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## “ A Kingly Gift: Bilbo’s Mithril Coat as Symbol in The Lord of the Rings ”

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In his discussion on the natural instinct that drives man to tell stories, historian Wilfred M. McClay writes: “ We are, at our core, remembering and story-making creatures, and stories are one of the chief ways we find meaning in the flow of events. ...Without memory, without the stories by which our memories are carried forward, we cannot say who, or what, we are ” (loc.386). In the late spring of 1944 after receiving a letter containing some “ grouching ” from his son Christopher, J.R.R. Tolkien encouraged him to look at his situation in a WW2 Royal Air Force camp from a different perspective: “ Not that in real life things are as clear cut as in a story and we started out with a great many Orcs on our side ..... Well, there you are: a hobbit amongst the Uruk-Hai. Keep your hobbitry in heart, and think that all stories feel that way when you are in them. You are inside a very great story! I think also that you are suffering from suppressed ‘ writing ’. ... I sense amongst all your pains ... the desire to express your feeling about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering ” (*Letters* 28). Tolkien goes on to relate how his own experience in the British Army during WW1 “ generated ” material for what eventually became *The Silmarillion*. Story-making provided Tolkien with a way to make sense of life’s flow. Similarly, throughout *The Lord of the Rings* the characters use story and verse to link events past and present. As the companions from the Shire join up with new and differing folk, the stories exchanged broaden the hobbits’ understanding of the world. Later, when the separate roads that the members of the Fellowship of the Ring have followed rejoin, the sharing of stories lived along the way gives the hobbits a new perspective on their place in Middle Earth and its history.

ISSN 0910-500X

# 英文學思潮

THOUGHT CURRENTS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

VOLUME XCII

2019

THE ENGLISH LITERARY SOCIETY  
OF  
AOYAMA GAKUIN UNIVERSITY

青山学院大学英文学会

Once on the road, Frodo Baggins and his companions, sometimes due to advantage and other times due to necessity, alter the contents of the equipment they carry. The demands of the quest across Middle Earth during a time of war dictate the type and the amount of gear they take, so while some of the items have sentimental value none of them are mere props in the story. One item in particular, a silver corslet, stands out from the rest of the personal effects. After retracing Frodo's path out of the Shire and discussing a few aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* quest and story, this paper will look at the different ways Bilbo Baggins' mail coat can serve as a symbol.

Unlike the Orcs and Uruk-Hai, literary products of Tolkien's WW1 experience, "hobbits strayed from stories he told his children into this greater story" (Lobdell 85). Tolkien wrote his son that "...what is really important is always hid from contemporaries, and the seeds of what is to be are quietly germinating in the dark of some forgotten corner, while everyone is looking at Stalin or Hitler" (*Letters* 91). The hobbits of the Shire were, in terms of stature, the least of the folk living in Middle Earth. While the Shirelings did not necessarily "stray" from their land into the great story of Middle Earth at the end of the Third Age, they had been lost from its history. There had been a time when hobbits were better known in the affairs of Middle Earth, but once they crossed the Brandywine River they "fell in love with their new land ... and soon passed once more out of the history of Men and of Elves" (*LOTR* 3). The year of the crossing became Year 1 in Shire-reckoning, and there they lived quietly until Bilbo and his heir Frodo "became by no wish of their own, both important and renowned, and trouble the councils of the Wise and the Great" (*LOTR* 2). At the Council of Elrond, the Dwarf Gloin related the tale of Dain, the King under the Mountain, who had received a visit from one of the dark lord Sauron's messengers. The Black Rider was seeking knowledge of the hobbits. Lord Sauron knew that the Dwarves had once had dealings with a hobbit and he wanted details on the Ring the "thief" possessed and where he now lived (*LOTR* 20). By the end of the Third Age, hobbits and their Shire were no longer forgotten.

Historically, the Shire was in an area under the rule of the King of

Gondor. The demands the King placed upon the hobbits were light: keep the Bridge of Stonebows (the Great Bridge) in good condition, maintain the roads and bridges in the Shire for the King's messengers, and recognize the King's lordship. The passing of King Arvedui led to a break in kingly rule, and the hobbits chose to be ruled by a Thain and their own chieftains until a time, as their saying went, "When a King comes back" (*LOTR* 1042). Hobbits minded their own business, having little to do with outsiders, and "forgot or ignored the labours of those that made possible the long peace of the Shire" (*LOTR* 5). While the hobbits forgot the outside world and it forgot about them, there were those who maintained a watchful eye over the Shire long before Sauron directed his gaze there. The *Annals of the Kings and Rulers* shows that over the millennium between Arvedui Last-king and Aragorn II, the Shire was guarded by the descendants of the Dúnedain and their royal line. Outside the Shire in the nearby town of Bree the innkeeper of The Prancing Pony, Butterbur, distrusted the Rangers who visited his establishment, but as strife spread through Middle Earth he came to see their value. When the Shirelings and Gandalf returned to Bree after the successful completion of their quest, Butterbur admits to the wizard, "...[W]e're not much used to such troubles; and the Rangers have all gone away, Folk tell me. I don't think we've rightly understood till now what they did for us" (*LOTR* 993).

While the Shire, then, was forgotten by the outside world until after Bilbo Baggins stirred its memory during his adventure with the Dwarves and brought home with him a ring he had found in a cave in the Misty Mountains. The number of Dúnedain guardians, or Rangers, was increased due to the Ring of Power's presence during the final years of the Third Age, but this change went unnoticed to the hobbits of the Shire. The outside world also failed to notice the strengthening of the guard because its attention was focused on the return of the orcs to the Misty Mountains and the increasing activity in and around Mordor. So it was that from the Shire, guarded by the Rangers and hidden from contemporaries both fair and foul, ventured four hobbits who came to earn the King's honor and respect for themselves, their folk, and their land. Once the King "came back" to Gondor the inhabitants of

the Shire were quick to recognize the rule of Aragorn II, and many of the folk delighted in crossing the Great Bridge to see him when he came near their borders (Aragorn had made a law forbidding the Big People from entering the Shire) (*LOTR* 1043).

On the evening of the September day when Frodo Baggins left his home at Bag End, he and his companions Sam (Samwise Gamgee, his gardener) and Pippin (Peregrin Took (his second cousin, once removed), "... set no watch; even Frodo feared no danger yet, for they were still in the heart of the Shire" (*LOTR* 72). On the second day, inspired by the view of the road stretching ahead to the east towards Woody End, Frodo sang Bilbo's old walking song:

The Road goes ever on and on  
Down from the door where it began.  
Now far ahead the Road has gone,  
And I must follow, if I can,  
Pursuing it with weary feet,  
Until it joins some larger way.  
Where many paths and errands meet  
And whither then? I cannot say. (*LOTR* 73).

In response to Pippin's observation that the rhyming had a discouraging feel, Frodo relates something that Bilbo often said at his doorway after returning from a long walk: "It's a dangerous business ... going out your door. ... You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to. Do you realize that this is the very path that goes through Mirkwood, and that if you let it, it might take you to the Lonely Mountain or even further and to worse places?" (*LOTR* 73). It is only a bit later in the same day that the road brings them their first encounter with danger, one of the Black Riders. Frodo and company secluded themselves in the woods, and after the Rider passes from sight Frodo says that he has "never seen or felt anything like that in the Shire before" (*LOTR* 75). Pippin also expresses confusion over the intrusion of one of the Big People into the Shire.

The event jogs Sam's memory, who then tells of a Black Rider visiting his father the evening before. At the time of the visit, Frodo himself was just around the corner from Sam's home in Bagshot Row. He had heard but not seen the speaker with the strange, unpleasant sounding voice addressing Sam's shrill and upset father. Frodo returned home, decided upon setting out at once. He gave his spare key to Sam to run down the hill to his father, and then Frodo slowly started out on his journey. Sam, in his hurry to catch up with Frodo, forgot his father's tale about the Black Rider's visit. When the rider inquired about "Mr. Baggins of Bag End," Sam's gaffer, believing that Frodo had departed earlier in the day, said that Mr. Baggins no longer lived there, causing the Rider to hiss and ride way. This roadway encounter and Sam's subsequent revelation began to awaken them to the danger they faced on the road, so they took to walking among the trees for a time.

Later in the twilight of the second day, fear lessened by some rest and a meal, the hobbits returned to the road and walked along humming another tune of Bilbo's. With stars coming to light overhead the hums turned to song:

Home is behind, the world ahead,  
And there are many paths to tread  
Through shadows to the edge of night,  
Until stars are all alight.  
Then the world behind and home ahead  
We'll wander back to home and bed. (*LOTR 77*)

As Pippin loudly repeats the last lines, hoofs are heard upon the road and again the companions flee to the woods. Another Black Rider appears, dismounts, and begins tracking them. A host of approaching Elves sings out "Gilthoniel, O Elbereth!" (words which would hearten Frodo and Sam further down the road on their quest), and it is their song that drives the Rider away.

The meeting in the Shire with Gildor Inglorion and some of the High Elves is the first time Sam sees elves, and it is also the first time a foreign

language is encountered on the journey. Frodo is the only hobbit of the three who knows some of the Elvish tongue, a fact which earns him some respect from the Elves. Sam and Pippin drift off to sleep after eating, but Frodo and Gildor stay up late to speak "of many things, old and new" (*LOTR* 82). Gildor warns Frodo that he faces peril from all sides, leading Frodo to admit: "I knew that danger lay ahead, of course: but I did not expect to meet it in our own Shire. Can't a hobbit walk from the Water to the River in peace?" Gildor responds: "But it is not your Shire. ...Others dwelt here before habits were; and others will dwell here again when hobbits are no more. The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot for ever fence it out" (*LOTR* 83). Frodo presses Gildor for more information on the Black Riders, but the Elf is unwilling to tell a tale that Gandalf himself had not yet seen fit to share with the hobbit. Frodo then reveals that Gandalf is overdue, news which makes Gildor, despite the usual Elfish reticence about giving advice, counsel him to get on his way to Rivendell with all haste.

The Elves have gone when Frodo wakes the next day, and he decides to head across country for Buckleberry Ferry. This route takes them across Farmer Maggot's land where they meet the good man himself. He, too, has a Black Rider story to share (a Rider came up the lane and inquired about "Baggins" just prior to Frodo's arrival). After telling his tale, the farmer proposes dinner followed by a wagon ride to the Ferry, which Frodo accepts. The meal gives Farmer Maggot the occasion to share some other stories and make a few speculations about why the Black Riders are in the Shire. On the way to the river hoofbeats are heard upon the road, but this time it is another of Frodo's cousins, Meriadoc (Merry) Brandybuck, who has ridden out in search of his three friends. The farmer says his farewells and the group of four makes for the Ferry. The crossing goes without incident, but from the far bank they look back across and see a Black Rider near the dock.

Frodo and company reach his new house, which he had bought as a ruse, and more story-telling ensues when Merry demands "the whole story" of the adventures they had been having without him. Since Frodo is still being tight-lipped, Pippin offers to tell "the whole tale from the beginning" (*LOTR* 102).

Frodo had hoped to keep his journey to Rivendell secret from everyone except Gandalf and Sam, but his talk with Gilder revealed that the Elves somehow knew his plans. Farmer Maggot's shrewd guesses linked tales of Bilbo's foreign travels and treasures with the appearance of the Black Riders in the Shire, and now around Frodo's hearth his cousins use those speculations to get Frodo to finally admit his plans to leave the Shire, something that they had guessed at months earlier in the spring of the year. As Merry and Pippin reveal their suspicions, Frodo is shocked to learn that others besides himself and Gandalf know of Bilbo's ring. Merry tells a story about learning of the magic ring when he saw Bilbo once use it to avoid meeting his unpleasant relatives, the Sackville-Bagginses. Merry and Pippin also confess to having used Sam as a spy, but the three ensure Frodo that they have not shared the secret with anyone outside the room. It was due to their care for Frodo that they kept a close eye on him and so learned of his plans. They tell Frodo that he can trust them "to keep any secret of his" but that he "cannot trust [them] to let [him] face trouble alone, and go off without a word" (*LOTR* 105). This settles the matter of farewells that had long been troubling Frodo, and he decides that they will set out together the next morning. After an uneventful night, the party sets out under the cover of fog. They pass through the High Hay, the old hedge that marks a 20-mile section of the Shire border in the east, and their quest takes them into the Old Forest. Frodo's trip across the Shire establishes a pattern of travel, tales, food, song, and sleep that is interrupted by dangerous encounters. While there is an increase of danger and a decrease of food and sleep after the hobbits leave the Shire, the pattern of information exchange through stories and verse continues for the rest of the quest, and even after its conclusion.

In the Prologue, Tolkien writes: "At the end of the Third Age the part played by the Hobbits in the great events that led to the inclusion of the Shire in the Reunited Kingdom awakened them to a more widespread interest in their own history ... [and] greater families were also concerned with the events in the Kingdom at large" (*LOTR* 14). When Frodo stepped out the door at Bag End and onto the road, he was not then aware that the events in the wide world



had sent a danger such as the Black Riders up the road to the doorway just around the corner from his own. When Bilbo left his doorway one bright morning in pursuit of the Dwarves, he knew clearly the objective of his quest: help Thorin and Company recover the Lonely Mountain, then come back home. When he returned home with his treasure and the Ring, neither he nor Gandalf knew its identity. Decades later when Frodo left, the identity of Lord Sauron's Ring of Power was known, and Frodo knew that the Ring could only be destroyed where it had been created in the fire of Mt. Doom, but the road was not yet known. Nor did anyone know the identity of the Ring-bearer. Frodo's path across the Shire was interrupted and diverged from his intended course. The folk he encountered along the first miles down the road of his quest brought him new knowledge of the world. Some characters, like the Black Riders, forced him from the road, while others, such as Gildor and Farmer Maggot, helped him find his way forward by providing food and information, and even by accompanying him a pace down his road. Even a person he knew and had expected to meet, Merry, supplied information that reshaped his thinking and gave him new direction. It is fitting, then, that when Frodo reached the High Hay and was not sure of the way through, it was Merry who led them to a hidden gate which he unlocked and then ushered them through to the Old Forest.

While the quest theme is primary in the Lord of the Rings, Jared Lobdell writes that "... the continually sounding theme of [the novel] is the past alive in the present " (Lobdell 21). Many things can serve as examples of the past alive in the present, the chiefest of which being the One Ring. It was made by Lord Sauron around 1600 in the Second Age. Over its long existence it was worn by Sauron, King Isildur, Gollum (who had a anigie bond to " the precious " ), Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam. Three other Rings of Power were made by the Elves shortly before Sauron made his Ring. Although Frodo does not yet know it, he has already met the bearer of Narya, the Ring of Fire, which Círdan the Shipwright gave to Gandalf after his coming to Middle Earth. And as the quest progresses he will meet Elrond, who wears Vilya, the mightiest of the three, and the Lady Galadriel, the bearer of Nenya, the Ring of Adamant.

In addition to accompanying the Ring to its doom and meeting the other Ring-bearers, whose living memory stretches back to ages past, the Shirelings will acquire gear along their various roads which interlaces peoples and times—swords from the Barrow-wight graves that were forged to be used against the Witch-king Angmar, now the head of the Black Riders, Elfish glass containing light captured by Lady Galadriel from the star Eärendil, Bilbo's coat of Dwarvish mail which had been made for some Elf prince, and weapons and armour from Rohan, Gondor, and even the orcs.

The above categorized items all come with stories that are linked into the Lord of the Rings narrative. Richard C. West argues that the narrative structure of the novel is not the common modern line that progresses from begging to end with an "organic unity" but rather one akin to "medieval interlace" (*Compass* 75). C.S. Lewis calls this type of structure "polyphonic narrative," writing that "depth, or thickness, or density" is added to an adventure when it is interrupted with another adventure which "steals upon us unawares the conviction that adventures of this sort are going on all around us, that ... this is the sort of thing that goes on all the time, that was going on before we arrived and will continue after we have left" (*Studies* loc.2746).

West expands on the interlacing technic: "The paths of the characters cross, diverge, and recross, and the story passes from one to another and then another but does not follow a single line. Also, the narrator implies that there are innumerable events he has not had time to tell us about; moreover, no attempt is made to provide a clear-cut beginning or end to the story. We feel that we have interrupted the chaotic activity of the world at a certain point and followed a selection from it for a time, and that after we leave it continues on its own random path. The author, or perhaps someone else, may take up the threads of the story later and add to it at the beginning, middle or end" (*Compass* 76). A broad view of the *Lord of the Rings* narrative shows the interlacing described above, especially after the breaking up of the Fellowship when the story follows one set of characters for chapters at a time before breaking off from that adventure to go back in time and follow the progress of other companions. The reader is forced to exercise his memory and "hold the

different, and constantly suspended, stories” in his head (*Stories* loc.2746). A closer view reveals, as shown above in the retracing of Frodo’s path out of the Shire, that at nearly every meeting or acquisition of gear there is a new tale to hear and information to learn that will play a role at some point later in the quest. Like the Ring which is only identified gradually over decades, there are some meetings, such as when the Shirelings are reunited in Gondor, where the story takes longer to unfold because other duties dictate that story-telling will have to wait until there is time to share the tale and link it to others.

Frodo begins to understand his passing part in the tale early on when Gildor corrects his reference to the Shire as the hobbits’ “own,” pointing out that the land was not and will not be always inhabited by them. Even Sam catches on when, as they near the stairs up to Cirith Ungol, he links their adventure to the Silmaril that Beren got from Thangorodrim’s Iron Crown and was eventually based on to Eärendil the mariner, the half-man, half-elf who sailed with the Silmaril star into the sky: “And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We’ve got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on. Don’t the great tales never end?” Frodo replies: “No, they never end as tales. ... But the people in them come, and go when their part’s ended. Our part will end later—or sooner” (*LOTR* 711).

Sam’s connection of adventures is made in the midst of the quest, and further events are linked after the quest had ended when there is time to put the assorted tales on paper to help others remember and benefit from what has transpired. In an essay entitled *The Use of the Past*, John Dos Passos writes, “In times of change and danger when there is a quicksand of fear under men’s reasoning, a sense of continuity with generations gone before can stretch like a lifeline across the scary present and get us past that idiot delusion of the exceptional Now that blocks good thinking” (*Use* 3). On the edge of Mordor, Sam’s recollection of a tale of “a worse place and a blacker danger” (*LOTR* 711) than the situation he and Frodo were in gave him hope for the future. The “change and danger” faced by the Shirelings during the years from Bilbo’s quest to the one Frodo and Company achieved was recorded in the *Red Book*,

first written by Bilbo, then added to by Frodo, and finalized by Sam. The original account of the hobbits' part in the events at the end of the Third Age was lost, but not before copies were made by Sam in the Shire and some time later by Peregrin's great-grandson who made, at the request of King Elessar (Aragorn II) "an exact copy ... of the *Thain's Book* in Minas Tirith" (LOTR 14). Like the "Road" in Bilbo's song, the collected account of the hobbits' adventure "goes ever on and on" to aid memory and to carry forward for future generations the story of the hobbits and how they handled the struggle between good and evil in their time.

Shimmering through the stories of Middle Earth is a metal known in Elfish as mithril, or true silver. The Dwarves had a name for it in their tongue, but they kept it secret from all the other folk of Middle Earth. Mithril can be beaten like copper or polished like glass. It resembles silver, but its beauty does not tarnish or grow dim. Mithril was mined by the dwarves, who made it into a metal that was light but yet harder than tempered steel. Elves dearly love it, and it was used to make *Nenya*, the Ring of Power worn by Galadriel. They used it to make "ithildin" (starmoon), which could be used in lettering upon stone such as was upon the doors of Moria where mithril was mined. Elves also used mithril and Elven-glass to build *Eärendil* the mariner's boat. And Elrond's daughter Arwen wove mithril and gold into the crown upon the standard that Aragorn brought with to Gondor. The men of Gondor used mithril to make the helms on the helmets worn by the Guards of the Citadel, and the Dwarf Gimli and his people used mithril and steel to replace the gates of Minas Tirith which had been destroyed by the Witch-king of Angmar. Of Saruman, all that is recorded is that he coveted it and had the orcs collect as much of it as they could. It was his hoarding that caused mithril, once valued at ten times the price of gold, to become priceless.

Once Thorin and Company gained access to their halls in Lonely Mountain, they set about arming themselves, and it was then that Thorin gave Bilbo a mithril corslet that had been made for some Elf-prince of long ago. After returning to the Shire, Bilbo lent it to the Mathom House at Michel Delving. Before he left the Shire to live in the home of Elrond at Rivendell, he

collected his mail coat from the museum and took it and his Elven-blade Sting on his journey. After it became clear at the Council of Elrond that Frodo would attempt to bear the Ring to its destruction at Mt. Doom, Bilbo gave him Sting and the mithril shirt. Frodo, at Bilbo's suggestion, kept the corslet secret from the other eight companions who made up the Fellowship of the Ring.

While traveling through the Mines of Moria, Gimli sang a song of Durin the Deathless, the eldest of the Fathers of the Dwarves and the founder of Gimli's dwarf clan. The lines, "And metal wrought like fishes' mail/Buckler and corslet, axe and sword" (*LOTR* 316) perhaps roused a memory in Gandalf's mind. When the song was finished and Gimli fell silent, Sam asked why the Dwarves returned to Moria after Durin's bane drove them out. Gandalf proceeded to tell a tale of mithril and wound up wondering what had become of the "...corslet of mithril rings that Thorin gave him. Gathering dust still in Michel Delving Mathom-house, I suppose." That jarred Gimli from his silence and he cried out, "What! ... A corslet of Moria-silver? That was a kingly gift!" (*LOTR* 317). Gandalf estimated that the mail was worth more than the Shire and all it contained. Upon hearing this, Frodo reached beneath his shirt and touched the mithril rings, his thoughts trailing back to Rivendell and Bilbo, and the Shire and Bag End, back when he lived there with Bilbo. He longed then to go back to those days before he had learned anything of the Ring. Although duty propelled Frodo's body forward, Gimli's song and Gandalf's story drove his heart home to the days of ignorance of the world and its woes.

Bilbo's gift to Frodo thrice protected him on his quest to destroy the ring: in Moria from the spear-thrust of an orc-chieftain, on the Andean river from an orc arrow, and back in the Shire on the doorstep of Bag End when Saruman tried to stab him with a knife. The corslet did not protect him from all evil, though, for in the pass of Cirith Ungol on the border of Mordor Shelob's sting got him above the collar in his neck. Sam left the mithril corslet on Frodo, but he traded his Barrow-wight sword for Sting and took the Ring and the star-glass (which Frodo had lent him) when he decided to continue the quest for his master whom he thought dead. The mail shirt, along with the sword and

the Elven-cloak and brooch from Galadriel, were taken from Frodo by the Orcs who discovered his body. Those items were sent to Sauron, who gave them to his Messenger to show Gandalf and Aragorn at the Black Gates of Mordor. The items were intended to encourage Gandalf to agree to terms, but in a swift move, ablaze with the light of resurrection, he snatched the items from the Messenger. Later, on the day the eight remaining members of the Fellowship gathered in Ithilien where Frodo and Sam had been recovering for two weeks after the fall of Sauron on 25 March, Gandalf returned the sword and the cloak to Sam and the mithril-ringed corslet to Frodo so they might wear them to the celebration that evening and then use on their eventual return to the Shire.

Bilbo's mithril coat takes on multiple symbolic meanings in the Lord of the Rings. Similar to the Rangers who kept a secret guard around the shire, the corslet was kept secret and protected an vital area. While the Ring became known to the Fellowship and its enemies, Frodo tried to keep the mithril coat hidden from his contemporaries; the Ring is important, but the success of the quest hangs on the survival of the bearer. The value of the mithril corslet is indeed priceless. As the retracing of the first days of the quest across the Shire shows, each meeting in the novel adds another link to the tale. The Ring-bearer encounters a variety of folks along his way, and many of the relationships formed serve to strengthen and protect Frodo. So to each interlinking loop in the mail coat meshes with others to produce strength. The mail protects Frodo from death when Saruman tried to stab him at Bag End, but it does not keep him from pain: the orc-spear pushed a link into his skin and the thud of the orc-arrow did sting. Frodo survived the quest, but he had to endure pains, some of which lasted him through the remainder of his days in Middle Earth. The rings in the corslet also represent the individual tales that are plaited together as the story progresses. The mithril coat with its history symbolises the past alive in the present. And the seamlessness of the links that circle round the corslet can stand for the "Road that goes ever on and on," connecting doorways around the world one to another. Like the *Red Book* that is handed from writer to writer and copyist to copyist, the mithril coat is

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e sword and



handed down from heir to heir, interlacing the efforts of generations to carry memory forward. And lastly, though perhaps not finally, the tens of hundreds of mithril rings were mined and refined, worked and wrought by countless dwarves. Tolkien wrote his son Christopher that in WW2 “we are attempting to conquer Sauron with the Ring. And we shall (it seems) succeed” (*Letters* 78). But in *The Lord of the Rings* the Wise and the Good of Middle Earth knew that they could not defeat Sauron by using the One Ring against him. Like the mithril coat of thousands of rings mined and made by innumerable hands, defeating Sauron required the effort of nameless thousands and a defensive sleight of hand that remained hidden from view.

The mithril shirt can be linked with other tales of middle Earth and also to another King, corslet, and “precious” outside the stories Tolkien made. As with Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*, a thief in *Beowulf* steals a cup from a slumbering dragon. The gem-studded cup is described in Old English as a “dēore māðmas” (Heaney 1.2236), which Tolkien translates as “precious drinking vessel” (*Beowulf* 80). The thief takes the cup to his King, Beowulf, who grants him the boon of being reinstated in the household from which he had fled. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo gave the golden cup he stole from the dragon Smaug to Thorin, claimant to the “King under the Mountain” title, and in return Bilbo received the mithril corslet from Thorin. (Hobbits described “anything that [they] had no immediate use for, but were unwilling to throw away, ...[as] a ‘mathom’” (*LOTR* 25), a word that recalls the Old English “māðmas” used in the dragon section of *Beowulf*.) When Beowulf was given the goblet, he “for the first time gazed now upon the olden work of men” (*Beowulf* 79)—the past alive in the present. Perhaps as he looked at the well-wrought treasure his memory went back to the gift he received as a youth from his grandfather King Hrethel, a corslet, or “breast webbing” (Heaney 1.453), that was the work of the famed smith Weland. Regardless of his thoughts at the time, Beowulf’s response is, in a blend of chivalry and “northern heroic spirit” to follow his indomitable will to confront the awakened, rampaging dragon and whatever doom awaits (*Tree* 143). This is, in essence, Frodo’s response at the Council of Elrond when he volunteers to

bear the Ring to its destruction. Both Beowulf and Frodo possess in their corslet clad breasts a will that drives them to perform acts that make other men quail.

The sad irony of the tale is that despite Frodo's heroic will, all his love for the Shire, and the ordeal he went through to save it, the Shire was not saved for him. It is not until the end of the quest, when Saruman dies at the doorway of Bag End, that Frodo realises the two-way nature of roads—they can lead you off to unwanted adventures, and they can also lead unwanted adventures to your door. It was said of the renewed Minas Tirith of Aragorn that "after the ending of the Third Age of the world into the new age it preserved the memory and the glory of the years that were gone" (*LOTR* 98). Like the city, the *Red Book* and Bilbo's mithril coat that Frodo handed down to Sam kept the memory of the story alive long after their parts in it ended.

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