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Colleen Donnelly

University of Colorado at Denver

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Abstract

Examines Tolkien's themes of service and stewardship, finding a model for the social order of Middle-earth in medieval feudalism and fealty.

Additional Keywords

Fealty in *The Lord of the Rings*; Feudalism; Stewardship; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Medieval period

FEUDAL VALUES, VASSALAGE, AND FEALTY IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

COLLEEN DONNELLY

THE social structure of Middle-earth, in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, is clearly based on medieval historical models. The style of governance and the societal landscape of Rohan and Minas Tirith are modeled on the individual, divided kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England that were united in the later Middle Ages under one king. According to Marc Bloch's socially based definition of feudalism in *Feudal Society*, the king ruled over all the people of his kingdom, including the various levels of aristocrats. The highest ranked dukes and earls in turn governed fiefs or land holdings and the vassals that dwelt there, including lower ranked aristocrats, barons and knights, as well as the commoners—serfs and peasants. The higher ranked lords conferred smaller fiefs to the barons and knights beneath them who dwelt within their borders. The lords at each level were responsible for distributing the land and its revenues and protecting their people in exchange for their service and loyalty. In reciprocity, the lower level aristocrats, serfs, and peasants pledged their fealty and service—military, domestic, or field/manual labor—depending on rank and ability, to the lords at ranks higher than their own.

Tolkien has carefully explicated the role of lord and leader in this society, positively through Théoden and negatively through his foil Denethor, and culminating in the ascension of Aragorn to the throne, thereby reenacting the medieval unification of smaller realms ruled by lords under one absolute sovereign. Interestingly, Tolkien chooses to portray the change of guard from elves to men not as to a more modernized society with a parliamentary governing structure as found in Victorian England or later but to a tiered society united under one king as existed in the High Middle Ages. In fact, Saruman, with his wicked machines and newly bred orcs, actually represents a warning against the potential danger and destruction that come with the dawn of the Industrial Age and which are realized in the war and ruin of the twentieth century. The reclusive Hobbits, who must join the other races of the world, are much like the reclusive Victorians who could afford such insularism due to the political and economic stability at home during the nineteenth century, only decades before England would have to join with its allies to fight in both World Wars. While history tends to concentrate on the rulers and leaders who rose and fell as society

evolved, Tolkien's imaginative vision highlights the importance of the role of the vassal, the loyal follower, the everyman of medieval society, who defines himself in relation to his fellows and to his lord.

By embracing the societal structure of England in the High Middle Ages, Tolkien definitively chooses to portray a pre-Descartian society, where the needs of the "common good" of the whole society and one's contribution to it far exceed the significance of an individual's needs and accomplishments. The members of the Fellowship, which represent the free peoples of Middle-earth (even if they seem to be insignificant and small like Merry and Pippin, as Gandalf reminds us) have a part to play. The success of the mission, and Middle-earth's future, depends not only upon Frodo but upon each character playing his part and fulfilling his fate. Without Merry's and Pippin's escape into Fangorn Forest the Ents would not have been aroused to rise up against Saruman, and without Merry's insistence on following Théoden, the Lord of the Ringwraiths would not have been slain by Éowyn with Merry's aid. The fracturing of the Fellowship and dispersion of the company is not only about deferring Frodo's story for suspense (and so that we can experience Aragorn's growth and preparation for assuming his position as sovereign), it is also about drawing our attention to the part that each individual must play in the salvation of Middle-earth. It is also about the need for all peoples (even some who would prefer to mind their own business like Hobbits, Ents and wild men) to actively perform their assigned duties and willingly embrace the roles they must play, if society and their world are to survive.

In this light, what is particularly interesting is the role that those who are not fated or chosen to be leaders play in such a society. The role of the man who willingly chooses to accept his place below his lord or leader, and who embraces and executes that duty to the best of his ability, is a defining character in Tolkien's world. Such are the characters of Sam, Faramir, Beregon, Merry and Pippin, Gimli and Legolas—true stewards and seconds—and it is on the backs of these characters that the true stability of society rests. There are a number of these characters in *The Lord of the Rings*: they multiply as the book progresses; their fealty is the mainstay of Middle-earth and what guarantees that all of its people will survive. Moreover, particularly through the characters of Denethor, Saruman, and Boromir, Tolkien demonstrates the destructive potential of those who cannot embrace the role of steward or vassal and who strive for a power that is above and beyond that assigned them. In the case of Denethor, we have a steward who cannot accept another as king because that would diminish his own power; his inability to accept his proper place in Tolkien's world leads not only to his madness, but necessitates he be excised from that society where he would be destined to become a festering malignant force working to destroy it.

While Sam is not presented as vassal to an overlord, his relationship to Frodo is of the same quality, and Sam epitomizes the virtues of fealty that are found in the loyal servant who embraces his position. Sam is described by Mark Hooker as being drawn from Tolkien's own World War I experience of batman and officer, and while that helps to define one tradition from which Sam's characterization springs, it does not totally explain his role (126-136). Sam certainly grows beyond this role in taking on the task of becoming a Ring-bearer himself. When he believes Frodo is dead, he takes on the task of completing the quest; however, upon discovering that Frodo is still alive, he does not continue the quest alone but returns to rescue him. Sam is presented as the dependable servant who embraces his position in the larger social hierarchy. For a time, Sam takes up the Ring, believing it is his duty, due to the fealty he owes to his dead master Frodo who can no longer complete the task and as Frodo's second and squire, and secondarily because the future of Middle-earth depends on the destruction of the Ring. Sam, says Charles Nelson, is "the loyal servant who follows his master into battle" ("Courteous, Humble and Helpful" 53) whose "apprenticeship comes to an end" at Mount Doom when he picks up and carries his master (61). More accurately, Sam does not replace his master or assume his role, but continues as his faithful servant, and the destruction of the Ring can only be accomplished by the two of them together, fulfilling their assigned roles. Tolkien reminds us in his letters that Sam "did not think of himself as heroic or even brave, or in any way admirable—except in his service and loyalty to his master" (*Letters* 329). What is interesting about this particular moment is not only the fortitude that he displays in taking up the task (arguably more than what would be expected of a batman since he cannot perform an officer's duties), but how Sam acts as a second, like those found in medieval literature such as Ivain who goes to battles in Gawain's place in Chretien's *The Knight and the Lion*, or Bors who takes up Guenevere's case when Lancelot cannot be found in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, or other seconds in history, who were called upon when a champion fell or failed to appear at the appointed time.¹ Sam takes the task upon himself—putting the Ring around his neck he "is bowed to the ground with the weight" (*LotR* 716)—but, at this time, the Ring does not speak in order to tempt him. Fearing discovery by the oncoming orcs, he places the Ring upon his finger, and while he feels the "world change," his senses sharpen, and "uniquely visible [to] an Eye searching for him" (*LotR* 717), notably absent is any temptation by the Ring itself. To this point in the text, the only person who has ever put the Ring on and not been tempted by its power, giving it up "of his free will" (Bradley 121), is Tom Bombadil. Tom represents an older power, a disinterested being, to whom the Ring can offer nothing of value. This is also true of Sam; the Ring cannot

¹ For historical examples, see Baldwin, White.

tempt Sam because it cannot offer him anything he values. Accidentally and ironically, because of the invisibility afforded him by the Ring, Sam overhears the orcs and rediscovers that which really matters to him: Frodo is still alive. Immediately, Sam proclaims “my place is by Mr. Frodo. [...] I can’t be their Ring-bearer. Not without Mr. Frodo” (*LotR* 718). Sam’s position, his role as companion, servant, and second to Frodo defines him; he believes it takes precedence over the destruction of the Ring. By the successful destruction of the Ring made possible through both Sam’s and Frodo’s efforts, Tolkien affirms that Sam has made the correct choice; his first duty *is* to Frodo and not to the quest, and the quest will be successfully completed by the very fact of Sam’s staunch fealty and service to Frodo. As Frodo weakens, the distance between the two closes in “heroic friendship” (Bradley 121). Indeed, there is a growing interdependency: Frodo needs Sam’s physical prowess and optimism, and Sam needs Frodo as master for his own growth and so that he can fulfill his role. Even in returning the Ring to Frodo, Sam’s concern is for “burden[ing] his master with it again” (*LotR* 890). Sam relishes the very role he has been assigned in life.

Before the gate of Cirith Ungol and before rescuing Frodo, Sam finally feels, for a moment, the temptation of the Ring; he has had it on for quite some time, the first time, while the orcs carried Frodo off and until the gates slammed shut, without being tempted by it. This time, as it hangs from his neck and he comes into sight of Mount Doom, he is “aware of a change in his burden. [...] untamable save by some mighty will” (*LotR* 880). He feels the Ring tempt him to “claim it and challenge the Power”:

In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm; but also deep down in him lived still unconquered his plain hobbit sense: he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such a burden [...]. The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not hands of others to command.

“And anyway all these notions are only a trick,” he said to himself. (*LotR* 881)

Sam’s passing moment of temptation is distinctively different than those of Boromir—who would give in to the temptation of fame and power that the Ring would bring—and Galadriel—who overcomes the temptation to become more powerful, since it would mean that she would inevitably turn to dark ways as that power corrupted her. Sam, plainly and simply, is not tempted by power, because he accepts his position as the sower of seeds and servant to Frodo. Sam knows his place in the world and he is happy there. His willingness to fulfill his role affords him the simple common sense that allows him to see that the Ring deceives. Unlike the powerful or potentially powerful who must fight the Ring’s

temptation to multiply their strength and influence, Sam's humility is his protection from the Ring; power cannot tempt the simple plowman or fieldhand of the Middle Ages or the gardener of Middle-earth who finds contentment in fulfilling the role assigned him.

In a radio interview with Denys Gueroult of the BBC, Tolkien commented, "I'm rather wedded to those kind of loyalties, because I think (contrary to most people) that touching your cap to the squire may be bad for the squire but damn good for you."² It may be bad for the "squire" in terms of reminding him of his high position and power (and their possible abuse), but it is good for the common man to acknowledge the fealty that the squire's position demands. It is important for Tolkien, who recognizes the necessity of vassalage and fealty in maintaining a feudal society, that he show a number of characters who willingly accept their roles. There will always be a greater need for loyal, dependable followers than for leaders.

One of the other significant characters chosen to demonstrate the importance of accepting and embracing the role of vassal is Faramir. Faramir is a foil to his brother Boromir, as well as to his father Denethor. (Théoden also acts as a foil to Denethor, representing the good leader who successfully escapes the malign influence and despair of the Dark Lord.) Even before Sam, Faramir—whom Frodo and Sam first meet in a Robin Hoodesque episode while Faramir and his band are attacking the fringes of Sauron's armies—rejects what the Ring has to offer because he is willing to accept whatever role is assigned him. Faramir says, "*Not if I found it on the highway would I take it* I said. Even if I were such a man as to desire this thing" (*LotR* 665-6), indicating that he, like Sam, is immune to what the Ring has to offer. As Charles Nelson notes, "of all who are tested by the Ring [Faramir] has perhaps the best opportunity of seizing the treasure." However, "he is aware of his own weaknesses and inclinations as well as being too conscious of the allure of the Ring" ("From Gollum to Gandalf" 55). Tolkien goes one step further to make us see that Sam and Faramir are of the same ilk when Faramir says, "Your land must be a realm of peace and content, and there must gardeners be in high honour" (*LotR* 666). Faramir indeed recognizes the role of those whose duty it is to serve rather than to lead, and like Sam he will serve as required.

Through Merry's service to Théoden, Pippin's to Denethor, and Legolas's and Gimli's to Aragorn, Tolkien enhances the theme of fealty through the sheer number of characters who are defined by their loyal service. Even Gandalf, who has the strength to rule, chooses rather to shepherd in the age of Aragorn, serving the future realm of men and willingly accepting that the age of elves and wizards is at an end. Jane Chance argues that Gandalf is a leader, one

² Private transcript cited by Marjorie Burns (147).

who rejects the tools and insignia of leader (87), but for the most part Gandalf chooses not to lead but rather to guide, or as Charles Nelson aptly puts it “all the guide figures” serve “a higher order, a greater plan” (“Gollum” 56). Moreover, both Pippin and Beregond are further tested in having to choose to whom their alliance lies when Denethor takes Faramir into the crypt. Disloyalty to a single lord is acceptable, even commendable, when the greater good of society is not being served, for then the lord is not worthy of service. Pippin sees himself as acting in Denethor’s best interest by seeking out Gandalf. At issue in this contest between the steward and the would-be servant is the concept of service and obedience. Pippin’s disobedience actually saves a nation; he is obedient “to the higher goal, of ‘fealty and service to Gondor,’ not just to the ‘Lord and Steward of the realm’” (Chance 87).

“Tolkien plays out the removal of the overly ambitious and of those who misuse power or authority” (Burns 149). Beregond is put in the position of having to choose to be treasonous; his act is reminiscent of Bilbo’s treason against Thorin in taking the Arkenstone and giving it to Bard in hope of ending the conflict between the dwarves and men. Through Beregond, Tolkien demonstrates that a vassal must recognize whether a lord possesses the qualities that should allow him to command obedience and loyalty. This is further demonstrated by the Grey Company’s allegiance to Aragorn, as well as the Wild Men to the Riders of Rohan, both of which stand in contrast to the orcs and men who serve Saruman and Sauron, blinded by false promises or so broken by their own enslavement that they dare not challenge these lords. The kind of loyalty that Saruman has commanded by creating slaves in Orthanc will, in an act of poetic justice, bring about his death: an evil lord who abuses those in his service must beware their treason. Wormtongue justly repays tyranny with treachery, slitting Saruman’s throat; the unjust leader is deservedly destroyed by the disloyal, untrustworthy servant of his own making. Denethor, having gone mad with despair and the corruption worked upon him by Sauron through the *palantír*, no longer deserves men’s fealty. Beregond is forced to choose between Denethor and Faramir; by dismissing the charge of treason against him and by placing Beregond in Faramir’s service, Aragorn symbolically rewards Beregond for wisely choosing to whom he owes fealty.

Contrasting these exemplars of good service is Denethor. Tolkien underscores the issue of his insurrection by calling him steward—which identifies him as the one who is supposed to keep all secure in the king’s absence until his return. But Denethor is unwilling to hand over the kingdom to Aragorn; he desires the realm for himself and has totally rejected his role as steward. A hunger for power and the duty of stewardship will inevitably be at odds, and Denethor, who has only ruled, cannot accept subjugation and being governed by another. More than the *palantír*, it is Denethor’s own pride that is his downfall;

due to hubris, Denethor sends Boromir to obtain the Ring, which the steward believes will cement his hold on the seat of power. Moreover, he foolishly believes that he can use the *palantír* to plan his strategy while not succumbing to the Dark Lord. Denethor cannot. Only Aragorn has the power to gaze into the *palantír* without being overcome by Sauron. Denethor's disdain for Faramir is in part a response to his seeing that Faramir is willing to be a true steward and vassal; Denethor wants a son whose only loyalty is to his father and to his father's vision of himself and his heirs as rulers rather than to a vision of what is best for the society. Denethor cannot fathom himself in any role other than leader; to step down and accept Aragorn as his lord would break him, just as the thought of giving up his position drives him mad. Since there is no place for him in the new feudal order that Aragorn will bring to Middle-earth, Denethor must die. But for his refusal to accept his place and because of his pride, he is not afforded the marvelous sendoff of a Théoden, who accepts his time is about to pass and who chooses to rally his men with a rousing speech much like Henry V's St. Crispin's Day speech. Théoden epitomizes the leader who dies honorably on the battlefield to be long celebrated by his people. Instead Denethor, in the clutches of hubris, selfishly attempts to take another's life along with his own as well as rob the people of Minas Tirith of a future good steward, and he is symbolically reduced to the defiled image of withered hands grasping an orb, greedily holding on to land and power that are not rightfully his.

The most complex case of fealty is illustrated by the painfully isolated Gollum, who finds a part of himself long forgotten, that part which wishes for companionship and to be of service and which compels him to become Frodo's guide and servant. Gollum has been a Ring-bearer, but in his dungeon beneath the mountains, he was no leader and had no followers and his "humanity" was simply eaten away by the Ring. The Ring sought a way out through Bilbo, in part because the Ring could not be an instrument of power in Gollum's hands. Gollum occupies an interesting space in Tolkien's work; he is mastered and dehumanized not by any being, but by an inanimate object, the Ring, through his own covetousness. Though over a much greater period of time, like Denethor, his humanity has been leached from him; his isolation and thus his inability to realize his purpose or place within society dehumanizes him even more. Frodo, who does indeed become his master, offers Gollum a chance at salvation through proper service: Gollum must guide Frodo and keep his promise to Frodo. Frodo hopes that this will help Gollum rediscover his humanity. Beyond his piteousness, readers are pleased to find something redeeming and salvageable in Gollum through the satisfaction he finds in serving Frodo (and Sam, although he'd prefer not to), as he becomes a member of a small community, first of two with Frodo, and then of three with both Frodo and Sam. This is by no means a friendship or a relationship of equal footing, but a relationship filled with

suspicion on both sides and defined by the service Frodo commands by being the Ring-bearer and demands by extracting a promise from Gollum: “a change, which lasted for some time, came over him. [...] he spoke to his companions direct, not to his precious self” and he was “pitifully anxious to please” (*LotR* 604). Charles Nelson calls attention to Gollum as an evil guide whose “apparent interest in their well-being, however, is simply another dimension of this dual personality [...]. [He] pretends to be looking out for them [when] he is in reality planning to lead them into danger” (“Gollum” 51). Nelson fails to recognize that what Gollum gains in being with Frodo and Sam is in conflict with his desire to lead them to their destruction; he actually acts in their best interests, perhaps despite himself, as he “leads them over paths they never would have been able to follow on their own” (“Gollum” 59). Gollum’s jealousy and the spasm of pain he experiences as Frodo lays sleeping with his head upon Sam’s lap, reminds us of Satan struck dumb as he looks upon the beauty and unity of Adam and Eve in Milton’s Eden (*Paradise Lost*, 4.356-7, 846) and connotes how an inability to find one’s place in the social order destroys one’s sense of self in Tolkien’s world. In fact, Gollum addresses the Ring and later “his” self as other, in an effort to create some sense of a warped community to provide himself with the companionship that all beings must have. Tolkien defines his characters and all of humanity as communal creatures whose need for interdependence far exceeds their need to be recognized for their individual accomplishments.

Through Gollum and Frodo, Tolkien also explores the duties and demands placed on master or lord by his servant or vassal. When Gollum faces death at the hands of Faramir’s archers, Frodo saves Gollum, who, up to this time, has performed his role as guide meritoriously—held by his oath which has some power to fend off the insistent pull of the Ring. Here, acting in the role of master, Frodo pays back the servant for his loyal service by saving his life, just as Aragorn will later reward his vassals for their service in battle. Frodo faces a dilemma, having to lead Gollum into a trap to save him; yet Frodo keeps his promise that he will allow nothing to happen to Gollum. Frodo is true to his word, and although Gollum resents being help captive and does not fully understand that Frodo has acted solely in his best interest, Frodo exemplifies the good lord who deserves fealty and who recognizes that “the servant has a claim on the master for service” (*LotR* 672). Despite Gollum’s twisted morality, he has shown that he does possess a limited capacity for serving loyally and that he can literally keep his word as sworn upon the Ring, and for that, at this particular point in the text, he is rewarded by being allowed to live. Unfortunately, before they enter Cirith Ungol, Frodo releases him from his bond since he has performed all he promised (*LotR* 700); Gollum again succumbs to covetousness since his oath to serve Frodo no longer checks his desire. Gollum breaches no vow by setting Frodo up to be slain in Shelob’s lair. Since he is no longer held by

promise or bond, he is once again a free agent who owes alliance to no one and who perceives his only alliance as being to an object, the Ring. Tolkien highlights Gollum's complete self-degradation by having him pledge lifelong fealty not to a person but to a thing. Gollum's situation is much like the heathen who worships the graven image—an object without sentience or spirit (and also reminds us of Eve worshipping the tree in *Paradise Lost*, 9.679-81). Gollum's unquenchable drive to regain the Ring will be his demise; ironically, his demise will save all Middle-earth at the very moment when Frodo himself succumbs to the Ring as it attempts to save itself from the fire. Gollum is allowed to serve a greater good by inadvertently sacrificing himself; like Boromir, who also succumbed to the Ring for a moment, he is partially redeemed by an act that has profound consequences for all of Middle-earth. However, Boromir willingly and bravely chooses to die protecting Pippin and Merry; in effect the arrows he suffers from the orcs are the penance he endures for caving in to temptation. Gollum's death, on the other hand, is not a conscious act of self-sacrifice but a fortunate mishap, by which Gollum saves the hobbit master who afforded him the opportunity to briefly experience community and humanity one more time. Here, as when Wormtongue rises up against Saruman and slits his throat, Tolkien thwarts treason so that it serves the greater good: for by treacherously biting off the finger of his good master, Gollum ironically saves Frodo as well as all the peoples of Middle-earth. While Wormtongue is unredeemable, Gollum is a more ambiguous and pathetic character, who like Wormtongue is eaten up by desire but who still can be touched by kindness, and who for a brief time becomes more "human" himself by existing within the sphere of Frodo's influence and by the service he performs.

The Lord of the Rings ends with one overlord, one supreme ruler, uniting all people and creating an ordered society out of the chaos and ruin of war. Most of Aragorn's story is devoted to establishing and installing him as the rightful ruler of Middle-earth. However, the coronation chapter is not only about Aragorn's ascending the throne; it is also about Aragorn ordering his kingdom according to medieval feudal standards. "The true king is a Steward, or servant, of his people" (Chance 93) and his authority resides in his power "to heal, to knit together, to bring peace and fruitfulness to the community" (104). While the title of the chapter, "The Steward and the King," refers specifically to Aragorn, it is truly about all stewards and vassals and the establishment of the social order of the new age. Aragorn honors the people who have served him, and shows mercy by pardoning the Easterlings who had surrendered to him after acknowledging their error in following an evil lord, and by excusing Beregond for leaving his post and committing treason against Denethor and then rewarding him for protecting his new lord by appointing him to the Faramir's Guard (*LotR* 948), Aragorn demonstrates that not only does a leader have the

duty to govern wisely, but that the people also have a responsibility to wisely choose who they follow and to whom they give their fealty. Aragorn acts as ring-giver, bequeathing land and position to loyal vassals who have served him well, thereby establishing a tiered governing structure that will defend and maintain the internal security of his realm. Aragorn installs lords in positions beneath him that will support his rule: Faramir will be Prince of Ithilien, Éomer will be King of Rohan. Prince Imrahil and all the chief captains, and Frodo and then Sam as well, all pledge fealty to Aragorn and sit together at the king's table (*LotR* 934).

The Shire remains a little spot of Victoriana in the midst of a mediievally modeled world. In the more democratic Shire, after Frodo has left for the Grey Havens, Sam can rise above his ascribed position to Mayor, succeeding Frodo and thereby symbolically becoming Frodo's "heir" (Bradley 126). He is no longer Frodo's servant, second, or squire; yet he will always be a vassal in Aragorn's kingdom. We end with a well-ordered medieval society built on the service of men who embrace their place; as Aragorn says, "By the labour and valour of many I have come into my inheritance" (*LotR* 946). As we read this medieval epic, the compilation of hand-penned manuscripts of Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam and the oral history of earlier ages, we are shepherded into a renaissance of our own enlightenment that lies before us between the covers of *The Lord of the Rings*.

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Bonnie Rauscher, Registrar

2231 10th Street

Berkeley, CA 94710

bonnier@fpckerkeley.org

Or register online via PayPal at www.mythsoc.org. Room and board rates are available on the conference website. We encourage attendees to take the room-and-board package and those staying off-campus to take the meal package. Shared meals are a large part of Mythcon, and attendees of past Mythcons will confirm that Clark Kerr serves some of the best meals we've had. There are no restaurants or hotels less than 1/2 mile from campus.

