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A KINGLY TRICHOTOMY: SPIRITUALITY, LINEAGE, AND DEEDS IN
BEOWULF AND THE LORD OF THE RINGS

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of English with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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2018

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ABSTRACT

Beowulf and *The Lord of the Rings* both present complex narratives of an individual using spiritual favor, heroic deeds, and a notable heritage to affirm their right to rule as king. By doing a close reading of this ancient epic alongside J.R.R. Tolkien's modern fantasy, one can understand the various ways that the kings in these texts have drawn power from these distinct realms of authority. In *Beowulf*, the title character's successful acts of warfare affirm his spiritual favor, and the poem demonstrates that one can construct a heritage using their self-made reputation. Unlike Beowulf, Aragorn's solidified, sacred heritage in *The Lord of the Rings* is bolstered by his deeds—not created by them. Ironically, the older text possesses more fluid ideas of kingship than the modern by including a deeds-based ascension to the throne in addition to the primogeniture tradition. Though today's rulers seem a far cry from Anglo-Saxon warrior-kings, these core characteristics of spiritual favor, noble acts, and esteemed heritage are still relevant. Studying the ascension of kings in *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* reveals surprising similarities between modern politics and ancient literature to the 21st century reader.

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“The only just literary critic is Christ, who admires more than does any man the gifts He Himself has bestowed” –J.R.R. Tolkien (qtd. in Birzer 65)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Vita.....	v
Chapters:	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. The Role of Spirituality	2
3. The Role of Lineage.....	16
4. The Role of Deeds.....	31
5. Conclusion.....	46
References.....	47

INTRODUCTION

If one were to do a cursory reading *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings*, one would most likely conclude that these texts are quite similar, and this is not an inaccurate observation. The majority of academia regards J.R.R. Tolkien's 20th -century trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* as Tolkien's "attempt to create the sort of story that could have been told by Anglo Saxons, filled with their beliefs, values, and ideologies, adapted to the modern form of a novel" (Ford and Reid 71). While the culture of Middle -earth indeed adheres to many of the Anglo-Saxon "beliefs, values, and ideologies" (Ford and Reid 71) that are also found in *Beowulf*, there is a major structural difference between these two political systems that is often overlooked. While both stories contain dragons, heirlooms, a rich cultural history, and a king figure that rises to the throne amidst violent warfare. However, this picture is incomplete. A further analysis of these texts shows that *Beowulf* and Aragorn's paths to their respective thrones are quite different. These two men rely on a trichotomy of spiritual favor, heritage, and heroic deeds to prove to others—and themselves—that they are worthy of gaining the throne. These three qualities intersect and overlap each other in within each text, creating a complex road to the throne for both *Beowulf* and Aragorn though they exist thousands of years apart in literary tradition.

CHAPTER ONE

The Role of Spirituality

In order to be deemed as having the right to rule in the Anglo-Saxon-text *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon-inspired text *The Lord of the Rings*, the appropriate candidate must possess a connection with the spiritual realm of their respective societies. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn—as the King of Gondor—must directly descend from and possess the same supernatural abilities as the mythological deities of Middle-earth. In *Beowulf*, however, the title hero figure has a more complicated relationship with God. Throughout Beowulf’s rise to the throne, he upholds Christian beliefs in a pagan society, and simultaneously trusts both God’s providence and Fate—or *wyrd*—for his political success. The characters in *Beowulf* are very aware of God’s role within their society, and they do as much as they can to remain within his divine favor. In *The Lord of the Rings*, however, there are very few (if any) mentions of Ilúvatar, the God figure in Middle-earth mythology. There are instances where spirituality is acknowledged, but these rituals are implied rather than performed overtly. Rather than God receiving the praise and awe of the people as in *Beowulf*, the king serves as the main object of adoration. Thus, the people in Middle-earth have a much more distant relationship with their God, but they still maintain their spirituality because of the king’s holy lineage. In *The Lord of the*

Rings, therefore, the king is seen almost as a god himself, whereas in *Beowulf*, the king is an instrument chosen and used by God. Looking at the spiritual context of *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* does more than help the reader understand the role of the king as a people's priest; comparing and contrasting these two texts causes the reader to consider if, ultimately, divine favor serves as a help or a hindrance to one's ability to gain the throne.

Beowulf

The relationship between kings and religion is particularly complex in *Beowulf* due to the dichotomy of Christian and pagan values. In this culture, the people actively acknowledge both God and *wyrd* in ordaining both their successes and failures. Liuzza explains that *wyrd* is “the Old English word for ‘fate’; it is sometimes quasi-personified, though apparently not to the extent that the goddess Fortuna was in Roman poetic mythology” (p. 62). God is actively involved in the political happenings of the Geats and the Spear-Danes, bringing forth warriors in a time of need and granting victory when he deems it fit. Additionally, there is an ever-present sense of *wyrd* consciously determining an individual's success or failure. The way a potential king navigates both Christian and pagan values in this society speaks to willingness to accept their “fate”—whatever the results may be.

Beowulf takes place in a pagan, Germanic society, but the poet interpolates Christianity into the worldviews of the heroes and the surrounding culture. This influence is evident in the commonly-held belief that any potential king must show evidence that they possess the divine favor of God in order to be accepted by the people as a rightful ruler. From the very beginning of the story, the narrator establishes that only God can

provide a truly successful warrior-king. For example, Scyld's son Beow is described as one "whom God sent/as a solace to the people" (13-14). According to the poet, God, looking down on the earth from the heavens, saw that the people desperately needed a leader, and he provided one for them. In *Beowulf's* culture, the Christian God is not removed from his people; rather, he is actively involved in the political life on earth. God bestows his favor upon individuals, and he sends them to accomplish his will; these favored ones living long lives as vessels of God's divine purpose. When Beowulf arrives to kill Grendel and restore Heorot to its former glory, Hrothgar gives thanks that

Holy God

in His grace has guided [Beowulf] to [them],
to the West-Danes, as [he] would hope,
against Grendel's terror (Liuzza 380-384).

Hrothgar recognizes that God, in his graciousness, has sent Beowulf as a savior to rid Heorot of Grendel's terrorism. Hrothgar even goes so far as to praise Beowulf's mother, noting that "the God of Old was good to [Beowulf's mother]/ in childbearing" (945-946). This implies that even Beowulf's birth was God-ordained, reinforcing the notion of Beowulf as a divinely chosen warrior-king.

If Beowulf himself is characterized as one chosen by God, then it is only fitting that Grendel would be characterized as a spiritual reject, a descendent of Cain. Grendel is described as an "unholy creature,/ grim and ravenous" who plagues the halls of Heorot (120-121). This creature is described in both human and demonic terms; the author characterizes him as a "fiend from hell" (101), a "grim spirit" (102) and a "miserable man" (104). This spiritual ambiguity mandates that only a hero that is both a physical

match and a spiritual match will be able to kill him. Beowulf's ability to defeat Grendel without the use of any weapons proves that he not only possesses the appropriate physical strength to be king, he also possesses a spiritual favor that can only come from God, a favor that enables him to vanquish demonic creatures.

Not only does the Christian God gain credit for sending heroes and kings to people during their time of need, but God also receives credit for the success of these heroes as well. In a culture that highly regards a person's renown and personal honor, one would think that heroes such as Beowulf walk into battle confident that their skills will win them victory and glory. However, a close reading of the text shows that Beowulf, renowned hero that he is, goes into battle quite blind to the outcome. For example, before Beowulf fights Grendel, he notes that "the wise Lord,/ the holy God, [will] grant the judgment of glory/ to whichever hand seems proper to Him" (685-687). Here, Beowulf counts his own strength and valor as almost obsolete; he expresses that the outcome of the battle rests entirely in God's predestined plan. Beowulf also uses unsure language such as "if [Grendel] is allowed to win" when speaking of his upcoming battle with the creature (442). Clearly, Beowulf believes that the result of the battle has already been decided by Providence, and there is nothing that he can personally do to alter this pre-determined outcome. Furthermore, the narrator remarks that "success in war was given to Hrothgar" (64), implying that military success may not be entirely dependent on one's own natural abilities. It is safe to assume, then, that if one is not within God's favor, then they will not fare well in battle.

Interestingly, in a culture where acts of heroism are instrumental in forming one's reputation, these acts fall short in being a sure, tell-tale sign of one's success in battle.

This ideology is evident when Beowulf recounts his successful battle against Grendel's mother in the cave. He ominously notes that "the battle would have been/ over at once, if God has not guarded [him]" (1658-1659). In this quote, Beowulf reveals a deeply-rooted fear that God's favor is fickle and prone to change; no matter how great his strength is, he is never guaranteed success in war. Beowulf questions whether he inadvertently angered God, who then sent the dragon as punishment. This fear is not something that Beowulf easily forgets, either. Decades later, when Beowulf is king of the Geats, a dragon terrorizes Beowulf's land. The poet notes that, because of the dragon's terror, Beowulf "believed he had bitterly offended/ the Ruler of all, the eternal lord,/against the old law" (2329-2331). However, despite this fear, Beowulf still chooses to fight the dragon, not worrying "much about the dragon's warfare,/ his strength or valor, because [Beowulf] had survived/ many battles..." (2348-2350). Although Beowulf does not know whether he is in God's favor, he still chooses to accept his fate and fight the dragon. Though a man's deeds and skills may win him a glorious reputation, these deeds are meaningless if he is not operating within the will of God. Thus, the man who is destined to rule must be victorious in battle because military achievement is a sure sign that one is favored by God, at least in the present moment.

However, it would be a gross simplification of the Anglo-Saxon belief system within *Beowulf* to say that a ruler's perceived success was solely due to an act of the Christian God. One should not overlook the traditional pagan influences that are at work within the poem. While *Beowulf* is full of references to God bringing military victory to an individual, there are also acknowledgements of *wyrd* also determining one's success or failure. This concept of fate is given the same amount of respect by the heroes within this

epic as the notion of the Christian God's predestination. In "A Christian Wyrd: Syncretism in *Beowulf*", the author notes that, in this text, "the pagan characters seem to invoke the Christian God; anachronistically, Beowulf himself often bears witness... Conversely, the Christian poet seems to invoke the pagan wyrd" (Major 1-2). This dichotomy of Christian providence and pagan beliefs working simultaneously to determine an individual's success renders the text seemingly contradictory. It seems impossible that both pagan and Christian principles can co-exist and play equal roles in determining the life, and more importantly the reign, of Beowulf. However, rather than undermining the work's credibility, the inclusion of these two worldviews strengthens it. The fact that *wyrd* is even included in this story bolsters the author's ethos. The author incorporates all aspects of the society, even the pagan ones that they may have personally disagreed with. It is also important to note that the idea of "Christianity" presented in this poem is not the same Christianity that would be recognized today. Therefore, Major notes the "inherent Germanic elements are not incompatible with [Beowulf's] Christian orientation" (Major 3).

One way to better understand this web of spiritual allegiances is to analyze the pagan and Christian influences of works written around the same era as *Beowulf*. For example, *The Dream of the Rood* tells the story of the tree who eventually became Christ's cross through a pagan lens, synthesizing the two worldviews to complement instead of contradict each another. In "The *Dream of the Rood* – A Blend of Christian and Pagan Values", the author notes that "the value of the ancient pagan forms of spirituality is upheld by the fact that the tree, as the essential link with the divine, submits humbly, even if unwillingly, to its role of a torture instrument" (Tampierová 47-48). While *The*

Dream of the Rood is, inherently, a Christian story, it maintains many aspects of pagan tradition like the value of heroism and sacrifice. In the same way, the poet of *Beowulf* takes a traditionally pagan story, and synthesizes it with Christian morals. The concepts of Christian predestination and pagan fate are simply mirrors of each other within two distinct cultures. Just as the Christian God's will and favor is prone to change (as discussed earlier), *wyrd*, also, is never absolute.

For example, when Beowulf recounts his five-day brawl with Breca on the waves, he notes that “*Wyrd* often spares/ an undoomed man, when his courage endures” (573-575). Here, *wyrd* decides whether a man should be “doomed” or “undoomed” and acts accordingly. Before Beowulf goes to fight the dragon, he notes that “it shall be at the wall as *wyrd* decrees,/ the Ruler of every man” (2526). Clearly in this epic, Beowulf is subject to (and acknowledges) *wyrd* for his success in victory and, in turn, his rise to power. However, the true significance of these two ideologies lies, not in the spiritual and cultural implications, but in the way that Beowulf dutifully accepts his destiny and faces it courageously.

To further complicate matters, while the characters in *Beowulf* are subject to both *wyrd* and Christian providence, the poet seems to have a preference for Christian values. For example, when Grendel first begins to terrorize the inhabitants of Heorot, the author writes that Hrothgar and his people “offered honor to idols/ at pagan temples, prayed aloud/ that they soul-slayer might offer assistance/ in their country's distress” (175-179). The poet justifies the pagan practices of these people, however, saying that “they did not know the Lord God, / or even how to praise the heavenly Protector” (180-182). The narrator almost expresses sympathy for these people, mourning their separation from “the

heavenly Protector” and their ignorance from the truth (182). Even though the poet has a personal bias, however, this does not negate the value of paganism as a cultural artifact within the story. The inclusion of a pagan belief system may even help redeem pagan heroes in the minds of a strictly Christian, Anglo-Saxon audience. As Bradley J. Birzer notes in *J.R.R Tolkien’s Sanctifying Myth*, the author “used the poem to demonstrate that not all pagan things should be dismissed by the new culture. Instead, the Christian should embrace and sanctify the most noble virtues to come out of the northern pagan mind: courage and raw will” (Birzer 35). In this society, the Christians believed that the best strategy for converting the pagans to Christianity was through gradual enlightenment instead of abrupt, violent force. Gregory the Great, who served as pope from 590-604 wrote in a letter that “it is undoubtedly impossible to cut away everything at once from hard hearts, since one who strives to ascend to the highest place must needs rise by steps or paces, and not by leaps” (qtd. In Liuzza 173). This is what the author of *Beowulf* is doing, writing from an empathetic perspective, the author shows the readers that not all aspects of the ancient pagan culture should be dismissed.

To further prove this point, the author of the poem has his hero dutifully accept both the ancient, pagan ideas of *wyrd* and the Christian theology. Susanne Weil writes that in order to receive honor during Beowulf’s time, a man must choose whether he would accept his fate—a proverbial arrow— “in the back or head-on, and how [he] chose determined whether [he] would be sung as a hero, a villain--or not at all...It would be a good fate, indeed the best, to die gloriously in the protection of your people as Beowulf does” (96). Beowulf accepts both the will of the Christian God and *wyrd*. He chooses to fight Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon, even though he had no way of knowing

absolutely what the outcome would be. By incorporating both pagan and Christian spirituality, the author emphasizes Beowulf's resolute acceptance of his destiny, regardless of the associated faith. This bolsters the idea of him as a true warrior-king: he does not run from his fate. Rather, he doubly acknowledges, both to *wyrd* and to God, their control over his life.

Both the pagan and the Christian influences of *Beowulf* are instrumental in kingly formation within this text. The Christian God, actively involved in political affairs, brings forth heroes and saviors during a time of need. God also bestows personal favor and allows those individuals to have an incredibly successful military and political career. However, this favor is fickle, and one can easily fall in—and out—of God's good will. One's success in battle gives evidence of one's favor with God. In the same way, the pagan concept of fate—*wyrd*—is also quite subjective. This ancient Anglo-Saxon ideology seems to have an awareness of who should and should not be worthy of survival. Even by combining two distinct cultures' spiritualities—Christianity and paganism—a warrior never knows for sure whether they are going to succeed or fail. As a result, military success was the only concrete evidence that one was operating according to fate and Providence. Beowulf's impressive military career was not solely boasting his great deeds or strength; it also served as an important testimony that he was operating within spiritual favor of a Higher Power, be that *wyrd* or Christian Providence. Since Beowulf exhibited acts of successful warfare, this affirmed him as a king in the eyes of the people.

The Lord of the Rings

Similar to *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon-inspired culture of *The Lord of the Rings* mandates that Aragorn, as Gondor's king, must also prove that he possesses a divine favor in order to be given the right to rule. Mirroring the posture of the ancient, Anglo-Saxon kings like Beowulf and Hrothgar, Aragorn also serve as vessels of military success and spiritual connection for his people. However, instead of simply operating within the will of God and accepting one's fate as in *Beowulf*, the candidate for the throne of Gondor in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy must descend from a line of deities. In order to fully appreciate and understand this relationship between kings and the deities of Middle-earth, however, one must have a thorough understanding of this world's rich mythological context.

Tolkien's novel *The Silmarillion* provides the necessary mythological and cultural history of Middle-earth and its people, offering important insight into the relationship between men and the spiritual realm of Middle-earth. Understanding the history of the race of men in Middle-earth will help the reader gain a thorough understanding of the role of the King of Gondor as the priest of the people. *The Silmarillion* opens by detailing the creation narrative of Eä, or Earth. In the beginning, Ilúvatar, the all-powerful God and ruler, creates the Ainur. These beings are "the offspring of his thought," and operate as a sort of angel (*The Silmarillion* 3). Ilúvatar then teaches the Ainur to sing, and together they create beautiful melodies and harmonies; it is this music which propels the creation of Eä. With Eä formed, Ilúvatar then shared his vision of populating it with Elves and Men with the Ainur. When the Ainur see the future of these "Children of Ilúvatar," they love them because the men and elves are "things other than themselves, strange and free, wherein they saw the mind of Ilúvatar reflected anew" (*The Silmarillion* 7). So great was

the Ainur's affection for men and elves, these beings that were yet to be created, that fourteen of them chose to reside in the Eä permanently to maintain its beauty and prepare it for the arrival of Elves and Men. Each of these individuals, who were then renamed Valar, had dominion over a certain aspect of the earth such as the wind, the water, and so on, similar to deities in Greek mythology. Tolkien writes that "Men often called them gods" and that they were regarded with a mix of awe, fear, and love (*The Silmarillion* 15). The Maiar, in addition to the Valar, also leave paradise and come to Eä. They are the spiritual servants and helpers of the Valar, and they also have certain proclivities and gifts that they use to tend to Eä. This background knowledge of the deities and gods in this complex mythology is essential for understanding the King of Gondor as a representative of Ilúvatar in Middle-earth.

Aragorn can trace his ancestry back to Melian, a Maia who served Vana and Este, two of the Valar. In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien notes that "[Melian] spent her time tending to the growing things of the Earth" (22). It is from this lineage that Aragorn, as King of Gondor, descends. Ford and Reid write that "Melian married an elf...their daughter, Lúthien married a human, Beren. Lúthien and Beren's great grandsons, Elrond and Elros, chose different paths; the latter choosing to be mortal. The kings of Númenor descended from Elros, and Aragorn descended from them" (Ford and Reid 74). Though the connection of spirituality is distant, Aragorn is still able to trace his heritage back to Melian, a spiritual being created by Ilúvatar. Bradley J. Birzer writes in *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth* that "Tolkien made it quite clear in his letters that the king was Ilúvatar's representative on earth... the steward of men, hobbits, Dwarves, and Elves" (83). As the "priest" of Gondor, Aragorn's role as king is not unlike that of a pope; Birzer

notes that “With the return of the king Aragorn to his rightful throne, Tolkien argued, the ‘progress of the tales ends in what is far more like the re-establishment of an effective Holy Roman Empire with its seat in Rome’” (43). While the spirituality of Middle-earth is not as overt as in *Beowulf*, Tolkien gives hints to the readers that Ilúvatar’s presence, while subtle, is still palpable. As Birzer notes,

The entire story of the Lord of the Rings reflects God’s grace, but while God is always present, he is never named. For example, when Frodo asks Gandalf how the Ring came into his possession, Gandalf answers: ‘Behind that there wears something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker’ (58).

Gandalf makes a connection between Fate and traditional Middle-earth spirituality in the same way that the author of *Beowulf* portrays Christianity and *wyrd* as equals. Because Ilúvatar was, arguably, a more “distant” God than the Christian God in *Beowulf*, a king who possessed, not only spiritual favor, but a palpable spiritual connection, was a necessity in Gondor.

Just as Beowulf finds his spiritual antagonist in Grendel, Aragorn also fights enemies who pose both physical and spiritual threats. The Ring-wraiths, or Nazgûl, are the nine feared servants of Sauron. These nine creatures (“men” is no longer accurate as they have lost all former beauty and morality that they possessed), had been given rings similar to the One Ring, and they “became mighty in their days, kings, sorcerers, and warriors of old” (*The Silmarillion* 346). The dark power of Sauron ultimately corrupted them, and “they had, as it seemed, unending life, yet life became unendurable to them” (*The Silmarillion* 346). These nine exist in an enigmatic spiritual state. All that was mortal,

including their physical bodies, has faded, and they lurk around draped in black cloaks: “darkness went with them, and they cried with the voices of death” (*The Silmarillion* 346). Aragorn, however, is knowledgeable of these enemies and their weaponry, and he courageously fights off the Nazgûl’s assault. When one of the Nazgûl stabs Frodo with a poisoned blade, Aragorn is able to save Frodo’s life (*The Fellowship* 67). The significance of Aragorn’s healing will be discussed in more detail in the last chapter, but here we might observe that just as Beowulf demonstrates his spiritual competency by successfully fighting off immortal creatures, Aragorn does the same.

However, while Aragorn is notably capable of being both a political and a spiritual leader of Gondor, solely boasting a holy lineage is not enough to prove that one is of a spiritual favor within the culture of Middle-earth; just because one is a descendent of a god figure does not mean that one will necessarily inherit the same spiritual gifts and abilities. Boromir, the eldest son of Denethor II, vocalizes this doubt: “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” (*The Fellowship* 281). Just because Aragorn possesses Isildur’s sword— “the sword that was broken”—and claims the holy and royal heritage of Isildur, this does not prove that he has the innate abilities to wage war, lead a people, and serve as a spiritual connection to Ilúvatar. Aragorn relies on deeds to prove his spiritual heritage; *The Lord of the Rings* chronicles Aragorn’s task to prove that he has this connection with the spiritual deities of Middle-earth and, thus, is worthy of serving as King of Gondor.

The spiritual culture of *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* mandates that each potential ruler must prove their spiritual validity in order to rule. Beowulf dutifully

accepts the ways that both Christianity and *wyrd* seem to determine his political success. Though he is blind to the potential outcomes of his noble endeavors, he still chooses to accept his fate, whatever the outcome. Conversely, Aragorn is confident in his destiny to be king of Gondor. His sacred lineage sets him up to serve as the “priest” of his people and help them maintain their spiritual connection. Though spirituality has a more obvious influence in Beowulf’s life than Aragorn’s, the fact remains that neither of these men would be able to obtain the throne without this spiritual affirmation. However, spirituality alone is not enough; these characters must also utilize their lineage and their heroic deeds to prove that their success as warriors is not coincidental, but a sure sign of their spiritual favor.

CHAPTER 2

THE ROLE OF LINEAGE

In *The Lord of the Rings* and *Beowulf*, lineage is closely intertwined with both deeds and spiritual favor, appropriately bridging the gap between my two chapters. The main characters from both of these texts—Aragorn and Beowulf—use their heritage as a means to bolster their reputation and to uphold the validity of both their deeds and their spiritual favor. The significance of heirlooms in both of these texts further emphasizes the idea of kingship being passed down. These heirlooms are a physical reminder of an established heritage. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the primary item passed down is a sword. However, since the culture of *Beowulf* places a heavy emphasis on gold and other forms of wealth in addition to weapons are also passed down to symbolize one's favor.

It is also important to note whether one's heritage is evident from the very beginning of the text. Aragorn, when first introduced by Tolkien, is not described as one who embodies royalty. Rather, his identity, intentions, and heritage are all shrouded in mystery. Beowulf, however, is described by the author as a “renowned prince” (201) from the very beginning of the text. The decision to reveal or conceal a character's heritage from the reader carries heavy implications about the importance of heritage within the respective text. However, the idea of lineage helping to propel one to their throne is not limited to a physical bloodline; rather, lineage can even encompass the

pseudo-father figures that are seen in mentor/mentee relationships. This shows that a king's "heritage" is not limited to his bloodline. Rather, both Aragorn and Beowulf possess webs of relations that include both blood relatives and forged relations. Gaining the approval of these mentor figures, in addition to possessing a bloodline of consequence, is instrumental in one's formation as king. Studying the way that both Beowulf and Aragorn handle their heritage will reveal the variant beliefs about the relationship between kings and heritage in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Beowulf*. In *The Lord of the Rings*, heritage is necessary in order to become king, while in *Beowulf*, heritage can be purchased and/or created by one's heroic deeds.

The Lord of the Rings

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn's lineage is strongly associated with his spiritual favor as he is directly descended from specific god figures within Middle-earth mythology. In this trilogy, Tolkien emphasizes the idea of a king as the high priest of the people, one who serves as the people's primary connection to the Gods within Middle-earth society. Tolkien also contrasts the way Aragorn approaches his lineage with the way that Denethor II, the steward of Gondor, and his sons handle their heritage. While Aragorn holds his position humbly, Denethor II is power-hungry and intent on staying in power for as long as possible. Studying the way that Aragorn takes ownership not only of his actual heritage but also of the heirlooms that are associated with his heritage reveals Aragorn's attitude toward the relationship between his lineage and his role as king. Aragorn is confident that, because he is Isildur's heir, he is not only capable but destined to be the King of Gondor. Finally, Aragorn's pseudo-father figure, Elrond, makes

Aragorn's path to kingship as smooth as possible by mentoring him and counseling throughout his journey to claim his rightful place at the throne.

One important difference between *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* is that while heritage in *Beowulf* serves as a way of bolstering one's reputation, heritage in *The Lord of the Rings* is absolutely essential in order for one to be king. However, although Aragorn was "destined" to be king, he does not resemble a king when he is first introduced in *The Return of the King*. Tolkien initially describes Aragorn as a "strange-looking weather-beaten man" (*The Fellowship* 177). Although Aragorn possesses a holy heritage, this fact is (for the most part) obscured at the beginning of the trilogy. Aragorn even acknowledges this: "little do I resemble the figures of Elendil and Isildur as they stand carven in their majesty in the halls of Denethor. I am but the heir of Isildur, not Isildur himself" (*The Fellowship* 278). This is an example of the influence of Tolkien's Christian faith; just as Jesus was born into humble, poor circumstances, Aragorn's sacred lineage is hidden away for the majority of the text. The true nature of his heritage is gradually revealed to the reader (and the majority of the characters) through his spiritual and heroic deeds. Just like the author of *Beowulf*, Tolkien emphasizes Aragorn's "rise" to kingship over his actual reign as king. The journey from a lonesome ranger to king of Gondor affirms that Aragorn, as proved by his deeds, possesses a renowned heritage.

One of the most effective ways of further understanding Aragorn's character is by looking at Aragorn's foil, the steward of Gondor's throne. Denethor II is described as having a "carven face with its proud bones and skin like ivory and [a] long curved nose between the dark deep eyes" (*The Return* 12). He is given a proud, haughty description to match the haughtiness of his character; this man clutches onto the power of his throne

and is desperate to keep it as long as he can. However, his son Faramir is a strong contrast to his father: “Faramir does not resent his family’s position as one of stewardship rather than royalty. Faramir is a man of integrity and great courage, not a seeker of power” (Birzer 85). When Faramir recognizes that Aragorn is the true King of Gondor, he does not cling to his heritage as next in line to be steward. Rather, he submits to Aragorn’s authority and welcomes him as king. Similarly to Faramir, Aragorn wields his heritage confidently, yet humbly. While he doesn’t shy away from prophecies and signs that affirm his true purpose, he still owes all of his training to be a king to Elrond.

Another component of Aragorn’s heritage worth scrutiny is his sword, which reflects the role of heritage in *The Lord of the Rings* as a bridge between spiritual abilities and heroic deeds. Aragorn’s sword Narsil, later renamed Andúril, is used to win battles and achieve victory, but the sword also possesses spiritual and sacred qualities. In order to completely understand the true significance of Aragorn’s sword, however, one needs to know its full history. Thousands of years before any of the events in *The Lord of the Rings* take place, Isildur and his father fight to defend Middle-earth from Sauron. As chronicled in *The Silmarillion*, Sauron slays Isildur’s father Elendil and “the sword of Elendil [breaks] under him as he [falls]” (352). However, Isildur takes the shard of Narsil’s broken blade and severs the ring from Sauron’s hand, cutting off Sauron’s source of power and vanquishing him for the time being. The shards of Narsil are saved and are regarded as a sacred heirloom of Gondor. However, Tolkien notes that though the shards are preserved, “its light [is] extinguished, and it [is] not forged anew” (*The Silmarillion* 354). Elrond prophesies that the blade will not be re-made until “the Ruling Ring should be found again and Sauron should return; but the hope of Elves and Men [is] that these

things might never come to pass” (*The Silmarillion* 354). The inhabitants of Middle-earth recognize that this blade is destined to be used for a divine purpose by a renowned king, Isildur’s heir.

When *The Lord of the Rings* opens, Elrond’s prophecy is beginning to see fulfillment. The Ring has been found by Frodo, and people are aware of Sauron’s growing strength. Furthermore, Boromir speaks of a recurring dream that both he and his brother, Faramir, have had during the night. Boromir explains to Aragorn and Elrond that, in his dream, he hears a voice saying, “Seek for the Sword that was broken... For Isildur’s Bane shall waken” (*The Fellowship* 276). In order to fully embrace his kingship and his power to defeat Sauron as Isildur’s heir, Aragorn must possess the “sword that was broken.” Before the company sets off from Elrond’s Council, the sword is re-forged by Elvish smiths and Aragorn re-names it Andúril, which means “Flame of the West” (*The Fellowship* 310). By renaming the sword, Aragorn takes ownership of the sword for himself and gives it a new, modern meaning. This name change shows that Aragorn recognizes his ancestors for the good they have contributed as Gondor’s Kings, but he also looks forward to his own unique contributions as king. Aragorn is, essentially, the “Flame of the West.” When Aragorn leaves Rivendell to fight Sauron’s armies, Tolkien is careful to emphasize the fact that Andúril has been restored: “Aragorn son of Arathorn was going to war upon the marches of Mordor... very bright was the sword when it was made whole again” (*The Fellowship* 310). For thousands of years, the sword’s light was extinguished; however, since the sword is re-forged, it glows anew. Shortly after receiving the newly created weapon, when Aragorn finds himself in a battle against an orc-chief in the mountains, Tolkien writes that “Andúril [comes] down upon his helm.

There [is] a flash like flame and the helm burst usunder” (*The Fellowship* 365). A standard blade would not create a flash of flame when it is wielded. Therefore, this small detail confirms that “The Sword that was broken” has been restored and is in the hands of its rightful owner. This is an example of Aragorn’s deeds confirming his sacred lineage. Just as Aragorn confidently wields the palantír and walks the Paths of the Dead, heroic deeds that will be explored more in the next chapter, he wields Andúril with assurance. He tells others not to treat the newly forged blade lightly, warning that “Death shall come to any man that draws Elendil’s sword save Elendil’s heir” (*Two Towers* 115). By wielding Andúril, he is not merely confidently displaying a weapon, but the physical manifestation of his sacred, spiritual lineage.

As an heirloom, Andúril is also the embodiment of Aragorn’s physical strength and proficiencies in warfare, qualities that further characterize him as a king. Curiously, much of the language used to describe Aragorn’s heroic deeds during battle revolves around Andúril’s actions rather than the actions of Aragorn for himself. For example, during a battle to defend a mighty fortress from thousands of orcs, Tolkien writes that “Andúril rose and fell gleaming with white fire. A shout went up from wall and tower: ‘Andúril! Andúril goes to war. The Blade that was broken shines again’” (*Two Towers* 139). Instead of placing the focus on Aragorn’s actions, the focus of this text is on the weapon. However, this emphasis does not demean Aragorn’s personal actions; rather, it emphasizes the importance of Andúril. The fact that Aragorn bears this weapon confirms him as king, so these statements are almost equivalent of saying “The King! The King goes to war.” Andúril and Aragorn are, essentially, one. By describing much of Aragorn’s battles in terms of what Andúril accomplishes rather than what Aragorn accomplishes through his

own personal strength, Tolkien shows that Aragorn would not be able to achieve anything by his own prowess. Aragorn is only able to appropriately lead and defend the people of Gondor as king because of his heritage.

However, in order to become king, Aragorn, like Beowulf, needs guidance along the way. Aragorn's paternal heritage is certainly important and, similar to Beowulf, he introduces himself via this heritage many times to establish his credibility: "I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn" (*The Fellowship* 194). However, Aragorn's father Arathorn does not appear in the trilogy itself. The readers learn in Appendix A of *The Return of the King* that Aragorn's father died when Aragorn was a child (371). Aragorn's mother takes him to live in Rivendell where Elrond "took the place of his father and come to love him as a son of his own" (*The Return* 371). Growing up in Rivendell, Aragorn's true heritage is hidden from him for his protection. He is called Estel (meaning hope) in order to hide his lineage from enemies who want to take the life of Isildur's heir (*The Return* 371). When Aragorn reaches age twenty, Elrond "look[s] at him and [is] pleased, for he [sees] that he [is] fair and noble" (*The Return* 371). Although Aragorn did not have his biological father with him to counsel him in how to gain Gondor's throne, Aragorn is still given the guidance of Elrond who acts as his father. Similar to Beowulf, Aragorn is "adopted" as Elrond's son, and he is mentored and coached into becoming a successful king.

The role of heritage in *The Lord of the Rings* is certainly complex. Aragorn proves the validity of his heritage through his deeds, and his use of heirlooms further affirms his role as king. Aragorn wields his heritage confidently yet humbly, and Elrond guides him on the path toward kingship. Tolkien characterizes Aragorn's rise to the throne as a

humble yet sure journey, there is no doubt that Aragorn will be king of Gondor.

Interestingly, the readers are given a very small picture of the type of king that Aragorn becomes.

Beowulf

While lineage is not as important in *Beowulf* as it is in *The Lord of the Rings*, it still plays an instrumental role in affirming one's reputation and ability to rule. Beowulf's heritage, in addition to his deeds, serves as a sort of resumé: unlike the culture in *The Lord of the Rings*, the culture of *Beowulf* believes that one would inherently possess the same qualities and strengths as their ancestors. This heritage is often manifested through heirlooms and riches that are passed from one family to another as a symbol of their forged kinship.

Deeds and heritage form an interesting tension in *Beowulf*; while deeds help bolster one's reputation, that reputation is often built upon that of one's ancestors. Despite the emphasis on showcasing one's spiritual favor to create a reputation, the importance of heritage in the culture of *Beowulf* cannot be over-emphasized. Time and time again, characters are introduced by their heritage and their father's name. For example, when Beowulf and his men first arrive to the shores of the Denmark to rid Heorot of Grendel, the watchman says to them,

Now I must know
your lineage, lest you go hence
as false spies, travel further
into Danish territory (251-254).

Upon hearing Beowulf's heritage and intentions, the watchman says "I understand that to the Scylding lord/ you are a friendly force" (290-291). Beowulf uses his lineage to prove that he is noble and capable of doing the task that he has set out to do.

In a chapter analyzing the implications of Beowulf's heritage, it only makes sense to contrast Beowulf's "noble" heritage with the "perverse" heritage of Grendel, Beowulf's spiritual counterpart. Just as Beowulf is defined by his heritage, Grendel, too, is described in terms of his heritage. The fact that the author characterizes Grendel as a descendent of Cain paints him as a demonic other from Beowulf. Genesis 4 tells the story of how Cain murdered his brother, Abel. As punishment, God tells Cain that he "shall be a fugitive and a vagabond...upon the earth" (Douay-Rheims Bible, Gen. 4.12). Like Cain, Grendel is a murderer, disowned by God, and a fugitive, having no truly safe place on earth. Through his lineage Grendel inherits the curse that Cain was given. Through Grendel's example, the readers can see the idea of one maintaining the qualities of their ancestors; just as Cain was an evil murderer, it is expected and assumed that Grendel will be an evil murderer as well. While the characters in *Beowulf* do not hesitate to inherently ascribe positive characteristics of a father to the son, this example of Grendel shows that the same can be said for negative characteristics as well. Though Grendel does not have a father, Cain serves as his source of heritage. This lack of a father, also, is problematic. In an explicitly patriarchal society, the fact that Grendel does not have a father further emphasizes his spiritual "otherness." Studying Grendel's heritage shows that the ideology that an individual inherits the qualities of their ancestors holds true for both positive qualities and negative qualities.

In contrast to Grendel, Beowulf boasts a father (Ecgtheow) along with the mentors and foster-fathers, Hrothgar and Hrethel. Because of Beowulf's deeds, he is "adopted" as a son by Hrothgar, and he is given several heirlooms to carry back to his native land. Hrothgar says that Beowulf "shall have no lack/ of any worldly goods which [he] can bestow" (949-950). This treasure that Hrothgar gives to Beowulf includes a "bright banner, a helmet and byrnie,/ [and] a great treasure-sword" (1022-1023). This exchange of wealth not only shows Hrothgar's gratefulness for the deeds that Beowulf has done, but it also shows his respect for Beowulf as a warrior. Barbara Raw notes in her essay "Royal Power and Royal Symbols in *Beowulf*" that "the giving of treasure is not merely a matter of generosity; it confers prestige on both giver and recipient" (169). Hrothgar not only serves as a pseudo-father figure to Beowulf, but he also mentors him as well. After Beowulf defeats Grendel's mother, Hrothgar tells Beowulf a story about a king, Heremod, who valued wealth and power over people. Hrothgar urges Beowulf to "learn from him,/ understand virtue" and to not follow the same path (1722-1723). Since Hrothgar's sons are too young to understand such lessons, Hrothgar takes full advantage of the opportunity to pass on "the wisdom of [his] winters" to Beowulf (1724). Like Elrond did for Aragorn, Hrothgar passes on the wisdom that he has acquired in his years of ruling as king. Beowulf also mentions that Hrethel, his great-uncle, "took [him] from [his] father;/...held [him] and kept [him],/gave [him] gems and feasts, remembered [their] kinship" (2429-2431). Though Hrethel and Beowulf were already related, Hrethel reinforces their relationship by adopting him as his own son. The importance of heritage in becoming king is not limited to a blood relationship; as evident in Beowulf's

relationship with Hrothgar and Hrethel, a successful mentorship also contributes to the web of relations that strengthen and prepare one for the throne.

Another important component of this web of relations is weapons. Although Beowulf does not possess a renowned blade like Andúril from his own bloodline, he still obtains a weapon of significance through his deeds when he fights Grendel's mother. This scene in the cave offers an interesting contrast from Beowulf's first encounter with Grendel, for when Beowulf first fights Grendel in Heorot, he voluntarily gives up his weapons and chooses to fight Grendel in hand to hand combat. Enacting a sense of honor, Beowulf says that he won't kill Grendel with a sword since Grendel "knows no arts of war, no way to strike back" (681). Beowulf maintains this same mentality when he goes to fight Grendel's mother; however, once Beowulf sees the ancient giant-made sword in the cave, this attitude dissolves quite quickly. This mindset shift speaks to the power of the blade; Beowulf is, somehow, aware of the sword's innate goodness; the sword is personified using human characteristics of victory and worthiness, even though Beowulf has no knowledge of the sword's origin or history: "[Beowulf] saw among the armor a victorious blade,/ ancient giant-sword strong in its edges,/ worthy in battles; it was the best of weapons" (1557- 1559). Similar to Andúril, the sword seems to be conscious of its destiny. Although Beowulf's sword does not carry a lengthy, renowned battle history like Aragorn's, the sword is instrumental in his "quest" for kingship. It would be too much to say that a king is only as good as his weapon; however, the fact that Beowulf is able to wield an ancient, renowned sword and use it to procure victory against such a monster serves as a tangible reminder that he is living within God's favor. When recalling his battle in Grendel's cave to Hrothgar and his men, Beowulf notes that "the

Ruler of Men granted to [him] that [he] might see on the wall a gigantic old sword,/ hanging glittering” (1662-1663). Although Beowulf attempted to kill Grendel’s mother the same way he killed Grendel—with his bare hands—he believes that his deed is still justifiable because the blade was put there by God specifically for him to use to win his victory. This episode in the cave serves as another example of deeds purchasing heritage: Beowulf’s deed gave the sword significance and elevated it to the status of an heirloom. While Andúril in *The Lord of the Rings* mainly serves as evidence of lineage, weapons in *Beowulf* serve as evidence of both prominent lineage and spiritual favor.

Weapons in *Beowulf* are representative of the lineage and status behind them. However, while the exchange of weapons and other material goods is of paramount importance in this text, the poet is sure to clarify that the significance of this exchange is not in the weapons themselves, but in what they represent. An example of this is seen before Beowulf goes to fight Grendel’s mother and avenge the death of Æschere. Unferth “lent [his] weapon/ to a better swordsman...for that he lost honor,” (1467-1468, 1470). Unferth, in an attempt to make amends with Beowulf, lends him his sword—Hrunting—to use during the battle against Grendel’s mother. However, the poet remarks that, in this act, Unferth “lost honor” (1470). Unferth does not accurately understand how the exchange of heirlooms works: in this culture, one performs an act of bravery or and then is rewarded with kinship and comradeship, signified by the exchange of gold or weapons. Unferth offers his sword as an attempt to reconcile with Beowulf, but this act alone is not enough to amend Unferth’s actions. The exchange of weapons should be symbolic for a deeper relationship that has already been forged.

While the readers are not given any indication of who will succeed Aragorn, however, the readers do get a glimpse of Beowulf's successor. The theme of one earning lineage in *Beowulf* comes full circle; at the end of the poem, Beowulf is mortally wounded and has no offspring of his own. Despite this, Wygelaf assumes the role of leader after Beowulf passes. As Beowulf lays dying, he takes his own necklace and puts it around Wygelaf's neck, saying "You are the last survivor of our lineage,/ the Waegmundings" (2813-2814). Here, fifty years after Beowulf's acts of bravery earned his kingship from Hrothgar, Wygelaf's deeds do the same. Wygelaf encourages the other soldiers to fight alongside Beowulf, invoking a sense of comitatus: "Now the day has come/ that our noble lord has need of the support/ of good warriors; let us go to it" (2646-2648). It is this loyalty and love that earns Beowulf's favor and sonship for Wygelaf. Placing this episode at the end of the poem reinforces the idea of one being able to gain a lineage and reputation through one's deeds.

This scene also emphasizes the importance of material wealth within Beowulf's political and social framework. As Joseph E. Marshall notes, a king's treasure was representative of the wealth of the nation (5). Therefore, "in a poem that continually celebrates gift-exchange, Beowulf's gesture to his people is the epitome of lordship and generosity because he sacrifices himself in order to save the kingdom" (Marshall 6). Beowulf sacrifices himself in order to win the treasure hoard for his people, not for his own personal glory. This treasure itself that the dragon was defending serves as a reminder of the importance of one being able to pass on their throne, guidance, and wealth to a next of kin, without an heir, one's heirlooms will be reduced to mere antiques and lay untouched for hundreds of years.

The role of heritage in *Beowulf*, like *The Lord of the Rings*, is indeed multi-faceted: both blood relations and mentorships propel one to become king. Additionally, Beowulf's deeds are closely intertwined with heritage in this text as they have the power to either create or destroy kinships. Beowulf primarily uses his heritage as resumé, showcasing the deeds that his ancestors have done and, in turn, the deeds that he will do. Hrothgar and Hrethel, additionally, serves as a pseudo-father figures to Beowulf. In this poem, the purchase of a heritage is often manifested through the exchange of riches and swords. The author of *Beowulf* bookends the poem: at the beginning of the epic, Beowulf wins Hrothgar's kinship through his deeds, and at the end of the epic, Wygelaf wins Beowulf's sonship through his loyalties. However, this time, Wygelaf takes an active ownership of this newly forged kinship and takes over Beowulf's throne. The power of Beowulf's blood relations and mentorships are instrumental in helping him become a renowned, successful king. This not only emphasizes the power and importance that is in one's heritage, but it also showcases the power of the deeds that this kinship possible.

Both Aragorn and Beowulf rely on their heritage to help them access the throne: the reputation of their heritage often precedes them, and this helps them win favor in the eyes of potential allies. While heritage is contingent upon noble, valorous deeds in *Beowulf*, *The Lord of the Rings* places a more spiritual value upon a king's heritage. Moreover, this heritage is not limited to mere blood relations; forged kinships and mentor figures also play an instrumental role in transforming Beowulf and Aragorn from warriors into successful kings. This reveals the reality of kingship to be much more complex than everyday readers would have initially surmised; these two texts reveal that one's heritage,

and the way one handled that heritage, is directly correlated with one's spiritual favor (or lack thereof) and acts of heroism.

CHAPTER THREE

The Role of Deeds

Deeds are instrumental, both in *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings*, in proving that one is worthy of successfully ruling a nation as king. In *Beowulf*, deeds create a reputation and construct a renowned legacy from the ground up, serving as an alternative source for lineage. If heroes take this route to kingship, then it is almost as if they are their own fathers—*causa sui*. Additionally, one's acts of bravery and loyalty can "earn" them the kinship of another. Finally, deeds in *Beowulf* serve as concrete evidence of one's spiritual favor. However, in *The Lord of the Rings*, deeds—particularly supernatural deeds—are used to prove the legitimacy of an already-existing holy lineage. Aragorn's deeds serve as evidence that the spiritual component of his lineage is active, not nascent. Additionally, examining the qualifications that are necessary for one to become king offers a glimpse into the type of leader that the king may become. While *Beowulf*'s culture prioritizes deeds that revolve around winning battles, Aragorn's culture focuses more on deeds that involve the supernatural. Studying the role that deeds play in securing *Beowulf* and Aragorn their respective thrones helps readers better understand the priorities of that specific culture: *Beowulf*'s culture values heroic deeds, so one can surmise that the culture is more worldly, and Aragorn's culture values supernatural deeds, so one can gather that the culture is more spiritual. Though both of

these cultures emphasize different types of deeds, acts of valor and spiritual fortitude are still necessary in order for one to gain the throne. Heroic deeds on their own are not enough for Aragorn or Beowulf to win the throne, it is about how those deeds reinforce heroes' spiritual favor or their sacred lineage.

The Lord of the Rings:

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn relies on his actions to prove that he possesses the same spiritual gifts as those who came before him as kings of Gondor. Ford and Reid write that "Aragorn must demonstrate that he is worthy of being king by showing not only that he has the favor of the gods through his possession of luck, especially through victory in battle, but also that his divine inheritance is active, a quality shown through supernatural abilities such as the ability to heal" (75). This quote echoes the concept of one gaining the favor of *wyrd* in battle in *Beowulf*. Boromir, therefore, has a right to be skeptical about Aragorn's claim to the throne. Until Aragorn uses deeds to prove that his divine inheritance is active, Boromir has no reason to believe that the shattered sword Aragorn possesses isn't "an heirloom only" (*The Fellowship* 281). As Ford and Reid mention, one main way that Aragorn proves the validity of his heritage is through supernatural healing. After a successful battle to defend Gondor from invasion, Boromir's younger brother, Faramir, lies gravely injured in the House of Healers. Tolkien writes that the healers of Gondor, skilled though they were, could find no cure for Faramir: "They called it the Black Shadow, for it came from the Nazgûl. And those who were stricken with it fell slowly into an ever deeper dream, and then passed to silence and a deadly cold, and so died" (*The Return* 137). This is not a mere mortal wound, for Faramir has been pierced by deep, dark magic. While the physicians debate how they

should treat the patients who have been affected by this “Black Shadow,” an older woman named Ioreth says, “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” (*The Return* 138). The fact that a prophecy exists about the true king of Gondor exhibiting healing qualities highlights the spiritual nature of this specific deed. Gandalf validates this prophecy and quickly summons Aragorn to the House of Healers. After recognizing the severity of Faramir’s injury, Aragorn asks the physician to bring him a weed known as kingsfoil. The physicians in Gondor are not aware that kingsfoil possesses any healing properties; however, Aragorn uses the plant to heal Faramir and remove the “Black Shadow” from him. When Faramir regains consciousness, and looks upon Aragorn, he says “My lord, you called me. I come. What does the king command?” (*The Return* 144).

Tolkien includes the scene of Aragorn healing Faramir in *The Return of the King* because it bolsters Aragorn’s claim to the throne in several complementary ways. First, Aragorn is shown to be the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. Middle-earth lore told that “the rightful king could...be known” by his ability to heal (*The Return* 138). Aragorn not only heals physical wounds, but he is also able to reverse the effects of dark sorcery. This is strikingly similar to Beowulf’s ability to defeat Grendel, who poses both a physical and spiritual threat. Beowulf even goes so far as to say that he will “cleanse Heorot” of Grendel’s presence, implying that Grendel’s defeat would be a sacred, spiritual purification of Heorot (432). By ridding Heorot of Grendel’s tyranny, Beowulf is also “healing” the kingdom and restoring peace to the Danes. Aragorn and Beowulf both use their supernatural abilities to cleanse and heal their respective worlds of evil. Kingsfoil

also serves as a metaphor for Aragorn's rise to the throne. Ironically, the common people of Middle-earth do not recognize kingsfoil as the valuable healing agent that it is; only the future king does. This plant is widely regarded as a worthless weed, and its full potential is not understood until someone—Aragorn—recognizes its power. Finally, Aragorn is affirmed as the heir to the throne of Gondor by the Steward's heir. Upon his healing, Faramir immediately verbally acknowledges Aragorn as the true king of Gondor. By validating Aragorn's position as king, Faramir also abdicates his own throne. Aragorn's ability to heal is of the utmost importance because it proves that he possesses the same supernatural abilities as his divine ancestors, thus confirming that his spiritual gifting is not dormant, while also fulfilling an ancient prophecy.

Although the prophecy itself states that “the hands of the king are the hands of a healer,” it would perhaps be more accurate to say that “the eyes of a king are the eyes of a healer” (*The Return* 138). It is important to note that it is not Aragorn's physical touch that heals Faramir; rather, Aragorn is able to look at Faramir and recognize that kingsfoil is the only plant that will heal him. While others look at kingsfoil and just see a weed, Aragorn's knowledge and careful eye sees power where others do not. Aragorn's supernatural abilities do not manifest themselves via sorcery or superhuman abilities; rather, Aragorn's watchful discernment heals Faramir. This watchful eye is an inherited quality that shows Aragorn's spiritual capabilities. It's even possible that this knowledge of the power of natural plants is inherited from Melian, whose job in Eä was to tend to the plants.

This hidden, intellectual power that Aragorn possesses may seem contradictory to today's stereotypical brash, buff, version of ancient warrior-kings. Moreover, the

successful kings in history and literature are the ones who are skilled in killing, not healing. However, this idea is not as far-removed from today's leadership as it may seem. Indeed, today's political leaders are often expected to be the "healers" of their respective nation. For example, when 2016 Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton gave her final campaign speech in North Carolina, she said that "we have to heal this country. We have to bring people together, to listen and respect each other" (Lee and Merica). Today's political leaders are expected to unite and heal their country after terrorist attacks, wars, and other national catastrophes. This idea of Aragorn's deeds showcasing bold deeds of military victory and gentle acts of healing presents an interesting dichotomy: a king's deeds are not solely about winning wars, but they are also about leading and healing their people as well. While some may argue that this is a contradiction, this simply shows how complicated the role of a ruler truly is. In order to succeed as a leader, one must find a balance between possessing the power both to destroy and to mend.

Aragorn's spiritual deeds synthesize his duties (as king) to both kill and to heal; specifically, his use of the *palantír* enables him to contend with Sauron's corrupt spirituality while also legitimizing Aragorn's sacred heritage. Before the rise of Sauron, the rulers of Gondor's separate realms would use the *palantíri* "to see far off, and to converse in thought with one another" (*The Return* 203). The *palantíri* were a set of stones that offered a look into the users' thoughts and intentions. However, by the time the events in *The Lord of the Rings* take place, most of the stones have either been lost or marred by Sauron's dark powers. Unlike other characters who touch the stone and become overwhelmed by Sauron's dark influence, Aragorn is able to overpower Sauron's corruption and bend the Stone to his will. For example, when Aragorn uses the *palantír*,

he looks into Sauron's consciousness (instead of vice versa) and discover Sauron's intention to launch a surprise attack upon the south of Gondor (*The Return* 43). Aragorn explains to Legolas and Gimli that "[he] is the lawful master of the Stone, and [he] ha[s] both the right and the strength to use it... The right cannot be doubted" (*The Return* 42). Aragorn's use of the *palantír* showcases the true strength of his spiritual powers; not only is he able to easily use the *palantír*, but he is also able to withstand Sauron's corruption. After revealing himself to Sauron in the *palantír*, Aragorn notes that Sauron is "not so mighty yet that he is above fear" (*The Return* 43). His deeds, therefore, not only affirm him as king to his allies, but to his enemies as well. This "spiritual fortitude" that Aragorn possesses complements the supernatural discernment that he uses to heal as well.

A final supernatural deed that Aragorn performs to showcase his spiritual fortitude is his leading of the Army of the Dead. Although the Paths of the Dead are closed off to all who are living, Aragorn reminds Gimli and Legolas that "in [this] dark hour, the heir of Isildur may use [them], if he dare[s]" (*The Return* 43). Aragorn reminds his friends of another prophecy:

The Dead awaken; for the hour is come for the oathbreakers... Who shall call them from the grey twilight, the forgotten people? The heir of him to whom the oath they swore. From the North shall he come, need shall drive him: he shall pass the Door to the Paths of the Dead (44).

This passage, among others, demonstrates that Aragorn is extremely knowledgeable of ancient prophecies. Thus, he walks confidently in his heritage: he is able to lift an ancient curse and summon the dead to fight for him. No merely mortal individual would be able to walk cursed grounds and command an army of "the Sleepless Dead," let alone

command them to fight on their behalf (*The Return* 45). Thus, this ability further validates Aragorn as the heir of Isildur, and as one whose supernatural gifting is active. This passage also shows that Aragorn is comfortable using his spiritual heritage for violence when necessary. Acting as a true warrior-king, he summons troops to join him in his battle against Sauron.

Aragorn's ability to heal injuries, use the *palantir*, and summon the Army of the Dead showcase his spiritual gifts and also affirm his sacred lineage. Moreover, they also show that Aragorn knows when to use his spiritual abilities to restore lives and to take lives. This wisdom, perhaps, is the most valuable "deed" of all. Furthermore, reading about the stories and prophecies that surround the *palantir*, kingsfoil, and the Army of the Dead makes one question how much power these "heirlooms" have in helping Aragorn gain the throne. Would Aragorn be capable of obtaining the throne had he been unable to use the *palantir*? Although the heirlooms that Aragorn uses qualify his kingship, they do not determine it. For example, if Aragorn had been unable to use the *palantir*, Aragorn still would have been Isildur's heir, there is no changing that. But *because* Aragorn is Isildur's heir, his spiritual heritage enables him to use the *palantir* to see into Sauron's mind. The heirlooms are just one of many "pieces" that make up Aragorn's kingship that fall into place throughout the trilogy. Tolkien takes his time revealing Aragorn as the true king of Gondor: Aragorn's sword, Andúril, is created in the first book, the *palantir* is introduced in the second book, and Faramir is healed at the very end of the third book. By spreading out these spiritual deeds and signs, Tolkien draws out the revelation of Aragorn as king of Gondor. The different signs that Aragorn gives the people to show his true

nature as king all serve as pieces of a puzzle that is slowly coming together. Each deed that Aragorn does reveals another component of his “character” as king.

Ford and Reid characterize Aragorn as a “Renewer,” one who serves “as the agent of Gondor’s renewal on both the material and spiritual levels” (71). Aragorn’s supernatural abilities demonstrate that his spiritual lineage is reliable, valid, and active. He also possesses an innate confidence in his heritage, urging others to trust the prophecies and to see him as the rightful heir to the throne. By possessing the ability to heal, using the *palantír*, and command the Armies of the Dead, Aragorn’s deeds validate his existing heritage and his right to the throne. However, Aragorn also acknowledges that the day may soon come when “there will be need of valour without renown, for none shall remember the deeds that are done in the last defense of [one’s] homes. Yet the deeds will not be less valiant because they are unpraised” (*The Return* 47). While deeds are instrumental in legitimizing Aragorn’s right to Gondor’s throne, Aragorn acknowledges that boasting about deeds is not nearly as important as the deeds themselves. He does not rely on his deeds to build his reputation, rather, deeds are solely the confirmation of his already-determined destiny.

Beowulf

Although Aragorn relies on supernatural deeds to validate an existing sacred lineage, heroic deeds are, arguably, even more important to Beowulf. Within this ancient, Anglo-Saxon context, one’s deeds, supported by one’s heritage, form the foundation of a reputation. The culture of *Beowulf* not only emphasizes heroic deeds and demonstrations of strength, but it is also instrumental for one to be boasting about these said deeds as well. While Aragorn is comfortable in the knowledge that he will one day perform a deed

that will go unpraised and unrecognized, many of the motivations within *Beowulf* are rooted in gaining personal glory and renown. Within this poem, deeds serve almost as one's resumé, detailing past accomplishments in order to predict future ones. It's safe to say that without heroic deeds, one would not be viewed as capable of rising to rule the country as king within this text.

Beowulf's anonymous poet notes that "praiseworthy deeds" are the key to one's success, fame, and rise to power, establishing early on that this culture views heroic deeds as the primary means of gaining fame: "with praiseworthy deeds/ a man will prosper among any people" (24-25). However, this also implies that these deeds must be witnessed, recorded, and retold in order to create a reputation. To emphasize the importance of this idea, the author places an example of deeds helping an individual gain renown at the very beginning of the epic. Scyld Scefing, the father of the Danes, "first was/ found as a waif" (6-7). Scyld came from nothing; unlike Aragorn, he did not have a renowned reputation or famous ancestors to help him construct a reputation. However, the narrator says that, despite this, Scyld grew into a king who "seized the mead-benches/ from many tribes, troops of enemies,/ [and] struck fear into earls" (4-6). Scyld's sons and grandsons build upon his reputation to create a lineage of successful kings and ruthless warriors. In this instance, deeds have a power greater than lineage; Scyld is able to use his deeds to establish himself as a worthy ruler, even though he did not have a famous heritage, or any heritage at all. However, if an abandoned child was found in Middle-earth, this scenario would have a starkly different outcome. Even if the child grew into a powerful warrior and wise leader like Scyld, it would be impossible for them to serve as king. No matter how successful their battles or how impressive their acts of bravery, they

would still lack the essential, sacred blood that must flow through all the kings of Gondor in Middle-earth. The power of deeds renders kingship in *Beowulf* more fluid, and arguably, more modern than in *The Lord of the Rings*. Although it is the older, more traditional text, *Beowulf* is not as straightforward as is *The Lord of the Rings* about the necessity for a specific lineage in order to obtain the throne. Furthermore, an individual's heritage would not matter if it was not associated with heroic deeds. If Scyld had not created a reputation for himself through his deeds, then his sons and kinsmen would have no reason to hold fast to their heritage and wield it with such pride. In *Beowulf*, if one's deeds are powerful enough, they are able to create a reputation and, over time, a noble lineage as well. The narrator of this poem makes it very clear that if one wants to have glory and renown, then they must use their deeds to spread their fame.

In addition to using deeds to construct a reputation, the characters in *Beowulf* use deeds to serve as their resumé, showcasing their past accomplishments as a glimpse of what they are capable of in the future. For example, when Beowulf first meets Hrothgar, he tells the king that his own counselors advised him to help Hrothgar “because they knew the might of [his] strength” (419). He then goes into a detailed speech where he lists his many accomplishments, which include fighting both giants and sea-monsters (421-422). Because Beowulf's advisors had seen his acts of might, they knew that he would be capable of defeating Grendel, so they suggested that he travel to Heorot to help Hrothgar. It is because of Beowulf's past deeds—not necessarily his heritage—that he is encouraged to help Hrothgar. Beowulf also uses his deeds to repay “past favors” (457) and “old deeds” (458) that Hrothgar paid to his father, Ecgtheow. It is assumed without question that one will perform the same heroic deeds as they had in the past. This is a

stark contrast from *The Lord of the Rings* where Aragorn constantly needs to prove the legitimacy of his heritage through his deeds. In this text, deeds have the power to create a concrete, solid reputation that cannot be lost.

The heroes in *Beowulf* also use deeds to earn kinship for themselves. Beowulf uses his heroic deeds of defeating Grendel to secure a new kinship from Hrothgar. After he succeeds in ridding Heorot of Grendel's violence, Hrothgar tells Beowulf that he will "cherish [him]/...like a son/ in [his] heart" and he encourages him to "hold well henceforth/ [his] new kinship" (946-949). This showcases the modernity of this text. The author of *Beowulf* abandons the traditional idea of inherited kingship in favor of a more fluid one: loyalties and families are forged through one's acts in addition to bloodlines. By defeating Grendel, Beowulf does enough to gain a new kinship through Hrothgar. Not only does Beowulf earn a form of kinship through this act, but he is also gains a version of immortality as well. Hrothgar notes that Beowulf has "done such deeds that [his] fame will endure/ always and forever" (954-955). Although this is not literal immortality, the notion that one's name will live on forever in future generations was heavily sought after in the culture of *Beowulf*. As seen in these two examples, deeds have the power to forge new lineages and render one essentially "immortal." If an individual wanted to become king, they must rely on their deeds to show their reputation and ensure that they are remembered after they are dead.

However, while deeds have the power to establish a legacy and a new heritage, false or failed deeds can quickly tear them down. When Beowulf first arrives at Heorot to come to Hrothgar's aid, he is greeted with hospitality and thanksgiving by all except for one. Before he even defeats Grendel, a jealous soldier of Hrothgar's, Unferth, attempts to

destroy Beowulf's reputation: "Rather than question the given information on name, provenance, descent, and past deeds against monsters, Unferth singles out a single unconventional contest" (Sayers 134). It may seem perplexing that while Beowulf is recognized and praised for the deeds that his father accomplished, it is not this that Unferth chooses to attack. Unferth's (unsuccessful) strategy is to attack the validity of Beowulf's reputation, hoping to find an example where his deeds failed him.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that Unferth does not try to discredit Beowulf by questioning a story that involves a monster or massive battle. Rather, Unferth questions Beowulf's story about a (comparatively) simple man to man contest. This choice is calculated, if Unferth discredits Beowulf's fight against another human, then no one would believe that he would have the ability to defeat a monster like Grendel. However, Unferth's plan does not come to fruition. Not only is Unferth unsuccessful, but he also reaps embarrassment for himself as Beowulf retorts that "never would Grendel have worked such terror,/ that gruesome beast, against [Unferth's] lord,/ or shames in Heorot, if [Unferth's] courage and spirit/ were as fierce as [he]... fanc[ies] they are" (591-594).

Beowulf attacks Unferth the same way that Unferth attacks him, calling into question his courage and accusing him of falsifying his own deeds. This episode with Unferth shows the power that deeds have in Anglo-Saxon culture. Perhaps Unferth feels threatened by Beowulf and worries that Hrothgar will grow to favor Beowulf over himself. His response to this fear is not to question Beowulf's spiritual favor or heritage, but his deeds. Just as one's works can construct a reputation, a successful attack of one's heroic deeds will quickly cause one's reputation to crumble.

While deeds are essential to either building and destroying one's reputation as a potential ruler in *Beowulf*, those deeds are useless unless others hear about them. While in *The Lord of the Rings* Aragorn is humble yet confident, Beowulf's deeds are punctuated by boasting and re-telling of his deeds. Like an Anglo-Saxon Odysseus, he seems afraid that he will die without a legacy to leave behind. At the end of the poem, he is determined to die nobly in order to win glory for himself. For example, before an older, wiser Beowulf goes to fight for the last time, he tells his fellow soldiers who rush to go with him that this task is for him alone, and only Beowulf himself "should match his strength against this monster,/ do heroic deeds. With daring [he] shall/ get that gold—or grim death" (2534-2536). Beowulf wants the sole credit for defending his country from the dragon,

or he will die trying. Even though Beowulf, by this point of the story, has already become king, he wants to ensure that his legacy lives on after he dies. Beowulf's desire to win glory for himself is also seen before he pursues Grendel's mother to avenge the death of Æschere. Beowulf encourages his fellow warriors by saying "Let him who can/ bring about fame before death—that is best/ for the unliving man after he is gone" (1387-1388). It is ironic that deeds, which have a strong spiritual connection in this poem, are used largely to gain one's own glory instead of spreading the glory of the God who supposedly enables them to accomplish these deeds in the first place. By closely analyzing this text, the readers can see how one's heroic deeds, and specifically the fame of those deeds, help create (and fortify) Beowulf's reputation in order to be considered worthy of the throne.

Surprisingly, both *The Lord of the Rings* and *Beowulf* offer the readers only small pictures of what Aragorn and Beowulf are like once they become king. Despite both of their journeys to power being minutely chronicled in their respective texts, there are very little details about whether the reigns themselves are prosperous or not. In *Beowulf*, the poet skips over fifty years of Beowulf's rule and focuses on the sunset of his reign. This poem is, then, most accurately, an account of Beowulf's characteristics and accomplishments that pre-date his ascension. The focus of this epic is, undoubtedly, Beowulf's rise to the throne rather than his actual reign, and the readers are left largely in the dark regarding the sort of king that Beowulf was. What does this say about Anglo-Saxon kingship? By emphasizing Beowulf's rise to the throne instead of his actual kingship, the author implies that ones' journey to becoming king is an accurate prediction of what type of ruler one will be. Tolkien follows the same model in his trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*: Aragorn is crowned king at the end of the trilogy, and the reader gets a very small idea of what his rule looks like. Both Tolkien and the author of *Beowulf* focus on their respective kings' rises to the thrones instead of the reigns themselves. This shows that becoming king can be just as difficult, if not more so, than actually reigning as king, regardless of the time period or country. This emphasis that is placed on one's rise to power in these texts is also relevant in today's politics. During the election season in modern American politics, all forms of media are saturated with election predictions and stories that minutely follow each candidate. It is all too easy to be swept up in the "drama" of an individual's journey from humble senator or governor to Nominee to President of the United States. Just like the authors of *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* were captivated by ones' journey from humble warrior to renowned king, individuals

today are engrossed by the drama of an individual's ability to prove their worthiness to serve as the country's leader.

The nature of deeds in *Beowulf* is starkly contrasted with the nature of deeds from *The Lord of the Rings*. While Aragorn relies on more unconventional, spiritual methods to prove his kingship like using a *palantír*, commanding the Army of the Dead, and performing supernatural healing, Beowulf relies primarily on more physical deeds and acts of bravery to further his reputation. Although Beowulf's deeds may have spiritual motives (i.e showing that he is working within the culture's spiritual favor), there are no inherently "supernatural" deeds that Beowulf performs (save his questionably supernatural strength). Additionally, there is a paranoia that one may not hear about the deeds that one performs in *Beowulf* that is not manifested in *The Lord of the Rings*. When writing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien chose to make Aragorn a less "traditional" king that relies on heroic acts of warfare and bravery to prove his worthiness of ruling as king. Even so, both of these texts showcase the power that deeds have in affirming one as having the right to rule as king. While deeds in *The Lord of the Rings* favored the spiritual side and served as a confirmation of Aragorn's holy lineage, the deeds in *Beowulf* favored the warfare side and served as confirmation that Beowulf was operating within a spiritual favor. Without these deeds—and the knowledge of them by other characters—Aragorn and Beowulf would not have been able to be king. By studying the role that deeds play in these texts, the reader can understand the way that one's actions and proving oneself as worthy have been a common thread throughout politics for thousands of years.

CONCLUSION

Though they exist thousands of years apart in the literary world, Aragorn and Beowulf both represent the same hero's journey from warrior to king. The spirituality of these texts mandates that both men must possess spiritual favor in order to rule. In *Beowulf*, this spirituality is exhibited primarily through active, heroic deeds. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this spiritual confirmation is seen in more unorthodox, supernatural acts. Aragorn's lineage, additionally, serves as evidence of his sacred connection with the gods of Middle-earth while Beowulf's heritage is used to construct a reputation which is then bolstered by deeds. Acts of bravery and loyalty win one favor and adoption as kinsmen in *Beowulf* in addition to serving as evidence of one's spiritual favor. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn's deeds reinforce his sacred, spiritual lineage. All three of these characteristics intersect with one another are emphasized in different ways in these two texts. However, one underlying similarity between *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* is that the actual reign of the respective kings—Beowulf and Aragorn—is (comparatively) given very little detail. Both of these texts focus on the ways that these men work to prove themselves as worthy and of ruling as king rather than the reign itself. Thus, *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* showcase the importance of spirituality, heritage, and deeds in helping one become king instead of helping one rule as king.

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