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I Am No Man; J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings as Gender-Progressive Text

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"In a hole in the ground there lived a dramatic reinterpretation of traditional gender roles in industrialized post-war Britain." Although not quite so pithy an introduction as the original opening to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), it is perhaps a more descriptive one. Long regarded as the seminal text of contemporary fantasy literature, Tolkien's work has received a great deal of criticism regarding its attitude toward traditional gender roles. Namely, progressive readers with a gender-oriented eye quickly aver that *The Lord of the Rings* seems to champion the conservative gender theory notion of separate spheres for men and women: men are suited to battle, glory, honor and triumph, whereas females, in the brief instances where they appear at all, are relegated to the hearth, the homestead, and generally as far away from the action as it is humanly possible to be. As problematic as Tolkien's general tendency to ignore women may be, a conservative interpretation of his intentions concerning gender is ultimately a superficial one. Allowing one's self a deeper look into this text provides a cornucopia of non-traditional performances of gender, both for the few female characters who grace the novels' nine hundred pages and the males who fill it from cover to cover.

First, however, one must acknowledge Tolkien's relationship with the critics. As Tom Shippey, widely-accepted preeminent Tolkien scholar, states, "[There is a] general phenomenon of intense critical hostility to Tolkien, the refusal to allow him to be even a part of 'English literature,' even on the part of those self-professedly committed to 'widening the canon'" (Shippey 305). Indeed, in my own experience, attempts to approach *The Lord of the Rings* as a serious contribution to literature are met with either outright disapproval or embarrassment, as though my request revealed some personal

failure on my part that it would have been more polite to keep hidden. As a tutor at Oxford informed me, "We might be able to provide you with an introductory survey of fantasy literature, but we really don't *do* Tolkien here." There are several possible motivations behind this rejection of all things relating to Middle-earth; for instance, a general distaste for genre literature, and specifically for science fiction and fantasy, pervades academia where more mainstream fiction is considered acceptable. It could stem from the gender issues this paper hopes to address and their tendency to alienate feminist and progressive readers. It could, conversely, even stem from the unconventionality of this work, which is more subtle, and as such perhaps more unsettling. It is this non-traditional interpretation that will be explored in the coming pages.

Fantasy, like dream narratives and the Gothic genre, has always been a "safe" realm for innovative social thought. The ability to insist, "It's just *fantasy!*" allows the author to introduce concepts that would be considered seditious in a more formally accepted setting. As an enthusiastic member of England's famous haven of masculine scholarly pursuits, the Oxford education system, Tolkien lived in a world where to break the status quo in favor of new and different ideas was to invite ridicule from the community, involvement in which was a necessity for any academic who wished to prosper, or even to survive. By turning his focus to writing fantasy in addition to his more traditional scholarly activities, however, Tolkien provided himself with an outlet for ideas that might otherwise have shocked and horrified his peers. *The Lord of the Rings*, therefore, is not only a work of well-crafted fantasy inspired by Nordic epic tradition, but

indeed a statement concerning an expanded understanding of the role of gender, and a broader pool of activities, roles and ideas considered appropriate for both women and men.

To many readers and critics, such a claim may seem ridiculous. After all, Tolkien is infamous among feminist readers for being nearly antithetical to a non-traditional gender viewpoint. Jennifer Neville agrees in her chapter, "Women," in Robert Eaglestone's *Reading The Lord of the Rings; New Writings on Tolkien's Classic*: "It is a commonplace that the women in Tolkien's fiction are disappointing. […] Tolkien presents a society […] in which women have traditionally been seen as decorative but ultimately powerless, as pawns in a man's world" (101). Neville recognizes the position of female characters in his work most noticeably by their absence. Certainly most female readers of Tolkien must wonder, where are the strong, smart *women* driving forth into battle and glory? Other than Éowyn, who seems to represent just about the only nod toward any active female participant in all of Middle-earth, there are no heroes who could also be called heroines; most importantly, the core nine of the fellowship are all male. There is little talk of any womanly influence, from mothers to wives or daughters, and certainly no discussion of sex, menstruation, birth or how even how some races come to be at all. One soon finds oneself wondering if dwarves, for instance, reproduce by budding, or if there are truly any dwarf-women hiding, entirely unmentioned, in the far-off mountain kingdoms, or if perhaps they too sport luxurious beards, making them indistinguishable from their men. (Tolkien confirms in Appendix A of *The Return of the King* that they do, in fact, sport beards, which opens an entirely different set of questions that would be

more well-suited to a rather different essay.) In any event, *The Lord of the Rings* is certainly not, by any definition, a "woman's novel."

Yet, it is my belief that to read Tolkien as a woman is not to resign oneself to authorial alienation. As Maureen Thum writes, "Contrary to those who see Tolkien as an anti-feminist writer, I wish to argue that Tolkien by no means underwrites the binary views of gender construction outlined above. He is no feminist. Nevertheless, he subverts traditional views of gender roles throughout his writings" (235). There may be no Amazon warriors riding to the Black Gate bent on slaying Sauron with only the power of their strong, womanly thighs. But on the other hand nor are the ubiquitous male characters so unfalteringly masculine that they are inaccessible to a female reader. Tolkien's male characters are not caricatures of masculinity: they touch one another when they are afraid or lonely; they weep when they are hurt or sorrowful; they laugh, leap, and sing when they are joyful. These are not the unrealistic, über-men of traditional heteronormative fantasy literature. Instead, we are given vulnerable, expressive characters willing to convey their doubt, fear, and pain as well as ride with honor and glory into the sunset.

Although the female sex is certainly underrepresented in *The Lord of the Rings*, traits associated with a more feminine gender identity abound throughout the text. The most progressive aspect of the work lies in the fact that gendered traits are not allocated to either sex alone, but are instead explored in both traditional genders. Before continuing, current gender theory must be addressed. Although some feminist theorists decry the gender binary, I am less convinced of such claims. Judith Butler states in

Undoing Gender:

> To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the "masculine" and "feminine" is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance. (42)

While I very much agree that gender goes far beyond the constraints of pure male and pure female, I do not believe we should abandon such terminology entirely until we have an equally expressive and widely-understood alternative vocabulary for these issues. As such, gender will here be referred to in terms of traditionally projected "masculine" and "feminine" traits, while acknowledging the highly nuanced continuum therein. In addition, since Tolkien does not acknowledge any form of intersex identity, in this paper sex will be discussed in terms of the established binary of male/female due to the author's historical context of early-and-mid 20th century Britain, as well as for simplicity. The terms "men" and "women" will also be used, despite the fact that many of Tolkien's characters are non-human; when discussing the race called "men," the capitalized "Man" will be used. Since women are few and far between in Middle-earth, it is easiest to begin our discussion with them.

Tolkien's Women

Any conscientious commenter on gender in Tolkien's work must acknowledge his failings when it comes to women. Although nearly all readers recognize the general absence of leading ladies, it is more difficult but perhaps more telling to peer into the rich, detailed background of the primary plot. For instance, not a single member of the

Fellowship has a visible, living mother. Between evidence expressed in the text itself and information provided by the hundred-odd pages of appendices at the end of *The Return of the King*, the strange quirk of absent mothers becomes an obvious omission. Frodo, our diminutive protagonist, is an orphan; both of his parents died by drowning thirty-eight years prior to the events of *The Lord of the Rings*. Sam's mother is also deceased, with no recorded date of death, although this is an omission that may be attributed as much to Tolkien's relative disregard of the lower classes than to a specific gender-blindness. Aragorn is also an orphan, whose mother, Gilraen, died eleven years pre-text. Boromir's mother is also dead, thirty years before the quest.

In addition, Merry, Pippin, Gimli and Legolas all must, theoretically, have mothers, but they do not appear nor achieve any mention in the text itself; Merry and Pippin's mothers are at least allowed names in the family trees of the appendices, but disappear at some point between the year 3001 and 3018; living or no, they are never heard from again. Gimli's and Legolas' maternal influences are not only invisible but nameless, unmentioned even in the almost absurdly detailed records of lineage and ancestry. Gandalf, as a semi-supernatural entity, may never have had parents at all; regardless of the precise details of his origin, he certainly has no tangible maternal figure[1]. Other characters bereft of mothers include Bilbo, Faramir, Arwen, Éowyn and Éomer, and all of the Ents. In fact, not a single character with a speaking role has an identifiable mother. While mothers are occasionally referenced as being influential, this role is always past tense; Bilbo and Frodo get their respective adventurous streaks from

1 Wizards in Tolkien's legendarium are known the Maiar, a form of lesser Valar or demi-god sent, full-grown, from the Blessed Realm of Valinor to Middle-earth by the greater Valar, the gods. Their true form is immortal and incorporeal.

their Took and Brandybuck matriarchs, but this maternal influence occurred before and outside the text. Although fathers are also frequently absent, they at least receive names in every mortal's history.

Part of this tendency toward authorial matricide stems from the author's own life; Tolkien's father passed first, followed by his mother when the author was twelve years old. He and his siblings were then raised by a Catholic priest by the name of Father Francis Xavier Morgan (Carpenter Biography, "Early Years"). Thus, the author came into his maturity somewhat unfamiliar with the mother-child relationship, and chose, it seems, to erase it rather than address it inexpertly. Personal tragedy, however, is no excuse to ignore an entire definitive gender role, and Tolkien's absent mothers create a motif that women readers may well find somewhat offensive. As stated in *Women Among the Inklings*, "In fact, Middle-earth is very Inkling-like, in that while women exist in the world, they need not be given significant attention and can, if one is lucky, simply be avoided altogether" (Fredrick 108). While this comment has a somewhat antagonistic tone, the authors make a valid point: an attentive reader can almost feel the relief Tolkien might have felt at managing to write his entire epic without having to consider the messy issue of women too deeply. The books' relationship with women and mothers is not solely focused on absence, although frequently the references to maternal influence is complex. Mothers are often lifted up in one sense while they are put down in another.

In a problematic discussion of the need and power of woman as mother, however, Tolkien approaches the weakness that men bring upon themselves when they ignore the necessity of procreation. Telling of why the line of kings failed in Gondor, Faramir

relates, "'Kings […] counted old names in the rolls of their descent dearer than the names of sons. Childless lords sat in aged halls musing on heraldry [...]. And the last king of the line of Anárion had no heir'" (*The Two Towers* [henceforth *TT*] 286). Additionally, strength is occasionally characterized by references to noble maternal lineage rather than paternal genesis. Legolas says about Prince Imrahil, "'But nobler is his spirit than the understanding of Sauron; for is he not of the children of Lúthien? Never shall that line fail, though the years may lengthen beyond count'" (*The Return of the King* [henceforth *RotK*] 152). The author also refers to Éowyn in terms of her feminine royal ties: "'For she is a fair maiden, fairest lady of a house of queens'" (*RotK* 142). Each of these quotations is ultimately both positive and negative; in the first, the need for women is implied through the need for children, but it is phrased in terms of the usefulness of those women for their men rather than themselves. The discussion of Prince Imrahil ennobles Lúthien and her descendants, but focuses more on her procreative power than on anything about her higher self. The relation of Éowyn to a line of queens sets up the power of the maternal line, but still quantifies that through the woman's beauty rather than her prowess or character. Tolkien attempts to bestow a sense of power and nobility to women, but, unfortunately to the eyes of the progressive reader, chooses to do so in a highly traditional manner, emphasizing female use in the masculine sphere and physical beauty rather than personhood.

Beyond the implicit role of mothers in *The Lord of the Rings*, other background attributes develop a complex view toward women and their power or lack thereof. One of the only times Tolkien uses an asterisk with accompanying footnote in the entirety of

the epic is to point out a fact about the gender of the sun: "The round Moon rolled behind the hill, / as the Sun raised up her head. / She* hardly believed her fiery eyes […] *Elves (and Hobbits) always refer to the Sun as She" (*FotR* 172). Later, entering Lothlórien, the stream called Nimrodel after a fabled elf-woman is granted restorative properties: "For a moment Frodo stood near the brink and let the water flow over his tired feet. It was cold but its touch was clean, and as he went on and it mounted to his knees, he felt that the stain of travel and all weariness was washed from his limbs" (*FotR* 353). These two instances are inconspicuous; though the author does not draw attention to the impact of women on his fantasy world, a portrait of feminine influence that is both wide-spread and potent is painted behind the main events. The feminine Nimrodel wipes away grief, weariness and pain simply through her touch. By making the Sun a She, Tolkien departs from the traditional Western interpretation of the moon as feminine and sun as masculine, and his rare asterisk marks an important point about the culture of Middle-earth, particularly since both the most noble beings (the elves) and the most accessible (the hobbits) ascribe to this idea.

Not all the positive attributes of women are so subtle. Frequently in Tolkien's narrative, women are idealized beyond the realm of reasonable expectations, but for the most part in highly traditional ways. Tolkien seems to greatly appreciate the Angel in the House conceptualization of women, where the perfect female is beautiful, graceful, distant, and part of the paradisiacal homestead (Patmore). Arwen, the elven love interest of Aragorn, is one such woman. The first time Frodo sees her, he is stunned by her perfection:

> Young [Arwen] was and yet not so. The braids of her dark hair were touched by no frost; her white arms and clear face were flawless and smooth, and the light of stars was in her bright eyes, grey as a cloudless night; yet queenly she looked, and thought and knowledge were in her glance, as of one who has known many things that the years bring. […] Such loveliness in living thing Frodo had never seen before nor imagined in his mind. (*The Fellowship of the Ring* [henceforth *FotR*] 239)

Similar is the description of Goldberry, wife of Tom Bombadil, the enigmatic and most ancient being in Middle-earth. The passage goes into less depth about her physical beauty, but the effect upon Frodo and the other hobbits is much the same:

> The Hobbits looked at her in wonder; and she looked at each of them and smiled. 'Fair Lady Goldberry!' said Frodo at last, feeling his heart moved with a joy that he did not understand. He stood as he had at times stood enchanted by fair elven-voices; but the spell that was now laid upon him was different: less keen and lofty was the delight, but deeper and nearer to the mortal heart; marvelous and yet not strange. (*FotR* 134)

This sort of reaction among men, particularly hobbit-men, is, of course, somewhat ridiculous even as it is empowering. Putting women on such a dramatic pedestal, above and separate from the somehow inferior men, both elevates and degrades them, because it makes them, in a way, distinctly un-human. Hyper idealization is flattering in the sense that it supposedly places women above men, but is simultaneously disempowering in the way that it removes them from the sphere of "real" people, i.e., men.

In addition to the problematic emphasis on her perfection, Goldberry's relationship with Tom has anti-feminist origins. While she first appears in "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" as a trickster character, Tom returns at the end of the poem to capture her:

> But one day Tom, he went and caught the River-daughter, [...]
> He caught her, held her fast! Water-rats went scattering
> reeds hissed, herons cried, and her heart was fluttering.

> Said Tom Bombadil, Here's my pretty maiden!
> You shall come home with me! The table is all laden [...]
> You shall come under Hill! Never mind your mother
> in her deep weedy pool: there you'll find no lover!'
> Old Tom Bombadil had a merry wedding,
> crowned all with buttercups, hat and feather shedding;
> his bride with forgetmenots and flag-lilies for garland
> was robed all in silver-green. He sang like a starling,
> hummed like a honey-bee, lilted to the fiddle,
> clasping his river-maid round her slender middle. (Tolkien, "Adventures" 14-15)

Goldberry is clearly an unwilling party in this "marriage." Kidnapped from her mother's dwelling, she is forced to wed her captor while he gropes her, singing. Although the poem is meant as a light-hearted adventure, it portrays a dark story in sharp contrast to the apparently happy marriage of Tom and his River-woman's daughter. Tolkien describes her beauty and kindness, but he also writes the story of her imprisonment, again empowering a female character even as he fetters her.

In any discussion of gender and particularly women in *The Lord of the Rings*, Éowyn quickly becomes an important character indeed. Rightly recognized as the books' only overtly feminist character, she alone is often able to persuade female readers that Tolkien isn't the unapologetic misogynist that many decry him to be. Begging to be allowed to fight like her brother, she delivers a speech that would not sound out of place in the contemporary fight to allow women in military combat situations:

> "If you must go, then let me ride in your following. For I am weary of skulking in the hills, and wish to face peril and battle."
> "Your duty is with your people," [Éomer] answered.
> "Too often have I heard of duty," she cried. "But am I not of the House of Eorl, a shieldmaiden and not a dry-nurse? I have waited on faltering feet long enough. Since they falter no longer, it seems, may I not now spend my life as I will? […] Shall I always be chosen [to stay behind with those who cannot fight]?" she said bitterly. "Shall I always be left behind when the Riders depart, to mind the house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return? […]

> All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death." (*RotK* 57-58)

Although she is not granted permission, Éowyn defies her male relatives and rides to battle with her male comrades anyway. In fact, she is the one who deals the mortal blow to Sauron's most powerful minion, the Witch-King of Angmar. When he boasts that prophecy states that no living man can kill him, she replies, "'But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him!'" (*RotK* 116). She proceeds, with Merry's help, to strike her foe, destroying him utterly. Tolkien makes here an interesting point: Éowyn's great success is no passive feminine victory, but instead comes from the realm of traditional masculinity. Tolkien seems, for a moment, to agree with a sentiment akin to the following from *Feminine Masculinity* by Judith Halberstam: "What is 'masculinity'? [...] I do not claim to have any definitive answer to this question, but I do have a few proposals about why masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects" (Halberstam 1). The undeniably female Éowyn nonetheless manages to embody a masculine identity, at least momentarily.

In general, praise for Éowyn by other characters occurs frequently in *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*. Explaining her plight to her brother, Aragorn says of her, "'[B]ut she, born in the body of a maid, had a spirit and courage at least the match of yours. Yet she was doomed to wait upon an old man, whom she loved as a father, and

watch him falling into a mean dishonoured dotage; and her part seemed to her more ignoble than that of the staff he leaned on'" (*RotK* 143). Of course, Tolkien cannot resist the desire to romanticize the feminine, so she is also given her share of prosaic descriptions of her beauty, but she is allowed to be both beautiful and strong, physically and in terms of character:

> [Éowyn] turned and went slowly into the house. As she passed the doors she turned and looked back. Grave and thoughtful was her glance, as she looked on the king with cool pity in her eyes. Very fair was her face, and her long hair was like a river of gold. Slender and tall she was in her white robe girt with silver; but strong she seemed and stern as steel. (*TT* 119)

As relatively progressive as these extracts may be, it would be naïve to assume that Tolkien's treatment of Éowyn marks the author as an incipient feminist. For every way in which she is given extraordinary power, she is also given a push back toward traditional female roles.

Like both Arwen and Goldberry, Éowyn is often defined by her status as beautiful woman. She is frequently called a maiden, and her virgin purity is emphasized as one of her key appeals. She is described as "fair and cold, like a morning of pale spring that is not yet come to womanhood" (*TT* 119). She is dismissed from the councils of the men – "'Go, Éowyn sister-daughter!' said the old king. 'The time for fear is past'" (*TT* 119) – and even after she destroys the Witch-King, whom we are specifically told that no man could kill, Aragorn says of her, "'Alas! For she was pitted against a foe beyond the strength of her mind or body'" (*RotK* 142). Although it can be said that the lord of the Nazgûl would be beyond the strength of any warrior's mind or body, there is a sense that Aragorn is here referring to the implied inherent physical and mental inferiority of the

"fairer sex." Although Peter Kreeft, Tolkien scholar, argues that Éowyn's victory is "a grace, not a justice" (106), and that her ability to slay the Nazgul shows the author's rejection of the hegemonic gender binary role structure, I disagree. Tolkien does not permit her to have a flawless victory, and she is nearly destroyed herself by the darkness that is brought upon her by her audacity in striking a male foe so obviously superior to her in both physicality and will.

Although Éowyn ultimately recovers from her wounds, it is through the power of a man; by falling in love with Faramir, her cold, unwomanly heart is melted and she renounces her old ways, choosing instead to be a traditional wife and mother. Succumbing to the implied natural way of things, she declares:

> "I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren. […] And would you[, Faramir,] have your proud folk say of you: 'There goes a lord who tamed a wild shieldmaiden of the North!'" (*RotK* 243)

After the strength that Éowyn displays until this point, and the independence of will that defines her character, her regression to womanhood under the influence of a man is doubly disappointing. At least one critic has tried to soften the blow by insisting that Éowyn manages to retain her agency even in her yielding to heteronormative, repressive love:

> The love of Faramir and Éowyn is not Courtly Love, like that of Aragorn and Arwen, because Éowyn takes an active role in the relationship. Faramir and Éowyn can be seen as more of a modern ideal for marriage, the uniting of equal life partners. Therefore, the love story and subsequent "healing" process of Éowyn should be seen as an independent woman's self-willed transformation. (McCrory Hatcher)

I find this interpretation to be overly generous. Although Tolkien seems sympathetic

toward the plight of the oppressed woman, ultimately, she is a threat; she is unnatural and uncomfortable, and though she may accomplish great deeds, she must eventually wind up back in her proper place. As is perhaps becoming clear, the author's relationship with women is a complex one, and though he desperately tries to be progressive, he is unable to allow such behavior without strict restrictions.

Of course, there are other female characters who are not placed so high, and therefore are not brought so low in an effort to retain control over them. Hobbit women, in particular, are portrayed in a much more accessible light, and one that is, though less unceasingly complimentary, actually more beneficial in terms of women's status in the novel. At the end of the quest, as the world itself seems to crumble and burn around them on the very brink of doom, it is Rosie Cotton that Sam thinks of:

> "So that was the job I felt I had to do when I started," thought Sam: "to help Mr. Frodo to the last step and then die with him? Well, if that is the job then I must do it. But I would dearly like to see Bywater again, and Rosie Cotton and her brothers, and the Gaffer and Marigold and all." (*RotK* 211)

Rosie is not some immortal beauty blessed with pseudo-angelic status, nor is she a bright, cold shieldmaiden willing to die for her land; she is a farmer's daughter whose first words to Sam after the quest are to scold him for his prolonged absence. "'Hullo, Sam!' said Rosie. 'Where've you been? They said you were dead; but I've been expecting you since the Spring. You haven't hurried, have you'" (*RotK* 287)? Although Rosie is in some ways the archetypal abandoned Penelope, left behind to wait faithfully while her Odysseus travels the world, she is given a reality denied Arwen, Goldberry, and Éowyn. Nor is she the meek, gentle woman with no word of reprimand for her deserting suitor; although she is merely teasing, Rosie lets Sam know just how it feels to wait without

word for more than a year.

There is another hobbit-woman who gains power in her own, more mundane way. Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, Frodo's much-loathed aunt, redeems herself toward the end of her life by showing remarkable spunk in the face of powerful adversaries. When the hobbits return to the Shire, they are brought up to date on her courageous acts:

> "Why, they even took Pimple's old ma, that Lobelia, and he was fond of her, if no one else was. Some of the Hobbiton folk, they saw it. She comes down the lane with her old umberella. Some of the ruffians were going up with a big cart.
> 'Where be you a-going?' says she.
> 'To Bag End,' says they.
> 'What for?' says she.
> 'To put up some sheds for Sharkey,' says they.
> 'Who said you could?' says she.
> 'Sharkey,' says they. 'So get out o' the road, old hagling!'
> 'I'll give you Sharkey, you dirty thieving ruffians!' says she, and ups with her umberella and goes for the leader, near twice her size. So they took her. Dragged her off to the Lockholes, at her age too. They've took others we miss more, but there's no denying she showed more spirit than most." (*RotK* 293).

While there are certainly problematic issues concerning class with Tolkien's depiction of most hobbits, in terms of gender, this portrayal of Lobelia is actually fairly positive. In overtly challenging the thugs who have invaded her home, she steps beyond the traditional limits of her sex and asserts her own agency. The fact that she fails in her attempt is ultimately unimportant; by physically challenging a much stronger opponent, Lobelia denies that her size or sex require her to submit to any power outside herself.

For the reader searching for a strong woman who is both intelligent and powerful, *The Lord of the Rings* contains one who is written as unabashedly strong. Galadriel, queen of the elves of Lothlórien, is a woman who is wiser than the most ancient wizards of Middle-earth, counseling them on their own matters and guiding their deeds. As she

states in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "'I it was who first summoned the White Council. And if my designs had not gone amiss, it would have been governed by Gandalf the Grey, and then mayhap things would have gone otherwise'" (372). It is made fairly clear that if the wisdom of Galadriel had prevailed, many of the evils brought about by Saruman would never have occurred, and the free peoples of Middle-earth would be more prepared to face the threat from Mordor. Indeed, Galadriel is one of the few who can strive mind-to-mind with Sauron, and it is through this constant struggle that the powers for good know as much as they do about his power and his plans. She tells Frodo of this as they stand by her mirror in Lothlórien after Frodo has seen the lidless eye:

> "I know what it was that you last saw," [Galadriel] said; "for that is also in my mind. Do not be afraid! But do not think that only by singing amid the trees, nor even by the slender arrows of elven-bows, is this land of Lothlórien maintained and defended against its Enemy. I say to you, Frodo, that even as I speak to you, I perceive the Dark Lord and know his mind, or all of his mind that concerns the Elves. And he gropes ever to see me and my thought. But still the door is closed!"
>
> She lifted up her white arms, and spread out her hands towards the East in a gesture of rejection and denial. […] Frodo gazed at the ring [upon her finger] with awe; for suddenly it seemed to him that he understood.
>
> "Yes," she said, divining his thought […]. "Verily it is in the land of Lórien upon the finger of Galadriel that one of the Three [elven rings of power] remains. This is Nenya, the Ring of Adamant, and I am its keeper." (*FotR* 380)

Galadriel's ability to face the power in the East, but also her ability to bear one of the great rings, indicates just how steadfast an individual she is. Each of the other rings, whether borne by men, elves, dwarves, or Sauron himself, are in the possession of males. Galadriel is the only woman among this confederacy of chosen ones, and even there she is among the most powerful. The dwarven rings all are lost, and the men were all corrupted by Sauron's influence. The elven rings are the only ones that survive, and even

among them, Galadriel bears Nenya, the ring of adamant, the substance that most represents an unbreakable will.

Even more important, Galadriel has the potential for yet more strength. Were she to take the Ring that Frodo freely offers her, she would become a power both wonderful and terrible, stronger even than Sauron and all his works:

> "And now at last it comes. [Frodo] will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!" (*FotR* 381)

The temptation for Galadriel to take the Ring is strong. If she does not, the fate of her world is balanced as though on the edge of a knife, and neither outcome is a full victory for her people. Should Frodo fail, the only hope for her and all the elves is to flee across the sea, where with time even there Sauron could reach them. Should he succeed and the Ring be destroyed, the elven rings will lose their power as well, and the elves will still be forced to abandon the land they love. If she were to take the Ring, she could defeat the evil in Mordor and take its place, restoring beauty eternal to all of Middle-earth. In time, however, she too would be corrupted, and her absolute power would turn to absolute domination that none could cast down. It is for this reason that Galadriel refuses the Ring, choosing to weaken herself rather than take power that would both save and ruin her.

Beyond these lofty manifestations of her ability, Galadriel is even able to show a degree of mastery over her own husband, the Lord of the Galadhrim. Compared to Galadriel, Celeborn seems both rash and somewhat foolish. When Celeborn asks a

question of the company, Galadriel already knows the answer:

> "Here there are eight," [Celeborn] said. "Nine were to set out: so said the messages. But maybe there has been some change of counsel that we have not heard. […]"
>
> "Nay, there was no change of counsel," said the Lady Galadriel, speaking for the first time. […] "Gandalf the Grey set out with the Company, but he did not pass the borders of this land." (*FotR* 370)

Later in this same exchange, she gravely scolds her husband for speaking against Gandalf's choice to lead the fellowship into Moria, ultimately causing his own fall:

> "Alas!" said Celeborn. […] "And if it were possible, one would say that at the last Gandalf fell from wisdom into folly, going needlessly into the net of Moria."
>
> "He would be rash indeed that said that thing,' said Galadriel gravely. 'Needless were none of the deeds of Gandalf in life." […]
>
> At length Celeborn spoke again. "I did not know that your plight was so evil," he said. "Let Gimli forget my harsh words: I spoke in the trouble of my heart." (*FotR* 371)

Although Celeborn is the Lord of Lórien, it is quickly apparent that its Queen is its true ruler. Wise though Celeborn may be, his wife's power is far beyond even his ken, and it is she who guides him.

Similarly to Galadriel's power over Celeborn, there is one other way in which female characters have dominion over males in *The Lord of the Rings*. The story of the Entwives is ultimately one of feminine independence, and while the final outcome of the tale remains unresolved, the way in which the Entwives reject the lands of their husbands and follow their own desires shows their agency as separate individuals. Speaking of forests, Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin, "The oldest were planted by the Ents to try and please the Entwives; but they looked at them and smiled and said that they knew where whiter blossom and richer fruit were growing" (*TT* 87). In rejection of the wild ways of the Ents with their trees, the Entwives turn instead to ordering the natural world as they

see fit:

> "They did not desire to speak with these [plants]; but they wished them to hear and obey what was said to them. The Entwives ordered them to grow according to their wishes, and bear leaf and fruit to their liking; for the Entwives desired order, and plenty, and peace (by which they meant that things should remain where they had set them). So the Entwives made gardens to live in." (*TT* 79)

It is in this way that the Entwives separate from the male Ents, to the extent that the Ents do no know where they went, if they shall return, or even if they are still alive. Although the Ents search for them in an effort to make amends, the Entwives do not come back to the woods they did not love in favor of the gardens that they do. As Treebeard sings of them, "'[They]'ll linger [t]here, and will not come, because [their] land is fair / […] [They]'ll linger [t]here beneath the Sun, because [their] land is best!'" (*TT* 80). Although they do not appear in person in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Entwives are a subtle feminist subplot in the text, where female choice is both real and powerful.

In addition to the feminism inherent in the story of the Entwives, the environmentalism implicit in their tale further strengthens both Tolkien's progressivism and female power in *The Lord of the Rings*. The Entwives and their gardens typify the author's attitude toward industry, in which progress that despoils the natural world is abhorrent and should be avoided at all costs in favor of sustainable practices. In modern feminist theory, environmentalism is strongly linked to women as a "female issue"; beyond the traditional feminine role of gardener, women are the most likely to hold environmental issues dear, and actively lobby on their behalf (Warren). This perspective, however, did not exist during Tolkien's time, and his foresight in linking women with ecological activism is both prescient and significant. The Entwives are, themselves,

nature, and it is consistent with modern feminist thought that they would serve as activist voices for environmental protection.

One of the more compelling female influences in *The Lord of the Rings*, however, is no benign-but-distant force. Instead, a chilling agent of darkness, and arguably the most direct and accessible of Tolkien's villains, is female. Shelob, the great spider-guardian of the pass of Cirith Ungol, is both terrible and inarguably a "she":

> Too little did [Sam] or his master know of the craft of Shelob. […] There agelong she had dwelt, an evil thing in spider-form[…]. But she was still there, who was there before Sauron, and before the first stone of Barad-dûr; and she served none but herself, drinking the blood of Elves and Men, bloated and grown fat with endless brooding on her feasts, weaving webs of shadow; for all living things were her food, and her vomit darkness. Far and wide her lesser broods, bastards of the miserable mates, her own offspring, that she slew, spread from glen to glen, from the Ephel Dúath to the eastern hills, to Dol Guldur and the fastnesses of Mirkwood. But none could rival her, Shelob the Great, last child of Ungoliant to trouble the unhappy world. (*TT* 332)

Anti-intuitive though it may seem, Shelob is perhaps the most feminist of any of Tolkien's women. Massive, ancient and horrid, Shelob is without master or superior. She precedes the reign of Sauron and lives on the borders of his lands not as his slave, but with his consent, making her more of an equal to him than even his most powerful minions. She is wholly, irredeemably evil and under the dominion of her own will alone, and all the inhabitants of Middle-earth, fair or foul, are her prey. It is unlikely that any reader will see the stinking spider demigoddess as a heroine for women's rights, but Tolkien's choice to write his most instinctively horrifying villain as a female force shows that the author himself respects and somewhat fears the potential for power within the female influence.

Tolkien's attitude toward women and their place in his world is a complicated one.

In many ways he is pleasantly progressive, producing characters such as Éowyn and Galadriel, writing about the Sun with feminine pronouns, making the primary deity of the elves, Elbereth, female, and bestowing upon many woman characters agency, strength, wisdom, and the audacity to use those gifts. He constructs his world so that even the simplest of women save lives, as in the case of Ioreth the old housewife, who remembers ancient lore about the King's ability to heal the wounded in time to save Faramir, Éowyn and Merry:

> Then an old wife, Ioreth, the eldest of the women who served in that house, looking on the fair face of Faramir, wept, for all the people loved him. And she said: "Alas! If he should die. Would that there were kings in Gondor, as there were once upon a time, they say! For it is said in old lore: *The hands of the king are the hands of a healer*. And so the rightful king could ever be known."
>
> And Gandalf, who stood by, said: "Men may long remember your words, Ioreth! For there is hope in them" (*RotK* 136).

Women play important roles in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the contributions they do make to the plot should not be forgotten by even the most frustrated feminist reader.

One critic, Anne Baylay, has made a powerful point about the way society defines a "strong" woman versus a "weak" one that should be discussed when approaching Tolkien's nuanced females. If to be a strong woman is to exemplify traditional male traits, is this strength in fact another form of oppression? Baylay addresses strong-willed, seemingly masculine female influences in children's literature: "[F]iguring out how to escape femininity and how to achieve access to masculinity is only part of the story. For if culture increasingly rewards all people according to their distance from femininity, then our binary gender system is replaced by something that sounds like masculine tyranny" (13). It is possible that by insisting that the gender traditionally inhabited by men is

inherently superior to that inhabited by women, feminine gender expression is further relegated to the realm of "Other" and systematically disempowered. Tolkien should certainly not be praised for his stereotyping of female characters. However, it is worth noting that the establishment of a single way to perform strong femininity through masculine actions and traits can be as limiting as traditional oppression. If women who feel most comfortable exemplifying their gender through historically feminine avenues are denigrated, is that not also persecution?

Beyond theoretical questions of female strength, readers should be aware that one of the most important influences in Tolkien's life was his wife. Edith not only loved and supported him throughout the majority of her life, but also directly inspired his work. In a letter to his son Michael in 1972, shortly after Edith's death, Tolkien wrote:

> [...]and only 5 years later (the equiv. of 20 years experience in later life) I met the Lúthien Tinúviel of my own personal 'romance' with her long dark hair, fair face and starry eyes, and beautiful voice. And in 1934 she was still with me, and her beautiful children. But now she has gone before Beren, leaving him indeed one-handed, but he has no power to move the inexorable Mandos[...]. (Carpenter Letters 417)

Lúthien is a powerful female character from the history of Middle-earth, a foremother of Arwen and heroine from previous battles against the forces of darkness that trouble the unhappy world. It demonstrates Tolkien's positive relationships with women that one of his most personally beloved characters finds her root in the author's own wife. In fact, Lúthien and Edith were so integral to Tolkien's relationship with both that, after Edith's death, he had her tombstone inscribed with the name of her derivative (420). His own bears the name of Beren, Lúthien's mortal lover.

Of course, this adoring husband is also the same author to resign Éowyn to a

traditional married role once her usefulness as a warrior is ended, to write Galadriel into a fading role that eventually dies away, and to refrain from giving Arwen Undómiel any semblance of personality traits beyond "beautiful." Timothy O'Neill agrees in *The Individuated Hobbit:*

> Tolkien does not appear to have been entirely comfortable with the females in his myth. His only feminine characterizations were either androgynous […] or self-consciously stereotypic[...], flighty or submissive enough to suit the fantasies of any male chauvinist. (104)

While this comment contains some merit, it also oversimplifies the point. As Simone de Beauvoir once wrote of the male mythologization of women:

> Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. […] Nature is a vein of gross material in which the soul is imprisoned, and she is the supreme reality; she is contingence and Idea, the finite and the whole; she is what opposes the Spirit, and the Spirit itself. Now ally, now enemy, she appears as the dark chaos from whence life wells up[...]. Woman sums up nature as Mother, Wife, and Idea; these forms now mingle and now conflict, and each of them wears a double visage" (303).

This observation strikes closer to the point. Like so many men, Woman as Myth is, for Tolkien, an alluring and terrifying subject. She is both goddess and horror, and it is not altogether surprising that his work betrays his anxiety. Indeed, if the effort to prove Tolkien a gender progressive must rest solely on his writings about women, it will be fruitless; although the author does show a tendency toward some feminist ideals, he also, in his trepidation, clings too tightly to the traditional roles that define a conservative standpoint to be truly innovative. It is instead in Tolkien's men that we find glimmers of real progressivism, and to them that any reader can relate, regardless of gender.

Tolkien's Men

At first glance, a reader may see Tolkien's men as the typical über-men of the epic quest formula. Aragorn, Boromir, Gimli and others do spend a great deal of their time roaming the countryside wielding broadswords, axes and bows, and the victories they accomplish are the complete, glorious successes of every traditional little boy's wildest hero fantasies. But although their deeds fulfill this role, their attitudes, relationships and emotions sit well outside this generalization. In his 2008 book, *Guyland*, Michael Kimmel writes about the hyperbolized expectations for the alpha male figure.

> In 1976, social psychologist Robert Brannon summarized the four basic rules of masculinity:
>
> > 1. "No Sissy Stuff!" Being a man means not being a sissy, not being perceived as weak, effeminate, or gay. Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of the feminine.
> > 2. "Be a Big Wheel." This rule refers to the centrality of success and power in the definition of masculinity. Masculinity is measured more by wealth, power, and status than by any particular body part.
> > 3. "Be a Sturdy Oak." What makes a man is that he is reliable in a crisis. And what makes him so reliable in a crisis is not that he is able to respond fully and appropriately to the situation at hand, but rather that he resembles an inanimate object. A rock, a pillar, a species of tree.
> > 4. "Give 'em Hell." Exude an aura of daring and aggression. Live life out on the edge. Take risks. Go for it. Pay no attention to what others think. (Kimmel 45-46)

The Lord of the Rings rejects these concepts with a purpose and method that could be no more systematic if that had been the novel's intention. Tolkien's men forge friendships with and dependencies upon one another throughout the text, and they are unafraid to share physical contact and proximity with one another through their numerous trials. They defend and sacrifice for each other in ways that go beyond the traditional boundaries of homosocial interaction, and the level of emotion they are willing to not

only feel but express is far beyond what is expected of the stereotypical epic hero. They are often weak and occasionally overcome with emotion, and the success they eventually achieve is not defined by physical aggressive strength but by the passive power of the soul to endure beyond any limitation.

One must look to Tolkien's scholarly activities to divine at least one source of his flawed, not-entirely-masculine male characters. Perhaps surprisingly, it is in the author's love of Anglo-Saxon epic poetry that one can most identify Tolkien's willingness to write non-traditional masculine heroes, which he then mixed with his own devotion to Christian thought. Although the protagonists of these works are hypermasculine, hyperbolized male heroes, they also experience intense emotions, great loves, and catastrophic defeats in both physical and spiritual respects. As Lynn Forest-Hill writes in her article on the linguistic sources of Tolkien's philosophy, for instance, "Through the process of Boromir's death, Tolkien depicts both a transition and a reconciliation between the pagan heroic spirit and the doctrines of Christianity. This is embodied in the form of the flawed warrior-hero who seeks absolution and receives forgiveness even as he gives up his life in the greater cause" (82). This observation may seem little more than a passing point, but the capacity for repentance, forgiveness and absolution is not traditionally associated with the modern concept of the epic hero. Although wise leaders may deign to exercise mercy and forgive those who trespass against them, it is not they who fall and must be forgiven. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition that so influenced Tolkien's scholarly work as a linguist, however, a great hero is also an imperfect construct that may fail in tremendous ways, may repent, and be forgiven as well as himself forgive.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, expanding upon the epic roots of Tolkien's studies, male characters are allowed to progress beyond their roles as "male" into those that more conservative texts reserve for women and children, including even the notably absent mother-role earlier discussed. Unlike the restrictions that still lie on his females, Tolkien's male characters explore the full range of gender expression without stigma, presenting a view of gender in society that is vastly different from the conservative approach one would expect from a white, upper-middle-class member of Oxford academia. To address why this gender-progressive viewpoint occurs, one may turn again to Kimmel's text, which discusses the motivations behind stereotypical gender performance:

> [...M]en subscribe to these [traditional conceptions of masculine] ideals not because they want to impress women, let alone any inner drive or desire to test themselves against some abstract standards. They do it because they want to be positively evaluated by other men. [...M]en want to be a "man among men," an Arnold Schwarzenegger-like "man's man," not a Fabio-like "ladies' man." Masculinity is largely a "homosocial" experience: performed for, and judged by, other men. (Kimmel 47)

Tolkien's males, however, do not participate in this constant evaluation. Although his characters appreciate strength and virtue in one another, there is no sense of impending judgment looming over the fellowship and their quest. Throughout the text, authority figures of both genders refrain from pressuring any individual into any role. Even as far as the land of Lórien, the fellowship is told that any of their number may abandon the quest and seek safety in whatever way they will (*FotR* 382).

One of the most powerful ways in which Tolkien's male characters defy expectation may be seen in the depth of their relationships with one another. Many of

these interactions stem from Tolkien's own experiences: throughout his life, he participated in social groups composed entirely of men, from the Tea Club, Barrovian Society he founded at King Edward's boys' school, to the Apolausticks, which he founded at Oxford, and the Inklings, the literary boys' club revolving around Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams (Fredrick 4). Much like Tolkien's own relationships, all of the members of the fellowship bond with each other, and in their darkest hours their greatest comforts lie within those connections, while their greatest grief stems from breaking them. In deciding what course to follow once the fellowship is broken with the death of Boromir, the escape of Frodo and Sam, and the capture of Merry and Pippin, the remaining three members of the fellowship lean on each other in their choice:

> "You[, Aragorn,] are our guide," said Gimli, "and you are skilled in the chase. You shall choose."
>
> "My heart bids me go on," said Legolas. "But we must hold together. I will follow your counsel." (*TT* 28)

In truth, there is no reason that the trio must remain together. If Aragorn believed that he must go to Minas Tirith, while Gimli decided to rescue the youngest hobbits and Legolas to follow Frodo and Sam into Mordor, there is no reason that they should not each follow their own desire. However, they are loathe to destroy what remains of their fellowship, and so they abandon Frodo and the quest itself, as well as Aragorn's primary goal of reaching the fortress of Gondor, in favor of saving Merry and Pippin and remaining together.

Such codependent decisions happen frequently in the novel, such as when the trail of the young hobbits requires Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli to enter the forest of Fangorn, which the dwarf finds fearsome and unpleasant. Speaking to Legolas, he says, "'You are

a Wood-elf, anyway, though Elves of any kind are strange folk. Yet you comfort me. Where you go, I will go'" (*TT* 94). As a devout Catholic, Tolkien would have been aware of the similarity here to the passage in the book of Ruth where Ruth swears to follow Naomi: "Intreat me not to leave thee: for whither though goest, I will go; and where though lodgest, I will lodge: thy people *shall be* my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:16 KJV). The concept of two different individuals from different cultures joining together applies to both excerpts, and the wording of Gimli's statement that where Legolas goes, he will go is an indirect allusion to Ruth's oath. Instead of two newly powerless women forging a relationship for the protection of both, however, Gimli follows Legolas simply out of his own desire to do so, and because the comforting relationship with the wood elf gives him strength.

This relationship is maintained throughout the work, even to the extent that, once the quest is finished and the war won, Legolas and Gimli choose to prolong their travels together rather than return to their homes. Legolas says to his dwarf friend, "'Let us make this bargain – if we both return safe out of the perils that await us, we will journey for a while together. You shall visit Fangorn with me, and then I will come with you to see Helm's Deep'" (*TT* 153). This they do, and it is clear that their relationship with one another has surpassed in importance even their ties to their own people and kingdoms, though they do eventually go back to these places. Even so, at the end of Gimli's life, the pair eventually reunite and sail across the sea together, thus allowing the mortal half of the pair to end his days with his greatest companion: "We have heard tell that Legolas took Gimli Glóin's son with him because of their great friendship, greater than any that

has been between Elf and Dwarf" (*RotK* 362).

It is perhaps most appropriate to address homosexuality in Tolkien's work in relation to the Legolas/Gimli interaction. In *Guyland,* Kimmel writes that "The single cardinal rule of manhood, the one from which all the other characteristics – wealth, power, status, strength, physicality – are derived is to offer constant proof that you are not gay" (50). Tolkien's male characters, nontraditional in so many ways, also refuse to play into this expectation, and many of their relationships have a degree of intimacy that a reader searching for homosexual tendencies might find suspect. In "Homoeroticism" from *Reading The Lord of the Rings*, Esther Saxey addresses criticisms of Tolkien's depiction of relationships between males and females in the work: "[Criticisms of Tolkien's seemingly childish attitudes toward sex and gender] may be valid, but linking heterosexuality to maturity and respect for women allows little space to discuss a mature, non-misogynist homoeroticism" (Eaglestone 125). In the history of gender-linked Tolkien criticism, this example embodies the two options critics most frequently choose: either the author hates and misunderstands women, leading to an epic-wide boy's club atmosphere, or he simply doesn't care about women and many of his male characters are implicitly gay. I reject these two extremes and prefer a middle ground between these two interpretations.

Apparently heterosexual, the author himself rejected any implication that his work contained gay characters, or that the relationships in his work between male characters were anything more than deep and abiding friendship. Of course, many authors have denied evidence of homosexuality in their work to avoid scandal or outrage, and the act

of denial does not change the evidence itself, nor alter the possibility for interpreting that work as, at the very least, ambivalent toward heterosexuality. For the purposes of this analysis, however, we will allow any possible implicit homosexuality to remain ambiguous. Ultimately, whether Tolkien's characters love each other beyond platonic limitations is unimportant when reading into expressions of gender in the work. Although sexuality is a part of gender, it does not define it, and one need not define the Legolas/Gimli or the Frodo/Sam relationship in this way to analyze the nuance of their characterization, and the importance of the relationships themselves. Even with the author's explicit denial of homosexuality, we will refrain from deciding the case one way or the other, and allow each reader to draw his or her own conclusions on this point. Suffice it to say, Tolkien's homosocial relationships are remarkably strong, and his characters love one another with a potency that is usually absent from other works of the same genre.

Throughout their trials, members of the broken fellowship often express pain at the loss of their comradery. When they are kidnapped, Merry and Pippin desire the comfort of their friendships amidst the horror of the orcs' cruelty: "A great longing came over them for the faces and voices of their companions, especially for Frodo and Sam, and for Strider" (*TT* 85). Later, when Merry and Pippin are separated from each other, they think of their distant companion frequently. "[Merry] missed Pippin, and felt that he was only a burden, while everybody was making plans for speed in a business he did not fully understand" (*RotK* 49). Indeed, each surviving member of the original Nine turns his thoughts to Frodo and Sam throughout the text, not only because the fate of the free

world rests on their diminutive shoulders, but also because of their genuine care for the two hobbits alone in the darkest place in the world. "Yet amid all their cares and fear the thoughts of their friends turned constantly to Frodo and Sam. They were not forgotten" (*RotK* 173-174). The friendships between the men of *The Lord of the Rings* go beyond the more traditionally masculine roles of fighting and dying together, but to the more "feminine" aspect of holding loved ones in one's thoughts even (and especially) at the darkest times. The friendships are not just the convenient bonds of soldier to fellow soldier in a time of need for cooperation and trust, but genuine affection that includes worry, fear, and tenderness.

Concerning this kind of tenderness, some of the most emotional scenes of the text stem from the love that Sam has for Frodo. Looking at his master in a moment of peace in the woods of Ithillien, Sam is overcome with feeling for his friend. "[Sam] shook his head, as if finding words useless, and murmured: 'I love him. He's like that, and sometimes it shines through, somehow. But I love him, whether or no'" (*TT* 260). Sam is one of the least duplicitous characters of the work, and it is only fitting that he expresses his love for Frodo so simply. He continues to do so, and a particularly heart-breaking scene comes when Sam believes Frodo to be dead, poisoned by the spider Shelob on the edge of the Black Land. "'Frodo, Mr. Frodo!' [Sam] called. 'Don't leave me here alone! It's your Sam calling. Don't go where I can't follow! Wake up, Mr. Frodo! O wake up, Frodo, me dear, me dear. Wake up'" (*TT* 340)! Frodo does not wake, however, and Sam begins to deal with the reality that he must continue the quest alone. Although he knows his duty, the driving force was always his love for Frodo, which now

has lost its object. As he says to his apparently dead friend, "'[I must take] your star-glass, Mr. Frodo, you did lend it to me and I'll need it, for I'll be always in the dark now'" (340). Ultimately, however, Sam shows that his love for Frodo goes beyond even his love for the world itself, as he abandons the quest and the hope of the free world in order to save his wounded companion:

> He flung the Quest and all his decisions away, and fear and doubt with them. He knew now where his place was and had been: at his master's side, though what he could do there was not clear. […] "I can't help it. My place is by Mr. Frodo. They must understand that – Elrond and the Council, and the great Lords and Ladies with all their wisdom. Their plans have gone wrong. I can't be their Ring-bearer. Not without Mr. Frodo" (344-345).

Sam does not care if he is caught, leading to the end of all of Middle-earth: his sole thought is for Frodo, and he will sacrifice every other relationship that he has ever had to save him.

In addition to the sheer potency of their relationships, Tolkien's men express their affection physically far more frequently than is usually expected of a male-to-male interaction. In the most emotional moments, characters embrace, caress, kiss and hold one another. For instance, as Boromir dies, Aragorn comforts him: "'No!' said Aragorn, taking his hand and kissing his brow. 'You have conquered'" (*TT* 16). In the terror of Shelob's lair, Sam and Frodo reach out to one another: "Sam left the tunnel-side and shrank towards Frodo, and their hands met and clasped, and so together they still went on" (*TT* 327). As Merry succumbs to the Black Breath after striking the Witch King, Pippin comforts him as best he can:

> "Help me, Pippin! It's all going dark again, and my arm is so cold."
> "Lean on me, Merry lad!" said Pippin. "Come now! Foot by foot. It's not far." […] So he let Merry sink gently down on the pavement in a patch of

> sunlight, and then he sat down beside him, laying Merry's head in his lap. He felt his body and limbs gently, and took his friend's hands in his own. (*RotK* 135)

On the last leg of the journey to the Mountain, touch is again the way in which the hobbits support one another. "Sam took his master's hands and laid them together, palm to palm, and kissed them; and then he held them gently between his own" (*RotK* 220). In times of great struggle, these characters do not rely on words or stoic, manly encouragement, but instead allow themselves the vulnerability of physical expression.

It is not only in the most dire situations that male characters reach out to one another, however, but in the most mundane situations. Instead of giving Gimli a horse of his own, Legolas and Gimli ride together upon Arod. "'Come, you shall sit behind me, friend Gimli' said Legolas. 'Then all will be well, and you need neither borrow a horse nor be troubled by one'" (*TT* 42). At other times, friends share utensils or pipes without a second thought (*TT* 167 and 263), hold hands (*FotR* 367, *TT* 231, *RotK* 44), and kiss one another (*TT* 304 and 342, *RotK* 50, 146, 215 and 310). They even sleep touching one another, both to comfort and protect each other:

> Sam sat propped against the stone, his head dropping sideways and his breathing heavy. In his lap lay Frodo's head, drowned deep in sleep; upon his white forehead lay one of Sam's brown hands, and the other lay softly upon his master's breast. Peace was in both their faces. (*TT* 323)

Touch is critical to the ways in which male characters interact with one another, and there is no taboo against such displays of affection in Tolkien's created world. In "Men, Halflings and Hero Worship," Marion Zimmer Bradley writes about this tendency toward physical affection. She lists many examples of male-male touch, but goes on to conclude, "[T]his is simply a pattern of manners and does not in itself merit mention as ballast for

the thesis that the major emotional threads of the story are drawn between men" (Zimmer Bradley 77). This statement is, in my interpretation, ridiculous. Zimmer Bradley dismisses the motif of male physical affection by categorizing it as a different "pattern of manners" without acknowledging that Tolkien chose this pattern with intention, coming from a society where such behavior was absolutely antithetical to the norm. The restrictions to the ways in which men may relate to each other in the world Tolkien would have known are utterly cast aside in favor of this much more forgiving paradigm where men may not only openly profess their love for one another but also show it through embraces and caresses in both the worst and best of times. Unlike Zimmer Bradley, I believe this authorial choice to be a significant one.

Physical affection is not the only way that the male characters of *The Lord of the Rings* express themselves in decidedly nontraditionally masculine fashions. Critics are eager to dismiss Tolkien and his fellow Inklings as misogynists, rejecting any trait that is commonly associated with the feminine in favor of the pursuit of intellectual and more masculine traits (Fredrick 20). I disagree: throughout *The Lord of the Rings,* characters express themselves in ways that have been regarded as "feminine" for vast majority of Western history. In nearly all contexts, the men of these books are far more intensely emotional than is usually the norm for the hero archetype of the fantasy epic. For instance, sadness and grief are fully expressed rather than stifled or withheld, and characters frequently weep openly in the presence of others, a trait not emphasized in the conventional definition of a man. When Sam is informed that he must release his beloved Bill-the-pony into the wolf-infested wilderness, he is distraught: "Bill, seeming

to understand well what was going on, nuzzled up to him, putting his nose to Sam's ear. Sam burst into tears, and fumbled with the straps, unlading all the pony's packs and throwing them on the ground" (*FotR* 317). Even more dramatically, the entire company responds with tears shortly after the death of Gandalf. "Frodo heard Sam at his side weeping, and then he found that he himself was weeping as he ran. […] Grief at last wholly overcame them, and they wept long: some standing and silent, some cast upon the ground" (*FotR* 345-346). Even after the quest is over, and Sam would be considered as hardened to toil and catastrophe as any, he still weeps at the loss of a beloved tree in his homeland: "He pointed to where the tree had stood under which Bilbo had made his Farewell Speech. It was lying lopped and dead in the field. As if this was the last straw Sam burst into tears" (*RotK* 298). In fact, Tolkien's men weep far more than his few female characters; whereas Éowyn weeps only once after the fall of her uncle and her confinement to the Houses of Healing, men, from the hobbits all the way up to Aragorn and Denethor, lords among Men, are overcome with tears throughout the work (*FotR* 416, *TT* 16, 153, 316 and 340, *RotK* 97, 118, 119, 128, 181, 188 and 309).

Grief is not the only non-masculine emotion that Tolkien's men are unafraid to both feel and express; fear also strikes them down, and though they may feel ashamed of their terror, they still acknowledge and respond to it. The greatest weapon of Sauron's Nazgûl is the panic they inspire in all beings, including Pippin and the men of Gondor. When he hears them above the city, he is stricken: "Pippin cowered down with his hands pressed to his ears […]. Another long screech rose and fell, and he threw himself back from the wall, panting like a hunted animal. […] Ashamed of his terror, while Beregond

of the Guard thought first of the captain whom he loved, Pippin got up and peered out" (*RotK* 82). Although he believes himself to have shown weakness in his fear, Pippin still feels this emotion intensely, and reacts with a visceral, physical response. In more traditional narratives where emotion is a feminine, unmanly trait, fear remains more of an intellectual concept rather than a consuming panic; characters, if they acknowledge their fear at all, almost never act on it, or allow it to influence the ways in which they behave.

In addition, it is not only the diminutive hobbits that fear, but also one of the more outwardly masculine males of the novel who is most affected by its grip. When faced with the Paths of the Dead where the spirits of traitorous soldiers still wander, Gimli, the stout-hearted dwarf, is nearly crippled with terror:

> His knees shook, and he was wroth with himself. "Here is a thing unheard of!" he said. "An Elf will go underground and a Dwarf dare not!" With that he plunged in But it seemed to him that he dragged his feet like lead over the threshold: and at once a blindness came upon him, even upon Gimli Glóin's son who had walked unafraid in many deep places of the world […] He stumbled on until he was crawling like a beast on the ground and felt that he could endure no more: he must either find an ending and escape or run back in madness to meet the following fear. (*RotK* 60-61)

It is no small point that Gimli is the one who is most afraid. Legolas is an elf, the most androgynous race of Middle-earth, and he is untroubled by the spirits of the dead, while the hirsute, ax-wielding dwarf can maintain his sanity when faced with the horror of death. Tolkien makes a point of emphasizing the masculinity of individuals who feel fear, rejecting the idea that to be afraid is somehow to betray one's homogeneous chromosomes. In Gondor, it is not only the weak and frail that are afraid, but the hearty, strong-willed men of the city:

> At length even the stout-hearted would fling themselves to the ground as their

> hidden menace passed over them, or they would stand, letting their weapons fall from nerveless hands while into their minds a blackness came, and they thought no more of war, but only of hiding and of crawling, and of death. (*RotK* 97)

In *The Lord of the Rings*, fear is a natural part of the range of human emotion, reserved not for the weak or womanly but for even the most battle-driven of men. Tolkien's male characters are permitted to be both brave and afraid; they are human beings rather than caricatures of heroes.

Sadness and fear, though important in a narrative of strife and struggle, do not define the full range of feeling among Tolkien's men. They also feel intense joy, and again express it in ways that are nontraditional for the heteronormative, hyper masculine quest narrative. Upon hearing the horns of the Rohirrim signifying that they have come to the aid of Gondor, Pippin is overwhelmed with happiness:

> But Pippin rose to his feet, as if a great weight had been lifted from him; and he stood listening to the horns, and it seemed to him that they would break his heart with joy. And never in after years could he hear a horn blown in the distance without tears starting in his eyes. (*RotK* 128)

Not only is Pippin touched, but also the feeling endures long past the end of the War of the Ring. Joy is no fleeting thing, but instead a sustained and powerful effect on the spirit. Additionally, it is not just life-changing events like the reversal of imminent doom that can lift the hearts of these men. In Lothlórien, Frodo is entranced simply by the colors of the natural world surrounding him, maintained and enhanced by the Lady of the Wood. "[…] Frodo stood for awhile still lost in wonder. […] He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful" (*FotR* 365). Even the visual confirmation that a well-loved friend is safe, even after

being told that it is so, can bring pleasure. Gimli, upon seeing Merry and Pippin for the first time after their capture as they feast and nap on the ruins of Isengard, says to them, "'Hammer and tongs! I am so torn between rage and joy, that if I do not burst, it will be a marvel!'" (*TT* 162). His consternation at finding them not only well but better off than himself and his joy at finding them alive mix into one powerful experience. Where a more stereotypical male character would be expected to take such feelings in stride, maintaining his masculine dignity at all costs, Tolkien's characters allow their emotions to affect them fully, refusing to hide behind walls of apathy in the quest to be some untouched super-man.

In general, Tolkien's men frequently exemplify attributes of masculinity that are in conflict with more conservative, essentialist interpretations of what it means to be a man or a woman. Physically, emotionally and through their actions, the men of Middle-earth express themselves in a range of ways that do not align with the expectation of man as stoic, unmoved aggressor and woman as emotional, nurturing pacifist. One of the most important traits of Aragorn's ascension to the throne of Gondor relates to his ability to heal, not his capacity for glory and bloodshed. "Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood, and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him" (*RotK* 246). Aragorn is learned and powerful, but the nobility of his line is not expressed through victory in battle but capacity to flourish in times of peace. In her chapter, "Masculinity" in *Reading <u>The Lord of the Rings</u>*, Holly Crocker also identifies the importance of this difference:

> Even the manner in which his rightful rule is discovered, through a folk adage that identifies the king as a servant of the people, suggests that Aragorn's authority is founded upon protection that defies visibility. […] As the old wife Ioreth's chatty revelation demonstrates, this power does not announce itself through bold gestures of control. (Eaglestone 121)

Aragorn's power is not a dominating, aggressive one, but one that relies upon his usefulness to his people rather than his own bravado. Even far lesser men take pride in their own personhood rather than in their ability to fight valorously or kill great hordes. When Gandalf introduces Pippin to the guards of the white city, the hobbit is indignant at the wizard's description of him as a "valiant man." "'Man!' cried Pippin, now thoroughly roused. 'Man! Indeed not! I am a hobbit and no more valiant than I am a man, save perhaps now and again by necessity'" (*RotK* 21). Although the joke lies in the fact that Pippin is a hobbit, and by no definition a Man, he makes an important point both in this very distinction and in his rejection of the adjective "valiant." Pippin refuses to be defined as a Man, and while this specificity refers explicitly to a literal difference in species, it also relates to his gender identification; Tolkien's men are not restricted to traditional manhood, and they reject such attempts to oppress their freedom of personal and gender expression. In this way, Pippin also refuses to be "valiant." He will do what he must when it is required of him, but he does not aspire to the kind of life where one must be brave, aggressive and victorious to be successful, and as such denies any association of himself with that life.

Beyond their tendency toward a broader expression of emotion than is expected among fantasy men, Tolkien's characters are frequently compared and related to individuals who are not men: namely, women and children. Edwin Muir notes in his

1955 review of *The Return of the King* that all of Tolkien's characters are prepubescent:

> For the astonishing thing is that all the characters, except a few old men who are apt to be wizards, are boys masquerading as adult heroes. The hobbits, or halfings, are ordinary boys; the fully human heroes have reached the fifth form; but hardly one of them know anything about women, except by hearsay. Even the elves and the dwarfs and the ents are boys, irretrievably, and will never come to puberty.

While I disagree with Muir's somewhat dismissive tone and the gross oversimplification of numerous complex and nuanced characters, he is correct in noticing that many of Tolkien's men maintain a somewhat child-like, or at least non-manly, facade. Although many of these references can be somewhat ambiguous, the overall portrait is one of a culture in which men are free to fulfill any manifestation of their gender as they see fit to perform it. As Legolas tells Aragorn and Gimli about Fangorn, "'It is old, very old,' said the Elf. 'So old that almost I feel young again, as I have not felt since I journeyed with you children'" (*TT* 94). An immortal member of the Elven race, Legolas is hundreds of years older than the other members of the fellowship, save Gandalf, and to him the others are practically infants. This example is not the only instance where male characters are likened to children, however; in total, child references occur explicitly nine separate times (*TT* 33, 62, 81, 94, 197, *RotK* 35, 106, 186, and 218), even on the slopes of Mount Doom: "As Frodo clung upon his back, […] Sam lifted Frodo with no more difficulty than if he were carrying a hobbit-child pig-a-back in some romp on the lawns or hayfields of the Shire" (*RotK* 218). Other than these specific references to children and youth, child-like imagery is also produced on numerous other occasions.

This tendency to relate characters, and particularly hobbits, to children is noted by Roger Sale in *Modern Heroism:* "Occasionally Tolkien relaxes with the hobbits and

pretends that buffoonery and schoolboy pluck are important responses to danger, but these lapses are infrequent and easily identified" (200). Although Sale dismisses the utility of childlike behavior, he is correct in pointing out that many characters seem to be children more frequently than they appear full grown. For instance, Pippin's best companion in Gondor, once he is separated from the remaining rest of the fellowship, is Bergil, the ten-year-old son of a guard of the city: "Bergil proved a good comrade, the best company Pippin had had since he parted from Merry, and soon they were laughing and talking gaily as they went about the streets" (*RotK* 42). Pippin is quite young by hobbit standards, having not yet "come of age," but he is no child; making such a connection would be akin to lumping high school juniors into the same category as students still in primary school. Nonetheless, the hobbits, in particular, behave like children in times of peace or rest, such as when they pass the time of the Entmoot with Quickbeam, who also behaves in a child-like fashion:

> All that day they walked about in the woods with him, singing, and laughing, for Quickbeam often laughed. He laughed if the sun came out from behind a cloud, he laughed if they came upon a stream or spring: then he stooped and splashed his feet and head with water; he laughed sometimes at some sound or whisper in the trees. (*TT* 86).

Despite the terrors of the power that lurks in the East, the hobbits and the Ent can still enjoy the world around them with innocent wonder; their need to be both brave and strong does not counteract their ability to be gentle and fair-tempered. In the more traditional model in which aggression epitomizes the peak of manhood, childlike behavior is antithetical to masculinity, because aggression is abandoned in favor of wonder and delight. In Tolkien's created world, however, a man may have both and still

be a man: Merry, Pippin and Quickbeam all engage in the physical violence of warfare at Isengard, the Pelennor Fields and the Black Gate, but their ability to do so does not negate the gentler aspects of their gender performance.

Along with references to children, Tolkien's men are also often associated with traditionally feminine attributes. The Rohirrim, for example, are somewhat vain, and their flowing locks are referred to at frequent intervals. Other instances of feminine behavior involve the hobbits' love of food and hospitality, such as when Merry greets Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli after the two hobbits' abduction:

> "Will you have wine or beer? There's a barrel inside there – very passable. And this is first-rate salted pork. Or I can cut you some rashers of bacon and broil them, if you like. I am sorry there is no green stuff: the deliveries have been rather interrupted in the last few days! I cannot offer you anything to follow but butter and honey for your bread. Are you content?" (*TT* 166)

This is an almost motherly nurture-response; the hobbits have nothing but the food they have scavenged from the surrounding waste, and they press it upon their guests as a gesture of caring and comfort, offering to prepare it as well. Sam shares a similar domesticity in love for the preparation and enjoyment of the comforts of the table. Toward the very end of his and Frodo's journey to the Cracks of Doom, it is his cooking gear that he is most grieved to throw away. "Hardest of all it was to part with his cooking-gear. […] The clatter of his precious pans as they fell down into the dark was like a death-knell to his heart" (*RotK* 214-215). The preparation of food is, in nearly all Western cultures, a primarily female task. Traditionally, men are expected to fill the role of hunter/provider, but once the meat reaches the home, it passes into the jurisdiction of the woman, who is expected to cook and serve it. Although women do fill this role at

various points in Tolkien's narratives, men may do the same. Men provide for their friends and loved ones in the highly nurturing context of food and drink.

The lighter moments in *The Lord of the Rings* sometimes emphasize this role-bending feminine masculinity as well, although in a way that leads the reader to further identify with Tolkien's characters rather than to mock them. For instance, when Sam and Frodo are attempting to scale a cliff during their journey east, Sam is flustered by the realization that he has forgotten the rope in his pack:

> "Rope!" cried Sam, talking wildly to himself in his excitement and relief. "Well, if I don't deserve to be hung on the end of one as a warning to numbskulls! You're nowt but a ninnyhammer, Sam Gamgee: that's what the Gaffer said to me often enough, it being a word of his. Rope!"
>
> "Stop chattering!" cried Frodo, now recovered enough to feel both amused and annoyed. (*TT* 214)

This rapid babbling is not, in and of itself, particularly feminine, but the comparison is made clear when Tolkien writes the voice of Ioreth the old wife in a similar tone:

> "Why, cousin, one of [the halflings] went with only his esquire into the Black Country and fought with the Dark Lord all by himself, and set fire to his Tower, if you can believe it. At least that is the tale in the City. […] Now he is a marvel, the Lord Elfstone: not too soft in his speech, mind you, but he has a golden heart, as the saying is; and he has the healing hands. 'The hands of the king are the hands of a healer,' I said, and that was how it was all discovered. And Mithrandir, he said to me: 'Ioreth, men will long remember your words', and —" (*RotK* 244)

Although Ioreth has a more formal speech pattern than Sam, her way of running on and on in her eagerness to convey information, and her tendency to hyperbolize, is just like Sam in his panic at first having forgotten and then having remembered the rope. Although Sam has faced far greater enemies than a cliff wall and his own forgetfulness, he has a moment of scatter-brained verbosity that recalls female characters from the novel, providing just one more example of men refusing to fill the expectations set for

them and denying an essentialist interpretation of what it means to be gendered. Butler comments on men displaying "feminine" characteristics in her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*:

> If it is possible to speak of a "man" with a masculine attribute and to understand that attribute as a happy but accidental feature of that man, then it is also possible to speak of a "man" with a feminine attribute, whatever that is, but still to maintain the integrity of the gender. But once we dispense with the priority of "man" and "woman" as abiding substances, then it is no longer possible to subordinate dissonant gendered features as so many secondary and accidental characteristics of a gender ontology that is fundamentally intact. (Chapter 1, Section V)

What Butler is saying is that, essentially, gender itself is defined by individual actions. When we assume that there are normative behaviors for men and women, we believe that these behaviors are the result of gender, but Butler instead asserts that the relationship is reversed, and gender is actually defined by behavior. This is one explanation for Tolkien's non-traditional characterization, and one I believe to fit his gender-vision.

It is not only peripheral characters who exemplify commonly-understood "non-masculine" traits, but also even the protagonist of the saga, Frodo. As Lee Rossi relates in *The Politics of Fantasy*, Frodo is presented as having few of the characteristics of the expected male hero:

> When Gandalf explains to Frodo why he had been chosen, he indicated that it was not a matter of Frodo's possessing any superior power or wisdom. We might even say that it is a matter of his innocence; the powerful and the wise are even more susceptible to the influence of the ring, with its promise of complete power and mastery over others. (124)

Frodo wants none of this power. As the story progresses, he becomes even less and less willing to interact with others in the traditional formula of violence and aggression, instead claiming a non-violent role and discouraging others from attaining their desires in

the same fashion. In Mordor, he casts off his weapons and scavenged orc armor: "'There, I'll be an orc no more,' he cried, 'and I'll bear no weapon, fair or foul. Let them take me, if they will!'" (*RotK* 214). Even after his task of destroying the ring is finally completed and his deeds are celebrated by the free world, he must be persuaded into bearing any blade on his person in even ceremonial situations (*RotK* 233).

More telling is Frodo's response, late in the novel, to the thugs who have invaded his own peaceful homeland in the North. Despite the fact that these men, who are twice as large and strong as his own kind, have imprisoned, oppressed and killed his fellows, Frodo insists that his hobbit compatriots refrain from violence to the utmost limit of possibility:

> "Fight?" said Frodo. "Well, I suppose it may come to that. But remember: there is to be no slaying of hobbits, not even if they have gone over to the other side. Really gone over, I mean; not just obeying ruffians' orders because they are frightened. No hobbit has ever killed another on purpose in the Shire, and it is not to begin now And nobody is to be killed at all, if it can be helped. Keep your tempers and hold your hands to the last possible moment!" (*RotK* 285)

Although he cares more for his own people than the great lurking minions of Saruman, he desires to avoid all violence, even toward the traitors against their own community. Tolkien notes, after the scouring of the Shire, that Frodo does not strike a single blow in this process, and that he was dismayed by the killing that did occur (*RotK* 289). While this attitude alone would stand as a powerful statement on the role of non-violence in masculine gender performance, the author goes on to tell how it is Merry and Pippin who attain the most glory following the battle for their own lands, because they behaved in the expected, traditional masculine fashion and lead the physical assault, while Frodo is largely forgotten. Tolkien is not blind to the reactions of a conservative social

community, and his narrative acknowledges the fact that while it may be noble to refrain from bloodshed, history remembers and celebrates those who fight.

In addition to his awareness of cultural norms relating to men, the author is also cognizant of experiences that belong more frequently to women. Tolkien shows remarkable awareness of and sensitivity toward struggles that have historically primarily affected women, and he applies them to male characters. For example, in several instances male characters are faced with situations that call for a vocabulary most frequently associated with rape and rape victims, creating a visceral experience of a historically feminine danger for his male characters. In the last moments of Merry and Pippin's capture by the orcs, they are kidnapped by one great brute seeking to save himself at their expense. The hobbits later relate their experience to their friends in a brief respite from danger: "[Pippin] shuddered and said no more, leaving Merry to tell of those last horrible moments: the pawing hands, the hot breath, and the dreadful strength of Grishnákh's hairy arms" (*TT* 169). Like many rape victims, Pippin is unable to speak of the terror of his experience, and the way Tolkien summarizes the interaction emphasizes Pippin's vulnerability and the physicality of Grishnákh's attack. As noted by sexual assault counselors, rape is not a sexual crime but a power-oriented one. The fact that Merry and Pippin are not violated in a bodily sense does nothing to change the nature of their experience, and Tolkien's language evokes a clear sense of physical subjugation, personal disempowerment, and both deep and lasting trauma.

To introduce this concept just once would be a statement in itself, but Tolkien does not use the rape metaphor just a single time. On the edge of Mordor, Frodo faces a

similar circumstance at the hands of Sauron's orcs, which he later relates to Sam:

> "They stripped me of everything; and then two great brutes came and questioned me, questioned me until I thought I should go mad, standing over me, gloating, fingering their knives. I'll never forget their claws and eyes. […] The two big brutes: they quarreled, I think. Over me and my things. I lay here terrified. And then all went deadly quiet, and that was worse." (*RotK* 187)

The language here is less explicitly that of the rape victim, but the image is the same; Frodo is both physically and emotionally at the mercy of two stronger, armed attackers, and his terror persists through the experience and for a substantial period after its conclusion. Additionally, before the rape is even described, Tolkien signals its approach. When the orcs find Frodo, they describe Shelob's method of hunting: "'When she's hunting, she just gives 'em a dab in the neck and they go as limp as boned fish, and then she has her way with them'" (*TT* 350). This role reversal, in which the female force "has her way" with the male character, is not an anti-woman statement but rather a true reversal to show greater sympathy to the plight of the victim of male assault. By using rape imagery in reference to men, Tolkien applies a form of oppression and violence that, in his own culture, affected women in incomparably higher numbers than it did men, thus inserting a form of equity between the sexes in his work: if men and women have the same fears and horrors, they may relate to one another on a much more practical continuum than previously presented.

Perhaps the most powerful example of a male character filling a feminine or non-masculine role is that of Samwise Gamgee, Frodo's companion from the beginning of the quest to its end. Although homosocial codependence is common in *The Lord of the Rings*, and there are numerous other close male-male friendships, none are so intimate as

that between Sam and Frodo, nor so nurturing. Sam is Frodo's support, bearing not only many of the physical burdens that his master grows unable to carry himself, but also the brunt of the emotional toil of a hopeless venture into a blighted, hellish land. Sam sacrifices his own desires in favor of those of his master, ignoring even the primal needs for food, water, and sleep by the end of the journey to afford Frodo even one more moment of peace in a day of torment. Through this intense, nurturing drive, Sam fills a role left vacant by Tolkien's paucity of women: Sam becomes the ultimate mother, and his actions toward Frodo parallel the sacrifices of both body and mind that a mother makes for her child.

The parallels between Sam's behavior and traditional motherhood are drawn first in subtle ways, such as Sam's hyper-focused awareness of Frodo's presence and well-being at all times. Even when the two are relatively safe in the keeping of Faramir after being captured in Ithillien, he is still utterly attuned to his friend: "Sam, waking suddenly by some instinct of watchfulness, saw first his master's empty bed and leapt to his feet" (*TT* 292). Like the idealized mother-with-babe, Sam is aware of his charge even when he is not conscious in any other way. Such focus on the needs of Frodo arise frequently throughout the text, even to the last day of the quest, when both he and his master are on the verge of death: "At last he groped for Frodo's hand. It was cold and trembling. His master was shivering. […] [L]ying down he tried to comfort Frodo with his arms and body. Then sleep took him, and the dim light of the last day of their quest found them side by side" (*RotK* 217). Even at the utmost limit of his energy, Sam remains attuned to Frodo's needs, and fulfills them as best he can in the most terrible of circumstances.

Beyond this awareness, Sam's total willingness to sacrifice himself for Frodo suggests the love a mother has for her offspring. For most of the last part of the quest, once the pair has entered the land of Mordor, Sam gives up the majority of his share of both food and water to Frodo without informing him of his gift: "He gave Frodo water and an additional wafer of the waybread, and he made a pillow of his cloak for his master's head. Frodo was too weary to debate the matter, and Sam did not tell him that he had drunk the last drop of their water, and eaten Sam's share of the food as well as his own" (*RotK* 206). Walking miles upon miles every day, Sam needs both sustenance and sleep as much as his master does, but he gives up each of these things without a second thought. Tolkien seems here to evoke the image of a mother who goes without in order to ensure that her children eat, and the nurturing role there depicted is filled entirely and well by Sam-the-mother.

In addition, like the nearly instinctive motivation behind pushing one's child from the path of a speeding car, Sam is willing to give his own life to keep Frodo safe. When Shelob, the evil spider many times his size, crouches over the fallen form of his beloved companion, Sam does not pause:

> Sam did not wait to wonder what was to be done, or whether he was brave, or loyal, or filled with rage. He sprang forward wit a yell, and seized his master's sword in his left hand. Then he charged. No onslaught more fierce was ever seen in the savage world of beasts, where some desperate small creature armed with little teeth, alone, will spring upon a tower of horn and hide that stands above its fallen mate. (*TT* 336)

It should not be understood that Sam performs these heroic deeds for the sake of the quest. Although it is true that, should Frodo fail, so too will the world that Samwise loves, the things he does for his master are simply motivated by his love of him, and not

by larger considerations. When Frodo is captured by the orcs, Sam makes it clear that it is Frodo's safety that he cares about, not the quest, and that he would throw away the fate of the entire free world to see his friend safe and whole (*RotK* 345).

The master-servant relationship in this situation provides its own problems for a progressive, feminist interpretation of Tolkien's intent. How can the role of mother be idealized if it is given to a clearly lower-class individual, whose role the author emphasizes with his constant references to Frodo in the form of "Master" or "Mr. Frodo," only calling him solely by his given name in the most dire and emotionally intimate of circumstances. One must, however, take Tolkien's own background into account. As a comfortably established member of the upper-middle class in Britain, the author was surrounded by the hierarchy of English society, where it was simply "truth" that some men are masters and others servants. Although the classism inherent in this ideology may be repugnant to contemporary readers, one cannot conflate this antiquated description of cultural structure with a sense of moral or spiritual superiority. Samwise Gamgee is modeled upon the batmen who served British officers in the first World War, with whom Tolkien forged powerful friendships based on mutual respect. As he wrote in one of his letters, "My 'Sam Gamgee' is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognised as so far superior to myself" (Carpenter Biography 81). Despite the socio-economic inequity between Sam and Frodo, the reader should not apply this inequity to a discussion of gender roles in the text, because Tolkien's understanding of this class-based difference would not have impeded his capacity to write a character who is both lower class and the ultimate hero. Sam's

servant status is not meant as a critique of his personal abilities, but instead as a reference to individuals who Tolkien found admirable indeed, and who also happened to be of a lower social status.

To place Tolkien's gender-progressivism in a wider context, the work of Judith Butler most accurately summarizes the performativity of gender depicted in *The Lord of the Rings*. As she writes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* all gender is defined by the ways that individuals construct it:

> Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deterred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure. (Chapter 1 Section IV)

In addition:

> [...G]ender proves to be performative -- that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. [...] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results. (Chapter 1 Section V).

Dense though Butler's prose may be, her depiction of the structure of gender is in near perfect alignment with that of Middle-earth. Although not nearly so specific in its presentation, the message of Tolkien's men is that gender is what you make of it. There is no preordained concept of male and female, but simply the construction thereof as it occurs. The gender binary with its traditional expectations is reductive, and puts the cart before the horse: it is not gender that predicts behavior, but behavior that defines gender.

Reading *The Lord of the Rings* can be both frustrating and empowering for the gender-progressive reader. If one looks simply for strong female characters, one will find them in Éowyn and Galadriel. At the same time, traditional housewives and shrewish caricatures also appear, and the general absence of women can be a source of alienation for a feminist audience. However, when one turns a careful eye to Tolkien's male characters, a surprisingly cohesive body of gender theory emerges. Tolkien's men are not the distant, un-feminine portraits of manliness that one would expect from a work that fits so neatly into the genre of epic quest narrative. Without having read the text, one might expect Tolkien to follow an essentialist construction of gender in which women are gentle, men are strong, and there is little overlap between the two. Instead, J.R.R. Tolkien, the famously white-haired, tweed-wearing Oxford academic, manages to thwart our expectations and preconceptions and incorporate a surprisingly progressive understanding of gender performance in his text from start to finish.

Gender in *The Lord of the Rings* is complex, nuanced, and indifferent to conservative or progressive expectations. Unconcerned with traditional regulation of emotion, relationships between men and masculine roles, Tolkien's characters are male in the broadest, most permissive use of the term. They are valued and celebrated not only for their most "masculine" traits, but frequently and often to a greater extent for their "feminine" or gender-neutral ones. Although Tolkien himself was confined within the gender-regulation of his day, fantasy served, as it has so often done, as a safe space for the expression of radical ideas. The fact that the aspects of his work most frequently commented upon by progressive readers are those that do play into tradition and

repression is a pity, because the greater message of Tolkien's gender theory is one of acceptance, possibility and opportunity. The author is no hero, of course, and his attitudes toward women, even those to whom he gives great power, is problematic; however, one need not be perfect in one's quest for reform to nonetheless do great work toward that higher goal. Although few would believe Tolkien to be in line with gender theorists like Butler, J.R.R. Tolkien's message of acceptance and non-binary gender expression pervades *The Lord of the Rings.* It is absolutely appropriate – indeed, one might say high time – that these perspectives be recognized.

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