

A Tribute to England: J.R.R Tolkien's Works as the Missing Anglo-Saxon Mythology

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Abstract

In a 1951 letter, J.R.R Tolkien states that "I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend...which I could dedicate simply to England," an idea that eventually became reality with *The Lord of the Rings* universe. Tolkien, a lifelong lover of myth, lamented that the thousand-year-past Anglo-Saxons were without a genuine mythology and sought to fill that void. However, was Tolkien successful? Is it possible to artificially create a mythology, especially so for a culture that so little was known about? Since *The Lord of the Rings* was published fifty years ago, much more about Anglo-Saxon culture has been revealed. Using these discoveries, I examine Tolkien's works to decide if he successfully created a fitting mythology for the Anglo-Saxons, both in terms of cultural accuracy and the actual definition of mythology. To do this, I primarily use the work of Dr. Christopher Snyder for Anglo-Saxon historical basis and Dr. Tom Shippey and David Harvey for characteristics of myth. I also emphasize language. Tolkien, an enthusiastic philologist, based much of his universe on Old English words--one of the few reliable sources of Anglo-Saxon history he had. By using Old English dictionaries and guides, I dissect aspects of Tolkien's universe to their origin of an Old English word, and then examine how apt Tolkien's creation is to the original meaning of the word for the Anglo-Saxons, both in terms of literal definition and cultural influence. By the end of the paper, I intend to show to what extent *The Lord of the Rings* collection is genuine Anglo-Saxon myth, and, in a larger sense, challenge the definition of myth and make an argument for artificially-created myth as a part of it.

Keywords: Tolkien, Mythology, Anglo-Saxons

1. Introduction

With *The Lord of the Rings* legendarium, J.R.R. Tolkien embarks on a difficult and noble task--creating a true mythology for England, or, rather, the Anglo-Saxon version of England, one that lacks in such an intricate mythology compared to other ancient civilizations. Hindering things further, Tolkien did not have a rich and deep well of knowledge to draw from about the Anglo-Saxons; very few documents were kept, most structures were destroyed, and the small pool of writings that were preserved were twisted and warped by the many translators that had edited them before. In fact, much of what is legitimately known about the Anglo-Saxons has been discovered since Tolkien's works were completed. The information possessed today, however, does not cheapen Tolkien's attempt. By studying what has been revealed about Anglo-Saxon culture, life, and history, one realizes how incredibly accurate Tolkien's stories are and, occasionally, where their weak spots lie. Overall, thanks to the evidence possessed today, I would suggest that Tolkien did indeed succeed in creating a mythology fitting for the Anglo-Saxons with *The Lord of the Rings* legendarium, drawing from other people who also settled in England but, primarily, the Anglo-Saxons.

Before any sort of argument can be made, it must be shown that *The Lord of the Rings* is a genuine, dedicated mythology for England instead of simply a work of fiction that draws upon Anglo-Saxon themes. Tolkien states this in a personal letter in 1951, claiming that “I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend...which I could dedicate simply to England.”¹ This quote poses two main questions: why create this mythology and why for specifically the Anglo-Saxons? Verlyn Flieger believes that Tolkien was inspired by Elias Lönnrot, the man who compiled *Kalevala* and effectively “gave Finland its own myth and mythic identity equal to that of Greece or Scandinavia.”² Flieger shows this with a quote from Tolkien, “[*Kalevala*] set the rocket off in my story.”³ More importantly, along with Finland’s own mythology comes pride in one’s culture and the identity that myth provides. According to Flieger, “[Lönnrot’s] effect on Finnish art and culture was...profound. It became the instant inspiration for all kinds of artistic expression,” leading directly to such works as *Finlandia* and the *Swan of Tuonela*.⁴ Tolkien—a medievalist who loved poetry and the arts—would naturally want to arouse such expression as well. In addition, England was in desperate need of inspiration after the first World War. Tolkien, in 1914 laments, “[w]hy has not England a great mythology? Our folklore has never advanced beyond daintiness...England still waits for...the great poet that shall voice her.”⁵ Through his personal writings, Tolkien reveals the artistic reasoning behind his desire for mythology and the inspiration that whet his determination.

England has been inhabited by many peoples, from Celtic druids, to Norse invaders, and ending with the United Kingdom we know today. Why, out of all these groups, would Tolkien choose the Anglo-Saxons? In Tolkien’s mind, they are the sole inhabitants of Britain. Tolkien claims that “[t]here was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish...but nothing English.”⁶ Tolkien also apparently admired the Anglo-Saxons (or rather, what little was known about them at the time), studying, writing on, and drawing from such Anglo-Saxon works as *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the *Christ*.⁷

One may argue, though, that Tolkien’s job was already completed; the Anglo-Saxon void was filled by Arthurian legend and *Beowulf*. True enough, both of these works serve as foundations that Tolkien built upon and each hint at bits and pieces of Anglo-Saxon culture. As far as being a dedicated mythology, however, they both fall short. As for *Beowulf*, several flaws are evident. For one, *Beowulf* is not about the English. Beowulf himself is a Geat - hailing from Scandinavia - who goes to the aid of the Danes--the English are not even mentioned. Along with this, years of translation has warped *Beowulf* greatly from its original story, particularly in the terms of religious beliefs. A modern translation features prominently quotes as, “The Almighty Judge.../ the Lord God, / Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,”⁸ and “the mighty judgment of God in majesty,”⁹ while simultaneously featuring such pagan elements as demons, dragons, “[o]gres and elves and evil phantoms.”¹⁰ *Beowulf* supposedly originated around the 6th century before Christianity had taken strong hold in then-pagan Anglo-Saxon England. The tacked-on Christian elements are most likely remnants of monk translators. Elizabeth Canon concurs with this, showing even more religious discrepancies such as Beowulf’s cremation—a funeral rite not allowed by the Roman Church.¹¹ Canon eventually decides that *Beowulf* “mov[es] imperfectly from Pagan to Christian in a zig-zag pattern that is echoed in the structure of the poem.”¹² Non-religious disputes can also be found, such as the unconfirmed identity of the Geats and the Jutes.¹³ Finally, *Beowulf* is a poetic work of fiction, created solely for entertainment. So, *Beowulf*, while remnant of Anglo-Saxon culture, is unsuitable for an Anglo-Saxon mythology.

Arthurian legend is relatively more recent and historically clear than *Beowulf*, but, nonetheless, is unfit for Anglo-Saxon mythology as well, mainly because it is a legend rather than a myth. David Harvey explores the difference. According to Harvey, “[l]egends are stories embedded in some elements of fact and history,” while myths, although somewhat based in fact, must involve the supernatural, such as gods or magic, and are genuinely believed..¹⁴ For example, King Arthur likely existed, Poseidon did not. Arthurian legend occasionally delves into magic, but a pantheon of gods and beliefs is never established. Arthurian legend, then, is not the mythology Tolkien envisioned. *Beowulf* and Arthurian legend both draw upon Anglo-Saxon culture, but also must be viewed very critically as being Anglo-Saxon. Rather, they resemble Anglo-Saxon culture, but due to hundreds of years of twisted translations and being works of literature and history rather than an actual belief system, they are not a mythology.

Now, Tolkien’s predicament is realized; a desire for genuine English mythology, but no suitable works in place. *The Lord of the Rings*, to legitimately be considered a mythology, must fulfill two distinct requirements. One, it must be a mythology, not a legend, fable, or only a work of entertaining fiction. Two, it must reflect Anglo-Saxon culture and resemble what they could have believed. Tolkien was not creating legend based on Anglo-Saxon ideals or attempting to discover what their religion would have been, but, rather, create a mythology that would have been fitting for them--an incredibly difficult task given the lack of information we have about them, a situation that was even worse when Tolkien wrote his works. By analyzing these two axioms, it can be determined how successful Tolkien was.

2. Defining Myth And Classifying The Legendarium

David Harvey does a fantastic job drawing parallels between recurring elements in myths and their counterparts in *The Lord of the Rings*. To start, Harvey points out that almost all myths involve a complex creation story. In Egyptian myth, Atum rises from the waters of chaos to produce other gods. In Greek, Gaia emerges from a void also known as Chaos. In *The Silmarillion*, which contains much of the lore of Middle-earth, both of these influences are shown heavily. Eru, the Creator, exists in a void of Chaos and, like Atum, creates the Holy Ones¹⁵. Another interesting similarity is the physical level at which the Holy Ones exist. Throughout Greek myth, the gods intervene regularly, oftentimes in human or other physical forms. Harvey points this out, noting that, “everything is done at every level by living beings, the Valar...exist physically.”¹⁶

Even more akin, though, are the races that are formed and the associated history that occurs as a product of the creation. Greek myth details ages of gods and heroes, while Egyptian myth tells the reign of the sun god and the eventual separation of the gods from humanity in the *Myth of the Heavenly Cow*.¹⁷ Tolkien, in his history of Middle-earth, goes equally in-depth. He paints a history spanning from Ainulindalë, to the Spring of Arda, to the eventual Golden Age of Men. Most importantly, Tolkien creates a complex race system within Middle-earth, and each race has its origins in other myths. Harvey points out that “[d]ark and Light elves feature strongly in Scandinavian myth.”¹⁸ Dwarves, too, “appear in many European mythologies as craftsmen and underground delvers.”¹⁹ Even the Silmarils, Tolkien’s jewels, are inspired from the Sampo in the *Kalevala*.²⁰ The only true original creation of Tolkien’s world, then, are Hobbits (who serve a unique purpose as discussed later); all else derives directly from other myths. Tolkien’s creation, the history of his world, and the beings within his world are all in the same vein as other myths, strongly supporting his case for *The Lord of the Rings* as a mythology.

On a more symbolic level, Tolkien’s mythology features a moral battle prominent in other mythologies as well; the eternal conflict between good and evil. W.H. Auden realizes this, writing “Mr. Tolkien has succeeded more completely than any previous writer in...the conflict between Good and Evil.”²¹ The conflict between good and evil is highlighted throughout mythology. Kronos seeks to overthrow the Olympians, the Sirens devour those who come near them, and Polyphemus tries to eat Odysseus’s men. In *Beowulf*, Grendel is a “fiend out of hell,”²² who is “malignant by nature, he never showed remorse.”²³ In Middle-earth, Sauron threatens to destroy Hobbiton, and “Mordor draws all wicked things.”²⁴ Christopher Snyder insists that dragons in the Western tradition such as Smaug are always inherently evil. Good, evil, and the perpetual conflict between them are highlighted throughout Tolkien’s literature.

That being said, though, the line between good and evil is not always so clear, especially so in mythologies—something that Tolkien takes into account, and, thus, he does not rely on simplistic, mindless villains to represent evil; instead, Tolkien engages in ideas of morality and creates evil as a force that one chooses. Tolkien, in response to Auden’s review, writes that “if the conflict really is about things properly called *right and wrong*...the rightness or goodness of one side is not proved or established by the claims of either side.”²⁵ In other words, Tolkien admits that he does not deal with absolute evil—Sauron is the closest he ever comes. Mythologies, too, do not deal in complete evil; every decision has consequences, every villain has redeeming qualities, and every hero has flaws. Heracles chooses a glorious lifestyle and murders his family, the Olympians have several illegitimate offspring and are cruel to Titans, subjecting them to eternal torture. In *Beowulf*, Grendel’s mother is hunted down after exacting revenge for the murder of her son. All of these scenarios are murky when it comes to morality. The supposed “good” Olympians are cruel, and Grendel’s mother is killed for avenging her son. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien demonstrates the often-fuzzy line between good and evil, particularly with Gollum and orcs. Gollum is initially introduced as a “small slimy creature,”²⁶ and, more importantly, “miserable, alone, lost.”²⁷ Gollum is not, by definition, an evil creature. He is pitiful, corrupted by the Ring, and, later, mercy shown to him proves beneficial. Tolkien leaves it to the readers to decide Gollum’s nature; is he a villain or only a victim? Along with the Ring comes the ambiguous morals of the object. The exact nature of the Ring is still debated: is it inherently evil or just powerful? Does it by nature corrupt or is the corruption a byproduct? The orcs, as well, demonstrate this shifting morality. Orcs are not, contrary to appearance, only bloodthirsty slaughterers. In actuality, their souls have been twisted after historically refusing a call for help. Such uncertainty is also seen in myth from the Sirens to the Titans. Are these creatures, by definition, evil? Or do they corrupt, or become corrupted, through their sheer might? Just as in mythology, morality is rarely binary in *The Lord of the Rings* legendarium.

One major problem Tolkien faced in the creation of a mythology for a people several centuries past is that he had to make his myth relatable to people of the present while also staying in the tradition of the Anglo-Saxons. Myths typically originate *with* a people. Similar to the science-fiction megatext, the universe of a myth is already understood and can then be built upon. For example, in the Greek myth system, immediately known is the characteristics and

powers of the gods, thanks to years of learning, reading, and belief. With Anglo-Saxon myth, however, Tolkien knew that modern people must be eased into it in order to suspend our disbelief and value the laws of that universe. Tom Shippey writes about Tolkien's predicament, "the pressing problem for Tolkien was perhaps not to introduce the archaic world...as to give it intellectual coherence, to make the reader feel that it had a sort of existence outside the immediate narrative."²⁸ Shippey also proposes two solutions Tolkien utilizes in *The Hobbit* to introduce his world—a flexible narrator and a modern (at least, at the time) character in Bilbo.

Shippey describes *The Hobbit*'s narrator as "flexible and intrusive," and provides several examples of this.²⁹ For one, the narrator seems to recognize the reader's unfamiliarity with Middle-earth. Four paragraphs into the book, the narrator imagines a question, "what is a hobbit?" but, instead of a detailed answer describing a completely unknown entity, the narrator answers as a real figure who would live in Middle-earth "I suppose hobbits need *some* description *nowadays*."³⁰ Immediately, Middle-earth is created not as a stiff, fictional, detached world, but a living, breathing one with beliefs, history, and personality. Tolkien does this again when describing "'the famous Belladonna Took'" as if, according to Shippey, "the author is only selecting from a body of pre-existing information."³¹

Of course, Tolkien had to provide some explanation and relatability to his readers, which is seen with Bilbo. As a main protagonist and first introduced character, Tolkien recognized that Bilbo must be familiar—according to Shippey, "fairly easy to place both socially and chronologically."³² True enough, Bilbo smokes tobacco, is "'well-to-do', but not necessarily 'rich'" and values his meals and tea above almost anything else.³³ In short, he is a perfectly middle-class English man, not "unfamiliar at all to the English reader."³⁴

Naturally, then, there will be some conflict between the modern-man and archaic world that the rest of Middle-earth belongs to. But, as *The Hobbit* proceeds, the two worlds blend together to where, eventually, "one might conclude that they are not as far apart as they first seemed, and that Bilbo has just as much right to the archaic world and its treasures as Thorin or Bard."³⁵ This slow understanding of each other is shown several times. As a burglar commissioned by dwarves, Bilbo is forced to "conform to the expectations of the fairy-tale world" and "tries to pick the troll's pocket because 'somehow he could not go straight back to Thorin and company emptyhanded.'"³⁶ Later, in the riddle scene under the Misty Mountains, this is discretely shown again by Tolkien. Riddles are an essential part of surviving Anglo-Saxon literature, with several being found in the Exeter Book. Whereas Gollum's riddles are all ancient in origin, echoing Old Norse riddles found in *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, Bilbo's are rather modern, found in nursery rhymes that modern readers would be familiar with.³⁷ Nonetheless, Bilbo is able to go toe-to-toe with Gollum, showing that, according to Shippey, although he is a "middle-class English-man in the fairy-tale world, he has not quite lost his grip on old tradition."³⁸ Through this conflict, resolution, and eventual understanding, Tolkien makes Bilbo a tool, used to slowly lower readers into the universe of Middle-earth in a believable fashion.

Since Tolkien's works are written in the same style, feature the same stories, and incorporate many elements—both physical and moral—from other mythologies, it is logical that *The Lord of the Rings* legendarium can be classified as a mythology. But, what about *The Lord of the Rings* makes it specifically an *English* mythology? By digging into the lore of Middle-earth, several reasons can be found.

3. Acknowledgement Of Other Influences

Keep in mind, in Tolkien's time, very little was actually known about the Anglo-Saxons. Hence, one common argument against *The Lord of the Rings* is that it draws too heavily upon other cultures, such as the Norse and Germanic and translated texts like *Beowulf*. True, Tolkien did base some of his myth on Old Norse. Dimitra Fimi concedes that "[t]he influences of Old Norse texts on Tolkien's creative writing, in terms of motifs, characters, and storylines, are abundant."³⁹ However, she also claims that Tolkien was successful in his "search for the English identity in the Norse world."⁴⁰ To Tolkien, these Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Germanic myth were connected through England's history of invasions and cultural mixing. According to Fimi, Tolkien accurately "viewed England's Anglo-Saxon past as part of a wider whole, including Germany and Scandinavia."⁴¹ So, although Tolkien obviously had other influences, I argue that his primary one was specifically the Anglo-Saxons; however, just as the melting pot nature of England, *The Lord of the Rings* legendarium experiences similar inadvertent blending of cultures.

4. Heroes And Loyalty—Values Of The Anglo-Saxons

One of the more prominent Anglo-Saxon characteristics lies in Tolkien's protagonists. His characters are not simply inspired by or based upon Anglo-Saxon heroes; they *are* Anglo-Saxon heroes. This is shown throughout the series in

a number of different ways, one of the most prominent being the concept of oaths. John Holmes writes, “the earliest written record of Germanic culture, Tacitus’s *Germania*, suggests that the oath is *the* very foundation of Germanic society.”⁴² Holmes demonstrates this by referencing Wulfstan, a bishop of London around the early 11th century who provides many of the few Anglo-Saxon texts known today. In Wulfstan’s *giedd*, or sermon, appears a seemingly unique word: *āðbrice*, which derives from *āð*⁴³ and *brecan*⁴⁴, meaning “oath” and “break,” respectively. It makes sense, then, that oath-breaking to the Anglo-Saxons was a harsh offense, something Tolkien shows through many of his heroes. For example, at the Council of Elrond, Gandalf—a great wizard—apologizes to a lowly hobbit for breaking his promise of meeting Frodo in Bree, saying “such a thing has not happened before, that Gandalf broke tryst and did not come when he promised. An account to the Ring-bearer...was required, I think.”⁴⁵ Even after being imprisoned by magical, uncontrollable forces, Gandalf still feels his absence is not justified.

Surprisingly, Tolkien further demonstrates the power Anglo-Saxons put on oath through his antagonists as well. Gollum, a treacherous character who murdered his friend to obtain the Ring, still is bound by oath. Holmes points out that “once bound by the oath [to help Frodo], Gollum does not, in fact, strive to break it, but instead...find[s] a way to destroy Frodo and Sam without violating his oath.”⁴⁶ Though technically abiding by his oath, Gollum still feels a certain guilt upon his betrayal of Frodo and Sam, “[Gollum] touched Frodo’s knee—but almost the touch was a caress. For a fleeting moment...they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit...an old starved pitiable thing.”⁴⁷ Gollum, a seemingly immoral, conscienceless character, still is not free from the value that an Anglo-Saxon oath carries.

Hand in hand with oaths is loyalty, another concept that the Anglo-Saxons apparently valued heavily. Pritha Kundu recounts a 757 AD entry of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in which the rebellious Earl Cyneheard killed his king Cynewulf and captured many of the king’s loyal thanes. The next day, an army loyal to Cynewulf arrived, to which Cyneheard told them that several of their kinsmen were now loyal to him, when in actuality they were prisoners. In the end, in Kundu’s words, “Cynewulf’s thanes, those who...were under the enemy’s power, would not be spared by their own kinsmen who had come to take revenge, and they would rather prove their loyalty to their dead king...by getting killed now by their own kinsmen.”⁴⁸ A similar loyalty is also seen in *Beowulf*, particularly by Wiglaf who proudly proclaims “As God as my witness, / I would rather my body were robed in the same / burning blaze as [Beowulf’s] body / than go back home bearing arms.” This fierce loyalty is a prominent Anglo-Saxon ideal and is thus exemplified throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Pippin shows allegiance to Boromir, pledging his life to Gondor in his honor, though it is more political, reminiscent of later Middle-Age chivalric ideas, “But I honour his memory...my gratitude is none the less...Little service, no doubt, in a hobbit...yet such as it is, I will offer it.” Merry does something very similar, though more fitting for an Anglo-Saxon lord-thane relationship, asking Théoden as a friend to receive his service and becoming a Knight of the Mark. Perhaps most like this lord-thane dynamic, though, is Sam’s unwavering service to Frodo, accompanying him to Mordor and exclaiming “I can’t carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well.”⁵¹ These are just three examples out of many throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, however, they do show the importance Tolkien purposely placed on loyalty.

A protagonist is not limited only to their character—oftentimes they are defined more-so by their actions, especially to the Anglo-Saxons. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the entire purpose of the Green Knight was to “test [Gawain’s] knightly pride,” and eventually prove him “[a]s any man on earth, for true art thou.”⁵² Aragorn demonstrates this, becoming king based on his actions rather than his name (even electing to hide his identity). Based on this concept, David Harvey evaluates Tolkien’s character’s actions and compares them to Anglo-Saxon “Quest Heroes.”⁵³ Parallels can be seen throughout. One recurring theme is the voluntary adventure, rather than being thrust into one. Beowulf answers Hrothgar’s call for aid, Gawain asks Arthur’s permission to behead the Green Knight, and Aragorn initially approaches the Hobbits in the Prancing Pony. Also, there tends to be a sacrifice of some sort in which the hero must demonstrate his selflessness and character. For Beowulf, it is his glorious battle against the dragon that has been terrorizing his kingdom. Gawain refuses temptation from Lady Bertilak and courageously honors his duty to the Green Knight, even though it will most likely result in his death. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf’s bold stance of “[y]ou cannot pass!” serves as a typical Anglo-Saxon, selfless, glorious last stand.⁵⁴ Thanks to Gandalf’s fearless fight and morally good qualities, he is worthy of resurrection and becomes Gandalf the White. In Middle-earth and Anglo-Saxon culture, quests are what defines heroes. Since Tolkien’s protagonists are reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon heroes, they must show their character through their individual quests and storylines.

5. The Anglo-Saxon War Culture

In a broader sense, Middle-earth as a whole is very reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon England, especially so since they share the same war-culture. Pritha Kundu writes on this culture and “Tolkien’s own passionate and critical engagement with the war-literature of the Anglo-Saxons.”⁵⁵ This can be seen in many ways in Tolkien’s work.

On a governmental level, Middle-earth, with its small kingdoms, reflects this culture. Christopher Snyder points out that, around the 8th century, “England was divided into seven petty kingdoms known as the Heptarchy.”⁵⁶ A map of Middle-earth shows several kingdoms as well, including Rohan, Gondor, Mordor, and more. Snyder also points another similarity, writing “a *bretwalda*...sometimes ruled as an ‘overking,’ as the King of Gondor once did with the kingdoms of the West,” and provides Anglo-Saxon examples such as Rædwald. Furthermore, Snyder mentions Alfred the Great, a Wessex ruler who unified Anglo-Saxon England, masqueraded undercover, battled Viking invaders, and who “is perhaps one of the inspirations for Tolkien’s Strider / Aragorn.”⁵⁷ Several small kingdoms, along with an overking ruler, are all present in both Anglo-Saxon England and Middle-earth.

Also apparent in Middle-earth is the esteem that weapons and armor held. In *Beowulf*, the narrator speaks of a “sword in her armoury, an ancient heirloom / From the days of giants, an ideal weapon / One that any warrior would envy.”⁵⁸ Snyder also writes on Rædwald’s grave “in which excavators found remnants of a ship with arms and armor.”⁵⁹ In *The Lord of the Rings*, weapons receive similar respect. In *The Hobbit*, Elrond knows of “the Goblin-cleaver...a famous blade...Glamdring.”⁶⁰ In a more grave sense, upon Boromir’s death, Gimli, Aragorn, and Legolas set him in a ship with “such trophies of his last battle...His helm they set beside him, and across his lap they laid the cloven horn and the hilt and shards of his sword; beneath his feet they put the swords of his enemies.”⁶¹ Just as in Anglo-Saxon England, then, weapons and war command a certain respect in Middle-earth.

Another part of war-culture is the official relationship between kings and thanes. Pritha Kundu uses *The Battle of Maldon*, an Old-English poem, to demonstrate Anglo-Saxon thaneship. Kundu writes of “the poet [who] celebrates the action of the loyal thanes who die by Brythnoth’s side,” and claims “the poetic account...[illustrates] the Anglo-Saxon ideal of friendship between a lord and his thanes.”⁶² Important to this lord-thane relationship is the concept of friendship. By the time the Normans invaded, knighthood and political loyalties were more valuable than genuine devotion to a lord.⁶³ In *Beowulf*, actual devotion is shown, not loyalty for the purpose of political gain: “the noble son of Weohstan [Wiglaf] / saw the king in danger at his side / and displayed his inborn bravery and strength.”⁶⁴ In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Arthur and court rejoice Gawain’s return, “cheer[ing] the knight...laugh[ing] loudly at the tale,” and requiring each knight to wear a green badge “in honour of that Knight [Gawain].”⁶⁵

Already stated was Pippin and Merry’s devotion to a king. Not mentioned, however, were the integral aspects of friendship to this devotion. Théoden, Merry’s lord, speaks to him as a friend, saying “[y]ou shall not stand. You shall sit beside me...and lighten my heart with tales.”⁶⁶ Perhaps more prominent, though, is the relationship between Sam and Frodo that mirrors that of a lord and thane greatly. Kundu provides evidence, writing “just as Wiglaf comes to help an exhausted Beowulf, [Sam carries] Frodo up the hill when he is too fatigued to move....The very fact that Sam bears the great Ring without falling into any temptation or corruption, shows the great moral heroism he possesses.”⁶⁷ The lord-thane dynamic is shown in Middle-earth, but, also, so is the close personal relationship between the two, rather than a more politically-minded alliance as seen in chivalric bonds.

Not strictly Anglo-Saxon war-culture, but part of their culture in general, is the role of women. Anne Klinck writes “investigations of Anglo-Saxon social history have usually drawn the conclusion that women during that period enjoyed a favourable position in comparison with their successors.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, F.M. Stenton writes on Anglo-Saxon queens and argues that “[t]here is no doubt that Old English society allowed to women, not only private influence, but also the widest liberty of the intervention in public affairs.”⁶⁹ In the Domesday book, ~~even~~, women are present and listed as landholders.⁷⁰ All of this is very similar to Lady Galadriel and Éowyn. Galadriel, an Elvish noblewoman, is described as “wise and fearless and fair”⁷¹ and is defended by Aragorn when he says “[s]peak no evil of the Lady Galadriel....There is in her and in this land no evil.”⁷² Éowyn, too, is treated with comparable respect. She is entrusted to rule Rohan in Théoden’s absence, being given “the charge to govern the people.”⁷³ In Middle-earth, women are treated with respect and entitled to power nobility. Anglo-Saxon women did not experience full equality but did garner considerable respect compared to most other civilizations at the time.

6. The Art of Middle-earth

Artistically, even, Middle-earth is based upon Anglo-Saxon England. Snyder shows this by mentioning *The Ruin* and comparing it to “the Hobbits gazing at the fallen ancient Númenórean monuments,” along with Tolkien rewording lines from *The Ruin* for a quote for Legolas.⁷⁴ In addition, several poems and songs from Middle-earth share several of the same literary devices as Anglo-Saxon works, such as half-lines, alliteration, kennings, and litotes.⁷⁵ Also, the *Exeter Book*—a collection of Anglo-Saxon poetry—features ninety-six riddles. It can be seen, then, that the riddle scene from the *Hobbit* is a tribute to this cousin of Anglo-Saxon poetry.⁷⁶

On a similar note, music plays a large role in Middle-earth, as shown through the many traveling songs sung through the Hobbits’ journey. Once again, this was a tactical choice by Tolkien. In an article for the *Westminster Review*, William Henry Sheran writes, “[l]ove for music has always been a remarkable characteristic of Teutonic nations,” and that “when the Anglo-Saxons, a Teutonic tribe, migrated to England, they brought with them the passionate love of song.”⁷⁷ The exact origins of the Teutons is still up for debate today, however they were definitely a Germanic tribe and likely ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons, as Sheran claims. This argument, then, makes logical sense. Sheran also mentions how Anglo-Saxon music was “practised only in ear and memory, simply handed down the treasures of tradition.”⁷⁸ Even a small detail like this is shown in Tolkien’s works. Early in *The Fellowship*, a song is sung “made on the model of the dwarf-song that started Bilbo on his adventure long ago, and went to the same tune.”⁷⁹ It is implied, then, that, like Anglo-Saxon tunes, this particular song had also been passed down through generations. In *The Hobbit*, the dwarves sing a song reminiscent of their ancestors, “deep-throated singing of the dwarves in the deep places of their ancient homes.”⁸⁰ Tolkien left no stone unturned when creating his mythology for England, including the art of the Anglo-Saxons.

7. A Fine Philologist: Tolkien’s Love Of Language

No detail in Middle-earth, though, is more articulate than the care Tolkien exhibited when crafting the language of his world. It is only natural that Tolkien, a lifelong philologist, would carefully dress every name, word, and language in Anglo-Saxon fashion. Snyder mentions several, including Éomer translating to “excellent [with?] horse,” and Théoden meaning “lord of the people.”⁸¹ By investigating an Anglo-Saxon dictionary, even more examples can be found. For instance, Grima refers to Gandalf as “Láthspell,” which, in Old English, means a messenger of ill-news.⁸² There are countless examples of Anglo-Saxon names and words used in *The Lord of the Rings*, but Tolkien goes one step further and bases entire kingdoms on Anglo-Saxon word origins. Rohan is one prominent example. Horsa and Hengest were brothers who supposedly led the Angle, Saxon, and Jutish invasion of Britain. Hengest is mentioned in *Beowulf*, and, also, Hengest translates to “stallion” while Horsa becomes “horse.”⁸³ Michael D.C. Drout makes this intricate connection, writing Tolkien “linked Hengest both to *Beowulf* and to early English history...he decided to bring the ‘Horse Kings’ into his Middle-earth narrative.”⁸⁴

Even for things that played little to no narrative role, Tolkien was meticulous in preserving Old English nature. For example, Beorn, a character who plays a rather small role in *The Hobbit* and none at all in *The Lord of the Rings*, was created from Old English. Shippey makes this connection: “Beorn is the Old English ‘cognate’, or equivalent [of] Bjarni, and in Old English it means ‘man’: but it used to mean ‘bear.’”⁸⁵ Shippey makes another argument relating *Beowulf* and Beorn. *Beowulf* translates to ‘the wolf of the bees’ (or enemy of the bees, as a honey-stealing bear would be) and is very similar to both Beorn and bears in character, fighting bare-handed and being extremely strong.⁸⁶ Beorn’s Old English nature, then, envelops his character as well as his name. Shippey claims that Tolkien went beyond interesting verbal connections and created Beorn to be what a werebear would actually be like.⁸⁷

Important characters, too, often derive their personality from their Old English origins. Take Smaug, for example. The Old English phrase *smēahgan wyrme* roughly translates to “against the worm.” *Smēagan* is also a verb, translating to “to get into or penetrate” In Old Norse, the Old English *smēah* would likely combine with the Old Norse *ormr* (worm or dragon) to create *smaugr*: a dangerous worm or dragon. Thus, Smaug was created.⁸⁸

In settings as well, Tolkien made these connections. Stanzas from the *Elder Edda* mention a word *úrig* and *byrs* while describing a journey of the servant Skírnir who possesses a magic sword. An Old English compound word—*orc-byrs*—relates orcs and *byrs*. *Úrig* likely translates to ‘damp, shining with wet.’ Combine these two translations with the narrative of the story, and suddenly, Bilbo traveling over the Misty Mountains, wielding Sting, and navigating through orcs, while under the service of Thorin, makes perfect sense.⁸⁹

Language, then, was an incredibly strong influence on Tolkien, affecting everything from common names to the entire culture of kingdoms—not just as tricky word challenges, but as bits of history that Tolkien traced back, dissected, and expanded into myths.

8. Conclusion

So, did J.R.R. Tolkien fulfill his task? Did he successfully create the English version of the *Kalevala* that he so desired, and, in turn, give the Anglo-Saxons an identity and the modern English inspiration and pride in their ancestry? I would argue yes. Tolkien, with *The Lord of the Rings* legendarium, fully fulfills the two axioms that an Anglo-Saxon mythology must have: to genuinely be a mythology rather than simply fiction, and to reflect Anglo-Saxon culture. By definition, *The Lord of the Rings* is a mythology, shown by comparisons against accepted mythologies such as the Greek and the Egyptians. In the second, much trickier part, Tolkien succeeds as well. Tolkien, piecing together only bits and scraps of Anglo-Saxon history, managed to create an accurate Anglo-Saxon mythology, recreating all aspects of Anglo-Saxon culture from heroes, to war-culture, to gender roles, to art, to even language. Even with the discovery of Anglo-Saxon information since Tolkien's works were published, his portrayal of the Anglo-Saxons still stands strong. Based on all of this, Tolkien has earned his place among mythmakers and legends, and *The Lord of the Rings* legendarium stands as a both a mythology and a tribute to England.

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