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### Heorot or Meduseld?: Tolkien's Use of *Beowulf* in "The King of the Golden Hall"

#### Abstract

A thorough investigation of the way Tolkien used and built on *Beowulf* in the chapter "The King of the Golden Hall."

#### Additional Keywords

Beowulf—Influence on J.R.R Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of Beowulf; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Beowulf; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. "The King of the Golden Hall"—Sources

## Heorot or Meduseld?: Tolkien's Use of *Beowulf* in "The King of the Golden Hall"

Michael R. Kightley

In *The Road to Middle-earth*, T.A. Shippey observes that there is a strong association between the Riders of Rohan in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the Anglo-Saxons of poetry and history, and more specifically that "the chapter 'The King of the Golden Hall' is straightforwardly calqued on *Beowulf*" (94). The word "calque" is very useful for understanding this chapter, but it is only through Shippey's summarization of the connections between the two works that the calquing becomes straightforward; Tolkien's use of the first third of *Beowulf* as a source for the Meduseld scenes actually forms, on closer examination, a concerted and pervasive rhetoric, built upon the calquing function. Shippey defines this calquing as a piecemeal translation after which "the derivative does not sound anything like its original" but "nevertheless it betrays influence at every point" (77). Shippey, however, concentrates primarily on the latter, the similarities between the two works, to the exclusion of the differences, wherein lies the true complexity of "The King of the Golden Hall." This complexity is completely dependent on the similarities, however, hence Tolkien's use of the "like/unlike" (Shippey, *Road* 77) nature of a calque; the likenesses, which are predominant early in the chapter, act as signposts, creating a signaling effect that resonates throughout the entirety of the chapter, even as the similarities progressively fade into differences. The ultimate purpose of the signaling effect is, I believe, to maneuver the reader into interpreting the main characters of the second half of the chapter primarily in terms of their counterparts in *Beowulf*, beginning with Théoden and Hrothgar, followed by Wormtongue and Unferth, and culminating in an unexpected connection between the aged Gandalf and the virile Beowulf that could not have been made without the extensive network of connections previously built up between the two works. It should be noted that this argument does assume a certain amount of

conscious or unconscious authorial intention, which can be critically perilous. I hope to demonstrate, however, that the concerted and progressive nature of the connections made between the two works makes the argument both logical and worthwhile, especially in light of certain opinions Tolkien expressed about *Beowulf* in "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth."

Tolkien's choice to name the King of Rohan Théoden (Anglo-Saxon for "lord," "protector"<sup>1</sup>) may seem simplistic, perhaps even redundant or lacking in creativity, to a student of Anglo-Saxon. Such a judgment would be premature, however. Ignoring for a moment the implications of defining a character by his rank or position via his name, Tolkien is actually giving a not-so-subtle invitation to read the Rohan story line in a particular Anglo-Saxon context. At the beginning of "The King of the Golden Hall," in *The Two Towers* (TT), this context is made clear. Gandalf identifies the scene as he and the remnants of the fellowship approach Théoden's hall. "'Edoras those courts are called,' said Gandalf, 'and Meduseld that golden hall'" (135). Edoras, presumably derived from the Anglo-Saxon "eoderas" ("sheltering building," "enclosure"), and Meduseld ("mead-hall"), a word drawn directly from *Beowulf* (3065), locate the chapter in context of the first part of *Beowulf* (Shippey, *Road* 94-95). The "golden hall" makes this association all the more certain, echoing *Beowulf*'s own approach to the hall of Hrothgar; "Guman onetton, / sigon aetsomne, oþ þæt hy sæl timbred / geatolic on goldfah ongyton mihton" ("men hastened, marched together until they could see the timbered hall, splendid and gold-adorned") (306-308). Gandalf's warning that the lords of the Rohirrim "do not sleep" (135) informs the reader that, like Heorot, Meduseld is troubled. Such use of language is the reader's first active signal that the events of the chapter, and the following story line, are inherently connected to, and even critical of, the first third of *Beowulf*; the calquing that Shippey describes is, in effect, the tool by which this signaling is achieved but the signaling is itself merely a tool for the criticism.

The signaling similarities between "The King of the Golden Hall" and *Beowulf* go beyond simple word-use when Gandalf and his companions reach the walls of Edoras. Upon their approach, the gate guard of Meduseld challenges them in almost the exact same words as Hrothgar's coast guard:

Who are you that come heedless over the plain thus strangely clad,  
riding horses like to our own horses? Long have we kept guard here,  
and we have watched you from afar. Never have we seen other riders  
so strange [...]. Say, are you not a wizard, some spy from Saruman, or  
phantoms of his craft? Speak now and be swift! (137-38)

This passage expels any doubt that may remain about Tolkien's desire to create a connection between "The King of the Golden Hall" and the first third of *Beowulf* since it is merely a distillation of the coast guard's first speech, formed by recombining nearly exact translations of three of his main points (237-40, 244-45, 251-54). The introductory challenge, for example, differs significantly only in the mode of transportation, Beowulf and his companions arriving not on horseback but by boat, "þe þus brontne ceol / ofer lagustræte lædan cwomon, / hider ofer holmas" ("who thus lead a tall ship over the sea-street, have come hither over the seas") (238-40). While Shippey observes that the use of horses is fundamentally non-Anglo-Saxon (94), the difference is really rather minor since the image of being carried across the plains of Rohan by horse corresponds well with being borne across the sea via ship; the difference is reduced even further by the Beowulf poet's use of the kenning "lagustræte" ("sea-street"). The rest of the gate guard's speech is likewise directly translated from the coast guard's; the only significant difference between the two passages comes at the end, when the coast guard and gate guard each attempt to visually analyze the characters of the newcomers, Beowulf and Gandalf respectively. While Hrothgar's coast guard does mention the possibility that the Geats are "leassceaweras" ("spies") (253), he is actually rather impressed by the mighty warrior and expresses his almost profound respect. "Næfre ic maran geseah / eorla ofer eorþan, ðonne is eower sum, / secg on searwum; nis þæt seldguma, / wæpnum geweorðad" ("I have never seen a greater warrior on earth than a certain one of you, a man in wargear; he is no mere hall-retainer made to seem good by his weapons") (247-50). The coast guard's analysis of Beowulf is quite accurate and he later explains that such accuracy is demanded by his position (287-89).

The gate guard of Edoras, on the other hand, does not succeed in his character analysis of Gandalf; he is unable to "gescad witan, / worda and worca" ("understand the meaning of words and deeds") (288-99), to

use his counterpart's phrasing. Instead of seeing in Gandalf a powerful man who is well-disposed to his king, as the coast guard sees in Beowulf, the gate guard assumes that Gandalf is a servant of the enemy, Saruman. Assuming for a moment that Théoden's gate guard is not inept, this distinction between the two scenes seems to indicate that Gandalf, while projecting power (the guard does recognize him as a wizard), does not project the aura of good will that the coast guard seems to sense from Beowulf. Then again, Hrothgar's coast guard does leave his troops behind, ostensibly to "wið feonda gehwone flotan eowerne, / niwtyrwydne nacan on sande / arum healdan" ("protect your ship, the newly-tarred vessel on the sand, against all enemies") (294-96), but possibly to hold the ship hostage, thereby ensuring Beowulf's good conduct and indicating a potential lack of trust. With this irony in mind, the concerns of Théoden's gate guard seem even more reflective of those of the coast guard, though the gate guard's method of expression is clearly far more blunt than the coast guard's diplomatic irony. A subtle note of irony may be the most important thing a reader takes from this early connection between "The King of the Golden Hall" and *Beowulf*; Tolkien, after all, seems to have gone out of his way to create a situation where the similarities between the two are glaring but also to include an important deviation—via the gate guard's bluntly expressed analysis of Gandalf—that signals the reader to not only compare the chapter to the first third of *Beowulf* but also to be willing to contrast them.

*TT* moves quickly from the gate guard episode to the encounter with the Doorward of Meduseld, which yet again strongly echoes *Beowulf*, this time the hero's encounter with Wulfgar, Hrothgar's "ar ond ombiht" ("herald and officer") (336). In a fashion similar to the scenes just discussed, Wulfgar and Théoden's Doorward Háma each attempt to analyze the worthiness of the approaching heroes. Wulfgar, even before asking his lord's permission to admit the Geats, expresses his belief in the noble intentions of the travelers, saying, "wen ic þæt ge for wlenco, nalles for wræcsiðum, / ac for higeþrymmum Hroðgar sohton" ("I expect that it is because of daring, not at all because of exile, but for magnanimity, that you have sought Hrothgar") (338-39). Similarly (and unlike the gate guard's poor judgment earlier in the chapter), Háma echoes the insight of the coast guard and the judgment of Wulfgar; "Yet in doubt a man of worth must trust to his wisdom. I believe you are

friends and folk of honour, who have no evil purpose" (141-42). Wulfgar's use of "wlenco," translated above as "daring," seems to connect directly to Háma's use of "honour," which is a reasonable translation for the positive side of "wlenco." Háma's tone does not seem to carry any of the negative connotations of "pride" that are evident in the other usages of the word in *Beowulf*, as in Unferth's taunts and in the story of Hygelac's death (508, 1206). In what initially seems to be an intriguing coincidence, this tale of Hygelac's death actually begins with a reference to a legendary Hama:

	Hama ætwæg
to þære byrhtan byrig	Brosinga mene,
sigle and sincfæt, —	searoniðas fleah
Eormenrices,	geceas ecne ræd. (1198-1201)

(Hama carried off the necklace of the Brosings, jewel and precious setting, to the bright stronghold; he endured the cunning hostilities of Eormenric, choosing a plan for long-lasting benefit.)

In a subtle way, the story of Hama told in *Beowulf* directly relates to the situation of Tolkien's Háma; the derivative Háma strips the fellowship of their treasured weapons and, later in the chapter, risks the wrath of Théoden by providing the captive Éomer with his sword, correctly believing that it is the right thing to do in the long-term ("ecne ræd"), that Éomer will eventually regain the favor of the King. The connection between the two Hámas is not absolute, but the similarities are strong enough to at least raise the possibility that Tolkien used the above passage as a source in his creation of Théoden's Doorward.

Returning to the comparison between Wulfgar and Tolkien's Háma, the judgments they make on Beowulf, Gandalf, and those accompanying them, form the core of their similarities. Tolkien has, it seems, adopted the insight of Hrothgar's coast guard, that the job of a sentry "se þe wel þenceð" ("who thinks well") (289) is to be able to anticipate the needs of his lord and judge newcomers accordingly. Interestingly, unlike the *Beowulf* poet, who provides two examples of officers performing this function, the coast guard and Wulfgar, Tolkien takes the opportunity to provide a substantial contrast between his two guards, which he presents as extremes, the gate guard who is apparently unable to effectively judge Gandalf, as opposed to Háma who goes so far

as to risk Théoden's wrath when he feels it is in his lord's best interests, thereby exhibiting the long-term vision ("ecne ræd") that his potential namesake commends. Shippey argues that this presentation of the guards' willingness to use their own judgment, "that in free societies orders give way to discretion" (*Road* 95), is the primary purpose of Tolkien's imitation of *Beowulf*, but I do not totally agree. While Tolkien does spend significant efforts guiding the reader to this important revelation via his signaling calques, this calquing does not end with the guards' judgments of the fellowship, making it unlikely that its main purpose is the privileging of discretion over orders. What its main purpose is, however, remains relatively unclear to the reader at this point. The fact that the similarities between the two texts become much looser, continuing to fade into differences as the chapter proceeds, may be the source of the difference between Shippey's reading and my own. Interestingly, this same looseness is one of the strongest reasons to view the chapter not as merely "straightforwardly calqued" on *Beowulf*, but as a conscious rhetoric that uses early and straightforward signals in order to create a progressively growing freedom to comment on and even criticize the characters of the two texts.

Despite a willingness to follow his discretion over Théoden's orders, Háma does obey his lord in less important matters, such as in forcing the fellowship to remove their weapons. There is a corresponding disarmament in *Beowulf*, though it is somewhat more spread out. While the hero surrenders his spear to Wulfgar early on, he does not completely disarm himself until after Hrothgar retires for the evening. *Beowulf* raises the issue of disarmament approximately halfway through his first speech to the king, however, creating the sense of disarming, if not the actual act, by the declaration of his intention to engage Grendel hand to hand:

ic þæt þonne forhicge,	swa me Higelac sie,
min mondrihten	modes bliðe,
þæt ic sword bere	oþðe sidne scyld,
geolorand to guþe,	ac ic mid grape sceal
fon wið feonde	ond ymb feorh sacan. (435-39)

(Therefore—so that Hygelac, my liege lord, will be pleased with me in spirit—I disdain to bear a sword or a broad shield, a yellow shield, to battle, but with my hand I shall grapple with the enemy and contend for life.)

Hrothgar, it should be noted, allows Beowulf to bear his sword and shield into the hall without comment or concern; it is Beowulf himself who decides to lay them aside before his battle with Grendel. Beowulf claims to willingly discard his wargear because he has learned that “se æglæca / for his wonhydum wæpna ne recceð” (“the adversary, in his rashness, is not concerned about weapons”) (433-34), but his motives clearly go beyond any insight into Grendel’s magical resistance to weaponry. Beowulf’s reference to his lord, Hygelac, is revealing; George Clark characterizes Beowulf’s feelings towards his lord and uncle as “enduring love, and lasting sorrow for the dashing figure of young Beowulf’s admiration” (“Theme” 281), emotions that indicate how important it is to Beowulf that his uncle reciprocates his admiration. Furthermore, Beowulf desires this admiration not only from his uncle but from the nobility at large, the general “lof” (“fame”) and “dom” (“judgment of others”) that Tolkien emphasizes in the appendix to “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” (36-42). The disarming scene, then, is primarily a method through which Beowulf can acquire more “lof” and “dom,” a kind of heroic reputation enhancement, for his lord and for himself.

Unlike the relative simplicity of Beowulf’s vow to fight hand to hand, the disarming scene in *TT* is extensive and elaborate, beginning with the order coming from Théoden, developing through a discussion of the King’s right to command such a thing, leading to Gandalf and his companions surrendering their valuable weapons, and culminating in Gandalf refusing to also surrender his staff. “‘Foolishness!’ said Gandalf. ‘Prudence is one thing, but discourtesy is another. I am old. If I may not lean on my stick as I go, then I will sit out here, until it pleases Théoden to hobble out himself to speak with me’” (141). Gandalf’s indignation can, of course, be read merely as a ruse to gain admission into Théoden’s presence without surrendering his staff, but the potential wisdom of retaining a wizard’s staff does not eliminate the discourtesy of the act. Gandalf’s true motives aside, Théoden’s command contrasts sharply with the high formality and hospitality of Hrothgar’s hall; more particularly, the nobility and valiant heroism of Beowulf’s disarming scene is contrasted with the incivility of stripping an old man of his walking stick for no reason beyond a self-protective fear of the staff’s power.

Interestingly, Théoden's order is not only a discourtesy towards Gandalf, but also a discourtesy towards his own guards, indicating his lack of trust in their powers of observation and judgment. Alternatively, Théoden's demands may be an attempt to claim a position of power over the fellowship before they even enter his hall; in Beowulfian terms, Théoden's disrespectful command can be seen as an act of dismissing the "lof" and "dom" that Gandalf has hitherto earned throughout the land. From this perspective, the scenes are closely connected, though distinct; the value of "lof" and "dom" is central to both scenes, but while Beowulf disarms himself to demonstrate his confidence in his power to achieve fame, Théoden attempts to sour the fame of another for his own political gain.

The distinction between the proud nobility of Beowulf's disarming and the self-protective power politics of its counterpart in *TT* marks a fundamental shift in the associations between these two scenes. Up to this point in "The King of the Golden Hall," Tolkien has mimicked the first part of *Beowulf* rather closely. As becomes clear in the disarming scene, however, Tolkien does not merely imitate the other story; on the contrary, he utilizes it and, as such, actively alters it to fit his needs. The close speech/act-based similarities early in the chapter have, however, fulfilled their primary purpose; they have provided Tolkien, hereafter confident in his readers' attention to the chapter's affinity with *Beowulf*, with the leeway to expand the calquing procedure to a broader destination, a rhetorical analysis of the main characters in the two works, particularly Hrothgar, Unferth, Beowulf himself, and their *TT* counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

The reader probably expects a direct association between the characters of King Hrothgar and the as yet undescribed Théoden. There is even a subtle hint of this connection in an early reference to the King of Rohan, when he is called "Théoden King" (137) rather than "King Théoden" as might be expected. This placement of the title after the proper name is unusual in modern English but is evident in certain Anglo-Saxon texts, such as "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle." See, for example, "Æpelgar abbod" ("Abbot Æthelgar") (212, year 980) and "Æðelwine ealdorman" ("Aldorman/Nobleman Æthelwine") (213, year 992). This subtle note reinforces the more obvious signal that Tolkien provides, the King being named for an Anglo-Saxon word for "lord," as

discussed above. The first description of Théoden strengthens the connection to Hrothgar even further. "In the middle of a dais was a great gilded chair. Upon it sat a man so bent with age that he seemed almost a dwarf" (142). This passage echoes the first description of Hrothgar, "eald ond anhar" ("old and hoary") (357), but is profoundly different in tone. Hrothgar and Théoden are similar in type and age, but are different in degree; while Hrothgar is old, Théoden is "so bent with age" as to be considered almost decrepit. The brevity of the *Beowulf* poet in the above physical description of Hrothgar is more than made up for by Tolkien himself, who describes Hrothgar in his criticism; "in the *folces hyrde* of the Danes we have much of the shepherd patriarchs and kings of Israel, servants of the one God" ("Monsters" 27). Tolkien views Hrothgar through a typological lens; Hrothgar is not just the king of the Danes, he is akin to the king of Israel and is even representative of the entire line of Old Testament kingship. This reading resounds in Tolkien's choice of name for the king of Rohan; the lack of specificity in Théoden's name indicates that he is not merely the ruler of the Rohirrim but also a generalized conception of a "lord," typologically representing Hrothgar, and through Hrothgar, the Old Testament kings.<sup>3</sup> Combining this typological perspective with the physical descriptions of his overwhelming weakness due to age creates the sense that Théoden is Tolkien's attempt at creating an almost iconographic image of the elderly, wizened king—an apt image of Hrothgar but with Hrothgar's characteristics taken to the extreme.

Tolkien also provides a direct correspondent for Hrothgar's most vocal counselor, Unferth, in the character of Gríma Wormtongue. Tolkien makes this association clear, this time not with a description of the character but with the character's position: "At [Théoden's] feet upon the steps sat a wizened figure of a man" (143). Tolkien's placement of Wormtongue at the feet of his king mirrors Unferth's positioning, "þe æt fotum sæt frean Scyldinga" ("who sat at the feet of the king of the Scyldings") (500). The incivility that has characterized the encounter with the gate guard and the disarming scene, as contrasted with the general politeness in *Beowulf*, continues in Tolkien's characterization of Wormtongue. Tolkien, it seems, takes the *Beowulf* poet's first description of Unferth's character quite seriously in his development of Wormtongue. Unferth "ne uþe, þæt ænig oðer man / æfre mærdā þon

ma middangeardes / gehede under heofenum þonne he sylfa" ("did not concede that any other man of middle-earth cared more about glory under heaven than himself") (503-505); after this description, Unferth proceeds to bluntly challenge Beowulf about a past heroic deed. While Unferth may simply be a warrior who values fame, not unlike Beowulf himself, and his challenge may simply be fulfilling his role as "þyle" ("court spokesman") (1165) of Heorot, there is obviously the potential to read Unferth as overly arrogant, presumptuous and rude. Tolkien seems to have developed Wormtongue on the basis of this negative interpretation of the Unferth character, perhaps influenced by a later reference that can be interpreted as labeling Unferth as a Cain-like kinslayer (587-88). Tolkien enhances this negative interpretation, making Wormtongue intensely proud, rude and manipulative; Wormtongue's deceitfulness is reinforced by his name (Anglo-Saxon "wyrn" meaning "serpent"), which connects him not only to the verbally dangerous dragon Fáfñir of the northern tradition (see Shippey's analyses of Sigurth's discussion with Fáfñir, *Road* 69-70 and *Author* 36-37) but also to the deceptive serpent of Eden, just as Unferth is connected to Cain. Significantly, Tolkien presents Wormtongue as taking the role of "þyle" to excess; Wormtongue is not merely the spokesperson of Meduseld, he has actually usurped the voice, and therefore the power, of Théoden himself. Théoden eventually recognizes the insidious nature of Wormtongue's influence on his court, saying to him, "your leechcraft ere long would have had me walking on all fours like a beast" (152). Ironically, Gandalf reveals that Wormtongue is, in fact, a true spokesperson, but simply not the spokesperson of Meduseld; instead, Wormtongue's speeches truly represent the interests of the enemy, Saruman.

As the actions of Théoden and Wormtongue unfold in this chapter, a pattern begins to emerge in terms of Tolkien's calquing of *Beowulf*. Tolkien, it seems, has taken most of the primary characters of the first third of *Beowulf*, magnified a certain characteristic in each, and then translated them to the court of Meduseld, thereby creating the "like/unlike" tension that Shippey identifies as inherent to calquing (*Road* 77). The gate guard's bluntly expressed suspicions about the fellowship can be seen as a magnification of the coast guard's diplomatic but cautious deployment of his men to guard Beowulf's ship; Háma arming

Éomer in the belief that it is in Théoden's best interests is an exaggeration of the duty of a guard to evaluate a situation in anticipation of the well-being of his lord, as expressed by Wulfgar and Hrothgar's coast guard; Hrothgar's age and possible connections to the Old Testament kings are enhanced in Théoden until he is a generalized image of a king immobilized by age; and the negative images of Unferth, as well as his role as "pyle," are exaggerated in Wormtongue to the point that he has usurped the voice of his king and even speaks for another.

The unresolved issue is, of course, how this exaggeration or magnification of character traits applies to Beowulf, since his counterpart in "The King of the Golden Hall" is far less obvious than those of the characters analyzed above. The elaborate and persistent connections between the two works, however, create a situation in the chapter where someone, obvious or otherwise, must play the role of Beowulf even if only by default. Clark identifies one possibility in Aragorn, calling him "the great leader of the heroic strand" ("True Hero" 44), an accurate depiction of both Aragorn and Beowulf. Clark's observation functions well in terms of the entirety of *The Lord of the Rings* but Aragorn plays a very small part in the speeches and events of "The King of the Golden Hall." Aragorn, after all, assumes the role of passive follower once Gandalf rejoins the fellowship, rarely asserting himself and never exerting anything like the bold leadership of Beowulf, on whom that poem focuses so strongly that his followers are often barely noticeable. Intriguingly, the chapter focuses primarily on Gandalf rather than Aragorn, suggesting a strange connection between Beowulf, the youthful warrior, and Gandalf, the ancient wizard. It is Gandalf who has the absolute leadership of the fellowship, guiding them to the aid of Meduseld; it is Gandalf that Wormtongue challenges, mirroring the taunts of Unferth against Beowulf; and it is Gandalf who offers aid to the troubled king. Gandalf, therefore, as strange as it may seem, is the character that fills the apparent hole in the chapter created by the lack of an obvious counterpart to Beowulf. The strangeness of this association between Gandalf and Beowulf is, perhaps, the true reason that Tolkien provides so many obvious connections between the two works, signaling the reader, as I have argued, to consider the events of the chapter in the context of the first third of *Beowulf* and, more specifically, to read

Gandalf's actions in this chapter in the context of Beowulf's heroism, despite the glaring differences between their characters.

Returning to the idea that each of Tolkien's characters in this chapter illustrates a magnification of a facet of his counterpart in *Beowulf*, it is difficult to see, at first glance, how Tolkien has followed this pattern in developing the connection between Gandalf and Beowulf. In his conversation with the coast guard, however, Beowulf makes a statement about his intentions that suggests an important possibility:

	Ic þæs Hroðgar mæg
þurh rumne sefan	ræd gelæran,
hu he frod ond god	feond oferswyðeþ -
gyf him edwenden	æfre scolde
bealuwa bisigu	bot eft cuman. (277-81)

(I, through generous spirit, can teach Hrothgar good counsel, how he, wise and good, can overcome the enemy - if a change of fortunes shall ever come again to him, relief from the distress of affliction.)

The key word here, at least in the development of the character of Gandalf, is "gelæran" ("teach" or "advise"). Beowulf is using the word more in the sense of "demonstrate," insofar as he actually intends to defeat Grendel himself; alternatively, one could interpret his speech as saying that he will "advise" Hrothgar to allow Beowulf, himself, to confront Grendel. Either way, however, Beowulf is the one that actually performs the action of defeating Grendel, which undermines the "teach" aspect of "gelæran;" this literal meaning of "teach," however, resonates strongly with Gandalf's role in "The King of the Golden Hall." Gandalf makes an offer to Théoden that is similar in word use, if not in meaning, to Beowulf's statement to the coast guard. "No counsel have I to give to those that despair. Yet counsel I could give, and words I could speak to you. Will you hear them?" (145). Gandalf, as powerful as he is, is not offering to "demonstrate" his prowess by defeating Saruman and his orcish army; on the contrary, he is offering to "teach" Théoden how to resolve these problems himself and to stand beside him in the struggle; the mission of Gandalf and the other wizards is, after all, one of teaching and influence, "to move Elves and Men and all living things of good will to valiant deeds" (*Silmarillion* 299), rather than to fix all of their problems for them like Beowulf does for Hrothgar. Gandalf teaches Théoden how

to be what Beowulf calls a “god cyning” (“good king”), one who actively participates in the conflict against the enemies of his people, rather than sitting feebly by while his people are slaughtered and manipulated. Théoden, following Gandalf’s teachings, undergoes an almost miraculous transformation. “From the king’s hand the black staff fell clattering on the stones. He drew himself up, slowly, as a man that is stiff from long bending over some dull toil. Now tall and straight he stood” (147). Théoden, previously the icon of ancient, wizened king, is transformed into a good king—virile, though still wise, and able to actually lead his people rather than merely observe them. Interestingly, age in general, through Théoden’s transformation, dwindles in significance in this scene and, as a result, the most obvious difference between Beowulf and Gandalf is also reduced.

Théoden’s need for transformation, from virtually disabled to virile and strong, appears to be a harsh criticism of Hrothgar’s inability to defeat Grendel, which is strange given Tolkien’s considerable respect for the “noble” king (“Monsters” 38). It is more likely that the scene is critical of Beowulf, or at least of certain characteristics that Beowulf demonstrates, given the disapproval of Beowulf that Tolkien expresses rather fervently in “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth.” Beowulf, according to Tolkien, expresses an “excess” of “pride, in the form of the desire for honour and glory” (144); he “does more than he need, eschewing weapons in order to make his fight with Grendel a ‘sporting’ fight [...] though it will put him in unnecessary risk and weaken his chances of ridding the Danes of an intolerable affliction” (145). Beowulf, then, while succeeding in delivering Heorot of its foe, is a notably imperfect savior because his motive is personal glorification rather than the communal good. Herein lies a key difference between Beowulf and Gandalf; Gandalf takes the threat of Saruman intensely seriously and is unconcerned about his personal glory, a difference that he makes clear to Théoden—and to the reader—immediately upon entry into the presence of the king. In his greeting to Théoden, Gandalf declares that “now all friends should gather together, lest each singly be destroyed” (143), thereby emphasizing the importance of communal, rather than individual, efforts in the upcoming conflict. “Lof” and “dom” are not worth pursuing, in Gandalf’s opinion, a perspective that is entirely foreign to Beowulf. This difference is what Tolkien modifies and

enhances in his conversion of Beowulf into Gandalf, following the pattern of modifications and magnifications made in the development of the other characters in the chapter. Gandalf is, at least in this chapter, Tolkien's attempt at a version of Beowulf who is not driven by personal glory, who is more concerned with outcomes, particularly Théoden's well-being and ability to engage in the upcoming war against Sauron, than he is with appearances.

Clark, in his analysis of Tolkien's heroes, maintains that "Tolkien sought a true hero motivated by a heroic ideal consistent with his own religious and moral ideals, but he could not rid himself of his desire for the glorious heroes of old" ("True Hero" 39). Clark argues that the hero who personifies these ideals is ultimately Sam Gamgee (45) and, in terms of the totality of *The Lord of the Rings*, he is again quite correct; specifically in terms of "The King of the Golden Hall," however, Gandalf fills in for the absent Sam. Interestingly, Gandalf takes Clark's argument one step further; the character of Gandalf actually manages, if only for one chapter, to exemplify Tolkien's "religious and moral ideals" by disregarding the pagan "lof" and "dom," while also playing the role of his correspondent, Beowulf, a distinctly "glorious" hero. Gandalf is, in effect, an experiment at creating a champion of the heroic north who maintains Tolkien's Christian value system by correcting Beowulf's imperfection as savior. It should be noted that this duality between the Christian and the heroic that Gandalf exemplifies is rather tenuous; it is only achieved through the extensive system of connecting calques between "The King of the Golden Hall" and *Beowulf* that signal the reader to interpret Gandalf in this particular way. The question becomes one of determining the impact of this duality on Gandalf's character outside of the chapter. On one hand, the tenuous nature of the duality presents the possibility that it only truly lasts for the one chapter, becoming unsustainable after Gandalf is distanced from the Anglo-Saxon associations in Meduseld; the duality clearly echoes, however, through at least the rest of the Rohan storyline, culminating in the overthrow of Saruman, in which Gandalf again privileges teaching over demonstrating by requiring Théoden to join him in the confrontation with their mutual enemy. On the other hand, the Christian-heroic tension can be read into some of Gandalf's actions that are completely distinct from Rohan, particularly his self-sacrificial and notably heroic

last stand against the Balrog, which is followed by his Christ-like resurrection and return. Depending on which of these views one takes, "The King of the Golden Hall" is either an isolated experiment into the viability of combining Christian values with the heroism of the north or is a vital key into understanding Gandalf's character in its entirety. Either way, it is clear that the chapter's connection to *Beowulf* makes it central to understanding the complex concerns about the nature of heroism that Tolkien explores throughout *The Lord of the Rings*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Anglo-Saxon quotations are from Fr. Klaeber's *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. The translations are my own but have been accomplished with assistance from the notes and Glossary of Mitchell and Robinson's *Beowulf: An Edition*, and from Prof. George Clark of Queen's University, Ontario.

<sup>2</sup> Tolkien creates a fourth pair of counterparts in Wealþeow and Éowyn by having Éowyn ceremoniously serve Théoden a cup of wine (156), a calque of Wealþeow's first actions in *Beowulf* (612-28). I do not address this pairing in this paper for two reasons. First, Éowyn's character develops primarily in later chapters. Second, and more importantly, the issues of gender roles and male-female power relationships that both Wealþeow and Éowyn raise form a central effect of their pairing, an effect that deserves far more attention than this paper can give.

<sup>3</sup> In *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Shippey notes that the generic meaning of Théoden's name is not unique to him but is characteristic of his line. "The names of their kings, Théoden, Thengel, Fengel, Folcwine, etc., are all simply Anglo-Saxon words or epithets for 'king', except significantly, the first: Eorl, the name of the ancestor of the royal line, just means 'earl', or in very Old English, 'warrior'" (92). Shippey explains Eorl's disruption of the pattern by arguing that the ancestral line "dates back to a time before kings were invented" (92) but Eorl's non-royal name can also be considered reflective of the modest roots of the early "shepherd patriarchs and kings of Israel," to use Tolkien's words ("Monsters" 27).

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