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The Gifts of Galadriel

We all remember the scene at the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*; all of us chuckled a bit when Galadriel handed Sam the Hobbit a coil of elven rope and he sheepishly asked for a nice shiny dagger instead. But for Tolkien, the scene of the Fellowship receiving Galadriel's gifts was more than a convenient way to give the characters things they would need later in the plot.

Tolkien was a rigorous scholar of Medieval English and Norse traditions, and many details from his academic life have crept into his creative works, as well. The Anglo-Saxon tradition of gift giving is only one of many.

In Anglo-Saxon tradition, as seen in texts such as *Beowulf*, leaders and chiefs would bestow gifts upon their warriors, both as reward for their loyalty and to signal their own wealth and power. The more generous a king was, the more riches he had to give away. This same value is seen reflected in Middle-Earth when the tired Fellowship arrives in Lothlorien, the mystical realm of the Galadhrim, Elves led by Celeborn and Galadriel. Both are renowned throughout the realm for their wisdom and their grace, which by Anglo-Saxon standards would have been proven when they bestowed a long list of personalized gifts on the Fellowship before they left their lands. They give both practical items, such as boats to continue their journey and Elvish food to sustain them, as well as objects of deep power or meaning. However, the parallels to

Anglo-Saxon tradition don't end with just the giving of gifts as a ritual; the objects themselves given to the Fellowship also hold hints of English and Saxon influence.

Several of the gifts were not far off from the types of treasures we see being distributed in the beginnings of *Beowulf*. There are garments given to all, the woven cloaks with the leaf brooches, as well as additional ones given to Boromir, Merry, and Pippin. A gift of a weapon is also given in the form of a bow given to Legolas, and Sam receives a small box of dirt from Lothlorien for his garden. Frodo is given something precious and that will help him in his quest, the light of the star Earendil (Tolkien 375). But the two gifts given that most closely resemble the Norse traditions and the archaeological finds of Tolkien's time were the ones given to Gimli and Aragorn.

When it's Gimli's turn to receive a gift, Galadriel asks him what he would like, as they don't know what to give their first Dwarven visitor in many decades. Gimli answers that he would like a strand of Galadriel's hair to, "be set in imperishable crystal to be an heirloom of my house, and a pledge of good will be between the Mountain and the Wood until the end of days." (Tolkien 377). Galadriel gives him three strands, and a few pages later we see Gimli debating whether or not it would be proper to inlay them with gold. This bit of Dwarven craft resembles an Anglo-Saxon tradition called cloisonne, a type of jewelry making where gold is inlaid with colorful glass and precious gemstones, often garnet. This tradition is best exemplified in the Kingston Brooch, excavated in Southern England and dated to approximately 600-625 C.E. (Liverpoolmuseums.org).

Aragorn's gift is perhaps the most indicative of the relationship between Tolkien's works and ancient tradition. To him the Elves give a sheath made for his recently reforged sword,

“overlaid with a tracery of flowers and leaves wrought of silver and gold, and on it were set in elven-runes formed of many gems the name Anduril and the lineage of the sword, (Tolkien 375). This is a reflection of not one, but several traditions found in Celtic and Norse artifacts found in England. The “tracery of flowers and leaves” is similar to the Celtic tradition of interlacing patterns, often with animal imagery, found on everything from manuscripts to tapestry to jewelry to, yes, sword sheaths and hilts. An example of interlace decoration can be found on a golden belt excavated from the Sutton Hoo ship burial (britishmuseum.org). The name and history of the sword in Elven runes is indicative of the Norse and Viking runes, of which three alphabets are known to historians, seen engraved on a whalebone box dated from 700 C.E. in the form of a riddle about the box’s origins (wikimedia.org).

The material culture of the ancient Norse and Anglo-Saxon traditions is seen in many places in Tolkien’s most well known work, *The Lord of the Rings*, yet here in the scene just before the end of the second book it feels the most poignant. The gifts themselves with their intricate interlace and cloisonne-esque decorations, interwoven with the importance of gift-giving in Norse culture and the implication thereof that the Elves are powerful beings, rulers to be respected, gives the scene an air of history and mythical wonder. Galadriel, in all her mystery and wonder, is shown by Tolkien as a great leader in the way his ancestors would have shown her, and thus makes her a part of a long and glorious tradition even outside of the one within his secondary world of his own making. In yet another way Tolkien uses his expertise and understanding of other languages and cultures to make *The Lord of the Rings* a truly unique experience in the world of modern literature.

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