in association with the king. I would argue that there is nothing particularly healing in *athelas* itself—as generations of healers would undoubtedly have discovered it—but that, in the hands of the rightful king, it gains new properties. Aragorn's healing is specifically associated with his kingship and is an ability he would not have if he were not the rightful king. This special ability connected with his kingship and the manner in which he claims his rightful kingship is Germanic or Gothic in nature. Why must Aragorn be a healing king? Because he is an inherently Germanic king, and his healing abilities are associated with his Germanic/Gothic kingship—a tradition that existed in a pre-Christian Germany and remained present throughout the late Medieval ages.

This argument is a type of source criticism and, as such, it requires a method. Jason Fisher, in his essay "Tolkien and Source Criticism: Remarking and Remaking" lays out a plan for testing source criticism. Fisher writes

Given the hypothesis of a source, there are basically two stages to testing it. First, one must establish the validity or plausibility of that source; then, assuming this is sufficiently defensible, one must discuss how the source was used and what consequences this has for the author's work. To put it simply, could Tolkien have known this source? And assuming he could have known it, and did intend to use it, what did he do with it? And how does

the knowledge of this source help us to understand or appreciate *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or whatever work we are investigating? (Fisher 36)

Before it can be established that Tolkien “borrowed” from a work, it must first be proven that the source was available to Tolkien. It must have been published or rediscovered before he wrote whatever work is being analyzed. Next, it must be proven that Tolkien was acquainted with the source in question. “The best sources are those which Tolkien acknowledged himself,” Fisher acknowledges. “Failing Tolkien’s own admission of direct influence (which is pretty rare), a second tier of sources comprises those Tolkien is known to have read, owned, enjoyed, or commented on” (Fisher 36). There is also a third tier which comprises “*possible* sources.” These are never explicitly mentioned by Tolkien but are no more than one step away from an explicit statement. Tolkien’s knowledge of Gothic and early Germanic language and culture specifically seen through the writings of Tacitus falls into the second tier of sources.

Tolkien studied Classics at Exeter College, Oxford for five terms before switching to English. He is known to have attended lectures on Tacitus during the Trinity Term of 1912. In February 1913, Tolkien began the First Public Examination for the Honour School of Greek and Latin Literature where he was examined on Tacitus’ *Annals I-IV*. Tolkien noted in an interview with Charlotte and Dennis Plimmer that he had “a particular love for the Latin language” (*Letters* 376). He was, therefore, familiar with Classic Latin literature and was specifically familiar with the writings of Tacitus.

Tolkien was also familiar with the Gothic language and early Germanic tradition. In *Letters* on July 20, 1965, Tolkien wrote about a facsimile of an inscription found in a book. Tolkien describes his experience with the Gothic language.

I had come across this admirable language a year or two before 1910 in Joseph Wright's *Primer of the Gothic Language* (now replaced by *A Grammar of the Gothic Language*)...

I was fascinated by Gothic in itself: a beautiful language which reached the eminence of liturgical use, but failed owing to the tragic history of the Goths to become one of the liturgical languages of the West...I often put 'Gothic' inscriptions in books, sometime Gothicizing my Norse name and German surname as Ruginwaldus Dwalakoneis. (*Letters* 357)

Tolkien then goes on to correct his younger self's Gothic mistakes in the inscription and to explain the meaning.

There is no doubt that Tolkien was familiar with early Germanic tradition, as it has appeared in other forms elsewhere in his works. The people of Rohan, for example, are very clearly drawn from Anglo-Saxon tradition. Mirkwood and the connotations of an enchanted forest appear in many cultural traditions, but Tolkien noted in a letter to his son Michael on July 29, 1966 that

Mirkwood is not an invention of mine, but a very ancient name, weighed with legendary associations. It was probably the Primitive Germanic name for the great mountainous forest regions that anciently formed a barrier to the south of the lands of Germanic expansion...I speak now from memory: its ancientness seems indicated by its appearance in very early German (11th c.?) as *mirkiwidu*." (*Letters* 369)

Hence, Tolkien was familiar not only with early Germanic tradition from a Classical perspective, but also with the etymology associated with primitive Germanic and Gothic words, names, and myths.

In *English and Welsh*, Tolkien said that “Gothic was the first [language] to take me by storm, to move my heart. It was the first of the old Germanic languages that I had ever met. I have since mourned the loss of Gothic literature. I did not then” (Hammond/Scull 466). Tolkien experienced great loss in his personal life, but he also felt loss in his professional life. He regretted the “incalculable amounts of knowledge and literature that have been lost to time” (Hammond/Scull 555). In *The Goths*, an unpublished Oxford lecture, Tolkien wrote

In vain we regret the past, or speculate on what might have been. Yet it is inevitable that we should regret...In dealing with the Goths—regret cannot be avoided, if not regret for what might have been, at any rate regret for our altogether scanty records of what was... the vanishing of their tradition, literature, history, and most of their tongue. (Hammond/Scull 555)

Tolkien was not only aware of early Germanic and Gothic tradition through the writings of Tacitus and others, but he was deeply affected by the loss of the culture attached to the language he loved so much. Undoubtedly, he would have searched and read to find out more about this culture. Only after exhausting all sources could he have mourned the loss of a culture like he did the Goths.

Tolkien would also have been familiar with some of the scholarship surrounding early Germanic kingship and healing written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While he certainly did not agree with all of the historical evidence offered by Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* or Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, he may still have been inspired by some of the key concepts offered by each. Indeed, both of these authors went on to inspire serious discussion surrounding the nature of early Germanic kingship and the sacrality associated

with healing. Frazer's work covers the entire world in such broad strokes that it is difficult to find places that would have pulled Tolkien's attention. In his chapter "Priestly Kings," however, Frazer makes the important assertion that

The union of a royal title with priestly duties was common in ancient Italy and Greece. At Rome and in other cities of Latium there was a priest called the Sacrificial King of King of the Sacred Rites, and his wife bore the title of Queen of the Sacred Rites... This combination of priestly functions with royal authority is familiar to every one... Teutonic kings, again, in the old heathen days seem to have stood in the position, and to have exercised the powers, of high priests. (Frazer 9).

Frazer goes on to argue that ancient kings were commonly priests, but that they also may have acted themselves as gods "able to best upon their subjects and worshippers those blessings which are commonly supposed beyond the reach of mortals" (Frazer 10). Tolkien, however, would most certainly have disagreed with Frazer's perspective on magic. Frazer writes in the chapter "Sympathetic Magic"

Are the forces which govern the world conscious and personal, or unconscious and impersonal? Religion, as a conciliation of the superhuman powers, assumes the former member of the alternative... Thus in so far as religion assumes the world to be directed by conscious agents who may be turned from the purpose by persuasion, it stands in fundamental antagonism to magic as well as to science, both of which take for granted that the course of nature is determined, not by the passions or caprice of personal beings, but by the operation of immutable laws acting mechanically. (Frazer 51).

Weston, on the other hand, while agreeing with Frazer in many places recognizes that literature crosses these boundaries that *The Golden Bough* lays out.

In *From Ritual to Romance*, an exploration of the effect of pagan natural cults on Grail tradition, Weston notes, “[t]hus, while the purely Folk-lore interpretation of the Grail and Lance excludes the Christian origin, and the theory of the exclusively Christian origin negatives the Folk-lore, the pre-existence of these symbols in a popular ritual setting would admit, indeed would invite, late accretion alike from folk belief and ecclesiastical legend” (Weston 69). In this way, Weston recognizes the natural intermixing of pagan and Christian perspectives in the organic formation of literary tradition. Later in her writings, Weston also writes

That Christianity might have borrowed from previously existing cults certain outward signs and symbols, might have accommodated itself to already existing Fasts and Feasts, may be, perforce has had to be, more or less grudgingly admitted; that such a *rapprochement* should have gone further, that it should even have been inherent in the very nature of the Faith, that, to some of the deepest thinkers of old, Christianity should have been held for no new thing but a fulfillment of the promise enshrined in the Mysteries from the beginning of the world, will to many be a strange and startling thought...I firmly believe that it is only in the recognition of this one-time claim of essential kinship between Christianity and the Pagan Mysteries that we shall find the key to the Secret of the grail. (Weston 142).

Tolkien may have been inspired by Weston’s appraisal of Grail tradition to confidently integrate Christian or messianic tradition with pagan Germanic kingship. Weston also explores the pagan

healing traditions that may have led to the healing knight, Gawain. Most of these traditions Weston draws directly from Frazer. Frazer wrote, in the chapter “Magicians as Kings,”

The belief that kings possess magical or supernatural powers by virtue of which they can fertilize the earth and confer other benefits on their subjects would seem to have been shared by the ancestors of all the Aryan races from India to Ireland, and it has left clear traces of itself in our own country [England] down to modern times... In the Middle Ages, when Waldemar I., King of Denmark, travelled in Germany, mothers brought their infants and husbandmen their seed for him to lay his hands on, thinking that children would both thrive the better for the royal touch, and for a like reason farmers asked him to throw the seed for them. (Frazer 89)

Frazer also draws a parallel between the early pagan belief in royal healing touch and the practices of thaumaturgy by going on to describe the healing acts performed by many English monarchs such as Edward the Confessor, Elizabeth I, and James I.

Having now established that Tolkien was aware of and deeply affected by early Germanic tradition as recorded by Tacitus and others as well as the contemporary commentary surrounding early Germanic kingship and sacral healing, I will argue that Tolkien’s understanding of Gothic kingship is reflected in his writing of Aragorn: a sacral, healing king for whom descent was not enough to claim kingship.

Argument

In the chapter “The House of Healing” in *The Return of the King*, J. R. R. Tolkien makes it abundantly clear that Aragorn’s healing abilities are directly connected to his rightful kingship in the following exchange:

Then an old wife, Ioreth, the eldest of the women who served in that house, looking on the fair face of Faramir wept, for all the people loved him. And she said: ‘Alas! If he should die. Would that there were kings in Gondor as there were once upon a time, they say! For it is said in old lore: *The hands of the king are the hands of a healer*. And so the rightful king could ever be known.’

And Gandalf, who stood by, said: ‘Men may long remember your words, Ioreth! For there is hope in them. Maybe a king has indeed returned to Gondor; or have you not heard the strange tidings that have come to the City?’ (RK 166)

When the old woman at the house of healing quotes the old proverb “The hands of the king are hands of healing,” no one questions the proverb’s validity or truth. Clearly the proverb was once universally known and is now only remembered by the older, more traditional citizens. Many prophecies, poems, and proverbs written about Aragorn or about Númenorean kingship have been referenced or recited throughout the course of the quest, but this is the first the reader hears of a healing king. Up until this point, it would have been easy to assume that Aragorn’s healing abilities were a result of his training as a Ranger or his upbringing by the elves. Now, however, Tolkien directly connects Aragorn’s ability to heal with his “rightful” kingship. Why is it so important for a human king to heal?

One of the most overarching themes in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and the other stories that take place in Middle earth is that of mortality and immortality. Tolkien wrote in *Letters* to Joanna de Bortadano in April 1956 that “The real theme [of *The Lord of the Rings*] for me is about something more permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality: the mystery of the love of the world in the hearts of a race ‘doomed’ not to leave it, until its whole evil-aroused

story is complete” (*Letters* 246). In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien outlines the idea that man is mortal and that the elves are immortal. Instead of infusing mortality with a penal nature, however, Ilûvatar says in a draft of *The Book of Lost Tales* “to Men I will appoint a task and give a great gift,” and, in the final version, “a new gift, and a greater” (*LT* 59). “This he did that of their operations everything should in shape and deed be completed, and the world fulfilled unto the last and smallest” (59). At the same time, however, Ilûvatar has ordained that “the Children of Men dwell only a short time in the world alive, yet do not perish utterly forever...the Sons of Men will after the passing of things of a certainty join in the Second Music of Ainur” (Hammond/Scull 604). While Ilûvatar meant for mortality to be a gift, however, men “murmur against this decree” (*The Lost Road and Other Writings* 11). Man was dissatisfied with the gift of Ilûvatar because it quickly became corrupted by Melkor, who “cast his shadow upon it, and confounded it with darkness, and brought forth evil out of good, and fear out of hope” (*The Silmarillion* 42). Because of this fear, men rebelled. Ultimately, however, mortality would never lose the shadow of fear that Melkor cast over it.

Melkor taught men to fear death. The men of Numenor were blessed with extraordinarily long lives, and yet, when they began focusing on their mortality, their lives gradually became shorter. As they began fearing the maladies of age, they succumbed to them. Because of this, the suggestion of a human king who was able to heal and therefore stave off mortality for a certain time was a blessing and was greatly desired among the kingdoms of men. Aragorn’s coming, therefore, during the darkest time of Gondor’s history when Sauron seems to be winning and the shadow is spreading, is both unlooked for and joyfully received.

Our own world also has both a desire and a tradition of a healing and sacral king. Aragorn's kingship is directly modeled from early medieval Germanic kingship, and that, because of this, his healing abilities can be traced directly to the healing traditions in pagan Germany used to identify the rightful king. First of all, it is important to understand some of the unique aspects of Gothic history in pre-Christian Germany. One of the earliest written references to German kingship comes from Tacitus in his *Germania*. In Chapter seven of this work, he makes a distinction between two different types of leaders, the *rex* and the *dux*. "*Reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt. nec regibus infinita aut libera potestas, et duces exemplo potius quam imperio, si prompti, si conspicui, si ante aciem agant, admiratione praesunt.*" "They take their kings on the ground of [noble] birth, their generals on the basis of courage [literally: manliness]: the authority of their kings is not unlimited or arbitrary; their generals control the people by example rather than command, and by means of the admiration which attends upon energy and a conspicuous place in front of the line [literally: before the line]" (Tacitus 140-141).

Daniel George Russo in his dissertation "Sacral Kingship in Early Medieval Europe: The Germanic Tradition" uses a slightly different translation of Tacitus' much-quoted commentary. "They [the Germans] choose their kings for their noble birth, their warlords for their valor" (Russo 74). Russo notes that "dual kingship (Doppelkönigtum), was actually far more common in early Germanic institutional history than unitarian kingship, i.e., monarchy" (Russo 99). This concept of dual kingship—whether it be between *rex* and *dux* in the Latin or between *reiks* and *thiudans* in the Gothic—is generally thought to separate a political priest-king from a temporary warlord.

The most important aspect of this *doppelkönigtum* for this thesis, however, is the concept of “taking” or “choosing.” German kings were taken by special election based on their personal qualifications. The *rex* was taken for his noble birth and the *dux* was taken for courage or valor. Tacitus’ observation of German kingship uses the Latin, but the Gothic words associated with *dopplekönigtum* were *reiks* and *thiudans*. Contrary to the intuitive, however, *reiks* is not the same as *rex* in connotation. In her article “Tolkien’s Warrior Kings” Maria Blaszkiewicz quotes *Medieval kingship* by Henry A. Myers and Herwig Wolfram, in which the authors conclude that while *reiks* is “certainly kin to the Latin *rex* etymologically, [it] denotes *conmendo* ‘governor’ or ‘military official’ in other words, a person of rank in whom one-man authority is invested, but one in whom sacred personal connotations are minimal” (Blaszkiewicz 58). In *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples* by Herwig Wolfram, the author explains that the Gothic words *reiks* and *thiudan*—and our understanding of them—come from the Gothic translation of the Bible in which *reiks* is used for “kings of earth” and *thiudan* is used most commonly for Christ or spiritual priest-kings.

There is no evidence to say that a *rex* could not be a *dux* or a *reiks* could not be a *thiudan*, but the primary difference appears to be the means by which they gain power and the responsibilities allocated to each. Wolfram comments

While the ‘king of noble birth’ (*rex ex nobilitate*) was the descendant of divine royal ancestors...the ‘commander by valor’ (*dux ex virute*) had to fight for his rise to the kingship as a leader of a victorious polyethnic army. The holder of this younger type of kingship could be of royal as well as non-royal descent. He was ‘chosen’ by the army... because of a decisive victory that brought the tribe new land. A heroic achievement...

gave proof that the commander was fit to be king. While the old tribal king was the successor of kings who had ruled a tribe ‘since time immemorial,’ the king of a victorious army was a founding king from whom both a new royal family as well as a new people took their origin. (Wolfram 18)

These Gothic *reiks*-kings, however, were concerned early on with continuing the traditions of the *thiudans*-kingship. Some scholars think that after the arrival of Christianity, *reiks* and *thiudan* combined duties. The priests were now a totally separate class, so the other attributes of the *thiudan* were easily transferred into the *reiks*. One of these attributes may have been blood holiness manifesting itself in the form of healing touch.

This concept of the dual kingship and the ways in which kings were chosen is vital for understanding Germanic kingship. First of all, royal heritage does not equal the right to rule. While the *thiudan*-king—or the king during peacetime—was usually descended in a direct line from the crown, he was not necessarily the person modern minds would consider the first in line to the throne. Instead, when it became necessary to have a new king, all of the descendants or relatives of the previous king would be offered to the people or, at the very least, the elders.

Tacitus acknowledges that a royal clan (*strips regia*) existed among some West Germanic peoples and that kings were chosen on the grounds of noble birth... When royal elections did occur, the council of *principes* apparently designated one of its own who belonged to the royal clan for approval by the assembly. In this way it can be said that early Germanic kings were ‘elected,’ and probably for life; yet the choice was already confined to a single family. (Russo 116)

It is clear that early German kings were—to some extent—elected, but the elected king had to be a member of the ruling clan.

In their study of kingship in Tolkien, Judy Ann Ford and Robin Anne Reid note: “In pagan Germanic Europe, primogeniture did not dictate the inheritance of a royal title. A family line claimed divine favor through descent from a god...[and] the people...would elect or choose from among the members of a royal house” (Ford and Reid 73). When an election occurred in sacral Gothic or Anglo-Saxon culture, the candidates were evaluated on three essential criteria: divine descent, good fortune (or favor of the gods) and supernatural ability. “A candidate for king would be believed to be close to the divine if he demonstrated luck, especially in military matters. A candidate could also demonstrate his close relationship to the divine by manifesting supernatural abilities such as prophecy or the ability to heal” (Ford, Reid 73).

Early Germanic kings practiced royal thaumaturgy as a way of solidifying their rightful kingship. This thaumaturgy took the form of both physical and political healing. Mikhail Boytsov, in his essay “The Healing Touch of a Sacred King?” describes a fascinating tradition written about Germany during AD 1300-1500:

In the Germanic territories (*Länder*) there was one rather strange motif that played an important role in the ritual entries of princes into cities throughout the late middle ages and into early modern times. The prince solemnly rode through the streets and was joyfully greeted by the citizens, while surrounded by criminals who had been previously convicted by local magistrates and sentenced to various terms of exile. (Boytsov 177)

Not only were exiles entering the city with the prince, but they came “clinging to the hem of his clothing, to his stirrup, his saddle, the harness of his horse, or to his carriage” (Boytsov 177).

This tradition lasted for at least two hundred years and was not at all quenched by the Reformation. Why this unusual tradition? “Many [scholars] have commented on the sacral content of this custom” (Boytssov 182). The personal and tactile act of touching—and not speech or document—grants pardon. Boytssov notes that the pardoning of exiles by the emperor “is probably based on the holiness of kings and princes and the special protection which proximity to them affords. The idea of sacredness or charisma of the individual chief or the king brought historians logically to assumptions regarding the sacred nature of his charismatic touch” (Boytssov 183).

On the one hand, this touch could be seen as strictly political—a higher judge taking precedence over the lower judges appointed in the city—, but, on the other hand “the deeper meaning of the medieval custom...found widely distributed across the globe especially among primitive peoples, that touching something sacred...that is a place, thing or person credited with special powers, brings freedom and protection. (Boytssov 183)

The author notes that the connection of this strange late medieval custom to ancient Germanic charismatic roots has only recently been explored by the younger generation of historians, but the connection is clear: the healing touch of a sacred (or sacral) king could heal politically in the same way it healed physically.

The concept of a king having supernatural healing abilities did not die off quickly. In “The Ritual of Royal Healing in Early Modern England: Scrofula, Liturgy, and Politics,” James F. Turrell writes

For a significant portion of its history, the Church of England celebrated in an official liturgy a peculiar ability of the English monarchs to heal the sick. It was long believed in England that the monarch had the power to heal scrofula—“The King’s Evil”—by the imposition of hands. In parallel to a similar belief about the kings of France, the English belief arose in the middle ages and persisted into the early modern period. (Turrell 3)

This practice did not stop with the Protestant Reformation, but was also practiced by avowed Protestants like Elizabeth I and James I. The source of this healing power was directly connected to a divine right to rule as “the source of the healing power was progressively identified as personal sanctity, the anointing of the monarch with holy oil at the coronation, and simple hereditary right as the true monarch...the act of healing scrofula by touch became a political action used to demonstrate one’s authority as monarch” (Turrell 6). The first English king to perform this type of healing was Edward the Confessor (1003-66), and this feat—performed only once—was one of the reasons King Edward became a saint. Thus, even in a Christian nation, right to rule was inexplicably tied up with a healing touch.

In Germanic tradition, a healing king—a *thiudan*-king—was also, necessarily, a sacral king. This king held priestly duties alongside his political duties and was responsible for the flourishing of the land and the people in a spiritual way. There is evidence that, if the land was not flourishing or there was a plague or famine, the king may have been either dethroned—as the famine may be a sign that the king was not in fact the “rightful” king—or sacrificed to restore order. H. M. Chadwick in his study *The Origin of the English Nation* noted that there is literary evidence “which suggests that in times of famine, natural or military disasters, Swedish, Norse,

and also Burgundian kings were sacrificed or deposed by their people” (Chadwick 216). Maartje Draak suggests that in pagan Ireland as well there are

numerous texts [that] insist on the King bringing about or being responsible for the fertility of the soil, the fairness of weather, the absence of disaster. If the king is a real King, there are during his reign “acorns and nuts up to the knees every autumn, wealth (?) on (the rivers) Bush (?) and Boyne in the middle of the summer-month of every year, abundance of peace so that no one slays the other in Ireland in his reign. (Draak 653)

If the kingdom failed to flourish, the “men of Ireland expelled [the king] from his kingship, for he had been an unlawful ruler” (Draak 661). Ireland may not have had such an organized pantheon of deities, but this sacral kingship still existed. This suggests that sacral kingship and the connection between a king and the health of a land and people existed outside of the belief in descent from a god. Having described the unique nature of early Germanic election and the qualifications put forward for rightful kingship, I will now show how Aragorn fulfills these qualifications and is formally elected by his people before becoming king.

Aragorn fulfills the need of his people for a healing king by conforming to the sacral kingship seen in pagan Germanic tradition. Aragorn fulfills all of the criteria of a German king in that he can trace his ancestry back to a semi-divine deity, demonstrates success in battle, and shows supernatural abilities through his healing touch. “Aragorn’s ancestry establishes that he is not only descended from a royal line, but from a line that traces its origin back to a god” (Ford, Reid). According to Ford and Reid, this divine descent qualification is fulfilled in Aragorn, Isildur, and Elindil’s descent from Melian, a Maia. Ford and Reid call the Maiar “operationally

gods in Middle-earth.” Aragorn’s success in battle is clear and extended throughout his extraordinarily long life across several cultures.

Aragorn’s humility in not staking his claim to the throne is not a result of doubt in his right, nor is it resistance to the kingship. On the contrary, Aragorn is fully aware of his descent from Isildur, but also respects the desires of the people and elders. He knows that he must prove himself to be the rightful king, but this is distinct from the need to prove himself as Isildur’s heir. He has the heirlooms and no one doubts his descent. Instead, they doubt his right and his designation as the rightful king. At the Council of Elrond, Bilbo is the only member to express the sentiment that “the crownless again shall be king.” Ford and Reid argue that “If the peoples of Middle-earth were operating on an idea of kingship as a human office descending through primogeniture, the Council presumably would have recognized Aragorn as king once Elrond explained his ancestry” (Ford, Reid 74). Instead, the reaction of the Council to Aragorn’s identity as Isildur’s heir reflects the notion that “a candidate's bloodline makes him eligible to be king, but is not sufficient to make him king” (Ford, Reid 74). This should immediately remind the reader of Gothic kingship in which primogeniture does not determine right-to-rule.

Boromir’s response to Aragorn’s heritage bolsters this. Unlike Peter Jackson’s adaptation in which Boromir declares “Gondor has no king, Gondor needs no king,” He says “Mayhap the Sword-that-was-Broken may still stem the tide—if the hand that wields it has inherited not an heirloom only, but the sinews of the Kings of Men” (*FR* 281). He implies that, if Aragorn is the true king of Gondor, he will be successful in overcoming the rule of Sauron through valor in battle and would have inherited the “sinews”—or blood luck associated with battle. Aragorn is not offended by this exchange, but promises to “return with Boromir to Gondor to help fight

Sauron but makes no demand to rule there” (Ford, Reid 74). Even after the battle on Pelanor fields and the healing of Faramir and Eowyn, Aragorn does not force his way into kingship. Instead, he says “I do not yet claim to command any man” (*RK* 139). It is Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth who says “the Lord Aragorn, I will hold to be my liege lord, whether he claims it or no” (*RK* 139) and also “Say not *The Lords of Gondor*. Say *The King Elessar*. For that is true, even though he has not yet sat upon the throne” (*RK* 143 italics in the original). The address Faramir gives as the Steward passing over leadership of the city to the king is particularly interesting. In presenting Aragorn to the people he says

‘Men of Gondor, hear now the Steward of this Realm! Behold! One has come to claim the kingship again at last. Here is Aragorn son of Arathorn, chieftain of the Dúnedain of Arnor, Captain of the Host of the West, bearer of the Star of the North, wielder of the Sword Reforged, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing, the Elfstone, Elessar of the line of Vandalil, Isildur’s son, Elendil’s son of Númenor. Shall he be king and enter into the City and dwell there?’

And all the host and all the people cried *yea* with one voice (*RK* 303)

In presenting Aragorn to the people Faramir establishes his bloodline, his success in battle, and his healing hands. He then asks the people if they will accept him as king.

Aragorn’s kingship may be inspired by early Germanic kingship in that Aragorn’s candidacy, but not necessarily the right to rule, is determined by his descent from the royal line. Instead, Aragorn must prove his divine descent and divine favor by displaying supernatural ability. Aragorn’s German inspiration, therefore, elucidates the most unusual part of Aragorn’s character: his humility in claiming the throne. With this in mind, therefore, the reason for

Aragorn's healing is clear. Aragorn heals as proof of his right to rule in keeping with early Medieval Germanic tradition.

There are four examples of Aragorn healing his companions. First, Aragorn keeps Frodo alive after the attack on Weathertop (*FR* 192-94). Second, he tends to Sam and Frodo after their escape from the mines of Moria (*FR* 326-27). He heals Faramir, Eowyn, Merry and others injured in combat after the battle of Pelennor Fields (*RK* 844-53), and he helps Frodo and Sam after the fall of Sauron (*RK* 931). While Aragorn's general medical care of the fellowship after the mines of Moria is simple first-aid and may be credited more to his skill as a ranger than to his kingship, it, along with his use of *athelas* after the events of Weathertop, prepare the reader for the healing that occurs in *The Return of the King*. This healing, in contrast to his earlier work, is clearly supernatural. The examples of healing that are more in line with his identity as king are the attempted healing of Frodo after being stabbed by a Morgul blade, the healing that occurs in "The House of Healing," and the healing he gives Frodo and Sam after the fall of Sauron. For the purposes of this thesis, we will focus on the chapter "The House of Healing."

The language of "The House of Healing" is extremely tactile as Aragorn heals through touch that is not inherently medical. Aragorn takes Faramir's hand and lays his other hand on Faramir's brow. Then he "walked afar in some dark vale, calling for one that was lost" and engaged in a "great struggle" (*RK* 847). When he used the *athelas* leaves, "he laid them on his hands and breathed on them" (*RK* 847). This is an interesting counter to the "black breath" of Sauron's agents. In healing Éowyn, he kisses her brow and "calls her back", and uses *athelas* leaves steeped in water (Nikakis 85). In healing Merry, he strokes his hair and touches his eyelids, calls him back, and uses *athelas*. "The giving of the healer's vital essences" Nikakis

notes “is not new. Jung [Carl G. Jung in *Man and his Symbols*] notes that “To breathe or spit upon something conveys a ‘magical’ effect, as, for instance, when Christ used spittle to cure the blind, or where a son inhales his father’s last breath in order to take over the father’s soul” (Nikakis 86). Much of this healing is clearly supernatural as it involves touching that serves no overt healing function. This language of breathing, calling back, and touching of eyelids reads as specifically messianic symbolism, but Tolkien uses these symbols to tie together Aragorn’s identity as a sort of Christ with his identity as a king. His physical methods draw a clear line back to messianic tradition, but this does not negate the fact that Aragorn’s character heals—at least in part—to fulfill the requirements of kingship laid out in Germanic tradition.

Finally, Aragorn heals the both the physical landscape—as symbolized with the white tree of Gondor—and the political landscape. One of the most unusual German associations with the physical touch of a king was that of political healing. As discussed previously, a new king, upon his first *adventus* to a city, could pardon exiles and bring about political healing. Aragorn exercises a similar right in the mercy he shows to Beregond, who killed a kinsman while trying to save his master.

‘And the King said to Beregond: ‘Beregond, by your sword blood was spilled in the Hallows, where that is forbidden. Also you left your post without leave of Lord or of Captain. For these things, of old, death was the penalty. Now therefore I must pronounce your doom.

‘All penalty is remitted for you valour in battle, and still more because all that you did was for the love of Lord Faramir. Nonetheless you must leave the Guard of the Citadel, and you must go forth from the City of Mines Tirith’ (*RK* 305)

In this way, Aragorn pardoned Beregon, for he appointed Beregon to the White Company to protect Faramir in Eryn Arneth. In acknowledgement of this pardon, Beregon kissed the king's hand.

Aragorn also fulfills the need for a healing king by being a sacral king. While there is certainly Christian and messianic reference in this, there is also pre-Christian tradition. Aragorn sacrifices many things in order to fulfill his duty as a healing king. First, he experiences social sacrifice as he is an outcast in what will be his own kingdom. The attitude of disgust and trepidation towards him is seen both in Bree and in Rohan. Secondly, he sacrifices his independence. When he joins the fellowship, Aragorn puts aside his own goals and desires to help Frodo get the ring to Mordor. Multiple times, he expresses his desire to turn and go to Gondor, but he recognizes the oath he made and strives to fulfill it. Even after Frodo and Sam leave the fellowship, he recognizes his duty to Merry and Pippin and he continues to pursue them instead of giving in to his own wishes. Finally, and most importantly, Aragorn fulfills the office of a sacral king in the manner and timing of his death. Aragorn did not exploit his healing abilities and his long life to extend his time in Middle earth. Where the kings of Númenor sought ways to live longer lives, Aragorn willingly gave up his life when he knew it was time.

As Queen of Elves and men [Arwen] dwelt with Aragorn for six-score years in great glory and bliss; yet at last he felt the approach of old age and knew that the span of his life-days was drawing to an end, long though it had been. Then Aragorn said to Arwen: '...We have gathered, and we have spent, and now the time of payment draws near.' (Appendix A 427)

Not only was Aragorn gifted with long life and the ability to heal, but also he was given the choice of his own time and manner of death. By choosing to give up his kingship when he felt his strength flagging, he mirrors the sacrality of Gothic kings who abdicated or gave up their lives in old age for the sake of the health of their people and land.

Conclusion

Why was it so important for a human king to heal? Larry Dossey noted :“Today, it is difficult for us to imagine the power of the belief that kings could heal...” Those that flocked to the throne possessed “a hope, a belief, a belief that had once exercised a powerful hold over English imagination...the royal touch...a sacred gift, a healing power that allowed [a king] to cure the disease...by the touch of his hand alone” (Dossey 121). Much like the humans of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth, we long for physical healing from a political leader. We desire a sign that our leaders are people who can heal us and can heal the land and the political atmosphere. We long for a true king. J. R. R. Tolkien wrote Aragorn to be a healing, human king not only because he reflects humanity’s deep longing for physical and political healing, but also because Aragorn’s healing abilities mark him as the rightful king in early Germanic tradition.

J. R. R. Tolkien drew on a number of literary traditions in the crafting of his character Aragorn including the *Beowulf* narrative, Arthurian legend, and messianic symbolism. With a closer study of early Germanic history, however, it is clear that much of Aragorn’s characterization as a healing king is drawn from a pre-Christian Germanic understanding of sacral kingship and healing. Unlike Peter Jackson’s depiction of Aragorn as a hesitant heir, who’s fear of his heritage and his own perceived weakness keep him from claiming the throne until the last moment, J. R. R. Tolkien writes Aragorn as an early medieval Germanic king who

understands that his descent does not inherently grant him the right to rule. Instead, Aragorn proves himself as the rightful king to his people through his actions. His success in battle and healing abilities coupled with his semi-divine descent make Aragorn a clear archetype of German kingship. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien draws together the two halves of kingship—the temporary warlord *reiks* and the healing, priest-king *thiudan*—in the melding together of Strider the Ranger and Aragorn the King.

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