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Abstract

Consideration of Aragorn's mythical role as rightful and sacrificial king in *The Lord of the Rings*. Using studies of the structure and function of kingship in folklore and mythology, presents instances of self-sacrifice in Aragorn's story to show how he exemplifies ancient patterns of regenerative sacrifice.

Additional Keywords

Kingship; Sacrifice; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Aragorn

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SACRAL KINGSHIP: ARAGORN AS THE RIGHTFUL AND SACRIFICIAL KING IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

KAREN SIMPSON NIKAKIS

IN DISCUSSING ARAGORN, Verlyn Flieger notes that:

The concept of the king as healer derives from the early Celtic principle of sacral kingship, whereby the health and fertility of the land are dependent on the coming of the rightful king. Where there is no king, or where the king is infirm, the land also will be barren. (50)

The fact that Aragorn is a healer, both of his people and of the land, is an important motif of *The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] and emerges gradually as the narrative progresses. Aragorn tends Frodo after the attack at Weathertop (LotR I:12 192-94), Sam and Frodo after their escape from the mines of Moria (II:6 326-27), Faramir, Eowyn, Merry and others injured in combat, after the battle of the Pelennor Fields (V:8 844-53), and Frodo and Sam after the fall of Sauron (VI:4 931). Similarly, his ascension marks the end of the lands' despoiling, his resolve that Minas Ithil be "utterly destroyed" in order for the cleansing process to begin (VI:5 948), and the imposition of order on his realm (VI:7 971), all symbolized by the blossoming of the White Tree in the Court of the Fountain (VI:5 951). The notion of healing here is broad, and reflects Strathern and Stewart's definition of healing (as opposed to curing), namely that which refers to "the whole person or the whole body seen as an integrated system with both physical and spiritual components" (7).

Historically the principle of 'sacral kingship' went beyond the literal and metaphorical healing of lands and people, linking back to ancient fertility rites. The wholeness and health of the realm and its citizens actually required more than just the presence of the 'rightful' king, it required sacrifice from him. This paper will explore the nature of the *sacrifice* that Aragorn makes, as heir and king, in order to heal the lands of Middle-earth and its people, and how this sacrifice helps him assert his legitimacy as the *rightful* (or sacral) king.

One of Aragorn's most powerful sacrificial acts is not included in the narrative, but is outlined in the Appendices of *The Return of the King*. It is in the manner and timing of his death. In his definitive work *The Golden Bough* (first published in 1922), Frazer explores the nature of this type of kingly sacrifice at length. Historically, a broad range of cultures considered it to be extremely

dangerous to allow a king to die of disease or old age. Simply put: “if the course of nature is dependent on the man-god’s life, what catastrophes may not be expected from the gradual enfeeblement of his powers and their final extinction in death?” (350) It was vital, then, that the king’s soul not be weakened by disease; or lost—snatched by sorcerers or demons, or by refusing to return to a dying body. Killing the king ensured that his soul could be caught and transferred to a “suitable successor,” before his “natural force was abated,” ensuring “the world should not fall into decay with the decay of the man-god” (Frazer 350).

In this context, the inter-relationship between the ruler and the continuing fruitfulness of the earth goes beyond the metaphorical; the sacrifice of the ruler or (later) surrogate, was in fact, literal. Mircea Eliade notes that:

A regeneration sacrifice is a ritual “repetition” of the Creation. The myth of creation includes the ritual (that is, violent) death of a primeval giant, from whose body the worlds were made, and plants grew. [...] The object in sacrificing a human victim for the regeneration of the force expressed in the harvest is to repeat the act of creation that first made grain to live. (346)

Thus the king’s death might be self-inflicted, accepted without resistance, or imposed. Frazer outlines an example of a self-inflicted death, the practice of replacing the king in the Indian province of Quilacare, every twelve years:

the king has a wooden scaffolding made, spread over with silken hangings: and on that day he goes to bathe at a tank with great ceremonies and sound of music, after that he comes to the idol and prays to it, and mounts on to the scaffolding, and there before all the people he takes some very sharp knives, and begins to cut off his nose, and then his ears, and his lips, and all his members, and as much flesh off himself as he can; and he throws it away very hurriedly until so much of his blood is spilled that he begins to faint, and then he cuts his throat himself. (Frazer 362)

In this rite, the king gives of himself *literally*, that is, his actual flesh and blood, to ensure the welfare of his people. This is both the ‘sacral king’ to which Flieger alludes, and the sacrificial king, and its roots are far older than the Celtic kings. They are hidden in the fertility rites such as those outlined by Eliade, whereby the substance of the living must be returned to its source to ensure the earth’s continuing vitality.

Like the sacral and sacrificing kings of old, Aragorn chooses his own time to die. When he felt “the approach of old age and knew that the span of his

life-days was drawing to an end” he “laid him down on the long bed that had been prepared for him. There he said farewell to Eldarion, and gave into his hands the winged crown of Gondor and the sceptre of Arnor” (*LotR* App. A:1037). The description of Aragorn’s death resonates strongly with notions of a return to the source and the replenishment of that which fructifies life. In telling Arwen of his decision he says: “Lo! we have *gathered*, and we have *spent*, and now the time of *payment* draws near” (my italics). Then as the grief-stricken Arwen pleads with him to delay his death he asks: “would [you] indeed have me wait until I *wither* and *fall* from my high seat *unmanned* and *witless*. Nay, lady, I am the last of the Númenoreans and the latest King of the Elder Days; and to me has been *given* not only a span thrice that of Men of Middle-earth, but also the grace to go at my will, and *give back the gift*” (my italics) (App. A:1037).

These aspects of Aragorn’s death mimic powerfully the sacrificial dimensions of the sacral kings described by Frazer and Eliade, but Aragorn’s choosing of the time and manner of his death are not the only aspects that do so. While Aragorn’s healing of Frodo on Weathertop, and Frodo and Sam after their escape from the Mines of Moria, require him to *give* his healing skills, it is his healing of Faramir, Éowyn and Merry after the battle of the Pelennor Fields (*LotR* V:8 846), which illustrate the most potent sacrificial elements of the sacral King.

Firstly, Aragorn touches Faramir by taking Faramir’s hand and by laying his own hand upon Faramir’s brow (*LotR* V:8 846). Secondly he does something characteristic of a shamanic spirit journey. To the watchers it was as if he “walked afar in some dark vale, calling for one that was lost” and engaged in a “great struggle” (847). In a shamanic spirit journey, the shaman’s spirit leaves the shaman’s body to engage in a perilous battle with demonic forces. It is a battle not without danger, the shaman risking the loss of his own soul and open to defeat by the demons or other underworld forces (Campbell 100). Aragorn *gives* his strength in this struggle, an ordeal that leaves him “grey with weariness” (*LotR* V:8 847). Thirdly, and more tellingly, is what Aragorn does with the *athelas* leaves: “he laid them on his hands and *breathed on them*” (my italics) (847).

Aragorn gives his own essence (his breath) only to Faramir, perhaps because out of the three injured, he is closest to death; the positive potency of Aragorn’s breath being in direct contrast with the debilitating effects of the “Black Breath” of Sauron’s agents (I:10 170). In healing Éowyn, he kisses her brow (not her mouth—which might be interpreted as either a gift of breath, or even spittle [and given what’s gone before, viewed as having a sexual aspect]), calls her back, and uses *athelas* leaves steeped in water. In healing Merry, he strokes his hair and touches his eyelids, calls him back, and uses *athelas* leaves once more.

The giving of the healer's vital essences—as Aragorn does to Faramir—is not new. Jung notes that “To breathe or spit upon something conveys a ‘magical’ effect, as, for instance, when Christ used spittle to cure the blind, or where a son inhales his dying father’s last breath in order to take over the father’s soul” (70).

Interestingly, while Peter Jackson’s film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring* largely ignores Aragorn’s healing aspect (or partly transfers it to Arwen), it does show him treating Frodo’s injury after Weathertop, by *chewing* athelas (thus mixing it with his spittle) before applying it to the wound (scene 21).

Breath, spittle and blood are all vital and important substances that a sacral and sacrificing king might give from his own body, a theme echoing the creation myths described by Eliade, and found in the Indigenous cultures of North America. For instance, in making the Navajo people, the Navajo Changing Woman used “a mixture of cornmeal and shreds of her own epidermis” and the Hopi were created by the Hard Beings Woman using a “piece of cuticle from her finger” (Suzuki & Knudtson 3, 31).

In healing Faramir, Éowyn, and Merry, Aragorn also touches each in a way that serves no overt healing function, being unrelated to cleaning or stitching a wound, or re-aligning broken bones. This ‘laying on of hands’ is reminiscent of Christ’s healing, which in turn gave rise to the association of healing with royalty in England and Europe. Thus “English kings were thought to heal scrofula by touch” with Charles the Second touching “nearly one hundred thousand sufferers from scrofula during his reign” (Noel 75). The fact that Aragorn touches in this way as part of his healing also strengthens his claim to the kingship (the sacral ‘rightful king’)—a point I will return to.

As well as being a healer, Aragorn is a warrior, a consummate killer, sweeping to Gondor’s aid from the Harlond River “with the Flame of the West, Anduril like a new fire kindled, Narsil reforged as deadly as of old” (*LotR* V:6 830). To be a king, or kingly, a man must literally fight, as Théoden does to reclaim his dignity, as the King of the Dead does to gain peace and “depart for ever” (V:2 772)—a right denied him and his host by their earlier refusal to fight—and as Éomer does “the lust of battle [...] on him; [...] still unscathed [...] young, and [...] king” (V:6 829).

This is the world “of contrasts and opposites” described by Jasper in his discussion of fantasy, where he notes that fantasy “may embrace extreme violence and intense beauty, represent starkly the experience of benevolence and malignity, the deeply physical and the mystical and spiritual” (ix). So it is that Aragorn’s hand that wields a sword also brings healing, both literally and metaphorically.

There are other less obvious—but in their own ways—no less powerful instances of self-sacrifice which mark Aragorn’s journey to his ascension. His

long years in solitary travel in the wilderness have left him weather-ravaged, and his guarding of settlements such as Bree, unacknowledged and unthanked. He himself is viewed with suspicion. It is Sam who, in advising Frodo not to accept Aragorn's help at Bree, echoes this lack of trust. "He comes out of the Wild, and I never heard no good of such folk" (*LotR* I:10 162), a jibe Aragorn endures silently. It is only when Aragorn later says: "A hunted man sometimes wearies of distrust and longs for friendship" (167), that the sacrifice of his very human needs—to be trusted, to be part of community—are made plain.

A short time after this Aragorn pledges Frodo and his companions his protection. "I am Aragorn son of Arathorn; and if by life or death I can save you, I will" (168). In making this pledge, Aragorn is exhibiting another form of sacrifice. He cannot wed the (elf) woman (Arwen) he loves unless he firstly ascends the throne, a condition laid upon him by Arwen's father Elrond (*App.A* 1036), so his life's greatest wishes are bound up with the destruction of the Ring. His sacrifice, in pledging Frodo protection, is not a relinquishment of his own need to have the Ring destroyed—a prerequisite of his marriage to Arwen—but a giving up of *how he might act* were he an *independent* warrior. In binding himself to Frodo's protection, he puts Frodo's welfare before his own, an act which might cost him his life, even if in the end, the Ring is destroyed.

The breadth of this sacrifice is illustrated in a number of ways. When the time comes for the breaking of the fellowship, Aragorn does not pursue his right, as the expedition's leader, or as the king-in-waiting, to impose his wishes (to accompany Boromir to Gondor [*II:7* 359]) on his companions. He doesn't direct. "Shall we turn west with Boromir and go to the wars of Gondor; or turn east to the Fear and Shadow; or shall we break our fellowship and go this way and that as each may choose?" (*II:9* 387).

He has a second chance to go to Gondor after the death of Boromir and the abduction of Merry and Pippin by orcs, a chance he also relinquishes for Merry and Pippin's sakes. "'I will follow the Orcs,' he said at last. 'I would have guided Frodo to Mordor and gone with him to the end; but if I seek him in the wilderness, I must abandon the captives to torment and death'" (*III:1* 409).

Finally, he leads his forces into battle before the Black Gate of Mordor to divert Sauron's attention from Frodo and Sam. As Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth remarks: "this is the greatest jest in all the history of Gondor: that we should ride with seven thousands, scarce as many as the vanguard of its army in the days of its power to assail the mountains and the impenetrable gate of the Black Land." Aragorn responds: "If this be jest, then it is too bitter for laughter" (*V:9* 864). Even the journey to Mordor is so terrible that "some of the host were unmanned, and they could neither walk nor ride further north" (*V:10* 868). Yet Aragorn goes forth, in full agreement with Gandalf, that they "must walk open-eyed into that trap, with courage, but small hope for ourselves" (*V:9* 862).

Aragorn's labors contain aspects of sacrifice even before the narrative begins, when he works with Gandalf against the gathering darkness of Sauron (App. A:1035). The re-emergence of the Ring heralds the beginning of the last phase of Aragorn's struggles, and his demeanor in the time before he leaves Rivendell with the fellowship reflects his knowledge that the course he has *chosen* to embark upon could cost him everything. "Aragorn sat with his head bowed to his knees; only Elrond knew fully what this hour meant to him" (II:3 273).

The association of healing with kingship is ancient, and Aragorn's healing skills later serve to substantiate his right to the kingship. For his own protection, Aragon has been raised in secrecy (App. A:1032), his identity and very existence known only to the elves and the learned such as Gandalf. Certainly no common folk, including the hobbits, view him as other than a weather-worn stranger. Butterbur, the inn-keeper at Bree, despite having seen him many times, has no idea (or seeming interest) in his real name, saying only that he's "one of the wandering folk—Rangers we call them" and that "he's known round here as Strider" (I:9 153). Even Boromir, heir to the stewardship of Gondor, and a person one would expect to know his own histories, doubts openly. Firstly when Aragorn asks him directly: "Do you wish for the House of Elendil to return to the Land of Gondor?" (II:2 241), Boromir ignores what is essentially the offer of the return of the king. Instead he focuses on Gondor's need of fighting men: "the sword of Elendil would be a help beyond our hope—if such a thing could indeed return out of the shadows of the past" (241), and later he says: "Mayhap the Sword-that-was-Broken may still stem the tide—if the hand that wields it has inherited not an heirloom only, but the sinews of the Kings of Men" (261). Even Sam, after journeying with him through the snows of Caradhras and the darkness of Moria, says at the very end after the fall of Sauron: "What king, and who is he?" (VI:4 931).

Aragorn's growth to manhood in hiding, and his years of labor in various disguises (App. A:1035) means his identity as Isildur's heir remains unknown and so *unacknowledged* by those he seeks to one day rule. Aragorn recognizes the potential difficulties posed by this state of affairs by choosing to make no claim on the kingship of Gondor until the ultimate outcome of the war is decided. After the battle of the Pelennor Fields, he makes camp outside the city's walls, and when Éomer remonstrates that he has already displayed the tokens of kingship, Aragorn replies: "I deem the time unripe; and I have no mind for strife except with our Enemy and his servants" (V:8 843).

However, Aragorn's healing aspect forces him to reveal himself more fully when Ioreth, an 'old wife' serving in the Houses of Healing, remembers that "*The hands of the king are the hands of a healer*. And so the rightful king could ever be known" (V:8 842). Aragorn must use his skills to heal Faramir, Éowyn, Merry

and others hurt in the battle, his deeds winning him recognition and the name foretold for him (853), the latter further cementing his acceptance.

The coming of the 'rightful king' (in the sacral sense [Flieger 50]) is mirrored powerfully in the literal and metaphorical flowering of the landscape. The link between the re-emergence of the White Tree, "Telperion [...] Eldest of Trees" (*LotR* V:5 950) and Aragorn, is made explicit by Gandalf on discovery of the sapling: "Here it has lain hidden on the mountain, even as the race of Elendil lay hidden in the wastes of the North" (950). Once transplanted in the Citadel "swiftly and gladly it began to grow; and when the month of June entered in it was laden with blossom" (951).

As well as symbolizing the return of the 'rightful' or sacral king, the blossoming tree is the sign Aragorn has been waiting for, to initiate a train of events that will ensure the city of Minas Tirith truly lives again. As he says to Gandalf earlier: "when those who are now in the wombs of women are born and have grown old, I too shall grow old. And who then shall govern Gondor and those who look to this City as to their queen" (950).

Aragorn and Arwen wed on Midsummer's Day—the summer solstice—the day of longest sunlight and shortest darkness. It is a time of year considered extremely potent in many cultures and one associated with regenerative love, vegetative replenishment and renewal (Frazer 202). Their marriage, and the heir and other children it produces, is the penultimate act of the sacral king. Aragorn's final act—as sacral and sacrificial king—of choosing to die before his rule and the land are enfeebled, has already been discussed, but is now returned to briefly.

Aragorn's choice of death-day is the same date as his birthday (March first), lending his life and reign a sense of wholeness and completion. This sense is deepened by the description of Aragorn in death: "Then a great beauty was revealed in him, so that all who after came there, looked on him in wonder; for they saw that the grace of his youth, and the valour of his manhood, and the wisdom and majesty of his age were blended together" (*LotR* App. A:1038). So it is, that even in death, Aragorn's qualities continue to mark him as the sacral king.

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