A Promise Made Is a Promise Kept:
Oath-Breakers and Keepers in Tolkien's Middle-earth

MA-Thesis Philology
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INTRODUCTION

> 'Forth rode the king, fear behind him,
> Fate before him. Fealty kept he;
> Oaths he had taken, all fulfilled them'.[1]

This passage from the song of King Théoden's death evokes the sentiment of a fallen heroic leader from another age. An era in which heroism was praised and loyalty and sworn oaths were highly valued. Tolkien himself was fascinated with the heroic culture of past times. As a professor he had done a lot of research into the language and history of what we now call England. Given Tolkien's love for and knowledge of the Old English language and Anglo-Saxon culture, it is generally acknowledged that these two fascinations have influenced his shaping of Middle-earth.[2] Many scholars therefore state that Tolkien's races represent 'real' historical cultures: the Rohirrim, for instance, might represent the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture.[3] They believe that Tolkien's knowledge of Anglo-Saxon culture did not only inspire him to write his fiction, but that he also reproduced the Anglo-Saxons and their warrior culture in his works. Critics claim that the linguistic backgrounds of the races of Hobbits and Rohirrim respectively are similar to Old English. Furthermore, it is believed that the clothing, appearance and behaviour of the race of Men are comparable to that of the Anglo-Saxons. The Germanic heroic ethos in particular would have been imitated by the heroes in *The Lord of the Rings*.

To fully understand the statements about the degree to which Tolkien's specialisation influenced his works, it is useful to know what Anglo-Saxon warrior culture represents. This particular warrior culture is characterized by its type of heroism: Germanic masculine heroism. Germanic masculine heroism has a specific heroic ethos, which consists of an agreed set of norms and values.[4] Two important values that the Germanic heroic ethos contains are the taking of oaths and the loyalty attached to the sworn language. The Old English poems *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* are first-class examples in which this heroic ethos is noticeable.

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[1] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (London, 2002), p. 79.
[2] T. Shippey, in *The Road to Middle-Earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (New York, 2003).
[3] Among those scholars who do believe that Tolkien's representatation of characters and culture in The Lord of the Rings is similar to the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture are: J.R. Holmes, 'Oaths and Oath-Breaking'; T.A. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien Author of the Century* (Boston: 2000); T.A. Schippey and C. Tolkien in T. Honegger, 'The Rohirrim'; M.R. Bowman, 'Refining the Gold'; M.D.C. Drout, 'J.R.R. Tolkien's Medieval Scholarship and its Significance', in *Tolkien Studies 4* (2007), pp. 113-176; S.D. Lee and E. Solopova, *The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature through the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien* (New York: 2005).
[4] R. H. Bremmer Jr., 'Old English Heroic Literature', *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature,* ed. D. F. Johnson and E. Treharne (Oxford, 2005), pp. 75-90.

Although many scholars believe that Tolkien's profession influenced the heroism in *LR*, or even that he duplicated Anglo-Saxon culture in his works, this idea is not shared by all.[5] While Holmes (2004) claims that Tolkien tries to recreate the heroic code that is part of this early medieval culture in *LR*, Bowman (2010) states the opposite. [6] In particular, Bowman suggests that Tolkien does not faithfully copy, but reshapes Germanic heroism.[7] For example, Tolkien's depiction of the heroic code often diverges from the heroic ethos of the Anglo-Saxons identified in poems like *Beowulf* and *BM*.[8] According to Bowman, Tolkien evolved his thinking about this ancient heroism because of the "negative view of war" he attained after fighting in the First World War himself. After the First World War, battle was no longer assumed to be glorious or enjoyable among the civilians and soldiers. Whereas loyalty is important in the Anglo-Saxon heroic ethos, Tolkien believes that blind devotion is shameful. He values different motivations for heroic behaviour than the Anglo-Saxons. For instance, he suggests that pride and selfishness as a stimulus for heroic behaviour are worthless, but that acting heroically and being loyal out of love and in order to fulfil a joint purpose is precious. Therefore, Tolkien diverges from the heroic code in his own work.

While Bowman provides a clear illustration of Tolkien's reshaping of the heroic code, she does not touch upon the making and breaking of oaths in her article. Taking oaths, and the consequence of breaking them, is an important cultural feature of the Anglo-Saxons.[9] Holmes focuses on oaths in *LR* too, although he does not share Bowman's view on the reshaping of the heroic ethos. In Tolkien's fiction, oaths play a major role, but the topic has only been superficially studied by Holmes. For example, Holmes articulates that several characters in Tolkien's Middle-earth break their oaths but he does not compare the characters' oath-making and -breaking to Tolkien's supposed medieval sources. In Anglo-Saxon culture, oath-breakers were punished but Holmes does not discuss the consequences for the ones who fail to live up to their oaths. Furthermore, he never gives an adequate definition of 'an oath'. Instead he includes various kinds of promises as well as oaths in his examples of oath-violation while there exists a significant difference in sworn language. In order to compare the Germanic heroic ethos to Tolkien's recast heroic code, it is essential to have a clear definition of the oath. Evidently, the issue of oath-making and –breaking still deserves further study.

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[5] *LR* abbreviation of *The Lord of the Rings*.
[6] J. R. Holmes, 'Oaths and Oath Breaking: Analogues of Old English *comitatus* in Tolkien's Myth', *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*, ed. by J Chance (Lexington, 2004), pp. 249-261.
[7] M. R. Bowman, 'Refining the Gold: Tolkien, The Battle of Maldon, and the Northern Theory of Courage', *Tolkien Studies* 7 (2010), pp. 91-115 (p. 97).
[8] *BM* abbreviation of *The Battle of Maldon*.
[9] Holmes, 'Oaths and Oath Breaking', p. 252.

This thesis will explore Tolkien's views on and presentation of oath-making and -breaking in his trilogy of *LR*. Tolkien's works and his representation of oaths will be compared to sworn speech in the Old English poems *Beowulf* and *BM*. This thesis will show that Tolkien creates a heroic code that is different from the traditional Anglo-Saxon heroic ethos, one in which free will plays an important part. In line with Bowman, I will claim that this part of the heroic code is also reshaped, hereby focusing on Tolkien's alterations in the representation of oaths in his works.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will discuss the concept of the oath in Anglo-Saxon culture on the basis of Laing (2014), who wrote his dissertation on oath-taking and -breaking in the early Middle Ages, and explore the contexts in which oaths were made.[10] I will provide a clear definition of the oath and other forms of sworn speech. In addition, I will briefly pay attention to the Anglo-Saxon heroic code and explain its meaning. The second chapter will consider the importance, use and representation of oaths in *BM* and *Beowulf*. The last chapter, which focuses on the works of *LR*, will demonstrate that while Tolkien's works clearly feature aspects of the Anglo-Saxon heroic ethos, he did not mean for the ethos to be similar, and created a distinct view on oath-making instead.

With this thesis, I will continue the ongoing scholarly debate about the influences of Anglo-Saxon warrior culture and its heroism on Tolkien's work. My analysis will not only present a close reading on Tolkien's *LR* and the Old English poems *Beowulf* and *BM*, supported by relevant secondary literature; it will also provide new insights regarding the heroic ethos in Tolkien's work. In particular, this thesis will provide new insights into oath-making in early and modern literature, which has been researched insufficiently in the past. Moreover, this thesis offers an opening for further research on the recreation of the Germanic heroic ethos in modern literature.

[10] G.L. Laing, 'Bound by Words: the Motif of Oath-taking and Oath-breaking in Medieval Iceland and Anglo-Saxon England' (PhD diss., Western Michigan University, 2014), pp. 1-248.

CHAPTER 1 - Oaths and Anglo-Saxon Culture: A Kingdom Built on Honesty

There are times life does not look as promising as you hoped it would be. When you come home and the clean, wet laundry, which your partner promised to hang out to dry, is still in the machine. To make up for this, he vows his eternal love for you, again. These days, all kinds of promises can be easily broken. Not only among family and friends but also in politics. By contrast, in the Anglo-Saxon period, it was far less easy to break or muddle with promises, pledges, vows and especially oaths. Times were different and making promises and taking oaths was a serious undertaking. As a result, the breaking of these oaths was not without consequences. These often involved inflicting punishment upon the oath-breaker. However, there were several ways in which a promise could be made, depending on the situation. Sworn language can be divided into five categories, each having its own meaning and application: the promise, pledge, vow, boast and the oath. This chapter will highlight the use and importance of the oath in Anglo-Saxon culture and explain the difference between these various categories of sworn language. This information will improve the understanding of both the Old English literature as well as Tolkien's works in the chapters that follow.

In the Anglo-Saxon period, the oath was highly esteemed because the judicial and social system was built upon honesty. It was not until the rise of Christianity that the oath became important in the Anglo-Saxon judicial system. At first, the Anglo-Saxons did not have a governed jurisdiction. For example, in the Old English period, when all men had to work the land to survive, there was no revenue that supplied policemen and prisons. Keeping law and order and giving the people protection was devised by other means than the ones we have today. There was no such thing as being imprisoned for a certain period of time: you could be fined, hanged or outlawed, or you could lose your hand or eyes.[11] The reeve could only lock people up in an outhouse or cellar for a brief period of time, during which higher authorities decided what should be done about the 'prisoner'.[12] It was usual in the Germanic civilisation that justice depended on blood feuds: kin of the man who murdered a man from another kin could be sought out to pay for his kin's crime.[13] Later on, this was prohibited and substituted with *wergild,* which is an amount of money fixed as compensation for murder or disablement of a person paid to the relatives. However, due to the influence of Christianity, sanctions were constructed in society through oath and ordeal. When one violated the law or any accusation

[11] M. Deanesly, in *The Pre-Conquest Church in England*, ed. J.C. Dickinson (London, 1961), p. 330.
[12] Deanesly, *The Pre-Conquest Church in England*, p. 330.
[13] Ibid.

took place, the accused was determined guilty or innocent by taking an oath or by ordeal, or by both. As is stated by Deanesly, "the difficulty of catching criminals, the normal brutality of punishment, and the lack of any system for the scientific proof of crime by evidence, must all be taken into account in the attempt to understand the importance of the oath in English pre-conquest society, and the provision of an ordeal rite by the church".[14] The system dealing with crime developed from bloodshed into a trial by oath since there were, of course, no means to prove guilt other than through witnesses and God's judgement.

Indeed, the method to deem the accused guilty or innocent was usually to obtain the affirmation of the witness(ess). They would be under oath and declared the accused guilty or not.[15] According to Deanesly, "the value of the oath depended on the status of the oath giver. The oath of a thegn was worth more than the oath of the 'gebur' of the village: the oath of a priest was worth more than the oath of a deacon, that of a deacon more than the oath of a layman".[16] Moreover, the status of the accused himself was also of significance: a man who had proven himself trustworthy and successful in oath and ordeal before, was able to clear himself by a 'simple oath' "when accused within the hundred gemot".[17] This meant that the accused had to choose two men within the hundred who would take the oath with him to prove his innocence. However, a man with a bad reputation, one that was deemed untrustworthy, had to take the triple oath: he had to find five oath-takers who would swear with him that he was innocent. If he did not succeed in finding those five oath-takers, he would be sent to the ordeal. There were two different ordeals to which one could be sent: the simple ordeal and the triple ordeal. If three people took a solemn oath that the accused were guilty, he would be sent to the simple ordeal. If six people took such an oath, he would be sent to the triple ordeal, which was harder and even more challenging than the simple ordeal.[18] When the accused and accuser were equals, God's judgement would tell who was lying.

Oaths were not only taken in crime procedures: they were also taken to establish social bonds that ensure consensus and reciprocity, according to the law. People would take an oath of loyalty to the king and he in return reigned over the land and protected his people. In the law of King Edmund, this oath of loyalty the folks should take is described as follows:

> Heac est institutio quam Edmundes rex et episcopi sui cum sapientibus suis instituerunt apud Culintonam de pace et juramento faciendo.

[14] Ibid, p. 329.
[15] Ibid. 331.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

> 1. Imprimis ut omnes jurent in nomine Domini, pro quo sanctum illud sanctum est, fidelitatem Eadmundo regi, sicut homo debet esse fidelis domino suo, sine omni controversia et seductione, in manifesto, in occulto, et in amando quod amabit, nolendo quod nolet; et a die qua juramentum hoc dabitur, ut nemo concelet hoc in fratre vel proximo suo plus quam in extraneo.
>
> [These are the provisions for the preservation of public peace and the swearing of allegiance which have been instituted at Colyton by King Edmund and his bishops, together with his councillors. 1. In the first place, all shall swear in the name of the Lord, before whom that holy thing is holy, that they will be faithful to King Edmund, even as it behoves a man to be faithful to his lord, without any dispute or dissension, openly or in secret, favouring what he favours and discountenancing what he discountenances. And from the day on which this oath shall be rendered, let no-one conceal the breach of it in a brother or a relation of his, any more than in a stranger.][19]

Every man in the realm had to swear this oath of loyalty, not just the king's lords or his military. The oath was taken again when a new king ascended the throne. For example, in the laws of King Æthelred, a reference to this oath also occurs. King Æthelred states that "æghwilc Cristen man do swa him ðearf is [..] 7 word 7 weorc fadige mid rihte 7 að 7 wed wærlice healde" [every Christian man shall do what is his duty […] and he shall order his words and deeds aright and carefully abide by his oath and his pledge].[20] These words are similar to the words of King Edmund. The oath and the pledge King Æthelred refers to convey the same message as that of King Edmund: one must be faithful to one's lord, the King, as well as to God. It is not certain at which age one had to take the oath to prove one's loyalty to the king. However, it is possible this oath was taken at the age of twelve because King Canute states in his laws that all people over twelve years must take the oath to not become a thief or a thief's accomplish: "Be ðeofan. We wyllað þæt ælc man ofer twelfwintre sylle þone að, þæt he nyle ðeof beon ne ðeofes gewita" [Concerning thieves; it is our desire that everyone, over twelve years of age, shall take an oath that he will not be a thief or a thief's accomplice].[21] In comparison to our modern Western government, Anglo-Saxon society lacked official authority and a formalized hierarchical structure. The community was held together by personal bonds that took the form of oaths. These oaths secured reciprocal commitment, solidified personal connections and political order and guaranteed the fulfilment of common ideals. According to Hermanson, "the acts [of oath-taking] were aimed at generating trust and guaranteeing the fulfilment of promises, which meant that those taking

[19] A. J. Robertson, in *The Laws of the Kings of England from Ethelred until Henry I,* ed. and trans., A.J. Robertson (London, 1925), p. 13.
[20] Ibid., p. 85.
[21] Ibid., p. 185.

part should be able to foresee each other's behaviour in the future".[22] Furthermore, he states that it could not only predict one's actions, but also solve conflicts and establish harmony.

Although both the oath of loyalty and the oath of honesty in judicial procedures were important to preserve the peace and guarantee safety, they could of course be broken. Since these oaths and the ritual of taking them were entailed in a very grave procedure, one did not simply break a promise without consequences. Oath-breakers awaited a punishment as demanding as the oath they had sworn. For example, when one broke the oath of loyalty to the king and turned against him, he would pay with his life: "7 gif hwa ymbe cyninc sirewe, beo his feores scildig, buton he hine ladige be þam deopestan þe witan gerædan" [and if anyone plots against the king, he shall forfeit his life, unless he clears himself by the most solemn oath determined upon by the authorities].[23] Plotting against the king after one has taken an oath of loyalty was perhaps the most severe form of treason. However, even a thief's punishment could mean death in the worst-case scenario. According to the laws of King Edmund, a thief must be caught dead or alive, and those who did not assist would pay a penalty:

> Vult etiam, ut ubi fur pro certo cognoscetur, twelfhindi et twihindi consocientur et exuperent eum vivum vel mortuum, alterutrum quod poterunt; et qui aliquem eorum infaidiabit qui in ea quaestione fuerint, sit inimicus regis et omnium amicorum eius; et si quis adire negaverit et coadjuvare nolit, emendet regi cxx s. – vel secundum hoc perneget quod nescivit—et hundreto xxx s.
>
> [Further, it is his will, that where a man is proved to be a thief, nobles and commoners shall unite and seize him, alive or dead, whichever they can. And he who institutes a vendetta against any of those who have been concerned in that pursuit shall incur the hostility of the king and of all his friends, and if anyone shall refuse to come forward and lend his assistance, he shall pay 120 shillings to the king- or deny knowledge of the affair by an oath of equivalent value- and 30 shillings to the hundred.][24]

Again, when one was accused but innocent, one could take an oath to swear one's honesty and innocence. The example above also shows that breaking one's oath to the king could lead to punishment in the form of a fine. Breaking an oath did not only lead to physical retribution such as torture, the loss of body parts, and death but could also cause a psychological

[22] L. Hermanson, 'Holy Unbreakable Bonds: Oaths and Friendship in Nordic and Western European Societies c. 900-1200', in *Friendship and Social Networks in Scandinavia, c. 1000–1800*, ed. by J. Viar Sigursson & T. Smaberg (Turnhout, 2013), pp. 15–42 (p. 20).
[23] Robertson, *The Laws of the Kings of England*, p. 87.
[24] Ibid., p. 13.

punishment. According to Hermanson, "a person who had sworn an oath (by, for example, the laying of hands on a reliquary) and later violated it was, according to the Christian view, forever condemned. Thus, the violator of an oath represented an emblem of moral degeneration and the antithesis of virtue".[25] This moral degeneration often resulted in punishments such as the loss of land, status, and perhaps most importantly: honour. In short, when an oath was broken, one could not escape the consequences, no matter the oath's status.

In the following paragraphs, sworn language spoken in the Anglo-Saxon period will be categorized into the following groups: the promise, pledge, vow, boast and the oath. At first glance, one may, like Holmes, view these five words as identical forms that function interchangeably as one definition of an oath.[26] However, in order to understand sworn language, and in particular oath-taking, in Old English and Tolkien's literature, it is necessary to define and separate these forms of swearing into different categories. There is certainly a difference between them, even though it seems slight at times. For instance, as is stated by Harris, "Æthelred's laws were "mid worde ge mid wedde gefæstnod" (V Æthelred, line 1) [confirmed by both word and by vow].[27] By declaring that Æthelred's laws were authorized by both oath and vow, this sentence shows that both forms must be applied to guarantee reliability. Moreover, Laing also provides an appropriate example, taken from an anonymous letter to King Edward the Elder, which contains the question how the Anglo-Saxon judicial system could subsist without sworn language: "Leóf, hwonne bið ángu spǽc geendedu, gif mon ne mæg nówðer ne mid wed ne mid áða geendigan?" [Sir, when will any claim be ended, if one might end it with neither vow nor oath?].[28] Here, syntax confirms dissimilarity in meaning between a vow and an oath. Most importantly, they differ in use and application. Accordingly, if one of the two forms was not accessible, the other would provide an alternative but equivalent form to ensure honesty. Apparently, both forms were critical during the execution of a legal case and it is important, if not necessary, to research the particular characteristics of each form. Moreover, as is stated by Laing, it is "worth considering why the anonymous writer chose to omit other varieties of swearing from his correspondence with King Edward".[29] As has already become clear from the examples above, there are two kinds of oaths that can be identified: the judicial oath and the oath of loyalty. Both will be

[25] Hermanson, 'Holy Unbreakable Bonds', p. 36.
[26] Holmes mentions this in his article **"**Oaths and Oath Breaking: Analogues of Old English *comitatus* in Tolkien's Myth".
[27] S. J. Harris, 'Oaths in the Battle of Maldon', in *The Hero Recovered: Essays on Medieval Herosim in Honor of George Clark*, ed. R. Waugh and J. Weldon (Kalamazoo, 2010), pp. 85-109 (p. 89).
[28] Laing, 'Bound by Words', p. 21.
[29] Ibid., p. 23.

separately defined in detail at the end of this chapter. Each category contains related nouns that share the same meaning and are based on different procedures to determine the truth in speech. There is a difference not only in meaning and use between the categories, but also in the complexity of the procedures. Therefore they are arranged from the least complex category, 'the promise', to the most complicated and regulated, 'the oath'.[30]

The Promise

Whereas the pledge, the vow and even the boast are formal forms of sworn speech, the promise need not be formal. In fact, the promise is perhaps the least complex category of sworn language that is not tied to strict procedures and rituals. The *Oxford English Dictionary* expresses the meaning of a promise as "a declaration or assurance made to another person (usually with respect to the future), stating a commitment to give, do, or refrain from doing a specified thing or act, or guaranteeing that a specified thing will or will not happen".[31]

Although the promise exists of words only, it is an intentional statement.[32] According to Schlesinger, the promise refers to "a future act of the speaker" which he honestly intends to fulfil and is therefore obligated to perform as promised.[33] The promise itself is not restricted to be used in certain circumstances. It is not specifically formal, it does not have religious aspects, and it is not used to achieve glory.

However, if one takes the meaning of the Old English word *behat* into account, the promise meets all the criteria of sworn language. The promise in its verbal form refers to an honest speech in which the speaker says whether something is true, or whether it will happen or be done.[34] A promise is the speech of honesty without a procedure or ritual. According to the *Dictionary of Old English*, the word *behat* is used for 'promise' as well as 'vow'. In ecclesiastical texts, the word *behat* means a "formal vow to devote oneself to monastic or religious life".[35] In other contexts, the word means 'promise' without a process or ritual. The promise is, so to speak, the most naked form of sworn language. Actually, the pledge, the vow

[30] One obstacle to defining these Old English terms of honesty is that they are often described in modern syntax that did not exist at the time of the Anglo-Saxons. These conceptions of truth and deception have also changed in their meaning over the years, even as the rituals around these terms.
[31] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'promise, n.'.
[32] H. J. Schlesinger, *Promises, Oaths, and Vows: On the Psychology of Promising* (New York, 2008), p. 41.
[33] Ibid., pp. 16-17.
[34] *The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*, 'promise, n.'.
[35] *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. 'behat n.'. The Dictionary of Old English even mentions the Old English word *beot*, for boast, which is likely to have derived from *behat*.
http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/doe/

and the boast, but also the oath, as will be explained later, are all formal promises. The promise itself can be informal or refer to formal procedures that accompany a promise. It therefore makes up the simplest category of sworn language.

The Pledge

The pledge makes up the first formal category of sworn language. It has the least complex structure of the formal categories. The pledge is less controlled in regulated procedures and rituals. In the *OED*, the pledge is described as "something [or someone] deposited as security for the fulfilment of a contract, the payment of a debt, or as a guarantee of good faith, etc., and liable to forfeiture in case of failure".[36] Although the pledge is described as an agreement in the *OED*, its meaning and use are more elaborate. As is stated by Schlesinger, a pledge can be written or unwritten, and it usually stipulates the manner in which the pledge has to be fulfilled, and when.[37] Moreover, it also details the consequences. This type of sworn language is formulated when two parties or more have a conflict of interest.[38] Accordingly, the pledge is an agreement of mutual trust and honesty. A person hands over something or someone valuable to guarantee that he will finish his assignment. The pledge is not "an object which betokens the spoken oath", but it is the speech of truth and the exchange of something valuable in one.[39] The speaker of the pledge can break the promise and lose the thing he sacrificed to validate his word. That which is offered as a valuable gift can be something intangible, such as one's integrity, honour or status, as well as something tangible, such as treasure, horses or one's home. It is also possible to hand *somebody* over to guarantee validity. Therefore, the burden can weigh heavily if the promise is broken, which increases the chances of honesty and the fulfilment of the pledge.

The Anglo-Saxons did not use the modern word 'pledge' as we know it now, but their vocabulary included other words that define the concept of pledging. According to Laing, "the word *wǽr*, whose conventional definitions of 'a covenant, compact, or agreement' help to convey the type of exchange indicated within this category of sworn language".[40] However, only little is known about what sureties would have been offered to guarantee the arrangement. Additionally, Laing states that "the covenant has an extremely broad scope from

[36] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'pledge, n.'.
[37] Schlesinger, *Promises, Oaths, and Vows*, p. 8.
[38] Ibid., p. 11.
[39] Harris, 'Oaths in the Battle of Maldon', p. 89.
[40] Laing, 'Bound by Words', p. 39.

the monumentally inclusive, representative of the contractual interactions between the human and the divine, to the infinitesimally personal, such as an agreement made between neighbours".[41]

One example of a frequently made pledge in Anglo-Saxon society is a wedding. In this case, sons and daughters of kings and queens were married off to the sons and daughters of leaders of other countries, tribes or war-bands in exchange for peace between the nations. An agreement of this sort was often made in Anglo-Saxon culture. This contract, also called the marriage-knot, formed a marriage alliance that would end violent feuds and brought hope and peace. In order to guarantee a lasting end to a conflict, this bond required a significant offer. Usually, the lives of the sons and daughters who were married off functioned as sureties.

Although the offers were valuable, and the agreements strong, these pledges were often doomed to fail. Marriage contracts that form pledges are frequently represented in Old English literature. A good example is the Finnisburgh Episode, where Hildeburh, the sister of Hnæf, the leader of the Danes, is married off to Finn, leader of the Frisians, in order to end the conflicts between the nations and ensure peace. However, Finn breaks this pledge of peace and attacks Hnæf and his men, who did not see this coming. Although the sureties are powerful, the pledge can still be broken, after which punishment is inflicted on the losing party.[42]

The Vow

The process of pledging covers more than one category. The vow is also based on the offering of a deposit to ensure the speaker's integrity. Therefore, it can be viewed as a subcategory of the pledge. While the pledge functions as an agreement or contract in a broad variety of situations, the vow is centred on divine invocation. The *OED* defines the vow as "a solemn promise made to God, or to any deity or saint, to perform some act, or make some gift or sacrifice, in return for some special favour; more generally, a solemn engagement, undertaking, or resolve, to achieve something or to act in a certain way".[43] Schlesinger also believes that the vow involves the divine and adds that the vow ensures that both parties have similar and mutual intentions, which avoids confliction and unforeseen behaviour.[44] Similar to

[41] Laing, 'Bound by Words', p. 39.
[42] For more information on the etymology of the word *wǽr* and its roots in French, Latin and Indo-European languages see Laing, 'Bound by Words', pp. 1-248.
[43] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'vow, n.'.
[44] Schlesinger, *Promises, Oaths, and Vows*, p. 7.

the pledge, the vow ensures that the speaker's words are honest and correspond with the truth in his actions. The speaker of the vow must keep his word and in doing so offer something of value. This sacrifice, or offer, and especially the risk to lose this precious object or one's integrity, is the motivation to guarantee honesty in the spoken words. A strong relation to the divine is included in the vow and the vow also expresses "a solemn promise of fidelity or faithful attachment".[45]

By looking at the Old English word for 'vow' and its use in religious texts and marriage ceremonies, we see that the vow also clearly differs from the pledge in Anglo-Saxon culture. As stated by Laing, "*wedd*, the Old English word most closely corresponding to the aspects of swearing that characterize our modern conception of the word 'vow', is principally defined by Joseph Bosworth and Thomas Northcote Toller as "a pledge, or what is given as security"".[46] The word *wedd* is found in many religious texts, which is why it has a strong religious connotation and is therefore related to the modern word 'vow'. From these religious texts it is known that the speaker of a vow often sought entrance into monastic orders or made a commitment to their faith.[47] Moreover, the vow was also made as a religious promise of commitment in a marriage ceremony. In the process of a marriage ceremony, the vow was ritualized in that both the bride and groom must promise their fidelity and their faithfulness to each other. In order to be allowed to be together and obtain all the sureties marriage brought, both had to promise to be honest, faithful and to stay together until death do them part. Additionally, Schlesinger states that "religious sanctions may enforce the keeping of marriage vows but the actual reason that these serious promises are uttered are to convince listeners of the promiser's sincerity".[48] Marriage vows had to be spoken in public with the intention of showing true honesty before it was legalised. According to Laing, "while surety given as a guarantee of the pledge is obligatory, sacrificing or giving gifts for the vow implies a personal desire to offer compensation for the trust guaranteed through this process".[49] The vow includes the important characteristics of the pledge but also incorporates the spiritual aspects.

[45] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'vow, n.'.
[46] Laing, 'Bound by Words', p. 48.
[47] Ibid., p. 47.
[48] Schlesinger, *Promises, Oaths, and Vows*, p. 7.
[49] Laing, 'Bound by Words', p. 47.

The Boast

Another category of sworn language is the boast. Perhaps the boast can be viewed as another subcategory of the pledge since the boast involves an offer made in the agreement. Whereas the pledge is usually made between two or maybe a few people, the boast is a public pledge to the community and to the speaker himself. Furthermore, the boast is spoken out of free will. The *OED* defines the modern boast as a "proud or vain-glorious speech" which expresses bragging and glorifying one's actions.[50]

However, the boast in Old English literature can be analyzed as a form of sworn language instead of vain-glorious speech. According to Holmes, "C.M. Adderly has identified a distinction in the Old English nomenclature of boasting, with bragging in the modern sense of vainglorious self-congratulation always associated with *beot*, and the heroic boast in the sense of a virtuous promise indicated by the verb *gylpan*".[51] Holmes views boasting speech as a kind of pledge that entails the achievement of glory. It seems similar to the pledge since it is an agreement in which a sacrifice is made that guarantees validity. Both the speech and the actions had to be truthful if the speaker did not wish to lose his offer. In boasting speech, the integrity and honour of the one boasting was often the precious possession at stake. The difference with other types of sworn language lies in the fact that "the boast is the act of a 'free-agent': it is voluntary, it is spontaneous, it is initiated entirely by the retainer".[52] Furthermore, Mathisen states that "a boast is a pledge for a specific action, such as Beowulf's pledge to kill Grendel".[53] In this case, Beowulf promises publicly that he will kill Grendel, which he does voluntarily after Grendel kills one of his men. If he breaks his word, he will lose his reliability and honour. In fact, boasting speech intends "to enhance the sense of importance of the oath maker, or to emphasize his depth of feeling about some issue".[54] When someone utters a boast, there are three stages within the speech according to Tyler.[55] Firstly, the speaker of the boast identifies himself, often declaring his family name. Secondly, he clearly states the conditions of the action that is to be performed. Lastly, he refers to the outcome and what should be done if he dies in the deed. Unlike the pledge, the boast can be

[50] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'boast, n.'.
[51] Holmes, 'Oaths and Oath Breaking', pp. 258-259.
[52] D.W. Mathisen, 'Words, Deeds, and the Combat Decision in Old English Heroic Literature' (Texas, 2001), p. 24.
[53] Ibid., p. 24.
[54] Schlesinger, *Promises, Oaths, and Vows*, p. 9.
[55] Mathisen, 'Words, Deeds, and the Combat Decision', pp. 26-27.

formulated by one person. The terms on which the agreement is based can be determined individually since its main goal is the achievement of personal glory.

The Judicial Oath

The oath, including the judicial oath as well as the oath of loyalty, is the most complex of all the categories of sworn language that attest to truth in speech. The oath is taken before witnesses and is bound to strict procedures and rituals. According to Laing, "the oath embodies an articulation of integrity not available to any other form of swearing, and this specialized characteristic explains its recurrent usage throughout the medieval world and its exceptional structure for ensuring honesty".[56] In Anglo-Saxon culture, the oath was indeed deemed the most important form of expressing honesty and carried great weight in decision making and the validity of loyalty. The Old English word for oath is *áþ* and is in the *OED* defined as "a solemn or formal declaration invoking God (or a god, or other object of reverence) as witness to the truth of a statement, or to the binding nature of a promise or undertaking".[57] Schlesinger also defines the oath as a serious, formal promise bound to future actions of the speaker.[58] He deems the oath the ultimate means to tell the truth, embodied as it is in culture and law and order.[59] The legal system in Anglo-Saxon culture was not well-developed yet, and the oath was used to perform justice. According to Schlesinger, the oath contributed positively to the morality of a culture:

> The 'soft' system of social controls embodied in 'culture' complements the more formal sets of rules and sanctions that are codified in law and regulation. Anthropologists tell us that every culture develops such patterns of traditional customs and expectations, which differ from each other in particulars but cover the same areas of behaviour and belief and always are supported by a set of overarching principles, often based in or supported by religion; and it is this set of higher principles that frames what is moral.[60]

In addition to the witnesses, divinity also played an important role in the enforcement of justice and was therefore involved in the rituals that complemented the sworn language. The oath was not only used in the legal structure built on truth, but it was also used in the system

[56] Laing, 'Bound by Words', p. 47.
[57] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'oath, n.'.
[58] Schlesinger, *Promises, Oaths, and Vows*, pp. 16-17.
[59] Ibid., p. 8.
[60] Ibid., p. 3.

of morality that was guided by religious principles. Because of its religious elements, the oath itself embodied the honesty of words that ensured the corresponding deeds.

Moreover, the oath is also bound by restrictive and prescriptive language. The oath depends on a formulaic structure as is described as follows in the *OED*: "The statement or promise made in such a declaration, or the words of such a statement".[61] Due to its formulaic structure in clear and uniform language, it is not easy to break the oath. Oath-takers are bound by these words wherein no loophole occurs. The oath is not ambiguous but straightforward and those who do abuse the oath are punished. This fixed language is still important in legal cases to avoid manipulation or deception.

As is mentioned earlier in this chapter, when an oath-taker in the Anglo-Saxon period broke the oath, the punishment did not necessarily have to be financial loss but could involve one's social and spiritual status as well. Financial loss was not a significant penalty for everybody, but the loss of one's social status and one's spiritual well-being was. Since divinity and the oath were intertwined, the breaker of an oath would also be religiously punished. These social and spiritual penalties that were incorporated within the oath ensured the fulfilment of the promise.

The judicial oath was employed in legal cases to guarantee the honesty in the speaker's words and consequently enforce justice in the Anglo-Saxon culture. Before the legal case began and the charges were brought forward, the accused had to take an "*fóreáþ*, the oath sworn at the beginning of every lawsuit".[62] In order for the defendant to argue for his final judgement, his innocence and ultimately his acquittal, he needed to take other oaths to support his statement. These specialized oaths were the accused's defence, which would guarantee the honesty of his words and validate the indictment. Depending on the social status of the accused, the accused himself and two others (or more, in some cases) had to swear an oath that the accused was innocent. The final judgement depended on the oaths that were taken, the spoken truth of the accused before witnesses and God. The judicial oath is therefore a complex and important form of sworn language, restricted by rules as well as rituals.

Much like the pledge, which usually involves the joining of hands, the judicial oath also involves a ritual that shows the importance of the hands of the speaker during the oath-taking. People would not take oaths using words alone; they took the oaths on relics in the presence of a saint, witnesses and God. As is stated by Deanesly, "every oath sworn before the altar [or court] was sworn by the relics that lay beneath it: and an oath taken (with the

[61] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'oath, n.'.
[62] Laing, 'Bound by Words', p. 34.

hand resting on the capsa or shrine containing the saint's relics) was a very solemn attestation that a man spoke the truth".[63] The speaker of the judicial oath had to place his hand on an important religious object while swearing. This gesture gave the sworn words more power and made the speaker aware of the importance of oath-keeping.[64] According to Laing, "someone swearing upon a religious object thus distributes the responsibility for detecting and punishing perjury so that enforcement falls not only to those individuals presently hearing the oath, but also to the spiritual power of the one whose objects are being used".[65] The formulaic language and the ritual of placing one's hand on a spiritual item ensured the conformity between the sworn words and reality.

The Oath of Loyalty

The oath of loyalty, also known as the oath of allegiance, is a subcategory of the oath. It expresses reliability or allegiance to one another. To take an oath of loyalty means mutual commitment and establishes strong, social bonds. According to the *OED*, an oath of loyalty is "a solemn promise of loyalty, support, and obedience, originally made to a temporal or spiritual leader (esp. the reigning monarch or pope), but now also to a government, state, or some other body of authority, or a symbol representing it".[66] By swearing an oath of loyalty before a king or saint, one expressed his fidelity and promised to be loyal. Subjects of the king swore to be loyal to the king, establishing peace, and in return, the king protected the land and its citizens. This reciprocal commitment could also solve political problems, strengthen personal bonds and create harmony.[67] The oath of loyalty was not only important between the king and his subjects but was also frequently used in the Anglo-Saxon *comitatus*, or war-band. In Anglo-Saxon warrior culture it was important that mutual trust existed between the lord and his retainers. Therefore, the retainers swore to be loyal to their lord and to follow him wherever he would go. In return, the retainers received treasures, status and glory. Additionally, "loyalty oaths join together those of unequal social status, and such acts of

[63] Deanesly, *The Pre-Conquest Church in England*, p. 333.
[64] Schlesinger, *Promises, Oaths, and Vows*, p. 41.
[65] Laing, 'Bound by Words', p. 30.
[66] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'oath, n.'.
[67] Patrick Wormald notes that "the significance of the Anglo-Saxon loyalty oath us thus that, from the genesis of the English kingdom as an organized state, the government was in the front rank of the battle to control social deviance and disorder", p. 338. Also, he states that "in the early period, there is no good evidence that oaths were sworn either to lords generally or to kings specifically: the warrior's loyalty to his lord arose from the latter's generosity, not from any ceremonial pledge." See *The Blackwell's Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, s.v. oath.

swearing are frequently associated with an individual's submission to authority".[68] Members of the *comitatus* were each other's equals and respected each other. They viewed themselves as brothers-in-arms but made their choice to submit to authority individually by oath. The oath of loyalty is strong, life-binding and a long-term commitment, often until one's death. For that reason, the oath of loyalty is the most complex and intense promise of sworn language. Everything one owned was at stake at that time, and could also be lost when the oath was broken.

Similar to the judicial oath, the oath of loyalty also places emphasis on hand gestures and other body language. In medieval times, the oath-taker would kneel before the person he promised his oath of loyalty to, insinuating his subordination to the person receiving his oath. In addition, "the hands of the one swearing are placed inside the hands of the individual accepting the oath, thus symbolically placing the ability to act within the control of the other".[69] This ritual of body language and hand-holding was the physical act that confirmed the speech of the oath of loyalty. Due to the complexity of the process and the prescribed conventions that accompany the speech of truth (the required body language, hand gestures and witnesses), the oath is superior to the other forms of sworn language. Therefore, the other categories of honest speech are not interchangeable with the oath.

From this chapter, it is clear that oath-taking played a significant part in upholding society, law and loyalty. Oath-taking had a great impact, but oath-breaking did not go without consequences either. Moreover, different forms of promises are used interchangeably during oath-taking, though each form has its own category, meaning and process. This chapter has explained the pledge, vow, boast, promise and the oath as separate incompatible forms, which have their own use and definition. However, in the following chapters, the focus will be on only one category of sworn language: the oath of loyalty. This category of sworn language in particular, which plays an important part within the Germanic heroic code of the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture and in Tolkien's works, will be extensively explored. The oath of loyalty and its importance in Anglo-Saxon warrior culture will be further developed in the following chapter by means of examples from the Old English texts *Beowulf* and *BM*.

[68] Laing, 'Bound by Words', p. 37.
[69] Ibid., p. 30.

CHAPTER 2 – The Oath of Loyalty in Old English Literature: Heroes of a Lost Age

> ‘Ic þæt hogode, þa ic on holm gestah,
> sæbat gesæt mid minra secga gedriht,
> þæt ic anunga eowra leoda
> willan geworhte, oþðe on wæl crunge
> feondgrapum fæst. Ic gefremman sceal
> eorlic ellen, oþðe endedæg
> on þisse meoduhealle minne gebidan!’
>
> [‘I resolved when I set out over the waves, sat down at my ship with my troop of soldiers, that I would entirely fulfil the wishes of your people, or fall slain, fast in the grip of my foe. I shall perform a deed of manly courage, or in this meadhall I will await the end of my days!’][70]

Oaths are taken to prove and guarantee one’s loyalty to one’s lord. As is stated by Beowulf in the lines above, he intends to satisfy his lord and prove his loyalty by taking up the fight against Grendel and fulfil the wishes of the Danes. Beowulf has sworn loyalty to his uncle Hygelac, king of the Geats, who has sent him to help the Danes. The oath of loyalty is deemed important in Anglo-Saxon warrior culture since it creates mutual commitment and deep social bonds. The significance of sworn loyalty becomes clear when looking at Old English literature. Oaths, loyalty and heroism are prominent features of texts such as *Beowulf* and *BM*. In fact, the taking of an oath of loyalty is part of a greater code that includes loyalty and heroic behaviour: the heroic ethos. To understand the importance of oath-taking in Anglo-Saxon culture, it is helpful to know what the heroic ethos represents. Additionally, the clarification of the heroic ethos will illustrate what kind of behaviour and values the oath of loyalty entails. This chapter will expand on the heroic code, in which the oath of loyalty is incorporated, and explore the norms and values connected to the oath of loyalty by using examples from the Old English poems *Beowulf* and *BM*.

Old English Heroic Literature: ‘Beowulf’ and ‘The Battle of Maldon’

Literature and poetry in the Anglo-Saxon period were mainly written in Old English. Poetry, and other literature, was often composed, carried out and passed on orally in verse form, which was common to Germanic people. The performing of poetry was rooted in the oral tradition and was only written down much later. Minstrels at the court of kings would sing

[70] *Beowulf*, trans. R. M. Liuzza from *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Medieval Period*, ed. J. Black *et al.* (Peterborough, 2009), pp. 44-92, ll. 435-440. All other references to *Beowulf* refer to this edition and translation.

about traditional legends from the Germanic past, occasionally adding Christian features or stories as well.[71] The Old English language and literature show the importance of heroes in Anglo-Saxon culture. Many expressions for 'warrior' are extensively used in Old English heroic poetry. Although the Anglo-Saxons did not have a word for 'hero', there were approximately seventy words for 'warrior' according to the *Thesaurus of Old English*.[72] Due to Anglo-Saxon warrior culture, heroic poetry was popular and highly valued. The genre of Old English heroic poetry, according to Bremmer, "comprises poems that deal with warriors endowed with often super-human courage whose actions are motivated from a special set of values, the 'heroic ethos'", for instance *Beowulf* and *BM*.[73]

The poems *Beowulf* and *BM* are two well-preserved Old English texts that illustrate the actions of heroes of old times. They tell the legends of two lords and their retainers who heroically fought many battles in the Germanic history. *Beowulf* is the longest surviving poem in Old English, consisting of 3,182 lines of alliterative verse. It outlines a folktale of a young hero who, isolated from his family, engages in marvellous and dangerous battles against his foes. He faces three important challenges, which ascend in order of difficulty. In the end, Beowulf achieves eternal glory. The only source of *BM* is a transcript, which was made before the original pages of the poem were destroyed in the fire at the British Library in 1731. The poem consists of 325 lines and already lacked its beginning and end before the fire. *BM* illustrates the tale of the hero Byrhtnoth and his retainers, who are facing a Viking army and choose to fight them instead of paying them off. However, due to Byrhtnoth's pride, he allows the Vikings passage to cross the causeway, which puts himself and his men at a disadvantage. Consequently, he dies a pitiable death but is also praised for his bravery. The rest of the poem shows the heroic deeds of the men that are left behind and reflects on the celebration of virtues such as morality, victory and courage. Although martial victory is impossible, the remaining men achieve moral triumph at least.

[71] D. G. Scragg, 'The Nature of Old English Verse', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. M. Godden and M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 50-65 (p. 107).
[72] Bremmer, 'Old English Heroic Literature', p. 75.
[73] Ibid., p. 76.

The Heroic Ethos

The heroic ethos derives from the heroism of characters in Anglo-Saxon warrior culture, which is also known as 'Germanic heroism'.[74] This heroic code consists of a collection of values and outlines the ideal conduct of a hero in a warrior culture. The three most important values within the heroic code are loyalty, honour and lasting glory. Anglo-Saxon heroes have to live up to the heroic ethos and strive to maintain their loyalty and honour and desire to achieve lasting glory. In order to guarantee one's loyalty, a retainer has to swear an oath to one's lord. According to Harris, "to swear an oath is to encumber oneself with sworn duties. Not only soldiers, but each member of civil society is legally defined by the sworn duties of his or her office".[75] Once the oath is taken, the retainer is bound to his word until he is released from it. Additionally, keeping one's oath also means that one acts honourably, which is the second important value of the heroic ethos.

Hence, heroes must always prove themselves to be honourable, and they must always attempt to gain more respect. Therefore, the lord needs many retainers to make him powerful and respected. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, who wrote about continental Germanic tribes in the year 98 AD, "both [a lord's] prestige and power depend on being continuously attended by a large train of picked young warriors, which is a distinction in peace and a protection in war".[76] Both the lord and his retainers benefit from being part of a large war-band. Retainers try to achieve honour in order to make a name for themselves and earn the respect of their lord and family. To realize this desire, retainers have to partake in battle and show their bravery by killing as many foes as possible. The reason for achieving honour is either because the retainer wishes to become a lord himself one day (and by gaining honour he augments the chance of future lordship), or because he desires lasting glory.

Lasting glory is the third essential value of the heroic ethos and the mutual aim of lord and retainer. They hope that their heroic deeds will appear on paper and that they will be immortalised in literature and song. The stereotype of Germanic heroes strives to live up to this heroic ethos and to both achieve and maintain loyalty, honour and lasting glory. Both

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[74] C. B. Thijs, 'Feminine Heroism in the Old English Judith', *Leeds Studies in English* 37 (2006), pp. 41-62 (p. 49); K. O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Values and Ethics in Heroic Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. M. Godden and M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 101-119 (p. 107).

[75] Harris, 'Oaths in the Battle of Maldon', p. 48.

[76] Cited in Bremmer, 'Old English Heroic Literature', p. 77. Tacitus is a Roman historian and writer of the Germania. Tacitus's work Germania is frequently used to specify the depiction of the bond between lord and retainer and provides a general outline on Germanic war-bands regarding their behaviour and rules. The reason for using his work is because the kingship of in Anglo-Saxon England is not well-documented and there is little known about its specific features. O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Values and Ethics', p. 107.

Beowulf and Byrhtnoth, the leader in *BM*, represent the typical Germanic hero and are, along with their retainers, bound by the oath of loyalty.

The Oath of Loyalty in 'Beowulf' and 'The Battle of Maldon': Banquets and Gift-giving

Taking the oath of loyalty creates a "vital relationship between retainer and lord".[77] The lord and retainer depend on each other, but for the lord to have the loyalty and the sword of a retainer, he needs to offer him something in return. The lord rewards his retainers with banquets and treasures for the deeds they perform under his command. In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar mentions that he boasted to build a hall, a great mead-house where his men could eat and drink, which would be remembered by the sons of men. Years later, when the hall was built, "he beot ne aleh, beagas dælde, / sinc æt symle" [he remembered his boast; he gave out rings, treasure at table].[78] He also gives a feast when Beowulf arrives in his hall with his men to reward the warriors. Hrothgar asks them "site nu to symle ond onsæl meoto, sigehreð secgum, swa þin sefa hwette" [now sit down at my feast, drink mead in my hall, men's reward of victory, as your mood urges].[79] Although Beowulf is sent to Hrothgar by his uncle to fight for him, Hrothgar shows his generosity as a lord to his retainers. Moreover, a lord gives his retainers treasures and gifts in return for their loyalty in the form of weapons, horses, gold or armour. As is stated by the *Beowulf* poet at the beginning of the poem:

> Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean,
> fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme,
> þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
> wilgesiþas, þonne wig cume,
> leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal
> in mægþa gehwære man geþeon.
>
> [Thus should a young man bring about good with pious Gifts from his father's possessions, so that later in life loyal comrades will stand beside him when war comes, the people will support him with praiseworthy deeds a man will prosper among any people.][80]

[77] O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Values and Ethics', p. 101.
[78] *Beowulf*, ll. 80-81.
[79] Ibid., ll. 489-490.
[80] Ibid., ll. 20-25.

By giving those treasures, "a lord enhances both his own reputation and that of his retainer, and he lays upon his men the obligation of future service".[81] Thus, those gifts are not only a reward for past service but they also ensure the retainers' future cooperation.

Due to the retainers' oath of loyalty, Beowulf and Byrhtnoth impose future service on their retainers by providing them with treasures as well. According to White, the oath, or as he calls it 'the agreement', "represents a tie that was or ought to have been constructed in terms of multiple models of lordship, fidelity, and gift-giving and that was the subject of almost continuous renegotiation".[82] Retainers are reminded of the treasures their lord granted them and are obliged to serve him. For example, in *Beowulf*, Wiglaf reminds his fellow retainers of the treasures Beowulf gave them and urges them to fight for him since they are indebted to him for these gifts and battle-gear.[83] Therefore, Anglo-Saxon warrior lords are often called *sinces brytta* 'distributer of treasure', *goldwine* 'gold-friend' or *beaggyfa* 'ring-giver'.[84] Beowulf himself is called *beaga bryttan* 'ring-giver' and *goldgyfa* 'gold-giver' by his men throughout the poem.[85] Additionally, Byrhtnoth also grants his retainers treasures, for his men call him *sincgyfan* 'treasure-giver'.[86] As said before, Wiglaf's words show that Beowulf grants his retainers treasures in return for their service. Hence, when Beowulf dies, he offers Wiglaf many valuables and his battle equipment as a reward for his loyalty and honour. While the retainers keep their oath and loyally risk their lives for their lords, Beowulf and Byrhtnoth keep their end of the bargain by recompensing their retainers with banquets and treasures.

Mutual Protection

Although the lord pays his retainers for their loyalty and future service, the oath they have taken involves mutual commitment to their cause. In pursuing this cause, lord and retainer offer each other mutual protection as well. The lord has to consider their position and strategy when he and his men go to battle. This must be carefully thought through since a fight has to be effective and efficient with as few casualties as possible. The lord needs to protect his men and not carelessly send them to war.

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[81] O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Values and Ethics', p. 102.
[82] Stephen D. White cited in Hermanson, 'Holy Unbreakable Bonds', p. 17.
[83] *Beowulf*, ll. 2635-2638.
[84] Bremmer, 'Old English Heroic Literature', p. 77.
[85] *Beowulf*, ll. 352, 2652.
[86] *The Battle of Maldon*, trans. R.M. Liuzza from *Broadview Anthology*, ed. Black *et al.*, pp. 103-108, l. 278. All other references to *The Battle of Maldon* refer to this edition and translation.

Therefore, in order to be able to protect his men, a lord must outshine his men in bravery. Consequently, Beowulf shows his bravery by letting his retainers know that he could never turn his back on a battle, just before he enters the dragon's cave: "Nelle ic beorges weard oferfleon fotes trem" [From the hoard's warden I will not flee a single foot].[87] Moreover, he promises his retainers that he would rather die than take flight. He boasts: "Ic mid elne sceall gold gegangan, oððe guð nimeð, feorhbealu frecne, frean eowerne!" [With daring I shall get that gold –or grim death and fatal barrel will bear away your lord!].[88] Similarly, Byrhtnoth outshines his retainers in valour when he chooses war instead of paying the Vikings off at The Battle of Maldon. He exclaims that "[t]o heanlic me þinceð þæt ge mid urum sceattum to scype gangon unbefohtene, nu ge þus feor hider on urne eard in becomon" [it seems too shameful to me to let you go with our gold to your ships without a fight, now that you have come this far into our country].[89] With this boasting speech he demonstrates that he has no fear and that he will lead his men to victory. According to Kightley, "Maldon dramatizes the ability of loyalty to hold back social disorder, both in a general sense and specifically on the battlefield".[90] Robinson adjoins Kightley's statement by asserting that "[a]s long as the Anglo-Saxons stand fast in their loyalty to Byrhtnoth, […] the English line holds, and the English warriors are as one".[91] Thus, in keeping their oaths the retainers and lord are an organized company able to protect each other and defeat their opponent.

Both Byrhtnoth and Beowulf are seen as the protectors of their men. For example, Byrhtnoth is called *hæleða hleo* 'protector of heroes'.[92] Beowulf is named *wigendra hleo* 'protector of warriors' or *eorla hleo* 'protector of the earls'.[93] According to King, "through Beowulf's own voice in his 'confession' (lines 2732b-42a), the poet illustrates his hero's particular style by describing how he stayed within his borders, concentrating on his responsibilities there and establishing himself securely so as to protect his people from attack; and how he refrained from starting feuds, breaking oaths, and (the worst of all crime) slaying his own kin".[94] Beowulf, like Byrhtnoth, takes his responsibility to keep his men safe and

[87] *Beowulf*, ll. 2524-2525.
[88] Ibid., ll. 2535-2537.
[89] *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 55-58.
[90] Michael R. Kightley, 'Communal Interdependence in the Battle of Maldon', *Studia Neophilologica 82* (2010), pp. 58-68 (p. 58).
[91] Cited in Kightley, 'Communal Interdependence', p. 58.
[92] *The Battle of Maldon*, l. 74.
[93] *Beowulf*, ll. 429, 791, 1035.
[94] Judy King, 'Transforming the Hero: Beowulf and the Conversion of Hunferth', in *The Hero Recovered: Essays on Medieval Herosim in Honor of George Clark*, ed. R. Waugh and J. Weldon (Kalamazoo, 2010), pp. 47-64 (p. 48).

protect them, as they will in turn defend him. Moreover, he asks Hrothgar to promise that he will protect his retainers if he should die in battle. As such, Beowulf guarantees his men safety and protection, even in death, by handing over his responsibilities to another lord.

Vice versa, the retainers protect their lord by following him into battle. They fight by his side and do not question his choices. Bound by their oath, they will not let their lord down and only leave the battlefield when their lord commands them to do so. Accordingly, Beowulf's retainers must also protect their lord by fighting together with him, especially when Beowulf himself is king and already aging. To remind his fellow retainers of their promise to be loyal, Wiglaf explains how a faithful retainer must act in a dangerous situation. At all times, retainers are obliged to fight with their lord when he needs them, for they have to compensate for the gifts and banquets he has given them:

> 'Ic ðæt mæl geman, þær we medu þegun,
> þonne we geheton ussum hlaforde
> in biorsele, ðe us ðas beagas geaf,
> þæt we him ða guðgetawa gyldan woldon
> gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe,
> helmas ond heard sweord. Đe he usic on herge geceas
> to ðyssum siðfate sylfes willum,
> onmunde usic mærða, ond me þas maðmas geaf,
> þe he usic garwigend gode tealde,
> hwate helmberend, þeah ðe hlaford us
> þis ellenweorc ana aðohte
> to gefremmanne, folces hyrde,
> for ðam he manna mæst mærða gefremede,
> dæda dollicra. Nu is se dæg cumen
> þæt ure mandryhten mægenes behofað,
> godra guðrinca'.
>
> ['I remember the time that we took mead together, when we made promises to our prince in the beer-hall – he gave us those rings – that we would pay him back for this battle-gear, these helmets and hard swords, if such a need as this ever befell him. For this he chose us from the army for this adventure by his own will. Thought us worthy of glory, and gave me these treasures—for this he considered us good spear-warriors, proud helmet-wearers, even though our prince, shepherd of his people, intended to perform this act of courage all alone, because he has gained the most glory among men, reckless heroic deeds. Now the day has come that our noble lord has need of the support of good warriors'.][95]

Wiglaf urges his brothers-in-arms to come to his aid and face the fight together. In return for their lord's protection they now have to protect him as well.

Furthermore, in *BM*, the poet highlights the depth of the retainers' loyalty. For example, two retainers, Ælfere and Maccus, do not break their promise to their lord. They are

[95] *Beowulf*, ll. 2633-2648.

described as "modige twegen, þa noldon æt þam forda fleam gewyrcan, ac hi fæstlice wið ða fynd weredon, þa hwile þe hi wæpna wealdan moston" [two valiant men who would not take flight at the ford, but stoutly defended themselves against the foe as long as they might wield weapons].[96] Hence, it is clear these warriors will do everything to protect their lord, and will uphold their oath even when their lord is slain in battle.

Retribution

In Anglo-Saxon heroic literature and poetry, taking an oath means being bound to it for an unspecific period, which is usually for life. Therefore, it became common practice to prove one's loyalty even when one's lord had died. The manner in which the retainers fulfilled their promise to their lord was by avenging him when he was killed at the battlefield. However, this final act of loyalty often meant that warriors ended up dying with their lord in their attempt to avenge him. As Harris accurately affirmed: "One's oath could literally be worth one's life".[97] However, Mathisen argues that this 'rise of the suicidal ethic' was a rather new development in Anglo-Saxon heroic culture in comparison to other former warrior cultures.[98] Additionally, Hill states about this changing ideal that "in these narratives of West Saxon feud a new ideal has been rightly established, one that politically asserts an ethically supreme kingship".[99] Thus, instead of the retreat or surrender by the retainers once their lord has died, a new value has developed, showing that it is more honourable to give one's life for one's lord. Therefore, this ideal is considered the final act of fulfilling the oath and invigorates the definition of loyalty in Anglo-Saxon warrior culture.

Particularly in *BM*, where lord Byrhtnoth dies in combat, the retainers are an important example of the fulfilment of this final act of loyalty. After Byrhtnoth's death, the men embolden each other with words to fight to the last man. One of the retainers, Dunnere, impelled each men to avenge Byrhtnoth by exclaiming that "[n]e mæg na wandian se þe wrecan þenceð frean on folce ne for feore murnan" [[h]e must never weaken, who hopes for to revenge his lord on this people, nor care for his life!].[100] Accordingly, Kightley states that:

> "[T]he ceorl Dunnere's brief speech has an 'infectious' effect on those around him, inspiring them to follow his heroic lead. This notion of infection is a useful

[96] *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 80-83.
[97] Harris, 'Oaths', p. 86.
[98] Mathisen, 'Words, Deeds and the Combat Decision', p. 23.
[99] Hill cited in Mathisen, 'Words, Deeds, and Combat Decision', p. 54.
[100] *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 258-259.

> way of imagining the structure of the latter part of the poem, specifically the series of speeches by individual warriors vowing either to avenge or to die beside their fallen lord: each warrior's speech infects another warrior, reaching a culmination".[101]

The loyal retainers only wanted one of two things: "Lif forlætan oððe leofne gewrecan" [To give up their lives or avenge their dear lord].[102] Moreover, Clark argues that "Byrhtnoth's fall imposed a demand of loyalty even in the prospect of defeat and death upon his followers. The disintegration of Byrhtnoth's fyrd, the moral collapse of the group he had made one with himself in the poem's first movement, becomes the poem's peripeteia or turning point, its crucial moment".[103] The death of one's lord is in fact the ultimate test to prove one's faithfulness to one's promise. Although Byrhtnoth himself was dying, "har hilderninc, hyssas bylde, bæd gangan forð gode geferan" [the grey-haired warrior, encouraged the young men and bade them go forth as good companions].[104] However, his support was superfluous since his loyal men were already determined to keep up their fight after his passing. For instance, two of his retainers, Ælfnoth and Wulmar, "begen lagon, ða onemn hyra frean feorh gesealdon" [both lay dead, and gave up their lives with their lord].[105] Many more died with them. Although it seems that the warriors did not have high hopes for success, they proved themselves steadfast and faithful to their lord.

Boasting Speech

Although the oath of loyalty is not taken during the two poems, *Beowulf* and *BM* include references to previously made oaths. Frequently, the warriors signify the oath they are bound to by repeating the promises they made in public. Beowulf, for example, does not take an oath of loyalty in the poem, but it is indicated that his father did so to Hrothgar. Therefore, Beowulf is also loyal to Hrothgar. Beowulf's father Ecgtheow had killed a man of the Wylfings, Heatholaf, whose wergild had been paid by Hrothgar. In return, Ecgtheow promises to be loyal to Hrothgar by taking an oath and this oath passed on to the next generation. As is also stated by Harris, "a kin group was responsible in the case of murder for the murdered

[101] Kightley, 'Communal Interdependence', p. 59. This citation of Kightley is based on the ideas of Robinson.
[102] *The Battle of Maldon*, l. 208.
[103] Cited in Kightley, 'Communal Interdependence', p. 58.
[104] *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 169-170.
[105] Ibid., ll. 183-184.

man's price, or wergild, and also for an oath".[106] In this case, Hrothgar paid for the murdered man and Beowulf's father took an oath of loyalty:

> 'Siððan þa fæhðe feo þingode;
> sende ic Wylfingum ofer wæteres hrycg
> ealde madmas; he me aþas swor'.
>
> ['Later I settled that feud with fee-money; I sent to the Wylfings over he crest of the waves ancient treasures; he swore oaths to me'.][107]

However, this oath of loyalty was passed on to the following generation. While Beowulf never swore loyalty to Hrothgar, he is bound to his father's oath and accepts Hrothgar as his lord. He boasts that he will fight for him or die in the attempt:

> 'Ic þæt hogode, þa ic on holm gestah,
> sæbat gesæt mid minra secga gedriht,
> þæt ic anunga eowra leoda
> willan geworhte, oþðe on wæl crunge
> feondgrapum fæst. Ic gefremman sceal
> eorlic ellen, oþðe endedæg
> on þisse meoduhealle minne gebidan!'
>
> ['I resolved when I set out over the waves, sat down at my ship with my troop of soldiers, that I would entirely fulfil the wishes of your people, or fall slain, fast in the grip of my foe. I shall perform a deed of manly courage, or in this meadhall I will await the end of my days!'][108]

Beowulf and Hrothgar are not the only ones to remember their sworn duties. Wiglaf, too, reminds his fellow comrades of their oaths when he declares: "We geheton ussum hlaforde" [We made promises to our prince].[109] The retainers in *BM* also refer to formerly sworn oaths in their boasting speech. In fact, they make boasts about their loyalty and swear to protect their lord, so that their oaths of loyalty echo in public. For instance, Ælfwine bravely speaks about the speeches they made: "Þonne we on bence beot ahofon, hæleð on healle, ymbe heard gewinn" [when we made boasts on the benches, heroes in the hall, about hard struggle].[110] Similarly, Edward speaks boastful words about his bravery; he would not flee now his lord was dead.[111] Moreover, Offa literarily speaks about his promise when he utters that "he hæfde

[106] Harris, 'Oaths', p. 86.
[107] *Beowulf*, ll. 470-473.
[108] Ibid., ll. 632-638.
[109] Ibid., ll. 2634.
[110] *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 212-214.
[111] Ibid., l. 275.

ðeah geforþod þæt he his frean gehet" [he had lived up to his promise to his lord].[112] He also "beotode ær wið his beahgifan þæt hi sceoldon begen on burh ridan, hale to hame, oððe on here crincgan, on wælstowe wundum sweltan" [boasted before his ring-giver that they would ride together into the stronghold, get home safely, or fall in the slaughter, die of wounds on the field of war].[113] Through boasts, Beowulf, his retainers and the warriors of Byrhtnoth show the strong social bond between themselves and their lord and allude to the oaths they made previously.

Oath-Breaking

However, not all retainers keep the oaths they made. In both *Beowulf* and *BM*, there are a few retainers who break their oath and are punished for it. As said before, a warrior's reputation and status are built upon honour. Therefore, breaking an oath, and thus the heroic code, results in the collapse of a warrior's position. During Beowulf's last battle, all retainers but one flee from the battlefield and hide in the forest:

> Nealles him on heape handgesteallan,
> æðelinga bearn ymbe gestodon
> hildecystum, ac hy on holt bugon,
> ealdre burgan. Hiora in anum weoll
> sefa wið sorgum; sibb æfre ne mæg
> wiht onwendan þam ðe wel þenceð.
>
> [His comrades, hand-chosen, sons of noblemen, did not take their stand in a troop around him, with warlike valour—they fled to the words and saved their lives. The spirit rose up in sorrow in the heart of one of them; nothing can overrule kinship at all, in one who thinks well.][114]

The consequences for these unfaithful retainers are severe. The price they pay for their cowardice is the right to be landowners for themselves and their family.[115] They lose their status, credibility and honour. Wiglaf eventually exiles the retainers. According to the *Beowulf* poet, he who does not risk his life in battle and flees, "dome forleas, ellenmærðum" [lost honour, his fame for courage].[116] In addition, as is stated by Katherine O'Brien

[112] Ibid., l. 289.
[113] Ibid., ll. 290-293.
[114] *Beowulf*, ll. 2596-2601.
[115] O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Values and Ethics', p. 103.
[116] *Beowulf*, ll. 1470-1471.

O'Keeffe, "their punishment of exile is a living death".[117] Warriors of Byrhtnoth also leave battle when they see their lord has been slain. They even take the horse of their lord:

> Godwine and Godwig: guþe ne gymdon,
> ac wendon fram þam wige and þone wude sohton,
> flugon on þæt fæsten and hyra feore burgon,
> and manna ma þonne hit ænig mæð wære,
> gyf hi þa geearnunga ealle gemundon
> þe he him to duguþe gedon hæfde.
>
> [Godwine and Godweg didn't care for battle, but turned from the war and took to the woods, fled to safety and saved their lives, and many more beyond any good measure, if they had remembered all the rewards he had given them for their services.][118]

The poet laments their flight, for they would not have fled if they had remembered their oaths and their rewards. According to Kightley, "because the poem presents the community as a web of interdependence, the disloyalty of the cowards is not simply to their fallen general, but also to the outnumbered few who remained loyal".[119] Due to the betrayal of these retainers, other warriors thought that it was lord Byrhtnoth himself who was leaving the battlefield on his horse and retreated as well. The ones who remained loyal and prepared themselves to fight until the end were now outnumbered. In addition, Tolkien states that "the poem exposes Byrhtnoth's flaws in order to expose at the same time the true depth of his followers' heroic loyalty: their 'heroism of obedience and love'".[120] The poem clearly shows who keep their oath at times of need and who do not. The cowardly retainers of Byrhtnoth too lose their honour, their titles and will live a life of shame.

Another good example of oath-breaking in Anglo-Saxon culture is re-encountered in the *Beowulf* poem. In the poem, a short piece of the story of Finn and Hengest is told, which includes the alliance they made. After Finn betrayed the Danes and killed Hnæf, Finn and Hengest swore peace to each other. The marriage between Hildeburh and Finn was already a pledge for peace between the two nations, but this promise was broken by Finn and resulted in slaughter. After this dreadful event, Hengest and Finn promised each other loyalty again:

> Ða hie getruwedon on twa healfa
> fæste frioðuwære. Fin Hengeste
> elne unflitme aðum benemde,

[117] O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Values and Ethics', p. 115.
[118] *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 192-197.
[119] Kightley, 'Communal Interdependence', p. 62.
[120] Cited in Kightley, 'Communal Interdependence', p. 58.

> þæt he þa wealafe weotena dome
> arum heolde, þæt ðær ænig mon
> wordum ne worcum wære ne bræce,
> ne þurh inwitsearo æfre gemænden,
> ðeah hie hira beaggyfan banan folgedon
> ðeodenlease, þa him swa geþearfod wæs;
> gyf þonne Frysna hwylc frecnan spræce
> ðæs morþorhetes myndgiend wære,
> þonne hit sweordes ecg seðan scolde.

> [They swore their pledges then on either side, a firm compact of peace. With unfeigned zeal Finn swore his oaths to Hengest, pledged that he, with the consent of his counsellors, would support with honour those sad survivors, and that none should break their pact in word or deed, nor through malice should ever make mention, though they should serve their ring-giver's slayer, without a lord, as they were led by need-- and if, provoking, any Frisian spoke reminding them of all their murderous hate, then with the sword's edge they should settle it.][121]

However, Hengest had a restless heart, full of revengeful intentions and he broke his oath. This resulted in another battle between the Danes and the Frisians, in which Finn was killed. Hengest returned to his own country with Hildeburh, who had no place among the Frisians anymore. Although avenging one's kin is deemed honourable, both Finn and Hengest lost their reputation for loyalty by breaking their oaths.

This chapter shortly explained the heroic code in Anglo-Saxon warrior culture, which includes the three main values loyalty, honour and glory. The value 'loyalty' is extensively discussed, focusing on the oath of loyalty in Anglo-Saxon heroic literature. From both *Beowulf* and *BM*, it is clear who strive to live up to their oath and the norms and values that accompany this promise. Furthermore, the oath-breakers and the consequences they faced are also analyzed in this chapter. The importance of oath-taking and –breaking and the heroic behaviour that involves the oath of loyalty in Anglo-Saxon culture was discussed at length in the previous two chapters. These heroic features are often used and implemented in modern literature and fiction. The next chapter will discuss Tolkien's *LR*, and show that the Anglo-Saxon oath-taking is not just borrowed by Tolkien, but used to illustrate a different approach.

[121] *Beowulf*, ll. 1095-1106.

CHAPTER 3- Nine Loyal Hearts and Twice as Many Promises: Tolkien's Recasting of the Heroic Oath in *The Lord of the Rings*.

> 'It is going to be very dangerous, Sam. It is already dangerous. Most likely neither of us will come back.'
> 'If you don't come back, sir, then I shan't, that's certain', said Sam.[122]

These are the words of a brave young hobbit from the Shire on a quest far away from his homeland. On their way to Mount Doom, Samwise Gamgee becomes an unexpected hero who is able to keep fighting for his home, the good of all and, most importantly, his master. He promises his loyalty to his master and their quest, which proves an important issue in Tolkien's trilogy of *LR*.

The promise of loyalty to one's master is also closely linked to Anglo-Saxon warrior culture. Therefore, Tolkien's *LR* is often deemed to be the beginning of heroic fantasy in modern literature.[123] With his professional and specialized knowledge of Old English and Anglo-Saxon culture, Tolkien laid the foundation of his works. Not only was he a creator of a new literary genre inspired on a historical age, he was also a firm critic of the ancient culture that survived in heroic poetry. Tolkien spent many years on the analysis and translation of *BM* and *Beowulf*. He thoroughly criticised both Old English texts and wrote a freely interpreted translation of *Beowulf*. Moreover, he composed a sequel to *BM*, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorthelm's Son*, containing post-commentary on the events, and discussed 'ofermod' at greater length in the third part.[124]

Although quite a few scholars believe that Tolkien reproduced the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture in his works, the heroic ethos that the characters live up to in *LR*, and in particular oath-taking, diverges intentionally from the heroic ethos and oaths of loyalty in Anglo-Saxon warrior culture. The appearance of the characters and their heroic behaviour may seem familiar, but there are subtle yet important differences. In *LR*, all common motives for heroic actions are accounted for but it is the presentation and the manner in which the characters deal with these motives that changes the heroic culture altogether. Leadership, loyalty, fame, revenge and oaths are all present. However, they are less important, or important for other reasons, in comparison with the Germanic heroic ethos. Tolkien reshapes

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[122] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (London, 2002), p. 114.
[123] *LR* abbreviation of *The Lord of the Rings*
[124] J.R.R. Tolkien, 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorthelm's Son', in *Tree and Leaf* (London: 2001), pp. 121-150.

the Germanic heroic ethos in his works and thus creates a different kind of hero. Specifically, he associates different norms and values with the oaths of loyalty made in his works.

This chapter will show that Tolkien intentionally diverges from the Germanic heroic ethos and oath-taking and breaking as it occurs in Old English heroic poetry. In order to understand why Tolkien recreated the oath-taking culture, his view on *Beowulf* and *BM* will be discussed below. Thereafter, this chapter will explore the new norms and values that are associated with the oath of loyalty in *LR*.

A Different View on Heroism

Tolkien struggled with a dilemma that entailed his own professional liking of the heroic behaviour in Anglo-Saxon culture and his strong ideological aversion to some of its values. He had developed, like many others at that time, a negative view of war. As a soldier in the First World War, he closely experienced the horror it brought. The glorious battle as it was illustrated by the authority and through campaigns, did not exist. According to Frank, "The First World War brought about a change in attitude towards war and soldiering […] We no longer assume that fighting is glorious or fun".[125] Defeat, and the knowledge that all comes to an end, is realistic and is emphasized throughout Old English heroic poetry as well as *LR*. In particular, 'glorious defeat' evokes critique on the heroic code. Perhaps more precisely, as Bowman states, dissatisfaction "with certain kinds of choices that an inappropriate emphasis on heroism might inspire".[126] Tolkien displays his dissatisfaction on 'glorious defeat' in his criticism on *BM* in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelms's Son*.

As Tolkien and other scholars would have it, the desire for *lof* and *dom* in heroic songs led Byrhtnoth to a wrong decision which proved fatal to himself and his retainers. Clark, for instance, noted about Byrhtnoth that "he sought honour for his valour rather than exercising his valour only and strictly in the service of his duty".[127] Tolkien attributed Byrhtnoth's actions to his *ofermod* 'pride', which he explains in *The Homecoming.* Here, Tídwald, an old veteran of war, searches for the remains of Beorhtnoth on the battlefield with the young clerk Torhthelm. Whereas Torhthelm believes that the songs of war are beautiful and that fighting a battle is heroic and courageous, Tídwald claims that war is not as glorious as Torhthelm's songs, but horrible and full of sadness. He considers the warlord's choice to be foolish: "He

[125] Roberta Frank in Bowman, 'Refining the Gold', p. 94.
[126] Bowman, 'Refining the Gold', p. 94.
[127] G. Clark, 'J.R.R. Tolkien and the True Hero', in *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-earth*, ed. G. Clark and D. Timmons (Santa Barbara, 2000), pp. 39-51 (p. 49).

let them cross the causeway, so keen was he to give minstrels matter for mighty songs. Needlessly noble".[128] Beorhtnoth's choice was not that of a responsible lord fulfilling his duty, but of a lord acting to achieve glory only. Tolkien particularly disapproves of this part of the heroic code because of two reasons. First, since it is a lord's duty to protect his country, Beorhtnoth falls short in this respect.[129] Second, a lord has to protect his men, just as his men need to protect their lord. Beorhtnoth has a responsibility to the retainers fighting for him. They all swore an oath of loyalty and would follow their lord to war and till death but most importantly, they would follow their lord in whatever choice he made. In the case of Beorhtnoth, he makes a choice not only for his own life, but also that of his men. According to Tolkien, "it was heroic of him and his men to fight, to annihilation if necessary, in the attempt to destroy or hold off the invaders. It was wholly unfitting that he should treat a desperate battle with this sole real object as a sporting match, to the ruin of his purpose and duty".[130] Thus, Beorhtnoth's choice to grant the enemy more land in order to gain glory, instead of protecting the country and its men, is deemed irresponsible.

Beorhtnoth's deeds are not the only ones believed to be imprudent; Beowulf's behaviour is criticized by Tolkien for the same reasons. Beowulf's pride and desire for personal glory diminishes his chance to save the Danes from their enemy. In his fight with Grendel, Beowulf "does more than he need, eschewing weapons in order to make his struggle with Grendel a 'sporting' fight: which will enhance his personal glory; though it will put him in unnecessary peril, and weaken his chances of ridding the Danes of an intolerable affliction".[131] However, he has no other duty to the Danes and no responsibilities downwards, which means that there is no harm in enhancing his personal glory at that moment. The situation changes when Beowulf is king and still makes his battles a 'sporting' fight. Now, he is responsible for the safety of his people, his retainers and his country. Therefore, the old king acts negligently when he tries to defeat the dragon alone. Again, Tolkien disapproves of Beowulf's behaviour as a hero, since he should place his people and men before his personal fame. Even in the end, when he is dying of the dragon's poison, Beowulf only thinks about glory and little about his men's loyalty: "Beowulf himself, […] thinks at the end only of his barrow and memorial among men, […] and his reward is the recognized virtue of his kingship

[128] Tolkien, 'The Homecoming', p. 137.
[129] Bowman, 'Refining the Gold', p. 95.
[130] Tolkien in Bowman, 'Refining the Gold', p. 96.
[131] Tolkien, 'The Homecoming', p. 145.

and the hopeless sorrow of his people".[132] He puts the lives of his men and people in jeopardy with his reckless battle, but also with his death, since they have no king and he has no heir. They will face an uncertain future with enemies lurking about the borders of the country.

This sense of fulfilling one's duty and the responsibility to consider the effect of one's choices on others is an important theme in *LR* as well. Due to his strong dissatisfaction with the heroic ethos as it is achieved by the heroes in *BM* and *Beowulf*, Tolkien finds a way to reshape the Germanic heroic code in his fictional works. Oaths of loyalty should not be misused for personal gain, nor should a leader act selfishly without considering his retainers or companions. Therefore, an oath can be broken without consequence if it seems insensible to live up to it. Accordingly, Tolkien states in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* that "it is the heroism of obedience and love, not of pride or wilfulness, that is the most heroic and the most moving".[133] Being loyal out of love in order to fulfil a joint purpose is highly valued, whereas pride and gaining glory as a stimulus of heroic behaviour is worthless. Blind devotion is considered disgraceful. Tolkien's works show that loyalty must not be acted upon needlessly. If there appears a situation in which one must sacrifice one's life for the greater good, though it is unknown if it will make a difference in the end, one must always be given a choice to act out of their own free will.

The Oath of Loyalty

While Bowman agrees that Tolkien does not reject, but recreates the Germanic heroic code, she mainly focuses on loyalty and the achievement of glory in her article, not oath-taking in particular. Conversely, Holmes dedicated an article to oath-taking in *LR* and supposes that Tolkien tried to rebuild the Anglo-Saxon culture and heroic ethos in his fictional works.[134] Holmes believes that Tolkien intentionally makes use of the promise or oath in his literature and in doing so, creates a sense of antiquity. He states that Tolkien's particular use of swearing speech in his literature creates a people from "the heroic age" as presented in Old English literature. These characters in Tolkien's works are a breed similar to the Anglo-Saxons and their actions and behaviour in regard to oaths would prove this. According to

[132] J.R.R. Tolkien, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics', in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. C. Tolkien (London, 2006), pp. 5-48 (p. 39).
[133] Tolkien in Bowman, 'Refining the Gold', p. 97.
[134] Holmes mentions this in his article **"**Oaths and Oath Breaking: Analogues of Old English *comitatus* in Tolkien's Myth".

Holmes, the heroic code of the Germanic warrior culture, in which the oath plays an important role, is the same heroic code that Tolkien "tries to capture in *The Lord of the Rings*".[135]

Although Holmes presents many examples of oaths in *LR*, his explanation of the oath and the heroic code is not clear, and he does not finish his argumentation. He starts his article by saying that "lies are a form of displacement, for by lying we say what is not. But so are promises, for by promising we say what is not yet". [136] Of course, this is partly true, but it is a vague definition of a promise. Particularly as the entire article is about the importance of oaths in Tolkien's literature. Moreover, Holmes mentions that there are limits to the oath in *LR* when Elrond tells the hobbits that they cannot in every circumstance uphold an oath because they do not know what the future will bring. However, he does not give details about these limits.

Furthermore, Holmes describes various characters who break their oath and who release others from their oath. Again, he does not explain what the consequences of breaking the oath are or what the definition of an oath is. For instance, Holmes describes Gandalf as the "first oath breaker mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings*".[137] The example he gives is the promise Gandalf makes to Frodo to meet them in Bree. Due to extraordinary circumstances, Gandalf could not keep his promise. Holmes even states that "it might be objected that what Gandalf breaks is not exactly an oath".[138] Hence, Holmes believes that this sworn language is an oath. However, the opposite is true. The promise Gandalf makes to Frodo is not an oath but a 'casual' promise. The promise to meet in Bree is not formal: there are no rituals or procedures attached to this sworn speech. In comparison with an oath, this promise has little to do with loyalty and heroism. Furthermore, it does not establish strong social bonds and harmony, nor does it involve hand gestures or other body language. Holmes offers an example of a broken oath while it is a broken promise. In fact, he uses the words oath, *comitatus* oath, promise, pledge and boast as having the same definition: oath. Unfortunately, this description is incomplete since all these words for 'oath' do have a different explanation and classification as is discussed in Chapter 1. Holmes argues that "no reader of *Beowulf* needs to be convinced of the centrality of the oath in Old English culture […] nor do we need a nod to the ultimate source of the theme in Germanic culture at large".[139] However, in order to be able to compare Tolkien's heroic code, and in particular oath-making and breaking, to the

[135] Holmes, 'Oaths and Oath Breaking', p. 251.
[136] Ibid., pp. 249-250.
[137] Ibid., p. 252.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid., p. 250.

Germanic warrior code in Old English literature, a complete and solid definition is needed. His article lacks a comprehensive characterisation of the oath and he does not make a thorough comparison of the heroic code, nor of the oath-making and –breaking between Tolkien's works and Anglo-Saxon culture.

This thesis has already defined the oath of loyalty and other varieties of promises in the first chapter, which makes it possible to compare the Germanic heroic ethos to Tolkien's recreated heroic code. The last part of this chapter will explore the oath-taking and -breaking by the characters in *LR* and, combined with Tolkien's own view on loyalty in mind, will demonstrate that Tolkien, in fact, made a conscious attempt to reshape the heroic code and attached other values to the oath.

Oath-taking in LR

In *LR*, many characters are presented as warriors who all value heroism and loyalty. They take various oaths of loyalty but their sworn loyalty and performance of heroism differs from the Germanic heroic ethos. While it is obligatory for a warrior to take an oath of loyalty in Anglo-Saxon warrior culture, the characters in *LR* have a free choice. Moreover, their heroism does not include dying with one's lord as a final act of loyalty, nor do the characters wish to die for honour and glory. Instead, they fight and die hoping they will be victorious in battle or succeed in their mission.

At the beginning of the Quest, it becomes clear that oath-taking in general is not highly valued. The Elves in particular, given their knowledge of life and their intelligence, do not believe in the good of taking oaths when one does not know if it can be kept. Therefore, oaths should be taken out of free will, since loyalty cannot be forced. Whereas loyalty is praised, the making of oaths is deemed insensible since one does not know what the future will bring. When the four hobbits arrive in Rivendel, there is a secret council to discuss what must be done about the Ring. During the council the question is raised who will take the Ring to Mount Doom. Elrond explains that this task is a heavy burden, one that cannot be laid on another by force. To stay loyal to the quest and keep hope to accomplish it, Frodo must freely choose to fulfil this deed. [140] Once Frodo has made up his mind, Elrond asks him to swear that he will faithfully try to destroy the Ring: "Do you still hold to your word, Frodo, that you will be the Ring-bearer?".[141] Frodo swears this and is the appointed leader of the Fellowship of the

[140] Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 355.
[141] Ibid., p. 361.

Ring. With him, eight others are willing to join the quest. Although Frodo could now be seen as the leader of the Company, Elrond warns them of making an oath of loyalty to Frodo:

> 'The Ring-bearer is setting out on the Quest of Mount Doom. On him alone is any charge laid: neither to cast away the Ring, nor to deliver it to any servant of the Enemy nor indeed to let any handle it, save members of the Company and the Council, and only then in gravest need. The others go with him as free companions, to help him on his way. You may tarry, or come back, or turn aside into other paths, as chance allows. The further you go, the less easy will it be to withdraw; yet no oath or bond is laid on you to go further than you will. For you do not yet know the strength of your hearts, and you cannot foresee what each may meet upon the road.'
> 'Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens,' said Gimli.
> 'Maybe,' said Elrond, 'but let him not vow to walk in the dark, who has not seen the nightfall.'
> 'Yet sworn word may strengthen quaking heart,' said Gimli.
> 'Or break it,' said Elrond.

Elrond stresses that the companions cannot look into the future and should not make a promise unless they are sure they can keep it. Regarding the view on oaths in *LR*, Clark states that "oaths frequently admitted the possibility of failure, and death, in the attempt to keep the promise".[142] Many of the companions do not know yet how brave they are or what they are capable of since they have never left their own peaceful home, seen battles or met great evil. Being bound to an oath when one is not able to go on could be damageable to both the oath-taker and the mission.

Following Elrond's advice, Aragorn does not demand an oath of loyalty from his men, but they are allowed to freely choose to follow him. As the rightful heir to the throne of Gondor, Aragorn is considered an important lord who will lead an entire country. Nevertheless, he does not demand his own friends and retainers to follow him if they do not freely choose this. When he rides to Dunharrow he says: "Only of your free will would I have you come, for you will find both toil and great fear, and maybe worse".[143] Aragorn wants Gimli, Legolas and a few other retainers to come out of free will and not because he needs fighters or because they are indebted to him. He believes in their loyalty and requires no spoken oath. Additionally, Éowyn believes that their faithfulness cannot be measured by a word, nor do they follow him because of gifts, honour or glory: 'They go only because they would not be parted from thee – because they love thee'.[144] Loyalty out of love instead of the

[142] Clark, 'Literary Resonances', p. 41.
[143] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (London, 2002), p. 51.
[144] Ibid., p. 55.

wish to gain glory by demanding men to battle is highly valued by Tolkien. This new value in heroism makes its appearance in Aragorn's deeds as well as those of others.

Furthermore, when Aragorn and his retainers reach their last battle before the gates of Mordor, he let his retainers choose to fight with him: "I do not yet claim to command any men. Let others choose as they will".[145] Those who do not have hope to gain victory in this battle, are allowed to withdraw and fight elsewhere for he does not desire the men to blindly follow him to death without hope. In that case, he demands them to "go, but keep what honour [they] may, and do not run! And there is a task which [they] may attempt and so be not wholly shamed".[146] He releases the men from their duty to follow him and offers them mercy and another task within their measure so that they could still perform a courageous deed. For some, this mercy is shameful and they stay and fight, but for others it gives hope. Aragorn provides a choice and the possibility to break their oath without discrediting them. The oath of loyalty is worth nothing, if one does not believe in fighting for it.

Not all retainers withdraw from battle when they are given a choice. The characters of whom one least expects it prove to be heroic and brave. Merry and Pippin are eager to fight for the cause and take the oath of loyalty out of free will. Beside their loyalty to Frodo, Merry and Pippin also swear loyalty to Théoden and Denethor when they are parted from the Company. They both feel the need to be of service and believe that becoming a loyal warrior to a lord will make them useful. They are still loyal to the Quest and wish to serve the cause when they stand alone as well. Pippin feels partly responsible for Boromir's death, since Boromir tried to save him and Merry and therefore asks Denethor to become his retainer:

> 'Little service, no doubt, will so a Lord of Men thing to find in a hobbit, a Halfling from the Northern Shire, yet such as it is, I will offer it, in payment of my dept.' Twitching aside his grey cloak, Pippin drew forth a small sword and laid it at Denethor's feet.[147]

Denethor accepts his service and commands that he should "swear to [him] now!".[148] Accordingly, Pippin submits to his demand to swear the oath of loyalty:

> 'Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor, and to the Lord and Steward of the Realm, to speak and to be silent, to do and to let be, to come and to go, in need or plenty, in peace or war, in living or dying, from this hour henceforth, until my

[145] Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, p. 180.
[146] Ibid., p. 188.
[147] Ibid., p. 17.
[148] Ibid.

> lord release me, or death take me, or the world end. So say I, Peregrin son of Paladin of the Shire of the Halflings.'
> 'And this do I hear, Denethor son of Ecthelion, Lord of Gondor, Steward of the High King, and I will not forget it, nor fail to reward that which is given: fealty with love, valour with honour, oath-breaking with vengeance.'[149]

Denethor emphasises that he will give his love in exchange for Pippin's loyalty, but he will also avenge Pippin if he breaks his oath. Similarly, Merry desires to become a retainer to Théoden. However, Merry does not want to swear his loyalty because he feels he is indebted to Théoden, but because he loves him:

> Filled suddenly with love for this old man, he knelt on one knee, and took his hand and kissed it. 'May I lay the sword of Meriadoc of the Shire on your lap, Théoden king?' he cried. 'Receive my service, if you will!' [150]

Théoden blesses him and names him esquire of Rohan. While Pippin feels obliged to serve Denethor, Merry wants to serve out of love. They are bound by their oath until their lord releases them or until they die.

Although warriors in *LR* are bound by the oath of loyalty, they do not live up to the Germanic heroic code entirely. The oath creates a strong relationship between lord and retainer and compels warriors to protect one another and avenge one's lord when he is slain in battle. Contrary to the Germanic heroic ethos, the characters in *LR* do not desire glory and fame, nor will they die needlessly with their lord. According to Clark, "the pursuit of power, the pursuit of wealth, and the pursuit of fame: these are quite illegitimate goals".[151] Tolkien wanted to create heroes that do not long for fame, wealth or revenge. The characters in *LR* realize that it is important to fight for the greater good and therefore irrational to gain personal glory in dying with one's lord to avenge him.

A good example of heroes in *LR* who fight for a mutual aim that affects all is the Rohirrim. The Riders of the Mark do not seek glory and fame in battle. Even when their lord dies, they do not desperately enter battle with the thought of gaining lasting glory in their final act of loyalty. According to Honegger, "the Riders of Rohan may know the concept of posthumous fame, yet this is not their primary motivation for heroic deeds".[152] They do not go

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[149] Ibid., p. 17-18.
[150] Ibid., p. 46.
[151] Clark in D. Timmons, 'Heroes and Heroism in the Fiction of Tolkien and the Old Norse World: An Interview with George Clark', in *The Hero Recovered: Essays on Medieval Heroism in Honour of George Clark*, ed. R. Waugh and J. Weldon (Kalamazoo: 2010), pp. 233-241 (p. 235).
[152] T. Honegger, 'The Rohirrim: "Anglo-Saxons on Horseback?" An Inguiry into Tolkien's Use of Sources', in *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources: Critical Essays*, ed. J. Fisher (London, 2011), pp. 116-132 (p. 127).

to battle for the songs, but because within their culture it is most fitting to fight when there is danger. This lasting fame in the afterlife is an important theme in *LR* but it is never a motive. Characters only wonder if their deeds would be brave enough to be sung about. The narrator in *LR* even foreshadows whether brave deeds will be sung about later, or not. Nevertheless, when the narrator foretells that there will be no one left alive to sing about the heroic deeds, the characters carry out their deeds at any rate. When Théoden and Éomer arrive at the Fords of the Isen, a messenger warns Éomer not to go further because they were overpowered and have no hope to gain victory. Instead of throwing oneself in battle without hope, they suggest another option to retreat and attack when they have more men to fight with.[153] Additionally, it is irrational to seek death while there is still a chance on winning a battle that would have an effect on everyone. Moreover, at the battle of Helm's Deep, Théoden decides that he has waited long enough and desires to ride to war himself in the morning:

> 'The end will not be long,' said the king. 'But I will not end here, taken like an old badger in a trap.[…] When dawn comes, I will bid my men sound Helm's horn, and I will ride forth. Will you ride with me then, son of Arathorn?'[154]

Théoden does not wish to die with his back against the wall and asks Aragorn to ride with him, as two lords fighting for their people. He will not ride because he has lost hope and wants to achieve at least a glorious end, but because it is his duty as a king to fight for his people. His retainers have protected him and already fought this battle. Mutual protection is incorporated in the oath they have taken and Théoden wishes to be there for his retainers too. The importance of glory is present in Théoden's speech but it is love and loyalty for their king that drives them:

> 'Now the hour is come, Riders of the Mark, sons of Eorl! Foes and fire are before you, and your homes far behind. Yet, though you fight upon an alien field, the glory that you reap there shall be your own forever. Oaths ye have taken: Now fulfil them all, to lord and land and league of friendship!'[155]

Perhaps it is better to view glory here as triumph or success instead of eternal glory in the after-life since it is not their aim to die in battle. They are aware that their deeds in battle serve a greater good and they do not fight to enhance their own status. Even when King Théoden dies, and they avenge him, they do not so recklessly. They still fight for each other to gain

[153] Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, p. 156.
[154] Ibid., p. 171.
[155] Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, p. 122.

peace in defeating the mutual enemy. Living retainers who are able to fight are more beneficial to saving Middle-earth than dead ones who died for glory. A peaceful Middle-earth is the glory they seek.

Oath-breaking and the Consequences

Although it is usual for warriors in Middle-earth to take an oath of loyalty, the way they characterize loyalty or perform heroism is different from the Germanic heroic ethos of the Anglo-Saxons. Not all characters are equally loyal, and not all characters are able to keep their oaths. Yet, breaking an oath does not necessarily mean that one is unfaithful and the person breaking the oath will therefore not always be penalized. Those who are disloyal, not only through oath-breaking, but also through treacherous behaviour, do face unpleasant consequences.

Contrary to Elrond's advise, the members of the Company swear loyalty to Frodo when they are on the brink of the last phase of their journey, but they break their oaths only moments later. At first, they were only sent to help Frodo along as far as they wished. As Gimli states: "None of us is under any oath or command to seek Mount Doom".[156] Yet, they cannot forsake their friend at this point and now Gimli and Legolas, too, swear go with Frodo whatever way he chooses. Aragorn already promised his loyalty to the hobbits at their meeting in Bree and was able to keep his word until now: "I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn; and if by life or death I can save you, I will".[157] Although they took their oaths to follow Frodo, only moments later they have to break them again. They do so due to unexpected events that Elrond has warned them about. Boromir falls, and Merry and Pippin are taken by Orcs. Consequently, Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas have to make a choice whom to follow: Merry and Pippin, or Frodo and Sam, who took a boat and set off to Mordor. The three of them believe that the remainder of the Quest is now for Frodo and Sam to fulfil. Aragorn swears that he "would have guided Frodo to Mordor and gone with him to the end; but […] the fate of the Bearer is in [his] hands no longer".[158] Despite the fact that Frodo does not know his companions guaranteed their loyalty to him, the oath is broken and they decide to rescue Merry and Pippin. However, none of them is judged nor do they believe that their journey has failed.

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[156] Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 529.
[157] Ibid., p. 226.
[158] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (London, 2002), p. 13.

Instead of being punished by losing honour, status or credibility, as would be the fate of an Anglo-Saxon warrior breaking his oath, the remainder of the Company freely choose another path to help the Quest succeed after all. They do not flee from the journey or from battle but bravely enter another journey to help Frodo and Sam. A similar choice was made in the dark pits of Moria, when Gandalf faced the Balrog at the Bridge of Khazad-Dûm and ordered the rest of the Company to fly: Gandalf did not want them to prove their loyalty and fight with him for honour and glory, but he wanted to sacrifice himself, intending for the others to escape and continue the quest. According to Bowman, "Gandalf is motivated by the long-term goal of the quest and not a desire for glory.[159] The Company did not lose their honour, but they lost a loyal and good friend. His sacrifice was their chance to fulfil their mission that would bring peace to all. Boromir and Aragorn would have stayed to fight, had they not had responsibilities to the Hobbits and their own people. Hence, "the effect on one's companions and on the larger society" is more important than their own wish to stay and fight.[160] Therefore, the remaining companions make a similar choice when the Company falls apart. Once they decided that it was no use to search for Frodo and Sam in the wilderness, they wished to rescue Merry and Pippin in order to prove their loyalty and friendship. Afterwards, each separately joins other battles to fight their enemies and distract Sauron from the Ring-bearer. They all act on their free will to maintain loyalty to their friends and their cause. Breaking the oath was necessary to be able to make a difference in the fight against their mutual enemy.

Similarly, Merry and Pippin also break their oaths almost immediately after taking them. Before Merry and Pippin can be of any 'real' service to their lord, Denethor and Théoden liberate them from their oath. Merry and Pippin are given a last command, which they do not accept. They break their oath because they believe there is a way to be of service that differs from the wish of their lords. When Théoden says to Merry: "I release you from my service, but not from your friendship", Merry wants to stay loyal and follow his lord to battle even though he has been told to stay with Éowyn.[161] In addition, Denethor demands Pippin to find a means to die as he releases him from his promise. Not surprisingly, Pippin complains: "But from my word and your service I do not wish to be released while you live".[162] However, when Pippin discovers that Denethor not only wants to kill himself but Faramir as well, he is not able to obey. His fellow retainers are commanded to keep others from the hall

[159] Bowman, 'Refining the Gold', p. 96.
[160] Ibid., p. 99.
[161] Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, p. 77.
[162] Ibid., p. 108.

and to not disturb Denethor in his actions. Again, Pippin has conflicting thoughts about Denethor's demands:

> 'Well, you must choose between orders and the life of Faramir,' said Pippin. 'And as for orders, I think you have a madman to deal with, not a lord.'[163]

Consequently, Pippin goes against Denethor's orders and asks for Gandalf's aid to rescue Faramir. Angry, Gandalf states that Denethor's men are "blind in [their] obedience" while the ones that broke their oath saved more lives.[164] Gandalf's words show that blind devotion leads to bad decisions and the needless loss of men. Moreover, Merry violates his promise as he believes he can fight for the cause. He does not see the worth of staying behind but supposes that the more warriors there are, the more chance there is of success. Furthermore, if he did not enter battle, Éowyn would not have been able to defeat the Black Rider alone. Together, they avenged their lord, and killed a powerful enemy. After Merry helped Éowyn slay the Black Rider, he asks Théoden forgiveness:

> 'Forgive me, lord,' he said at last, 'if I broke your command, and yet have done no more in your service than to weep at our parting.'
> 'Grieve not! It is forgiven. Great heart will not be denied.'[165]

Théoden does not deem Merry disloyal, and he does not punish him, but even compliments him on his great heart. To be fair, Théoden breaks his promise to Merry to hear all about herb-lore as well. Although Merry and Pippin break their promises, they do not intend to be disloyal. Their choices result from their desire to do justice and hope for the Quest to succeed. They do not want to fight to achieve honour for themselves, but for others. They wish to serve to save lives and eventually believe that their small deeds do greatly affect others.

Another important but also unusual oath-breaker is Sméagol. When Frodo and Sam finally catch Sméagol, who had been secretly following the Company for a long time, he begs them to be their guide. As the Ring-bearer, Frodo demands Sméagol to swear his loyalty because he does not trust him. Frodo wants a guarantee of trust and asks Sméagol to swear on the Ring. He states that he cannot let Sméagol walk free:

> 'Not unless there is any promise you can make that I can trust'.

[163] Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, p. 111.
[164] Ibid., p. 147.
[165] Ibid., p. 131.

> 'We will swear to do what he want, yes, yess,' said Gollum.
> […] *One Ring to rule them all and in Darkness bind them.* 'Would you commit your promise to that, Sméagol? It will hold you. But it is more treacherous than you are. It may twist your words. Beware!'.[166]

The only thing strong enough to ensure Sméagol's loyalty is the Ring. Therefore, Gollum swears: "We promises, yes I promise. […] I will serve the master of the Precious".[167] Reliable as Sméagol may seem now, he is able to find a loophole in his promise.

Since the Ring has had Sméagol in its power for a long time, Sméagol already promised his loyalty to this dark force. The Ring is too strong for Sméagol to stay on the right path entirely, and he escapes from his oath without breaking it. Gollum promised to stay loyal to the master of the Ring, Frodo. Hence, if all of a sudden Frodo would not be the master anymore, his loyalty would switch: 'But if we was master, then we could help ourselfs, yes, and still keep promises'.[168] He conceives the plan that Shelob will kill Frodo and plans to take the Ring for himself again. This way, Sméagol would not to be to blame for Frodo's death and he would keep his oath. Moreover, he would also maintain his faith to his actual master, the Precious, as he will "save the Precious as promised".[169] Although Sméagol, so to speak, stays true to his promise, he is disloyal at heart. This is deemed immoral and he is punished for his actions. His desperate devotion to the Ring will be his end, and in a last battle he dies with his master. With this example of Sméagol, Tolkien again shows why he disapproves of oath-taking. Although Sméagol breaks his oath after all, it's the false pretences under which he took the oath that makes oath-taking worthless. Sworn words do not represent loyalty and trust only. Words can be spoken, but it is possible that the speaker does not mean them. Like Sméagol, one can appear loyal by one's word, but be disloyal at heart. He was able to twist the words to his own advantage. Therefore, it depends on one's deeds whether one is truly loyal. Most oath-breakers in *LR* did not intend to break their oaths. They may have broken their spoken words, but not their loyalty. After they broke their oaths, all tried to make amends through performing other heroic deeds to prove their loyalty to the Quest. Thus, Tolkien demonstrates that loyalty stretches further than a verbal promise.

Perhaps the truest hero, and the character who best represents Tolkien's new morality on oath-taking and the heroic ethos in his heroism, is Samwise Gamgee. Sam is the unexpected hero of the story, who does not seem particularly bright in the beginning, but is

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[166] Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, p. 275.
[167] Ibid., p. 276.
[168] Ibid., p. 295.
[169] Ibid., p. 415.

able to perform fearlessly when called to great actions. As is stated by Clark, before Elrond's counsel against oaths, "Sam has already sworn an oath or a heroic vow, and his faithful performance of this oath is crucial to the story of the Ring".[170] Still in the Shire, Sam promises Frodo: "If you don't come back, sir, then I shan't, that's certain".[171] He swears his loyalty before Frodo, even though he does not know what perils he will face. However, when Frodo and Sam are in Mordor and danger surrounds them, Sam proves to be a warrior in their time of need. He remains faithful and never leaves his master's side. Therefore, he has to make a hard choice when Shelob has poisoned Frodo.

After Sam finds Frodo's body and believes he is dead, he takes upon himself the remaining task to destroy the Ring because he loves his master and he is the only one who can still achieve freedom in Middle-earth. Since loyalty to Frodo is his first duty, he wonders how many Orcs he can kill before they will kill him. At first, he desires to avenge Frodo's death and wonders if he will die a heroic death himself. He forgets the Quest and the larger war and imagines himself gaining glory by fulfilling his duty by Frodo only. Just like the Anglo-Saxon warriors in *BM,* he proposes to avenge Frodo for his own purpose and die in the attempt with the intention to "avoid the shame of failing".[172] Earlier, both Frodo and Sam speculated if this journey would make them famous heroes, Sam said: 'Still, I wonder if we would ever be put into songs and tales'.[173] During the Quest and in times of need thoughts of *lof* and *dom* cross Sam's mind, but this is never a motivation. Eventually, Sam rejects the desire to die with his lord and the achievement of fame and glory since "that was not what he set out to do".[174] For the sake of the Quest, he leaves Frodo behind and focuses on his true duty.

Sam's free choice to focus on his purpose and his duty to destroy the Ring leads to victory over evil. Due to the love for his master and his plain 'hobbit-sense', he makes "a morally and strategically superior choice", even though he has to break his oath for this.[175] The greater war between the good and the absolute evil is still going on, but the outcome ultimately depends on the two small figures Frodo and Sam. Sam realizes that their failure will be the ruin of all. According to Clark, "their duty to the good cause calls them and they cannot, will not, refuse".[176] Although Sam breaks his own oath by abandoning his master, he maintains his loyalty at the same time. As is stated by Bowman, "his loyalty to Frodo is

[170] Clark, 'Literary Resonances', pp. 45-46.
[171] Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 114.
[172] Clark, 'Literary Resonances', p. 46.
[173] Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, p. 401.
[174] Ibid., p. 425.
[175] Bowman, 'Refining the Gold', p. 102.
[176] Clark, 'Literary Resonances', p. 44.

enacted not by dying with him, nor protecting his body, but by completing the task that Frodo gave his life in attempting".[177] Even if he dies in the attempt to fulfil the task, he would not die because of his promise or because he lost hope, but he would die for the greater good. This higher purpose, peace in Middle-earth, is the most important motivation for Sam to carry on. His decision depends not only on the influence it would have on the ultimate victory or the defeat of evil, but also "simply because what happens in this life and in this world does matter".[178] Moreover, his own choice to discard personal glory and his rejection of the thought of using the Ring to realize his dreams enable him to destroy it. According to Clark, "to defeat the power of evil embodied in Sauron requires a 'Ring-Bearer' willing to destroy it and forgo the power and glory a personal victory over Sauron would entail".[179] Although Sam never comes to the point of throwing the Ring in the fire himself, he would be capable of it. When Frodo is still alive and Sam rescues him, he almost effortlessly returns the Ring to Frodo. As Sam does not desire honour, fame, wealth or power, the Ring has little influence on him. In fact, Sam's actions are entirely the opposite of how an Anglo-Saxon warrior in *BM* and *Beowulf* behaves. He does not flee or seek revenge, "he does not take up a military battle he cannot win, he does not do what will make the best song".[180] He does everything to achieve his purpose and serve his duty, even if this includes oath-breaking. Hence, Sam and his fellow companions clearly show that even small hobbits can make a huge difference.

Second Chances for Oath-Breakers

Many characters in *LR* break their oaths, but because they prove their loyalty through other heroic deeds there are no serious consequences. They try to recompense their oath-breaking by offering their service to aid the cause in other ways. Therefore, they are not punished, nor do they loose their status or honour. However, there are characters in *LR* who have paid for not keeping their word and are given a second chance after all. With this second chance, Tolkien shows that mercy and the achievement of a higher purpose are more important than the punishing of oath-breakers.

In order to help the Quest succeed and gain victory in battle, Aragorn gives the 'oath-breakers' a second chance. The 'oath-breakers', or the Dead Men of Dunharrow, are the ghosts of the deceased Men of the White Mountains. They swore an oath to Isildur to aid him

[177] Bowman, 'Refining the Gold', p. 102.
[178] Ibid., p. 106.
[179] Clark, 'Literary Resonances', p. 46.
[180] Bowman, 'Refining the Gold', p. 103.

and fight with him in the War of the Last Alliance. However, they broke their oath in times of need, and were cursed to dwell in the valley of Harrowdale when they died. Only by fulfilling their oath they would be released of their punishment. Their discharge is foretold and Aragorn reminds this prophecy that "the hour has come for the oathbreakers. […] Who shall call them from the grey twilights, the forgotten people? The heir of him to whom the oath they swore".[181] As Isildur's heir, Aragorn is able to command the Dead who dwell in the Paths of the Dead. In time of need, he orders their aid in return for the release of their bane when he states: "And when all this land is clean of the servants of Sauron, I will hold the oath fulfilled, and ye shall have peace and depart forever".[182] A second chance is offered to the Dead who broke an important oath because their help is now needed to achieve freedom for all the living people. After years of dwelling, they are allowed to prove their loyalty and gain freedom as a reward. Therefore, mercy is shown to the disloyal for the victory of all.

The achievement of peace and success for all or the desire for free will, are not the only reasons for the characters in *LR* to break their oaths. A lord misusing the power that loyalty creates for selfish deeds is also a motivation to break one's oath. For instance, Denethor uses his power over his retainers for personal purposes. He commands Faramir "to do his lord's will" and sends him into a hopeless battle in order to pay for his brother's death.[183] The only thing that he is likely to achieve is glorious death, which is scorned in Middle-earth's heroism. Moreover, after Faramir falls in battle, he orders his retainers to guard the doors and let no one enter the hall in which Denethor ends his life and his oath. As a lord, Denethor should protect his people and fight for them in need. A lord must always be braver than his retainers. However, Denethor lost hope and courage. He does not fight for his people, his land, or the greater good. He flees from battle and selfishly desires to commit suicide. In order to hold on to the heroic value of dying with one's lord, Denethor tries to kill the alive, but unconscious, Faramir and himself. He breaks his oath by giving up on his people and his retainers and by ending his life without a battle. The power he has as a lord allows him to do wicked deeds, which he himself believes to be heroic. If all the men had blindly followed Denethor's orders, an innocent man would have been killed and the retainers' only hope would be to die. However, there is one retainer, Beregond, who breaks his oath to Denethor and is able to save Faramir.

[181] Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, p. 51.
[182] Ibid., p. 62.
[183] Ibid., p. 96.

As Beregond breaks his oath to Denethor, he is both punished and given a second chance. In order to save Faramir, Beregond broke his command and was forced to kill Denethor's loyal retainers. He slew two of his fellow guards and was called "a traitor to his master".[184] Given the blood he has spilled and because he left his post without command, Beregond is punished. Accordingly, Aragorn states:

> "For these things, of old, death was the penalty. Now therefore I must pronounce your doom. All penalty is remitted for your valour in battle, and still more because all that you did was for the love of the Lord Faramir. Nonetheless you must leave the Guard of the Citadel, and you must go forth from the City of Minas Tirith".[185]

Beregond is banished from Minas Tirith and loses his status as a Guard. However, he must also leave because he is appointed to the White Company of Faramir and he "shall be his captain and dwell in Emyn Arnen in honour and peace, and in the service of him for whom [he] risked all, to save him from death".[186] Due to Beregond's love for Faramir he broke his word and chose to rescue him. He is punished and rewarded for his deed at the same time. As Beregond perceives it, he is given mercy and justice. As such, Tolkien shows that one should not blindly follow orders because one has taken an oath, but always listen to one's own intelligence. Needless death for glory or personal gain is not valued in *LR*, whereas saving lives is.

In short, in contrast to Germanic heroism, the characters in *LR* have a free choice to take an oath of loyalty. Their oath of loyalty does not include dying with one's lord in order to gain honour and glory. Instead, they fight and stay loyal out of love and for the greater good. Moreover, they are also allowed to break the oath if it stands in the way of achieving a higher purpose. Listening to one's own intelligence in decision-making is essential. Oath-breaking does not always equal disloyalty and is therefore not always punishable. Through the characters in *LR*, Tolkien shows the significance of mercy and second chances, since loyalty does not only appear in words, but in deeds as well.

[184] Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, p. 143.
[185] Ibid., p. 297.
[186] Ibid., pp. 297-298.

CONCLUSION

Having defined the oath of loyalty and explored the characteristics of the oath and the Germanic heroic ethos in the Old English poems *BM* and *Beowulf*, this thesis proposes that the heroism in Tolkien's *LR* is not similar to Germanic heroism. In order to prove that Tolkien's depiction of heroism in *LR*, and in particular his depiction of oath-taking, differs from oath-taking in Germanic heroism, a solid definition of the oath had to be given. While Holmes uses and classifies various kinds of sworn speech as oaths, this thesis has categorised the five kinds of sworn language and provides a clear description of each. The type of sworn speech that is used in Germanic heroism is the oath of loyalty.

This oath of loyalty, and the values that are attached to it, appear in the Old English poems *BM* and *Beowulf*. In both poems, the oath of loyalty is sworn between a lord and his retainers and guarantees loyalty, mutual protection and service. Retainers who have sworn the oath to their lord receive gifts as an assurance for future service. They follow their lord wherever he goes. They fight for honour and lasting glory in order to enhance their personal status. In order to achieve fame in the afterlife, retainers will die with their lord in battle when their lord is slain. They avenge their lord as a final act of loyalty since they are bound by their oath until either their lord releases them or they die themselves. When retainers break their oath, they are punished. Consequently, they lose their honour, credibility, status and sometimes even lands. They will be removed from the war-band and live a life in shame.

Instead of imitating the Germanic heroic ethos and its stance on oath-taking, Tolkien reshaped the heroic code in his fictional works and attached new values to the oath of loyalty. Similar to the Anglo-Saxons, who were inspired by the Germanic heroic ethos, the characters in *LR* swear oaths of loyalty, fight honourably and avenge their lords. However, they swear oaths out of free will and still remain loyal when they break their oaths. The loyalty of the characters in *LR* is not forced: they do not receive gifts to guarantee future service. They remain loyal out of love and because they choose to be faithful. Even when they break their oath, they show their loyalty by offering their aid in other ways. Sometimes oaths are broken because one is forced to do so by unforeseen encounters or because one's duty to fulfil a purpose is more important than a command or a promise. The punishment of losing status, honour or death is not the result of a broken word alone: one also needs to prove disloyal at heart. Even oath-breakers are offered a second chance to prove their faithfulness since the characters in *LR* value mercy and compassion.

Moreover, unlike the retainers in *BM*, the warriors in *LR* do not recklessly follow their leader, but are allowed to think for themselves. They are given a free choice to fight since Tolkien deems blind devotion shameful. There is no justice or benefit in dying with one's lord to avenge him, nor is the achievement of glory and fame valued. Dying in battle is only honourable if there is hope for victory. Oaths in Anglo-Saxon England force the takers to keep their word, which frequently results in failure or death. Therefore, breaking the oath is not disgraceful in *LR* if it allows the oath-taker to serve a higher purpose or fulfil one's duty. Instead of being punished, the characters in *LR* are rewarded for their own decision-making and placing the greater good above one's personal obligation. They show that loyalty out of love, and fighting for the good of all instead of enhancing one's personal glory is far more valuable. Therefore, Tolkien did not think highly of the oath of loyalty and changed the values that are attached to it since words can be twisted and broken, but the heart remains true.

This thesis has explored oath-taking in *LR*, but there are also other characters, works and approaches that can be used to expand further research on this topic. The main focus of this thesis lies on the good characters who highly value a free choice. However, dark characters, like Sauron, do not obtain loyalty from their retainers out of free will, but demand it from them by force. Sauron offers magic rings to bind his subjects to him. To explore the issue of loyalty and free will further, it can be relevant to look at these dark characters as well. With regard to further research on Tolkien's change of the heroic ethos, it would be interesting to include *The Silmarillion* in the study as well. There are many important oaths to find in this fictional work of Tolkien and it may be a nice addition to this thesis. Moreover, for an even more comprehensive overview of Tolkien's ideas on heroism in Old English poetry, it would be useful to fully explore his works *The Monsters and the Critics* and his translation of *Beowulf*. One could not only focus on the oath of loyalty, but on the Germanic heroic ethos overall. Furthermore, in expanding this topic, it could be worthwhile to focus on the effects of the First World War on literature and Tolkien's Christian beliefs to explore the influence both had on his view on heroism more deeply.

Although it is often thought that Tolkien's inspiration for his heroes and their heroism in *LR* came from Anglo-Saxon warriors and their Germanic heroism, the notion that he reproduced the Germanic heroism in his fictional works can be rejected. Perhaps it is easy to jump to conclusions about the source of an author's literary work if one has certain background knowledge. However, it requires close research of both the source and the literary work to see what exact influence the source has on the work, and more importantly, what the author did with the source. Authors do not always copy a source; it can also be remodelled to

send a different message. Accordingly, this thesis shows that Tolkien restructured the old values of Germanic heroism and created a new kind of heroic ethos in his own works. More specifically, this thesis provides a new view on oath-taking in modern literature and offers prospects for further research on the reconstruction of sources such as Germanic heroism in modern literature. In the end, Tolkien's recreated heroism is perhaps even more supernatural than the heroism of Beowulf and Byrhtnoth since the heroes in *LR*, who have great, loyal and sensible hearts, are able to move mountains for a higher purpose.

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