

Second Born, Second Best?

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With the release of New Line Cinema's *The Two Towers* and especially *The Return of the King*, Denethor's character has come to be misunderstood like never before. He was never easy to like, due perhaps to his harsh statements, the high expectations he must demand from those around him because of the ongoing war with Mordor, and his growing insanity brought on by using the palantír. However, with the release of New Line's movies, many people have serious misconceptions about Denethor's intent and his actions in Tolkien's books, including that he wished Faramir had died instead of Boromir at Amon Hen.

In fact, Peter Jackson's script says this explicitly, in the scene from *The Return of the King* where Pippin pledges fealty to Denethor:

Denethor: I do not think we should so lightly abandon the other defenses, defenses that your brother long held intact.

Faramir: What would you have me do?

Denethor: I will not yield the river and Pelennor unfought. Osgiliath must be retaken.

Faramir: My lord, Osgiliath is overrun.

Denethor: Yes, I wish that.

Faramir: Since you are robbed of Boromir, I will do what I can in his stead.

But is this how Tolkien writes the scene? It is true that in the books Faramir does ask Denethor if he wishes his sons' places had been replaced, and Denethor agreed he indeed wishes that. In the books, however, the context for this exchange is very different. Faramir releases Frodo, Sam, and Gollum from Henneth Annûn and then travels to Minas Tirith to confer with his father. After reporting that he has sent the Ringbearers on toward Mordor, Tolkien writes:

[Denethor said,] 'Ever your desire is to appear lordly and generous as a king of old, gracious gentle. That may well befit one of high race, if he sits in power and peace. But in desperate hours gentleness may be repaid with death.'

'So be it,' said Faramir.

'So be it!' cried Denethor. 'But not with your death only, Lord Faramir; with the death also of your father, and of all your people, whom it is your part to protect now that Boromir is gone.'

'Do you wish then,' said Faramir, 'that our places had been exchanged?'

'Yes, I wish that indeed,' said Denethor. 'For Boromir was loyal to me and no wizard's pupil. He would have remembered his father's need and would not have squandered what fortune gave. He would have brought me a mighty gift.'"

For a moment Faramir's restraint gave way. 'I would ask you, my father, to remember why it was that I, not he, was in Ithilien. On one occasion at least your

counsel has prevailed, not long ago. It was the Lord of the City that gave the errand to him.'
(“The Siege of Gondor”, *The Return of the King*)

Denethor does not want Faramir dead; in fact, when he later thinks Faramir has died, that “knowledge” breaks him. Instead, he is acting as a commander who believes he has made a tactical mistake. *Perhaps, if Boromir had only been in Ithilien, he would have brought me the Ring...* He thinks Faramir has brought about disaster, and that Boromir could have avoided it.

In “The Council of Elrond” we learn two important things about Boromir’s journey. First, he had to search for Rivendell; he did not know precisely where it was when he left Minas Tirith. Also, the dream that prompted him to seek for Imladris came to both Boromir and Faramir; in fact, as Boromir said,

[O]n the eve of the sudden assault [on Osgiliath] a dream came to my brother in a troubled sleep; and afterwards a like dream came oft to him again, and once to me.
(“The Council of Elrond”, *The Fellowship of the Ring*)

Faramir, as the younger son, would have been the more likely candidate to undertake such a dangerous and long quest. Boromir’s position of Captain-General suggests he spent more time with the regular army, so he would have had less cause to develop wilderness survival skills. Faramir, however, was a captain of the Rangers and so would have naturally learnt such skills.

Of course, Denethor may have had good reason to give the quest to Boromir. In this passage Denethor calls Faramir a “wizard’s pupil”. If he believes Faramir is too fascinated by enchantments, he might be concerned that visiting the Elves would bewitch Faramir, and that Faramir would not act in Gondor’s best interests. Boromir, however, is very practical and exceedingly loyal to Gondor (to the point that it becomes a fault). If anyone would always act in his country’s best interests, it is Boromir.

Regardless, Denethor had good reason to second guess himself here. Whoever would have been the wiser choice, both sons had reasons to commend their being sent. And now Boromir is dead. Denethor could very easily focus on those reasons he should have sent Faramir while forgetting those in favor of Boromir.

In *The War of the Ring* (HoME VIII), Christopher Tolkien cites a note from his father explaining precisely what he meant in this scene:

When he rejected this account of what happened at that meeting of the council my father wrote in the margin of the page: 'This must be altered to make Faramir only go to please his father against his own counsel and to "take Boromir’s place".'
And on a slip of paper he wrote a brief statement of how, and why, the existing portrayal of Denethor’s relations with Faramir must be changed:
'The early conversation of Faramir and his father and motives must be altered. Denethor must be harsh. He must say he did wish Boromir had returned to Henneth Annûn -- for he would have been loyal to his father and brought him the

Ring. (Gandalf may correct this.) Faramir grieved but patient. Then Denethor must be all for holding Osgiliath 'like Boromir did', while Faramir (and Gandalf?) are against it, using the arguments previously given to Denethor. At length in submission, but proudly, to please his father and show him that not only Boromir was brave [he] accepts the command at Osgiliath. Men in the City do not like it. 'This will not only be truer to previous situation, but will explain Denethor's breaking up when Faramir is brought back dying, as it seems. The first part of this passage was struck through, as far as 'Faramir is grieved but patient', and the second part allowed to stand; but this was then rejected also. Finally the whole was marked with a tick, when my father at length decided that this was how it should in fact be.

Even if Tolkien's Denethor believed, as he apparently does in the movies, that he wished Faramir had died at Amon Hen instead of Boromir, this not the same as saying Denethor wished Faramir was dead. The situation is similar to one presented in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*. In Styron's book a mother in the Nazi concentration camps is asked by a guard which of her two children she would like for him to kill; if she refuses to choose, he will kill both.

Unlike Sophie, Denethor did not know Boromir would die when he sent him to Rivendell. In the days between Boromir's horn-call being heard in Gondor and this conversation, Denethor has probably been brooding over some way he could have prevented Boromir's death. The answer is simple, to him: if he had sent Faramir to Rivendell and Boromir to Ithilien, Boromir would have intercepted the Ring and brought it to Minas Tirith. Since he believes Faramir's actions in Ithilien have condemned Faramir, along with all other Gondorians, to death in the current battle with Sauron's armies, while Boromir's bringing of the Ring to Minas Tirith would have given them the strength to resist and survive, Denethor believes that he would have been able to save at least one son if he had chosen differently. Moreover, Denethor's use of the palantir has convinced him that Gondor will fall to Mordor. As he later says to Gandalf,

Didst thou think that the eyes of the White Tower were blind? Nay, I have seen more than thou knowest, Grey Fool. For thy hope is but ignorance. Go then and labour in healing! Go forth and fight! Vanity.
(“The Pyre of Denethor”, *The Return of the King*)

However, Denethor *did* believe that the Ring could save Gondor:

[M]ost surely not for any argument would he [Boromir] have set this thing [the Ring] at a hazard beyond all but a fool's hope, risking our utter ruin, if the Enemy should recover what he lost. Nay, it should have been kept, hidden, hidden dark and deep. Not used, I say, unless at the uttermost end of need, but set beyond his gasp, save by a victory so final that what then befell would not trouble us, being dead.
(“The Siege of Gondor”, *The Return of the King*)

Since Faramir had intercepted the Ring, Denethor was sure Gondor was doomed. He believes that Boromir would have brought him the Ring, thus sparing Gondor. Denethor is observing that, if one

of his sons had to die at Amon Hen and the other intercept the Ring in Ithilien, he wishes that Boromir had intercepted the Ring and Faramir had died at Amon Hen. This is quite different from Denethor saying he wished Faramir was dead.

In the movies it also appears that Denethor expects Faramir to retake Osgiliath or die in the attempt:

"Faramir: If I should return, think better of me, father.

Denethor: That will depend on the matter of your return."

In the books, again, Denethor is thinking more politically and less personally. Denethor and Faramir are at a captain's council consisting of many more people than just the two of them and Pippin, as was the case in the movies. This council is discussing where to concentrate their defences against Mordor's attack.

'And what of Cair Andros?' said the Prince. 'That, too, must be held, if Osgiliath is defended. Let us not forget the danger on our left. The Rohirrim may come, and they may not. But Faramir has told us of great strength drawing ever to the Black Gate. More than one host may issue from it, and strike for more than one passage.' 'Much must be risked in war,' said Denethor. 'Cair Andros is manned, and no more can be sent so far. But I will not yield the River and the Pelennor unfought -- not if there is a captain here who has still the courage to do his lord's will.'

Then all were silent. But at length Faramir said: 'I do not oppose your will, sire. Since you are robbed of Boromir, I will go and do what I can in his stead -- if you command it.'"

'I do so,' said Denethor.

'Then farewell!' said Faramir. 'But if I should return, think better of me!'"

'That depends on the manner of your return,' said Denethor.

("The Siege of Gondor, *The Return of the King*)

Note that Faramir is speaking as a captain and Denethor as his lord. Denethor has asked "if there is a captain who has still the courage to do his lord's will," and Faramir answers. Unlike in the movies, Tolkien's version of this scene is a meeting between all the leaders of Gondor's armies; it is not a semi-private conversation between father and son. This biological relationship is only mentioned in the first passage quoted, which takes place during a more private debriefing of Faramir by Denethor, during which Faramir and Denethor refer to their personal relationship several times. In particular, Denethor says: "But not with your death only, Lord Faramir; with the death also of your father, and of all your people, whom it is your part to protect now that Boromir is gone." But even here, Denethor is appealing to Faramir's duty and obligation to protect not just himself but also his family. Personal emotions and feelings play very little part in this scene.

Gondor's ongoing war with Mordor has forced her citizens to produce results. Faramir, as a captain, is accepting a commission, and Denethor is informing him that, as his superior, he is not impressed by good intentions and noble gestures. He will think better of him if Faramir is victorious. This is perhaps a bit harsh, but it is certainly not abusive and can be read in such a way other than being evidence of a dysfunctional relationship.

The captain's council in Tolkien's *The Return of the King* is a poignant scene giving us insight into

Faramir's and Denethor's relationship. In the trilogy of movies, however, the lines are taken out of context and used in such a way that suggests they mean something other than Tolkien intended. Their relationship might be strained at this point, but I see no evidence that Denethor wished his son was dead.