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Spring 2021

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Honors in the Discipline

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Introduction

While many would classify J.R.R. Tolkien as a novelist, he more likely would have classified himself as “a university lecturer who specialized in the field of medieval literature and language” (Lee and Solopova 5). Throughout his life, Tolkien studied Sanskrit, Lithuanian, Old Bulgarian, Latin, Old Norse, Greek, Old and Middle High German, Old English, Old Welsh, and Finnish, among other languages (Carpenter 55). Tolkien loved language, especially Old English, and he felt as if he had a deep connection with the West-midland dialect due to his ancestry. He studied and taught Anglo-Saxon language and literature at Oxford University; his students remember his lectures on *Beowulf* vividly: Scottish novelist J.I.M Stewart claimed that Tolkien “could turn a lecture room into a mead hall in which he was the bard and we were the feasting, listening guests.” W.H. Auden, also a former student, wrote to Tolkien to comment on the “unforgettable experience” of listening to him recite *Beowulf* (Carpenter 133). Tolkien, first and foremost, was a philologist, which also translated into the creation of his own languages like Sindarin, which has developmental and linguistic similarities with Welsh, a language Tolkien also enjoyed (Hostetter 32).

Beyond his interest in Old English as a language, Tolkien found great value in the literature of the Anglo-Saxons. In his essay, “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,” Tolkien

points out the flaws of approaching a poem as a historical document, as most *Beowulf* critics before him did. He claims that the powerful poetry of *Beowulf* “overshadows the historical content, and is largely independent even of the most important facts” of Anglo-Saxon history (Tolkien, “*Beowulf*...” 54). Further, Tolkien claims that the poem contains an “illusion of historical truth and perspective,” which “is largely a product of art,” and says that this historical sense is “part indeed of the ancient English temper...of which *Beowulf* is a supreme expression” (Tolkien, “*Beowulf*...” 54). The *Beowulf* poet, according to Tolkien, uses factual names and events not as an object of history, but as one of poetry. Tolkien expresses interest in this poetic use of history in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, claiming, “I much prefer history [to allegory], true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers” (Tolkien xvii). Tolkien loved Anglo-Saxon literature, saw it as a powerful expression of feeling and language, and even expressed interest in the use of history, true or false, to relate his story to readers.

Tolkien’s lifelong study of Anglo-Saxon literature and language appears throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, not only in the fabricated history of Middle-Earth. The Anglo-Saxon values expressed in war poetry appear in *The Lord of the Rings* through the language and behavior of the Rohirrim, who feast together in mead halls and value bravery and loyalty above all. Linguistic and textual similarities between the Rohan scenes in *The Lord of the Rings* and Anglo-Saxon literary works such as *Beowulf* and “The Battle of Maldon” enhance connections with the values expressed in those works. These values also appear among the Fellowship of the Ring, a diverse group of people assigned to help Frodo take the Ring to Mordor, as they learn to love each other and show the loyalty and sacrifice, or “comitatus,” typical of Anglo-Saxon warriors to one another. Thematic connections with Anglo-Saxon elegiac poetry further show Tolkien’s

influence. The end of the Third Age of Middle-Earth, the constant presence of ruins, mood shifts between victory and loss, and themes of exile and extinction all contribute to direct connections with Anglo-Saxon elegiac poems like “The Wanderer,” “The Ruin,” and *Beowulf*. These poems, as well as *The Lord of the Rings*, evoke themes of the loneliness and transience of human life. In addition to these textual and thematic similarities, *The Lord of the Rings* holds structural similarities with the unique interlace narrative of *Beowulf*. Interweaving plotlines, digressions and flashbacks, as well as framing in each story contributes to a sense of legendary past, and implies that these stories do not begin or end where we find them, but rather continue on through the expanse of history, as in real life. Tolkien takes influence from ancient poetry and his own life to create a timeless, somehow extremely *real* work which emphasizes the interconnectedness and eternity of human history.

1. Anglo-Saxon Literary War Culture and Comitatus in *The Lord of the Rings*

“But I must go at once. It’s the only way.”

“Of course it is,” answered Sam. “But not alone. I’m coming too, or neither of us isn’t going.

I’ll knock holes in all the boats first.”

Anglo-Saxon culture and literature extensively focus on and celebrate war, and the loyalty between people who go to war together. This culture of glory in battle and extreme, unquestioning loyalty to family and tribe permeates Old English heroic poems as well as J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The culture of the Rohirrim, the horse-riding men of the kingdom of Rohan, mirrors this type of culture most closely in Tolkien’s novel. The Rohirrim’s social behaviors, battle practices, and even language mirror the communities of Old English heroic and epic poetry. The Rohirrim show clear literal Anglo-Saxon influence, but the warlike culture, specifically the loyalty, of the literary Anglo-Saxons, appears throughout the entire

novel. The Fellowship of the Ring, an unlikely band of different races tasked with destroying the Ring, display the comitatus aspect of Anglo-Saxon literary war culture through their loyalty to and mutual love for one another. Tolkien draws clear influence from the war culture celebrated in Anglo-Saxon literature for *The Lord of the Rings*, creating a community of fictional Anglo-Saxon warriors, and expanding upon the theme of loyalty in a war-centric culture to create meaningful relationships between diverse characters.

The Rohirrim are a race of horse-riding Men who live in the kingdom of Rohan in Tolkien's Middle-Earth mythology. These men provide a clear example of Tolkien's Anglo-Saxon influence; scholar Tom Shippey once simply described them as "Anglo-Saxons on Horseback" (Honnegar 1). The Rohirrim's warlike spirit and social rituals parallel early Germanic and Anglo-Saxon values. The Fellowship members Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas – a Man, a Dwarf, and an Elf, respectively – first encounter the Rohirrim in "The Two Towers," the second volume of *The Lord of the Rings*. When Legolas asks Aragorn what he knows of the "horsemen," Aragorn describes the Rohirrim as "...proud and wilful, but...true-hearted, generous in thought and deed; bold but not cruel; wise but unlearned, writing no books but singing many songs, after the manner of the children of Men before the Dark Years" (Tolkien 420). Aragorn immediately establishes the Rohirrim as a proud and warlike race who pass knowledge through songs. This first description already introduces a connection with Anglo-Saxons, as Tacitus described the similar culture of early Germanic people in *Germania*:

In the field of battle, it is disgraceful for the chief to be surpassed in valor; it is disgraceful for the companions not to equal their chief; but it is reproach and infamy during a whole succeeding life to retreat from the field surviving him. (Tacitus)

This description shows the proud and fierce culture the Anglo-Saxons derive from and idealize in their literature. Tacitus also notes that the Germanic people only recorded history in the form of “ancient songs,” similarly to how the Rohirrim “...[write] no books but [sing] many songs...” (Tacitus, Tolkien 420). Before the Fellowship members officially meet the Rohirrim, the reader knows that they come from a culture that prizes pride and bravery, and sing songs instead of writing history books, establishing an immediate connection with the values portrayed in Anglo-Saxon literature. While Tolkien himself “...felt the need to stress that you could not learn about the Anglo-Saxons from [the Rohirrim],” Tolkien clearly drew influence from the idealized society presented in Anglo-Saxon poetry for the society of Rohan (Lee and Solopova 279).

An examination of the Rohirrim’s Anglo-Saxon cultural values begins to show parallels between certain Anglo-Saxon literary works and Tolkien’s chapters focused on the Rohirrim. Specifically, scenes including the Rohirrim can directly compare to *Beowulf* and several heroic poems. The next time The Fellowship meets the Rohirrim occurs after Legolas, Gimli, and Aragorn find one missing member of their Fellowship: Gandalf the White Wizard. They travel back to Rohan with Gandalf and meet with the king in a chapter that closely parallels *Beowulf*’s arrival in Denmark. As Legolas, Gimli, Aragorn, and Gandalf approach Edoras, the capital city of Rohan, a guard immediately asks their names and errand. This mirrors the arrival of *Beowulf* and his retainers at Denmark, as the coastguard tells them he “must know [their] lineage” and “the cause of [their] coming” (Crossley-Holland 80). Within the Rohan scene the guard also tells the Fellowship that the Rohirrim “Never have...seen other riders so strange, nor any horse more proud than is one of these that bear you,” and comments on their strange appearance. This comment reflects almost exactly the *Beowulf* coastguard’s remark that he “...never set eyes on a more noble man, a warrior in armour...” than those in *Beowulf*’s company (Crossley-Holland

80). Further, when the company finally arrives at Meduseld, the great mead-hall in Rohan, the Doorward Háma asks them to leave their weapons at the door, similar to Wulfgar's demand that Beowulf and his company leave their weapons and shields outside the door of Heorot (Tolkien 499; Crossley-Holland 84). In addition to the chapter's syntactical parallels, the Rohirrim constantly describe The Fellowship members' appearance as strange or other-worldly as they approach Meduseld, and repeat their names as they meet with the guard, then the Doorward, and finally King Théoden. Stuart Lee and Elizabeth Solopova point out that this "...correspondence between the hero's appearance, reputation, and role is fundamental to Beowulf's portrayal..." as well (Lee and Solopova 278). Both Beowulf and the Fellowship members travel to a foreign land to offer assistance, and in both works, the heroes' other-worldly names and appearances signal their imminent salvation of that foreign land.

While Legolas, Gimli, Aragorn, and Gandalf mirror the foreign Beowulf in Rohan's part of the story, the social practices of the Rohirrim play a crucial role in displaying their Anglo-Saxon qualities and connection to heroic poetry. In the chapter "The King of the Golden Hall," the Rohirrim partake in a common Anglo-Saxon social ritual of gathering, drinking, and eating in the mead-hall. The Fellowship has convinced Rohan to join the fight against the armies of Mordor and saved Théoden from a sickness caused by the evil Saruman, so Théoden invites them to "take refreshment" in the golden hall. During this ritual, Théoden offers Legolas and Aragorn decorative shields and armor as gifts in return for their help, which places Théoden in the role of "treasure-giver" or "gold-friend," a concept alluded to in "The Battle of Maldon," "The Wanderer," *Beowulf*, and many more Old English poems (Crossley-Holland 16, 50, 103, 110). This role connotes a generous lord who constantly gifts his retainers with treasures, weapons, and armor, often cited as an important reason for the lord's retainers to keep their oaths

of faith to him (Kundu 4). This gift-giving ritual shows the importance of loyalty in battle in Anglo-Saxon war culture, as retainers fulfill these oaths by fighting to defend their lord and tribe. Late in the novel, in the last volume, the Rohirrim fulfil their oaths as Théoden tells them, “Oaths ye have taken: now fulfil them all, to lord and land and league of friendship” (Tolkien 818).

While Théoden takes the role of treasure-giver, his niece, Éowyn, takes the role of cupbearer in Meduseld, which closely mirrors Wealtheow’s role in *Beowulf*. After Théoden gifts the company with treasures, Éowyn appears, offering a cup of wine to each guest after drinking from it herself, telling Théoden first to “receive now this cup” (Tolkien 511). Tolkien scholar Thomas Honegger notes that Tolkien likely adapted this ritual from “the Germanic ritual of ‘wassailing’ or drinking to someone’s health” (Honegger 55). Wassailing reaffirms cohesion and hierarchy among the “court” or community, as the cup is offered first to the king and then to the guests, and each person proclaims a wish for the good health of others, such as “wes þu hal.” While Éowyn does not dispense the wisdom that the more matronly Wealtheow provides in *Beowulf*, she speaks similar words in this wassailing ritual, as Wealtheow presents the mead cup first to Hrothgar and asks him to “Accept this cup, my loved lord...” (Crossley-Holland 103). Wassailing and treasure-giving rituals both appear in Anglo-Saxon literature and serve to affirm cohesion and hierarchy among the communities in which they are performed. The Rohirrim’s performance of these rituals shows that Tolkien based their society on that of the Anglo-Saxons, especially as presented in their literature.

The language used by the Rohirrim, especially to denote names and military divisions, further prove a basic connection to the Anglo-Saxons. The King of Rohan is named Théoden, derived from the Old English word *þeoden*, which means chief or lord. When the Fellowship first meet the Rohirrim, the King’s nephew Éomer tells his men to “Tell the éored to assemble on

the path...” (Tolkien 424). Even the Rohirrim’s word for their cavalry mimics the Old English one. In their book *The Keys of Middle Earth*, Solopova and Lee note that “...the language of the Rohirrim was clearly a form of Old English...” and that the name of Rohan’s great hall, Meduseld, is Old English for “mead-hall” (Lee and Solopova 278). Further, the Rohirrim’s actual speech sometimes mimics Old English literature, like in a battle poem where Théoden calls to the Rohirrim: “...spear shall be shaken, shield be splintered,” which parallels the Old English heroic “Finnesburg Fragment,” where a leader calls to his soldiers: “...spears rattle, / shield answers shaft” (Tolkien 820; Crossley-Holland 8). Tolkien may draw direct influence from the heroic poem in this battle call, as the alliteration and meanings in the lines are nearly identical. While on a basic level, the presence of language directly taken from Old English and Old English poetry shows that Tolkien’s studies of Anglo-Saxon culture, language, and literature “...provided the indispensable ‘soil’ into which his ‘tree of tales’ would sink its roots and find nourishment” (Honegger 51).

The Rohirrim’s social practices and rituals prove a basic connection between *The Lord of the Rings* and Anglo-Saxon war culture, especially as portrayed in Old English literature. Using this connection to explore the entire novel gives new meaning to important relationships between main character. The Fellowship of the Ring builds upon this connection by displaying another aspect of this Anglo-Saxon war culture: “comitatus,” Tacitus’ term for the mutual agreement between a lord and his retainers based on love and respect (Tacitus). “The Battle of Maldon” exemplifies this theme when a retainer claims in battle, “...I mean to lie by the side of my lord, / lie in the dust with the man I loved so dearly,” and in *Beowulf*, where the Danes are “prepared for battle always, / for any occasion their lord might need / assistance...” (Crossley-Holland 19, 105). Comitatus also provided an important code of loyalty to the historical Anglo-Saxons, as

Tacitus described the highest disgrace of returning home alive after one's lord had been killed.

The theme of loyalty and love among kinsmen permeates *The Lord of the Rings*, although the "kinsmen" of the Fellowship face difficulties in bonding because of their differences.

Traditionally, as in the poems cited above, "kinsman" denotes someone of blood, ethnic, or tribal relation; retainers show loyalty to the chief or king and civilians of their own village. *The Lord of the Rings*, however, presents a company not related by blood, geography, ethnicity, or common leaders. In fact, two members of the group come from races which historically hate each other. Despite their differences, the life-changing experience of fighting together against a common enemy creates important, loving friendships between all members of the Fellowship.

In the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo Baggins sits in a council and ultimately joins with seven other individuals assigned to help him on his journey to destroy The Ring. This Fellowship includes Frodo, Samwise, Merry, and Pippin, all Hobbits; Aragorn and Boromir, both Men; Legolas, an Elf; Gimli, a Dwarf; and Gandalf the wizard. Despite this group's extreme diversity and occasional animosity, they exemplify *comitatus* extremely well, because despite their differences, fighting an epic battle together and fulfilling their oath to destroy the Ring makes them as close as true family. The Fellowship members become loyal and eternally bonded to each other the same way Anglo-Saxon warriors did, through common enemies, promises, and loss.

The Fellowship's bond mirrors the bond of characters in Anglo-Saxon literature in many ways, but it most closely parallels the professions of love and loyalty common in heroic poetry. The retainers in the Old English poem "The Battle of Maldon" express what John M. Hill calls "suicidal loyalty...loyalty reasserted within a context of certain death" (Hill 112). One of the most famous examples of this extreme loyalty appears in a section of *The Anglo-Saxon*

Chronical: “Cynewulf and Cyneheard.” When Cynewulf’s thanes learn that the enemy has captured him, they go to rescue him, and when offered land and money for the kingdom, they ignore the offer and fight to save their lord instead (Crossley-Holland 38). While Hill asserts that this loyalty does not entail inevitable death, the retainers certainly choose danger over safety and gifts. This loyalty, to the point of danger and death, appears often in *The Lord of the Rings* between members of the Fellowship. When the leader of the council, Elrond, tells Pippin he must go back home instead of helping Frodo get to Mordor, Pippin exclaims, “Then, Master Elrond, you will have to lock me in prison, or send me home tied in a sack... For otherwise I shall follow the Company” (Tolkien 269). Pippin has a choice, though Elrond does not provide it, and he fights to take the most dangerous path because of his loyalty to Frodo. Even as the Fellowship breaks, the members remain loyal and reluctant to leave one another. Later in the story, after the Fellowship begins their journey, Aragorn realizes Frodo has vanished and tells the Company they must find a different path. Legolas calls this “faithless,” Aragorn agrees that they are committing “a betrayal,” and Merry cries, “We can’t leave Frodo! Pippin and I always intended to go wherever he went...” (Tolkien 393). The Fellowship members all acknowledge the disloyalty of letting Frodo go by himself, implying the Anglo-Saxon importance they place on extreme loyalty between ‘kinsmen,’ and keeping their oath to help Frodo.

While the Fellowship’s loyalty to their oaths parallels the importance of oath-keeping in Anglo-Saxon war culture, Tolkien emphasizes the Fellowship’s bond by making these “kinsmen” so unlike one another. Boromir and Aragorn are both Men; however, Boromir is the heir to the steward of Gondor and knows that Aragorn is the true heir of Gondor but has chosen to not take the throne. Boromir feels angry that he cannot become king, even when the true king refuses to return, but Frodo examines that “Yet always he treated Aragorn with honour” (Tolkien

655). Aragorn even weeps at Boromir's death and gives him a heroic water-burial in a scene which closely mirrors Scyld Scefing's funeral in the beginning of *Beowulf*. Further than interpersonal disputes, some members of The Fellowship have inherited blood feuds against one another. In the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, Legolas laments a happier time "...when there was still close friendship at times between folk of different race, even between Dwarves and Elves," which prompts an argument between him and Gimli about who caused the destruction of that friendship. Eventually Gandalf must "beg" them "at least to be friends" (Tolkien 295). By the last chapter Legolas and Gimli appear in, they have become so close that they have plans to "...journey on together to [their] own lands in Mirkwood and beyond" (Tolkien 959). These unlikely friendships occur throughout the Fellowship and apply the idea of a "found family" to the traditional aspects of Anglo-Saxon comitatus. Tolkien emphasizes the romantic idea of a group so close and loyal that they would die for each other by claiming that people can develop that type of relationship when blood does not necessitate it, and even if differences make it difficult. Fighting in a life-changing battle for the same cause draws each member of the Fellowship closer, as it did Anglo-Saxon kinsmen, by allowing the individuals to grow attached to one another despite their extreme diversity. The Fellowship, rather than constantly fighting over differences and blood feuds, become stronger as they realize their ancestors' mistakes do not have to impede their own friendships and loyalties.

While an oath of loyalty ultimately binds The Fellowship together, they also present another aspect of the comitatus relationship: a feeling of love or deep friendship for each other, as shown previously between Legolas and Gimli. The retainers in "Maldon" and "Cynewulf" show extreme loyalty and place great importance on oath-keeping, but they also refer to their lords with proclamations of love. This emotional love between lord and retainer also appears in

Beowulf, especially between Hrothgar and Beowulf. When Beowulf departs from Heorot after slaying Grendel's mother, Hrothgar cries and kisses him; the author writes:

He so loved Beowulf
 that he could not conceal his sense of loss;
 but in his heart and in his head,
 in his very blood, a deep love burned
 for that dear man" (Crossley-Holland 120-121).

Beowulf also refers to Hrothgar as "Hroðgar leofa," meaning "Hrothgar beloved," and Wiglaf refers to Beowulf in the same way, calling him "leofa Beowulf." Pritha Kundu points out that beyond just an oath to repay him for treasure and weapons, "Wiglaf's *friendship* with Beowulf drives him to risk his own life for that of his lord" (Kundu 4; emphasis added). These particular kinsmen have an obligation to help each other by an oath of loyalty, but they also express a deeper reason for protecting each other: a genuine sense of friendship and love.

The strongest example of this "homosocial bond of love" within The Fellowship appears between the Hobbits Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee (Kundu 8). Sam is bound to Frodo by the oath of The Fellowship, and a promise to Gandalf. Sam technically acts as Frodo's servant, as he is Frodo's gardener and assigned to accompany him, so their official relationship entails that of a lord and retainer. However, more than by this oath, the two Hobbits are bound together by mutual friendship and love. When Frodo tries to break from the Company and go to Mordor alone, Sam tells him, "Of course you are [going alone]. And I'm coming with you" (Tolkien 397). Like Pippin's actions in Elrond's council, Sam *chooses* danger and near-certain death,

because he has sworn an oath to stay with Frodo, and because he loves Frodo. The omniscient narrator reaffirms this love in the second volume, as Sam ponders Frodo's 'inner light' and simply thinks to himself: "I love him. He's like that, and sometimes it shines through, somehow. But I love him, whether or no" (Tolkien 638). Frodo reciprocates this love many times throughout the story, even requesting Sam and his family move in with him after they get home to The Shire.

Sam and Frodo's final goodbye at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* closely mirrors Beowulf's departure from Heorot, emphasizing the connection between Sam and Frodo's relationship and that of a lord and retainer in Old English literature. As Beowulf prepares to leave for home, Hrothgar "kissed and embraced" him as "tears streamed down / the old man's face," and finally the author describes Beowulf's ship sailing away (Crossley-Holland 120-121). At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo must 'sail West' away from Middle-Earth because of his severe wounds. Sam, devastated that he can no longer stay by Frodo's side, begins to weep, while Frodo says goodbye and kisses him, followed by a detailed description of "...the ship [slipping] away down the long grey firth..." (Tolkien 1007). While Sam's character does not align with Hrothgar, because Hrothgar is a king and Sam is a servant, his position in this scene mirrors Hrothgar's. Both characters feel a deep bond of love and friendship for another, and must unwillingly witness that other leave, possibly forever. This textual connection emphasizes Tolkien's Anglo-Saxon influence, and the placement of Sam in Hrothgar's position reaffirms Tolkien's diversification of typical Old English heroic literature by placing a servant character in the heart of the story.

The Rohirrim prove Tolkien's literary influence from Anglo-Saxon war culture, through their speech, rituals, and social practices. However, applying this literary connection of war

culture to the entire novel provides a new context with which to analyze and understand relationships between characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. The war culture of the Anglo-Saxons shows the way that fighting towards a common cause brings people closer together, regardless of differences in race or inherited feuds between families. Tolkien challenges the idea that new generations must inherit and perpetuate blood feuds by crafting a close, loyal relationship between two individuals with inherited racial feuds: Legolas and Gimli. Beowulf also experiences closeness to other tribes through battle and war, as Hrothgar tells Beowulf that he loves him “like a son,” and requests loyalty to their “new kinship” (Crossley-Holland 97). This recurring theme of individuals from different tribes and races becoming family through fighting together provides Tolkien’s fantasy of Middle-Earth with a timeless attribute that all readers understand; a human connection reaching backwards to the Middle Ages and persisting into the modern world.

2. Anglo-Saxon Elegiac Elements in *The Lord of the Rings*

But I cannot guess what it means, save that it is laden with the sadness of Mortal Men.

The “sadness of Mortal Men” of which Legolas speaks after hearing Aragorn’s “Lament for the Rohirrim” permeates J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, creating an elegiac tone evocative of Old English poetry. The Third Age of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth contains endings and loss; it culminates in a bloody war and the extinction of many races. While the Fellowship of the Ring complete their arduous task and win victory, that victory comes with immense sorrow for most characters involved, fashioning the novel into an extended elegy. Tolkien achieves this tone by constantly reminding the reader that the Third Age represents the dwindling of Middle-Earth; characters lament people and relationships of the “Elder Days,” and comment on physical attributes of Middle Earth which represent the glory of the past. Mood shifts also emphasize an

elegiac tone, constantly balancing victory and rejoicing with a sense of foreboding and death. A theme of loneliness and extinction underlies the entire novel, emphasizing the loss and grief which arise from an era-ending war.

A nostalgic lamentation for days of old appears as a motif in many Old English poems, sometimes called *ubi sunt*, Latin for “where are...[they]?” (Bright 188). The *ubi sunt* motif appears most prevalently in the elegiac Old English poem “The Wanderer,” in which a speaker mourns the memory of his lost kinsmen, lord, and home. Remembering the “slaughters of the past,” the speaker asks,

Where has the horse gone? Where the man? Where the
giver of gold?

Where is the feasting-place? And where the pleasures of the
hall?

I mourn the gleaming cup, the warrior in his corselet,
the glory of the prince. (Crossley-Holland 52)

The key to this speaker’s grief lies in the diction with which the author describes his pondering: the speaker “mourns” his fate and that of his kinsmen, he “remembers” the happiness of “earlier days;” emphasizing that the speaker’s present and future will never match the glory and happiness of the past (Crossley-Holland 51-52). Aragorn’s recitation of the “Lament for the Rohirrim” begins to illustrate the presence of this sad nostalgia in *The Lord of the Rings*, as it paraphrases “The Wanderer:” “Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing? / Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing? / Where is the hand

on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing?” (Tolkien 497). The speaker of this poem also sadly remembers the horse and rider, the “warrior in his corslet,” and the “pleasures of the hall,” in this case, music, and a warm fire. In his recitation, Aragorn also states that “The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow,” which parallels “The Wanderer” speaker’s claim that “...that time has passed away, / darkened under the shadow of night as if it had never been” (Crossley-Holland 52). This image of a shadow reinforces the idea of death applied to the past, emphasizing that characters mourn the past and remember it with sorrow. Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, characters comment on and recite songs and poetry about the beautiful past, constantly contrasting the decaying state of the Third Age, and building an elegy for Middle-Earth itself.

Lamentation for the “Elder Days” occurs not only in relation to the “Mortal Men” of Middle-Earth, but also to the longer-living races, like Dwarves and Elves. Like Men, these races often express their longing for the past in songs and poetry performed in company, which also provides a basic connection with Anglo-Saxon culture. Gimli represents the Dwarves in the Company, and he expresses his sorrow for the downfall of Dwarf society upon seeing the Mines of Moria in ruin. The Mines remind Gimli of a time when the city of Dwarrowdelf thrived, and he recites a song which recalls the “light and splendour” of the city. The whole song details the glory of the Dwarf King, Durin, and the comfort of Moria “In Elder Days before the fall;” however, part of the last verse of the song perfectly captures this tone of longing:

No harp is wrung, no hammer falls:

The darkness dwells in Durin’s halls;

The shadow lies upon his tomb

In Moria, in Khazad-dûm (Tolkien 309)

Like the Wanderer and the Rohirrim, the Dwarves sing this song to remember the happiness and comfort of the past; Gimli laments that no music can be heard now in Moria, and that darkness has replaced the light that used to shine there. A theme of death parallels “The Wanderer” and the “Lament for the Rohirrim,” as this Dwarf song also evokes imagery of a shadow lying over the past, similar to the previous poems’ claims that the “days” or “time” are under a shadow. In this song of Moria, the shadow literally lies over the glorious King’s “tomb,” reinforcing Gimli’s grief and mourning for the Elder Days.

Characters in *The Lord of the Rings* and Old English elegies lament social and emotional ideals, and they often look to physical manifestations of a grand past to incite these musings. Ruins provoke lament for the departed civilizations which created such magnificent structures in Old English poetry and in *The Lord of the Rings* by representing “the passing of something that was once glorious” (Lee and Solopova 212). The ruins which fill Middle-Earth show the deterioration of the Third Age, intentionally contrasting the present with the great Elder Days (Mahon 34). As the Hobbits travel outside of the Shire for the first time, they constantly find ruins of great civilizations that have risen and fallen, while the hobbits knew nothing of them (Lee and Solopova 212). Upon reaching the ruins of Weathertop, Merry comments, “I wonder who made this path, and what for,” and Aragorn tells him of the great watch tower of Weathertop which now is nothing “but a tumbled ring...Yet once it was tall and fair” (Tolkien 181). These incidences occur throughout the novel: ruins of glorious past civilizations contrast the declining state of Middle-Earth in the Third Age with the glory of extinct civilizations, providing a prompt for musings on the wonders and triumphs of the Elder Days, and a melancholic nostalgia for a greater past.

Legolas' "Lament of the Stones" reinforces the state of ruins in Middle-Earth, which further emphasizes the theme of grief for forgotten civilizations. When Aragorn describes the great age of Rohan's golden hall, Legolas remarks, "Five hundred times have the red leaves fallen in Mirkwood in my home since then...and but a little while does that seem to [the elves]" (Tolkien 496). Legolas also comments later in the novel while travelling with Gimli and Aragorn, 139 and 87 years old, respectively, that he feels old while traveling with them, and calls them "children" (Tolkien 480). Legolas' portrayal in the novel as extremely old compared to Men and Dwarves emphasizes his lament for the olden days of the Elves because his age implies these "Elder Days" passed longer ago than Man could imagine. Upon reaching the border of Hollin, Gandalf comments on the safety of resting there, because "Much evil must befall a country before it wholly forgets the Elves, if once they dwelt there" (Tolkien 276). Legolas seems unsure of Gandalf's claims of safety and counters that the Elves of Hollin were a strange race, and that now only "the stones lament them: *deep they delved us, fair they wrought us, high they builded us; but they are gone. They are gone. They sought the havens long ago*" (Tolkien 276). Legolas' old age emphasizes the fading times of which he speaks, because if not even an Elf can remember this race, they must truly be forgotten. Personification of the stones further displays the use of ruins as a provocation for lamenting the long-forgotten past.

Legolas' "Lament of the Stones" reflects the themes and mood of the Old English elegy, "The Ruin." In "The Ruin," the speaker attempts to imagine the glories of a forgotten civilization while observing their crumbled buildings. The speaker's claim that "The earth's embrace, / its fierce grip, holds the mighty craftsmen; / they are perished and gone," reflects Legolas' claim that the Elvish builders of Hollin departed from Middle-Earth long ago. The word "gone" appears in both poems alluding to the builders of ancient civilizations; Legolas even repeats the

phrase “they are gone” after completing his verse. This emphasis on departure creates an image of grief for the ancient civilizations which both works discuss. As the speaker in “The Ruin” notes, the ruins of buildings “outlive kingdom after kingdom,” explaining their evocation of feelings of loss and grief, because a present state of decay contrasts the glorious past, reminding the speaker and reader of the transience of life. Ruins also appear in “The Wanderer,” when the speaker claims that “...he who has brooded over these noble ruins...often remembers the many slaughters of the past” before lamenting the horse, the man, and the giver of gold (Crossley-Holland 52). The Wanderer directly comments on the process Legolas experiences: the viewing of ruins provoking nostalgia and melancholy for a greater past, and for the land once inhabited by the strange race of “giants” who built such ruins.

Non-human races emphasize the elegiac tone of *The Lord of the Rings* again when Legolas and Gimli comment on the works of the Men of Gondor. When Legolas and Gimli enter Minas Tirith, the capitol city of Gondor, after the War of the Ring, Gimli comments that the Dwarves could improve the crumbling “stone-work” in Gondor, and Legolas agrees that the Elves could improve the dying gardens. Gimli claims that the better stone-work which has not fallen “was wrought in the first building,” because a frost or blight always makes men “fail of their promise” to build great cities, as they are mortal (Tolkien 855). However, Legolas argues that while men may not fulfil these promises, they do not “fail of their seed,” which “will lie in the dust and rot to spring up again in times and places unlooked-for” (Tolkien 855). Legolas explains that while the buildings of Man’s civilizations may crumble, they will never entirely disappear, leaving ruins behind to remind future generations of their former glory. Legolas’ mention of the “days of fading” in this passage, coupled with the discussion of ruins, emphasizes that Gondor may soon be nothing but a ruin, reestablishing the novel’s elegiac tone which

constantly recalls the transience of life. Confidently, the Elf tells the Dwarf that “The deeds of Men will outlast us, Gimli,” contrasting the long life of Gimli and Legolas against the transient one of men to emphasize that while Men must die, physical reminders of their achievements will last for a long time in the form of ruins. The ruins of Middle-Earth, like those in the Old English poems “The Wanderer” and “The Ruin,” represent physical reminders of the transience of life, emphasizing the elegiac qualities which connect the mood of *The Lord of the Rings* to that of several Old English elegiac poems.

Along with the lamentation for happiness and home of the past, characters in both *The Lord of the Rings* and Old English poetry lament relationships which once thrived but have dwindled into hatred, representing a downfall of current happiness. Blood feuds permeate the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* because vengeance for the death of a kinsmen is crucial to displaying loyalty to one’s tribe. These feuds represent the *ubi sunt* motif because they often contrast with the past camaraderie between tribes which has dwindled, based on one action, into constant bloody warfare. Since the new generations of each tribe inherit the obligation for vengeance, the feuds can last for years, destroying relationships between tribes. In *Beowulf*, this theme achieves full effect via an omniscient narrator who alludes to future feuds between tribes displayed as friendly and loyal to each other in the timeline of the poem. In the beginning of *Beowulf*, the reader knows that the mead-hall Heorot will later burn down. The author contrasts a description of the beautiful building by foretelling, “fierce tongues of loathsome fire had not yet attacked it, nor was the time yet near when a mortal feud should flare between father- and son-in-law, sparked off by deeds of deadly enmity” (Crossley-Holland 76). Amid celebration in Heorot later in the poem, the author also claims that “Heorot was packed with feasters who were friends; the time was not yet come when the Scyldings practiced wrongful deeds” (Crossley-Holland 99).

In *Beowulf*, the author presents the downfall of friendship into feud as a fortune and reminds the reader of the transience of life and happiness.

Tolkien presents this same theme of blood feud in *The Lord of the Rings*, not as a fortune but as a lament for the happiness of the past. Again, inciting a memory of the “Elder Days,” Legolas remembers “happier days, when there was still close friendship at times between folk of different race, even between Dwarves and Elves” (Tolkien 295). Legolas and Gimli then argue about which race caused the destruction of these friendships. These close friendships between races reflects the closeness of the Scyldings and the Heathobards in *Beowulf* because Legolas and Gimli’s argument implies that “wrongful deeds” of either race led to a feud which new generations of each race inherit and perpetuate. The *Beowulf* poet tells the story in past-tense, showing a connection with Legolas’ words as he laments the past friendship of the Heathobards and Scyldings. The reminder that a great friendship will soon end creates a mournful tone and implies the dwindling of Beowulf’s society. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the lamentation for a lost friendship also emphasizes the decay of the Third Age. Reminders of brighter and more heroic days, beautiful buildings turned to ruin, and friendships turned to feuds in *The Lord of the Rings* all mirror the same elements in Old English poetry and contribute to the “lyric-elegiac quality” that persists throughout the novel (Wilcox 133).

Mood shifts throughout *The Lord of the Rings* further emphasize the elegiac qualities of the novel by constantly contrasting victory with loss, reminding the reader of the diminishing nature of the Third Age. Similar mood shifts occur throughout *Beowulf*, emphasized by the foreboding digressions which allude to the transience of life. These mood shifts occur largely within the context of battle in *The Lord of the Rings*; Robert Lee Mahon notes in his article, “Elegiac Elements in *The Lord of the Rings*,” that the human perspective in the novel causes

elegiac themes to “swell to major proportions,” because while victory and celebration occur after battle, battle always leads to death (Mahon 35). Tolkien creates a sense of relief and completion at the end of the crucial Battle of the Pelennor Fields: “And in that hour the great Battle of the field of Gondor was over; and not one living foe was left within the circuit of the Rammas. All were slain save those who fled to die...” (Tolkien 830). Tolkien creates a mood of relief; a reader might expect a sentence like this to appear at the very end of a novel, rather than thirteen chapters prior. However, Tolkien shifts the mood immediately by commenting on the bloodshed of the battle, writing that many were “hurt or maimed or dead upon the field,” and describing in detail the trampling of two brothers. The narrator describes those killed in battle using their personal names and names of their homelands, intensifying the feeling of loss (Tolkien 830-831). The victory of battle contrasts sharply with the immediate recognition that loss must accompany that victory, drawing attention to the transience of life, especially in a culture and time steeped in war.

This shifting of mood incited by victory occurs again further toward the end of the novel, after Frodo has destroyed the ring and Aragorn returns to Gondor to take the throne. Tolkien again builds a calm tone, which comes from the plot progression and description of the Company’s experience in Gondor: “In those days the Companions of the Ring dwelt together in a fair house with Gandalf, and they went to and fro as they wished” (Tolkien 949). The Company has completed every task required of them: they have fought against Sauron’s armies, destroyed the ring, and Aragorn has even returned to his home; however, Gandalf reminds Aragorn of the Third Age’s transience. Gandalf tells Aragorn that the Third Age is ending, and that “though much has been saved, much must now pass away,” because the “Elder Kindred shall fade or depart,” leaving Men to rule Middle-Earth (Tolkien 949-950). Men, unlike the Elder Kindred

which includes Elves and wizards like Gandalf, have “The Gift of the One,” meaning that they die (Mahon 34). Gandalf’s conversation with Aragorn shifts the tone of the chapter from jovial to grim, reminding the reader that despite the Company’s victory, the destruction of the Ring diminishes the power of the immortal races of Middle-Earth, leaving only civilizations of mortal Men who will eventually pass away like those before them.

Tolkien’s intentional variation of mood throughout *The Lord of the Rings* serves to draw attention to the transience of life – current victory contrasts with its resultant loss, and its future consequences. Emphasis on this transience builds the elegiac tone of the novel and shows influence from the Old English *Beowulf*, which relies on digressions to contrast victory with past or future loss. After Beowulf slays Grendel, the Danes and Geats celebrate with music and food in Heorot, and a scop sings a lay about a tribe of Danes, who must live among the Frisians after the Frisians kill their leader in battle. The Danes take revenge after one winter, defeating the leader of the Frisians and returning to Denmark (Crossley-Holland 100-103). While this digression appears as simply entertainment for the people in Heorot, it shifts the mood of the poem from joyful to somber with vivid descriptions of bloody battles and vengeance. In his introduction to Constance B. Heatt’s translation of *Beowulf*, Kent A. Heatt claims that digressions like this story of Finn and Hildeburh contribute to a sense of foreboding; in this instance, a foreboding of vengeance, as Grendel’s mother comes to avenge her son’s death that night in Heorot (Heatt xxvii). Heatt also claims that these digressions “[powerfully generate] an elegiac view of life” in *Beowulf* by constantly alluding to an event in the future or past that shows by contrast the transience of Beowulf’s life, that of the Heathobards and Scyldings, and those of the individuals alluded to in each digression (Heatt xxix). Tolkien’s use of mood shifts appears most like *Beowulf*’s digressions at the end of the chapter, “The Battle of the Pelennor

Fields.” Like the scop’s song of Finn and Hildeburh after Beowulf defeats Grendel, the chapter concludes with an elegiac song that the author foretells as being sung “so long afterward,” by a poet of Rohan, and which Mahon claims is “written in the cadences of the heroic-elegiac *Beowulf* Tolkien so much admired” (Mahon 34). The song names the prominent figures fallen in battle and emphasizes the loss that must come with victory: “Death in the morning and at day’s ending / lords took and lowly” (Tolkien 831). Tolkien’s emphasis on the future – that this song *will* be sung in Rohan – shows a direct connection to *Beowulf*’s predictions and flashbacks. Since Tolkien based the culture of Rohan on the Anglo-Saxons, one may imagine this song being sung at a feast, much like the one in *Beowulf*, after a victorious battle.

The image of a poet singing about the Battle of the Pelennor Fields provides the reader with a preview of the future, contributing to the theme of a fleeting Third Age that Tolkien uses to create an elegiac tone reminiscent of Old English poetry throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Themes of loneliness, exile, and extinction interact with images of ruins, nostalgic poetry, and mood shifts to emphasize the decay of the Third Age. The Ents have no children, the Elves have no power, and Frodo Baggins finishes the Third Age by facing a unique exile of his own. These themes of exile and extinction show a connection with Anglo-Saxon lyric-elegiac poetry, which often invokes images of dying or extinct societies, and exiled individuals who must spend lonely days separated from their loved ones. Middle-Earth’s Ents and Elves display a clear similarity with the dying societies of Old English poetry. In “The Two Towers,” the second volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, Merry and Pippin meet Treebeard, who is an Ent: a giant, wise, tree-like creature who lives in the Fangorn Forest. They learn that very few Ents remain on Middle-Earth, as Treebeard says, “Only three remain of the first Ents that walked in the woods before the Darkness,” and claims that the female Ents, the Entwives, abandoned the forest long ago, so no

Entings have been born “for a terrible long count of years” (Tolkien 463-464). The introduction of Treebeard as belonging to a dying race subtly contributes to an elegiac tone; the Ents cannot mourn for their wives or children, since, as Treebeard says, “They did not die!” (Tolkien 464). However, the author implies that the Ents will most likely never find their wives or produce more Entings, emphasizing a grim theme of decay. Mahon correctly observes that Treebeard’s tale of the Entwives “foreshadows the eventual fate of the Ents themselves” (Mahon 35). By the end of the novel, after the destruction of the Ring, Treebeard seems certain about the extinction of his race. He replies to Aragorn’s expression of hope for the Ents with sadness, saying, “Forests may grow... Woods may spread. But not Ents. There are no Entings” (Tolkien 958). Treebeard’s negatives emphasize his certainty in the extinction of the Ents, and his loneliness among a diminished race.

The Elves provide another striking example of the Third Age’s decay and loss. Unlike the Ents, the Elves have children and a large population; however, due to the destruction of the Ring, the Elves of the Third Age have little power compared to the Elves of the Elder Days. The Elves once lived in Valinor, also called The Undying Lands, because the Elves, as immortal beings, could live there forever in happiness (Tolkien 1101). At the end of the First Age, the High Elves were exiled to Middle-Earth, also called by the Elves “the lands of weeping and war” (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 305). Since these Elves were forced from a blissful paradise to a land full of mortality, Legolas describes that “deep in the hearts of all my kindred lies the sea-longing,” a longing to go back to Valinor, from where they were exiled. While Legolas’ kindred have since regained access to The Undying Lands in the Third Age, their society which exists in Middle Earth fades at the end of this age. The Elves of Middle-Earth value their beautiful buildings and works, which face the mortality that the Elves do not. Galadriel tells Frodo that “The love of the

Elves for their land and their works is deeper than the deeps of the Sea” (Tolkien 356). Miranda Wilcox explains that while the Elves do not face their own mortality, in leaving Middle-Earth, they must “confront mortality by means of their transitory environment” (Wilcox 141). Since the Elves value their lives on Middle-Earth, Mahon notes that The War of the Ring provides a no-win scenario for the Elves (Mahon 34). Galadriel explains to Frodo that his task is “the footstep of Doom” for the Elves, because his success would trigger the fading of the Elves and Lóthlorien, so they must “sail West” to Valinor (Tolkien 356). The Elves represent both an exiled race which longs for home, and a dying race who will eventually leave Middle-Earth entirely, along with the Ents, initiating the Fourth Age, ruled by Men.

The dying societies of Middle-Earth reflect the themes of exile and decay in Anglo-Saxon poetry. “The Seafarer” and *Beowulf*’s “Lay of the Last Survivor” echo themes of the transient societies and communities of Elves and Ents. Before Beowulf fights the dragon, the narrator describes how the last survivor of a society placed treasure in the dragon’s cave long ago because he “thought he would enjoy those assembled heirlooms a little while only” (Crossley-Holland 130). While placing the treasure in the cave, the survivor claims:

I have no one
 to carry the sword, to polish the plated vessel,
 this precious drinking-cup; all the retainers
 have hurried elsewhere. (Crossley-Holland 130)

The litotes in the survivor’s claim that his dead kinsmen “have hurried elsewhere” echoes Treebeard’s comment that while the Entwives have not died, their obscurity in Middle-Earth signals the end of the Ents’ society. The litotes also mirrors the Elves’ eventual fate of “sailing

West:” they do not really “die,” but they must leave the mortal land which they love. After the survivor mourns his community, the narrator explains,

Thus the last survivor mourned time passing,
and roamed about by day and night,
sad and aimless, until death’s lightning
struck at his heart. (Crossley-Holland 131)

“The Seafarer” also presents, as Wilcox notes, a lonely individual who constantly “laments the general decay of mortal life” (Wilcox 139). The Seafarer claims that “I have no faith / that the splendours of this earth will survive for ever,” which supports his belief that people should not covet material objects, as life is transient (Crossley-Holland 55). Like the Seafarer and the Survivor, the Elves lament the decay of Middle-Earth and the passing of their own lives, looking back to the Elves of Valinor with nostalgia, and toward their imminent voyage back to Valinor with grief. Tolkien notes in one of his published letters that the Elves wanted to keep their nostalgic memories of the West, but remain in Middle-Earth where they had prestige and glory. This mindset, Tolkien says, caused the Elves to “become obsessed with ‘fading’,” wishing to “embalm” Middle-Earth (Tolkien, “131 To Milton Waldman”). While the Elves try to halt the transience that the Seafarer acknowledges, both must accept their existence in a world that is *læne*, loaned, and both express the nostalgic and mournful “sea-longing” described by Legolas as they come to terms with mortality of land and life.

Like the Elves and Ents, the main character of *The Lord of the Rings* experiences individual exile at the end of the novel, further creating an elegiac tone. When Frodo Baggins returns to his home, the Shire, after destroying the Ring in Mordor, he realizes that he bore the

Ring so long that he can no longer live without it. Mahon notes that “in becoming the hero [Frodo] loses all that he has loved and saved” (Mahon 35). Frodo understands this before he even returns to the Shire. As they ride home from Rivendell, Frodo tells Gandalf, “There is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?” Gandalf’s failure to reply to Frodo’s question implies that Frodo cannot find rest anywhere (Tolkien 967). A few months after returning, another Hobbit finds Frodo ill in bed, clutching a necklace which he imagines as the Ring, and saying “It is gone for ever [...] and now all is dark and empty” (Tolkien 1001). While Frodo took the Ring to Mordor to save the Shire and the people he loves, doing so rendered him empty, and incapable of experiencing the life he fought to save. In the end, Frodo must face the same fate as the Elves: “sailing West” to the Undying Lands. Sam’s reaction to Frodo leaving the Shire emphasizes a tone of grief which likens Frodo’s exile from the Shire to death – he tells Frodo, “but I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done” (Tolkien 1006). This scene shows Sam’s feeling of grief at losing Frodo, creating an image of death rather than of displacement. Mahon claims that Frodo “suffers the most complete death [of all the deaths that a man must suffer],” because he loses the essence of himself, and the life that he loved before he became a hero (Mahon 35). Following the symbolic death of the hero, Samwise Gamgee returns to the Shire and greets his wife and kids at home. Sam’s simple “Well, I’m back,” and the image of one of his children on his lap emphasize the nature of transience that Tolkien captures with elegiac elements throughout the novel – Frodo’s death contrasts with the new life of Sam’s daughter, which will be full and happy because of Frodo’s actions. Tolkien shows that life constantly

begins and ends, and that, as Gandalf says, “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us” (Tolkien 50).

3. Interlace Structure in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Beowulf*

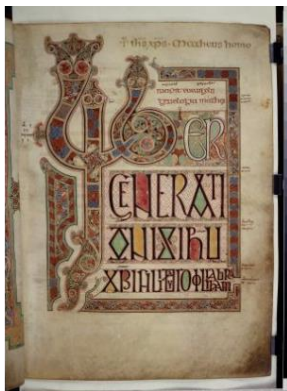
“Don’t the great tales never end?”

“No, they never end as tales,” said Frodo. “But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended.”

Critics have used “interlace” to describe the Arthurian romances of the 13th century, and more sparsely the structure of the epic poem *Beowulf*. Literary “interlace structure” first applied to Arthurian romances, because they contain various subplots, often occurring simultaneously, which the author “interlaces” throughout an entire work to create a cohesive plot. The term “interlace” can also describe the various digressions or episodes which occur throughout the epic poem *Beowulf*. While the definition of the term changes slightly when applied to *Beowulf*, gaining some influence from Anglo-Saxon art, it retains the same basic meaning: various subplots connected throughout a work to create a whole. However, rather than various simultaneously occurring plots, the *Beowulf* author weaves episodes from the past and future with a chronological storyline in the present to create a foreboding and elegiac tone. Critics have often compared J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* to *Beowulf*; however, many tend to find either influence or basic connections with the later Arthurian romances when discussing narrative structure. Like the Arthurian romances, Tolkien weaves together multiple subplots throughout the novel, especially in the second and third volumes, to create a whole story. However, the frequent use of mythical proper names, allusions to “historical” stories, and ambiguous framing serve the same function as the *Beowulf* structure: allowing the reader to

properly immerse themselves in the story, and creating a tone of elegy and foreboding that underscores the entire work.

As noted by Joanna Kokot in *O What a Tangled Web We Weave*, Arthurian romance authors attempted to *interlace* separate, older plots into a cohesive whole (Kokot 10). Some have noted the connection between this interpretation of “interlace” and *The Lord of the Rings*, especially in the second two books, when the Fellowship separates and Tolkien weaves the adventures of Merry and Pippin, Sam and Frodo, and Gimli, Legolas, and Aragorn together to create a complete plot. While this technique shows possible later medieval influence, some scholars, most notably John Leyerle, have applied the term “interlace” to *Beowulf*, which further shows *The Lord of the Rings*’ structural connections with Anglo-Saxon literature. The term applied to Anglo-Saxon literature originates in the Anglo-Saxon interlaced art style. This art includes several bands woven together, which become difficult to follow as they become more tightly knit (Leyerle 2). Interlace appears in illuminated manuscripts and clothing items, especially from the 7th and 8th centuries, such as the Sutton Hoo belt buckle and pages from *The Lindisfarne Gospels*:



(“Folio 27r”)



(“Sutton Hoo Gold Belt Buckle”)

Leyerle claims that Anglo-Saxon poets “weave direct statement and classical tags together to produce verbal braids in which allusive literary references from the past cross and recross with the present subject” like the bands of interlace art (Leyerle 4). The separate plots, or digressions in the case of *Beowulf*, intersect with the main plot (that of Beowulf fighting Grendel, his mother, and the dragon) to create a literary work of art “parallel to the carpet pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels” (Leyerle 7). While few have directly related *The Lord of the Rings* to *Beowulf* in this structural sense, a connection becomes apparent when comparing the digressions and differing plotlines, as well as historical allusions and framing, which contribute to the tone and theme of both works.

The *Beowulf* poet achieves an interlace structure with “digressions,” related stories from history or legend threaded into the main story either by a frame device or by the narrator himself, and flashbacks. These digressions usually appear as the narrator’s commentary or a story told by a character. While the digressions do not weave simultaneously occurring plots together, they weave together separate, thematically connected plots to foreshadow events to the audience, and create a tone of foreboding throughout the work. Digressions often include references to figures, either historical or mythical, which parallel the *Beowulf* characters, such as Sigemund the dragon slayer, who foreshadows Beowulf’s death after fighting a dragon. The narrator also compares Beowulf to Hygelac, the former king of the Geats. These comparisons appear indirect; however, the author uses interlace structure to continuously foreshadow events in Beowulf’s life using Hygelac’s expedition to Frisia, explained throughout four different episodes. The second episode shows the effect of interlacing flashbacks: Beowulf prepares to fight the dragon rashly, since he does not “set much store by the fearless dragon’s power” (Crossley-Holland 133). Immediately following this description of Beowulf’s preparation, the narrator briefly mentions Hygelac’s

hasty preparation to go to Frisia, which ends in his death. Hygelac's preparation and death mirrors and foreshadows Beowulf's encounter with the dragon. The author interlaces these episodes about the same story throughout the poem, disregarding linear order in favor of thematic order, which Leyerle notes helps the author "achieve juxtapositions impossible in a linear narrative" (Leyerle 7). Inclusion of these characters foreshadows the fate of Beowulf and those around him, and "directs thought and feeling into deep channels" using an interlace structure (Heatt xxx).

Tolkien uses both simultaneous plotlines and historical or mythical allusions in *The Lord of the Rings* to foreshadow and create tone. Historical allusion foreshadows the future when Elrond tells the story of Isildur cutting off the Dark Lord's hand to get the Ring "a long age ago" in Book Two, which portends Gollum biting Frodo's finger off to get the ring in Book Six (Tolkien 237; 925). Elrond's story shows similarities with the mention of Hygelac's death early in *Beowulf*, as each story foreshadows the characters' fates. The reader may not initially compare these characters; however, Hygelac's status as a king of the Geats connects him to Beowulf, and the Dark Lord's status as ringbearer connects him to Frodo. Tolkien also weaves together several plotlines, reflecting the "medieval interlace" of the Arthurian romances. These plots do not just occur simultaneously; Tolkien interconnects them expertly to achieve cohesion. For example, Pippin throws his brooch on the ground, hoping Aragorn will find it, while orcs kidnap him and Merry (Tolkien 439). Later, Aragorn finds the brooch and correctly hypothesizes the exact scenario from a few chapters before, showing the reader Aragorn's skill and finally connecting the two groups' plots together (Tolkien 479). Richard West notes that this structure "creates an infinite series of echoes and anticipations by which the work gains coherence" in both medieval

works and *The Lord of the Rings*. Echoes of the past in songs, poems, and stories allow the reader to understand the history of Middle-Earth and anticipate the fate of the Third Age.

Digressions further create tone in *Beowulf* with the constant use of proper names, like the mythical Sigemund the dragon slayer, as well as legendary historical figures such as the Frisian king, Finn. Gwyn Jones notes that while the *Beowulf* poet may not have distinguished historical fact from fiction, he does pull from the Anglo-Saxon “corpus of knowledge,” which would have allowed an Anglo-Saxon reader to fully engage with the work (Jones 33). Kent A. Hieatt also refers to this use of the “corpus of knowledge” as the author’s reliance on “a common stock of stories and heroes known throughout the Germanic world” (Hieatt xxx). While modern readers may have trouble keeping track of the historical and fictional names used in digressions, Anglo-Saxon readers likely would have recognized these names easily, allowing them to understand the deeper meaning of the text. The names mentioned in digressions throughout the text include the factual, historical Hygelac, Hrothgar, Ongentheow, Haethcyn, Onela and Heardre. They also include historical figures from Germanic myth, including Sigemund, who has been linked to several Germanic stories, including the Icelandic Sigurd and the German Siegfried, both fictional dragon slayers (Seigfried). Research into these legends allows modern readers to experience the weight of the foreshadowing that Anglo-Saxon readers would have already understood.

Much like the *Beowulf* poet’s allusions to real and fictional figures, research and understanding of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth lore allows for a richer understanding of *The Lord of the Rings*. Along with the foreshadowing of Gollum biting Frodo’s finger off from Elrond’s tale of Isildur, the romance between the elf Lúthien Tinúviel and mortal Beren parallels the elvish Arwen’s sacrifice of her immortality for the mortal Aragorn (Tolkien 187-189). Characters constantly mention proper names from the history of Middle-Earth, including Eärendil the

mariner, who Bilbo sings about, the Dwarf-lord Durin, who Gimli sings about, and dozens of placenames like Nargothrond and Gondolin (Tolkien 227, 308-309, 348, 237). Characters also refer to their own friends' and family's legends, not contained within *The Lord of the Rings*, to create a sense of anticipation in the story. When Pippin sees eagles flying overhead at the end of Book Five, he thinks of Bilbo, Frodo's uncle, but then thinks "no! That came in his tale, long ago" (Tolkien 874). While the reader knows Bilbo from the beginning of the novel, they would have to know the events of *The Hobbit* to understand that the Great Eagles rescued Bilbo and his Dwarf companions and fought in the Battle of the Five Armies. With this knowledge, a reader could imply that Pippin hopes the Eagles have come to assist in the War of the Ring, adding anticipation and longing to the tone of the story. The places and people mentioned in these contexts are fictional; however, Tolkien uses many techniques to immerse the reader in the world of the novel and create a sense of reality.

Tolkien wrote his novel within the context of an entire universe of Middle-Earth, contained in appendices, *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion*, and the *Red Book of Westmarch*. Tolkien created *The Red Book of Westmarch* as a fictional manuscript containing *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, along with supplementary writings by several fictional authors, including Bilbo Baggins, Frodo Baggins, and Samwise Gamgee. Due to this conceit, Tolkien essentially claims that he acts as translator and editor of his stories, not author (Bowman 274). Tolkien works to create a universe surrounding his story with these fictional histories, contributing to what West calls "a sense of the legendary past" (West 84). West claims that the reader "may be traveling through faery lands forlorn, peopled by imaginary beings, but the history, geography, and cultures of each cross one another with such complexity that we have the impression that the fantasy has lifelike depth and solidity" (West 84). A reader of *The Lord of the Rings*, like a

reader of *Beowulf*, must understand the complete context of the plot digressions and flashbacks contributing to interlace structure to fully experience the foreboding tone in both works.

Beyond a sense of legendary past from the use of proper names, interlace structure creates a powerful theme of transience discussed previously in the context of elegiac poetry. In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede summarizes this idea of transience with an extended simile of a sparrow:

...when we compare the present life of man with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a long sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you sit in the winter months to dine with your thanes and counsellors...This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another...Similarly, man appears on earth for a little while, but we know nothing of what went before this life, and what follows. (Crossley-Holland 159)

Interlace structure mirrors this theme, as the diverging plots, digressions, proper names, and flashbacks create a sense of chaos which make the reader feel as if they have walked into the middle of a story rather than starting from the beginning. The reader can enter the world of the story “for a little while,” not knowing what came before or what follows for the characters. *Beowulf* begins and ends with a funeral, both of which trigger hardship and struggle. Leyerle points out that the nearly identical beginning and end “complete” the interlace, and that the themes suddenly reverse “without regard to time [which gives] the whole poem a sense of transience about the world and all that is in it as beginnings and endings are juxtaposed” (Leyerle 14). The main plot reads easily: Beowulf goes to Denmark, kills Grendel, kills Grendel’s mother, fails to kill the Dragon, and dies. However, his death foreshadows a period of hardship for the Geats as their great leader dies and only a handful of Geats still live. The ending of the story

marks the beginning of this affliction, giving the impression that the story continues onward, while the reader knows “little of what follows.”

The Lord of the Rings' interlace structure also effectively conveys the theme of transience through interconnected plots. The divergences from the plot including flashbacks from the Second Age, allusions to pre-*Lord of the Rings* Middle-Earth lore, and interweaving plotlines contribute to a feeling of chaos, and like *Beowulf*, a feeling that the reader has stumbled across the story rather than starting at the beginning. West notes that this structure makes readers “feel that we have interrupted the chaotic activity of the world at a certain point and followed a selection from it for a time and that after we leave, it continues on its own random path (West 79). *The Lord of the Rings* acts as a continuation from *The Hobbit* and continues through the appendices and excerpts in the *Red Book of Westmarch*, so the story literally does not end; however, Tolkien's use of interlace allows him to effectively “finish” the story in the same manner as *Beowulf*. The novel begins and ends in very different versions of the Shire. The novel begins with Bilbo planning his birthday party in Bag End and ends with Samwise returning to the very same house, now devoid of the Bagginses as they both “sailed West.” Tolkien and the *Beowulf* poet complete the interlace by returning to the same setting as the beginning; however, the juxtaposition of themes, along with the ending of the Third Age, implies that the story does not truly end there.

The implication that the story does not truly end, achieved by interlace structure, contributes to a sense of transience and interconnectedness in both *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The endings of each story, as well as narrative elements within, emphasize the idea the shortness of life compared to history, while also asserting that culture continues forever. As *Beowulf* dies after receiving a deadly wound from the dragon, he tells Wiglaf, “You are the last

survivor of our family...fate has swept all my kinsmen, those courageous warriors, to their doom. I must follow them” (Crossley-Holland 145). As stated by Leyerle, Beowulf’s death completes the interlace of the poem: it begins and ends with a funeral. However, this “ending” of the interlace also implies the beginning of a period of hardship for the Geats, suggesting that this story, or another part of it, will continue after the words on the page end. Loss, victory, life, and death occur simultaneously throughout the poem, emphasizing the transience and continuity of life and culture, and mirroring the chaos of real life.

While *Beowulf*’s interlace structure implies the greater themes of human history, Tolkien uses a similar structure, along with commentary from characters, to create a powerful image of the human story as interconnected and never-ending. As noted by West, *The Lord of the Rings*’ interlace structure makes readers feel as if they have stumbled across the story and experienced it for a certain amount of time, rather than reading it from beginning to end. Both *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings* achieve this effect using interlace, which effectively mirrors the “recurrence of human behaviour, and the circularity of time, partly through the coincidence, recurrence, and circularity of the medium itself” (Leyerle 8). *The Lord of the Rings*’ self-aware dialogue and ambiguous ending contribute to this sense of circularity and recurrence which mirrors real life. Within the story, characters discuss and act according to what tales about their experiences will say in the future. While they trek toward Mordor, Samwise and Frodo wonder what kind of tale they have fallen into, and after Frodo claims that the characters of a tale never know either, Sam talks about the tale of Beren and realizes: “And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We’ve got – you’ve got some of the light of [the Silmaril] in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on” (Tolkien 696-697). Sam recalls the tale of the First Age, and realizes that elements of that tale, such as the light from the Silmarils,

still persist into his own life, showing him, and the reader, the recurrence of story which Tolkien emphasizes using interlace structure.

After his realization, Sam asks, “Don’t the great tales never end?” to which Frodo replies “No, they never end as tales...but the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended. Our part will end later – or sooner” (Tolkien 697). Frodo refers to their experience as a “tale,” and acknowledges that the great tales (like that of human history) never end, the characters simply come and go. They further explore this topic by hypothesizing how future generations will speak of them in their tale, which affects other characters throughout the story as well. Merry chooses to ride in battle with the Rohirrim because he wants to appear courageous in stories, and Éowyn wants to do the same so she can win renown (Tolkien 786; 767). Merry and Éowyn cause the death of the Witch-king of Angmar, showing the importance of their values as they endeavor to appear strong and brave in tales of the future. These tales appear a few times in the story, such as the song sung “so long afterward” from the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, and, to Sam’s delight, the song “Frodo of the Nine Fingers and the Ring of Doom” sung by Aragorn at the end of the novel (Tolkien 933). Mary Bowman points out this song’s similarities with the song Hrothgar’s scop sings on the way back from Grendel’s mere in *Beowulf* (Bowman 285). Tolkien uses not only digressions, flashbacks, and interlacing plotlines of the historical and main stories of Middle-Earth, but also the potential future stories of Middle-Earth, to create an interlace theme and structure that emphasizes the interconnectedness and never-ending nature of the human story.

One of the most important factors of interlace structure, as pointed out by Leyerle in his analysis of *Beowulf*’s framing, is a story’s ending. How can a story which emphasizes chaos, transience, and eternity, end? Certainly a “happily ever after” will not do, although Bilbo

Baggins wishes it would. From the beginning of the novel, Bilbo expresses that he wants to finish his tale – *The Hobbit* – with “and he lived happily ever after til the end of his days” (Tolkien 32). However, Frodo’s excursion to destroy the Ring prevents this from happening. The entire story, as well as textual elements, disprove Bilbo’s belief that he can put his story in a picture frame. At Elrond’s council, Bilbo says he knows Elrond thinks “Bilbo the silly hobbit started this affair, and Bilbo had better finish it, or himself,” to which Gandalf replies “Of course, my dear Bilbo...If you had really started this affair, you might be expected to finish it. But you well enough know that starting is too great a claim for any” (Tolkien 263). Gandalf’s reply lets Bilbo know that his story began far before he entered it, and as stated by Bowman, implies to the reader “that this story doesn’t really begin where we thought, either” (Bowman 277). By the end of the novel, Bilbo and Frodo find the end of their own stories, as their “part’s ended,” but the reader can see that the story they became part of still does not end, as Sam goes back home to a Shire full of life and a book to write. Sam’s role at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* is to keep the memory of the Third Age alive, and continue to write the story, showing that the end of the interlace is not really an end at all, but the beginning of a new age for Middle-Earth, mirroring the continuity of human life and history.

Diverging plotlines, digressions, flashbacks, and textual content create an interlace structure in both *Beowulf* and *The Lord of the Rings*. When compared to the art of the Anglo-Saxons, *Beowulf*’s structure proves intricate and meaningful: the digressions, flashbacks, and framing create a sense of transience, continuity, and interconnectedness much like the bands woven together on the pages of *The Lindisfarne Gospels*. Tolkien uses similar elements, although not an identical structure, to evoke the same themes in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien’s use of fictional history and authorship, intertwining plotlines throughout the novel, and

ambiguous framing allow the reader to infer that the story does not begin or end within the pages of the book, contributing to what Tolkien called the “endlessness of the World of Story” (Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories”). The interlace structure provides a view of the world as chaotic, indefinite, and constantly interconnected, emphasizing the vastness of human culture and history, and the relative transience within that history of individual lives and actions.

Conclusion

Tolkien’s influence from, or connection with, Anglo-Saxon literature becomes evident when studying the structure, themes, and content of his masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*. In his essay, “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien expresses his “desire to unravel the intricately knotted and ramified history of the branches on the Tree of Tales” (Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories”). He also claims that works of fantasy tend to have a better “grasp of the endlessness of the World of Story than most modern ‘realistic’ stories” (Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories”). In writing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien successfully expresses the intricacy and the endlessness of the “web,” “world,” or “tree” of story that he speaks of by utilizing textual connections to medieval literature, elegiac elements that emphasize the vastness of human history, and an interlace narrative structure which implies this sense of a “knotted and ramified history” of Middle-Earth itself. The interlace, elegiac elements, and comitatus expressed in *The Lord of the Rings* connect it structurally and thematically to Old English poetry, further emphasizing the connectedness of story that Tolkien writes about – the story itself is inextricably linked with poetry of the past.

Tolkien’s influence from Old English poetry in *The Lord of the Rings* also emphasizes the importance of human relationships and actions to the “Tree of Tales.” While the novel, as well as the Anglo-Saxon poems, strongly communicate the relative transience of life when compared to the breadth of history, Tolkien succeeds in communicating an even larger, more

optimistic idea: loyalty and love for family and home inseparably influence this breadth of history. Éowyn fights for the Rohirrim and kills the Witch-king because she feels burning loyalty to her kinsmen and desire to win renown; Sam carries Frodo to the top of Mount Doom because he loves Frodo and promised to help him destroy the ring; Gimli and Legolas learn to love each other despite a blood feud so they can save Middle-Earth; Frodo destroys the ring, even though it means the end of his own life, because he loves the Shire and wants to save it for his friends. These individual actions, and individual lives, are displayed as short and small when compared to the stories of the past, the stories that Sam realizes he still lives inside. However, the actions these characters perform, motivated by love and loyalty, change the course of history. Their actions echo until the end of time as they all contribute to the end of the War of the Ring, and with it, the Third Age. A medievalist reading of *The Lord of the Rings* reveals a connection of the novel to the eternal human concern of what we leave behind, and how such a short life can have an impact on such a vast history.

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