

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

4610 English: Individual Authors: J.R.R. Tolkien

English Student Research

Fall 2017

The Female Presence in Tolkien's Masculine World

Gwen Berglind

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_4610jrrt

Gwen Berglind

Professor Gerard Canavan

English 4610

22 October 2018

The Female Presence in Tolkien's Masculine World

"An individual's attitudes towards women are important... We believe that men's attitudes toward women impact their writing. If they hold gender prejudice, it will most likely be apparent in their work" (Fredrick and McBride xiii). J.R.R. Tolkien is well-known for his feats in literature and the fantasy genre, especially concerning his legendarium of *The Lord of the Rings* and his creation of Middle-Earth. However, Tolkien lacks the necessary inclusivity of realistic females in his works. The legendarium is dominated by male figures, and the few women characters that Tolkien includes are underdeveloped and have minimal roles in the progression of the plot. Women are mainly used in his works in order to create an ideal coupling, to explain how creatures came to be, to be a prize for a man to win, or, in the instance of few characters, to give women the illusion of a power role. Tolkien's characterization of women is often thin and hardly dynamic, imprinting the idea on his readers that he cannot help but succumb to typical gender roles. Comparing Tolkien's life and experience, or lack thereof, with womanly figures is vital when exploring the reason why he hardly scrapes the surface of female characterization throughout his legendarium.

To begin, Tolkien's minimal personal experiences with women in his own life unfortunately transfers to his works. According to Fredrick and McBride, "very few women played significant roles in his life, especially in his professional and creative endeavors" (45). His primary caregiver and the ideal woman was his mother, Mabel Tolkien. Since his mother

died young, Tolkien never did grow to the age of realization that his mother had flaws and was not as perfect as she appeared. He looked back on his mother as "a gifted lady of great beauty and wit" and declared that, to his mom, he does "owe [his] tastes for philology, especially of Germanic languages, and for romance" (Duriez 78). As he embraced his mother's taste for romance, an idealized romance, this applied to his everyday life and to his writing. His mother also converted to Roman Catholicism and was shunned from her Free-Church denominated family as a result, leaving an impact on the young Ronald Tolkien and his way of religion (Duriez 79). He viewed her devoutness as angelic and followed in Mabel's footsteps with his beliefs.

Ronald Tolkien had very little interaction with other women, with exception of his mother and his wife, Edith Bratt. Edith is described by Tolkien as "'attractive, small, and trim, her grey eyes bewitching'" (Duriez 79). Due to his idealization of his mother, Edith was also an idealized woman in Tolkien's mind. The belief is that Tolkien did not see Edith for more than a function of "beauty, romance, a specialized camaraderie, and entertainment" (Fredrick and McBride 49). George Sayer, a close friend of the Tolkiens', revealed in a lecture that Ronald was happy with the domesticity that Edith embodied, envisioning her as a function of homemaking and childbearing (Pearce 15). Sayer recounts the visit to Edith and Ronald's home when Edith was asked by Ronald to play the piano to entertain the guests (Pearce 15). Creating conflicts in the household, Tolkien believed that Edith should be satisfied with her caretaker role in the home, just as he misconceived his mother to be with caring for him and his brother. The production of the ideal image of women in his real life transfers clearly to his works as well. A look into Tolkien's adult life and his circle of friends at the time help a reader to understand the lack of connection he has with realistic women.

J.R.R. Tolkien grew up surrounded by same-sex friends. In a way, he "immortalizes" his group of friends by creating the fellowship that exists in *The Lord of the Rings* (Duriez 81). Later on in life while a professor at Oxford, he was the founder of a discussion group on literature called "The Inklings" (Duriez 82). It included no women, further emphasizing Tolkien's lack of available knowledge about women. It is rumored, but not proven, that Tolkien's creation of the Ent race directly parallels the literary group of the Inklings, right down to the missing wives and women in both the legendarium and the Inkling meetings. However, Tolkien did have a few female associates, including one of his students who helped him get his first work, *The Hobbit*, published (Fredrick and McBride 46). In opposition to what is thought of Tolkien, he did attempt to speak of his family in a conversation with other members of the literary group, only to have them ignore his comments about his family, sticking to their accepted talk of literature and politics. John Lawlor, an Inkling, disclosed information about Tolkien when compared to the other Inklings, in that he was "'much more aware of the human side of relationships'" (Fredrick and McBride 20). This comment on his relational side only goes so far when compared to the colleagues that surrounded him. A concrete example of this was his friend, C.S. Lewis. Lewis also tended to portray women as damsels in distress and refused to put them in battle scenes when writing. A like-minded group, especially of all men, is problematic when the lack of a feminine presence transfers to popular literature that reaches an extraordinarily large audience. This ultimately pushes the idealization of women agenda onto all readers.

Diving into his works, it is apparent that J.R.R. Tolkien was somewhat aware of this criticism of the lack of woman figures. Tolkien wrote in one of his many published letters to deny this complaint, declaring that "the only criticism that annoyed me was one that it 'contained no religion' (and 'no women', but that does not matter, and is not true anyway)" (*Letters* 220). It

seems he took this quite literally to mean that there were no women at all present in his works, which is not true, with exception of *The Hobbit*. In *The Hobbit*, female characters are only referenced, and none play an active role in the novel. These references include Bilbo's mother, Belladonna Took, and Fili and Kili's mother who Tolkien does not bother to name. It is important to examine the impact that this could impression upon young readers, both girls and boys. Girls could be led to believe that their gender has no importance within literature and that women are inferior to men. Boys could be swayed by Tolkien's creation of a world without women and reinforce gender stereotypes in their minds. In 2013, Michelle Nijhuis addressed this issue by reading *The Hobbit* to her daughter with main character, Bilbo Baggins, as female. She claims that the "switch was easy. Bilbo, as it turns out, makes a terrific heroine... she never makes an issue of her gender-and neither does anyone else" (Nijhuis). A women presence is lacking to the extent that readers choose to alter the books in order to teach their children to not succumb to typical gender roles. Peter Jackson, the director of *The Lord of the Rings* films attempts to combat this issue and assigns greater roles in the storyline to women who were assigned superficial parts by Tolkien.

A prime example of Peter Jackson solving this characterization of women issue is seen with the character of Arwen. Arwen is an elf who is Aragorn's love interest. In Tolkien's works, she is referenced more than she actually exists as a character. Peter Jackson manifests Arwen into a powerful character who is able to save others. For example, originally in *The Fellowship of the Ring* after Frodo is poisoned by a weapon of the Nazgul, he is saved by an elf named Glorfindel who is able to assist and hasten his journey to Elrond's house for healing (Tolkien 209). In the movie's portrayal, Arwen comes to the rescue and conjures up the river water to take out the Nazguls, then rides Frodo quickly to the house of Elrond. Peter Jackson considered the

impact of the lack of women on viewers everywhere, which is what Tolkien should have originally done when writing his works. Peter Jackson even had two female cowriters on the screenplay, which led to the more complete characterization of accurate women in order to avoid Tolkien's mistakes with depictions of the perfect, idealized woman.

The presence, or lack thereof, of minor female characters and Tolkien's chosen roles for them also embody a lack of sensitivity to the nature of women, again presenting itself as an issue that director Peter Jackson had to solve. To start, there is a category of characters that are only mentioned for the sake of explaining how a race came to be, as it is necessary to have both man and woman to produce offspring. This includes the absence of the Entwives and dwarf women that are mentioned but not actually present in the text. The Entwives are mentioned by Treebeard, the ruler of the Ents, in *The Two Towers* when reflecting on the diminishing of the race of Ents (Tolkien 461). Treebeard explains how the Entwives left long ago, but this comes across as an explanation as to why the Ent race exists at all. Tolkien cannot be bothered to include both female and male Ents in this scene in the forest, so he must conjure up an explanation as to why there are no female characters present. This also parallels the idea of his weekly meetings with the Inklings, where no wives or women are present. He misses the mark and fails to come up with a true explanation of this absence that satisfies readers.

This idea of the missing Entwives goes hand-in-hand with the idea of the missing female Dwarves. It is said that they are often mistaken for male dwarves, as they also have beards, but they too as characters are mostly only referenced within the legendarium. This may be due to Tolkien's focus on his "fellowship" which is all men, representing the group of friends he had through his childhood. Tolkien's devotion to his all-male friendship circles is apparent in more than one race. With Orcs, there are no females mentioned whatsoever, even though Orcs are a

race and would biologically need women to come into existence. Whilst Sauron and Saruman are breeding Orcs at Isengard, there are no female orcs present or mentioned. Peter Jackson, the director of *The Lord of the Rings* movies, attempts to combat this problem by directing scenes where Orcs are "hatched" out of the ground in a type of amniotic sac that is broken, revealing a fully grown, muscular Orc. Peter Jackson has saved multiple faux pas made by Tolkien through his film adaptations of the novels. Through the exploration of minor female characters, Tolkien's created races, and Peter Jackson's necessary editing, it is evident that Tolkien missed the mark in the creation of his Legendarium, leaning a heavy hand on the importance of masculinity, therefore neglecting women in the process.

A female character that reaches somewhat past Tolkien's typical surface-level development is Éowyn. She is the character in the main legendarium that receives the most "page time", therefore allowing her character to build. Regardless, she is still assigned the role of a prize for a man to win, with her character's existence revolving around love and attempting to win a man's affection, in this case, Aragorn's. Éowyn is the maiden of Rohirrim and the niece of the King of Rohan. She pines for Aragorn, the future king of Gondor, who dismisses her because of his betrothed love for Arwen, an elf. Upset, as a woman in Tolkien's eyes would be, she sets off on a suicide mission by disguising herself as a man and riding into the Battle of Pelennor Fields. Prior to battle, Éowyn is shut down by men for wanting to disguise as a man and ride on to defend Rohirrim but proceeds to ignore their words and do as she pleases anyway. In this way, she represents a powerful woman that is to be looked up to by readers. She avenges her fallen uncle, Théoden, in battle, and she kills the Lord of the Nazgul. Prior to the killing, the Nazgul Lord declares that "no living man may hinder me!", only for Éowyn to state "you look upon a woman. Éowyn I am" (*"The Return of the King"* 823). Tolkien clearly credits Éowyn with

killing the Lord of the Nazgul in this chapter, making a heavy statement by saying that a man may not kill this ferocious being while a woman is able.

Yet, when she returns from battle after killing the most powerful being, she is shunned by the community and told that she should not have gone into battle. A recognition for the great deed she had done for her people and community is needed, but Tolkien dismisses her bravery. This seems centered on the basis that she is a woman and incapable of going into battle, an idea that is extremely frustrating to readers. Although many shun her after this incident, some do applaud her efforts, mostly women in the community, as shown in Appendix A, where she "was known after in the Mark as the Lady of the Shield-arm" (*The Return of the King* 1045). Be that as it may, an overwhelming amount of the community was disgraced by her decision to put on a disguise and ride into battle, which is deemed a man's job by Tolkien. Later on, she goes into a deep depression due to Aragorn's dismissal of her love for him paired with the rejection of her community that can only be cured when Faramir of Gondor takes her hand in marriage. This embraces the idea that a woman is only happy when she is dependent on a man to care for her. This is viewed by modern readers as a much outdated issue that may be chalked up to the era of the publishing and writing of the legendarium. Regardless, it is cringing to read about domesticized female characters in the fantastical world of Middle Earth that is expected to take a reader away from the norms of society and everyday life.

At a surface level, Tolkien shows progression in a woman's ability to have powers similar of man with originally crediting Eowyn with the killing of the Nazgul. An examination into the appendix of *The Lord of the Rings* reveals otherwise. The appendix explains that Merry struck a blow to the Nazgul Lord in battle. Although Merry obviously only deals the Nazgul a superficial wound, Merry is given equal credit to the killing as Éowyn is by Tolkien. Merry's contribution to

the killing of the Nazgul Lord is justified by Tolkien because he has a "magic sword" in battle, regardless of that fact that Aragorn states earlier in the text that the swords are not magic, and it is claimed that the Nazgul Lord is not receptive to magic swords. This confuses readers due to an inconsistency of the plot, as is found semi-frequently in the author's novels. Tolkien, then, dismisses Éowyn's heroic killing for the vengeance of her uncle because she is a woman and not capable of such. This goes hand-in-hand with the sexist mentality that women should not participate in battles.

The idea of women not belonging in battle is reflective of J.R.R. Tolkien's beliefs. However, it might as well be chalked up to the time that Tolkien was raised and to the experience he had in the First World War. His colleague, C.S. Lewis, admitted that "battles are ugly when women fight", knowing well that battles are ugly in general, regardless of the gender participating (Fredrick and McBride). Tolkien had first-hand experience in this, fighting in battle, losing two of his closest childhood friends in battle, and contracting trench fever that plagued him for years (Duriez 80). Both Tolkien and Lewis were not familiar with the idea of women fighting in battle because it was not the norm of their time, where only men were drafted or able to volunteer to fight in war, while women stayed at home or volunteered as nurses to help the war effort. It is clear that Éowyn chose to ride to war due to the hardship of the times, not clearly for the fact that she was a woman. Nonetheless, other portrayals of women at the time seldom crossed this gender-bending line, where a man goes to battle, in a medieval chivalrous sense, in order to defend his lady's honor.

In spite of Tolkien's potential show of progression, the fact that others in the community shunned Éowyn upon her return even after her great feat can impact readers, especially certain communities. The transgender community could be largely impacted by this idea that dressing as

a man is wrong, and that one cannot become gender fluid and decide to be what gender suits them best. For Éowyn, in order to ride into battle, it was necessary to take on the guise of a man in order to participate as she wanted. Then, when her act was revealed, the community dismissed her actions as heroic and instead shamed her. This is not what a young audience still discovering their identities wants to hear. Again, this idea may be attributed to the time of writing, and the blame should not be put on Tolkien altogether. His writing did not seek to offend alternative communities, although the transgender community had less of an existence as mainstream at the time. Director Peter Jackson attempts to clean up the mess Tolkien has made through omitting the more problematic plot points involving Éowyn, while also fully crediting her with the killing of the Nazgul. In doing so, Peter Jackson created powerful female characters where Tolkien failed. Also, as shown by the author Nijhuis leading the example and reading Bilbo as a female to her daughter, it might be necessary to omit and recreate certain passages from the text in order to positively impact children and young audiences that *The Lord of the Rings* reaches.

On the other hand, an influential example of female power in Tolkien's works is the character of Galadriel. She is the keeper of Lothlórien and protects this land by the use of one of the elven rings that she bears. She is a powerful elf, having the gift of prophecy and a greater significance than even her husband, Celeborn. Galadriel is the prime character of the text that is more powerful than most men, even her own husband. She can be looked up to by readers and seems to bypass Tolkien's usual application of his experience of women in his own life to the text. Tally summarizes her character, stating that she is "described in Tolkien's writings as 'the greatest of the elven women' and 'the mightiest and fairest of all the Elves that remained in Middle-earth'" (Tally). She perseveres as a benevolent creature when she is tempted to hold Frodo's ring, a ring that corrupts any being in its grasp: "I do not deny that my heart has greatly

desired to ask what you offer... I pass the test" ("The Fellowship of the Ring" 356-357).

Although tempted, she passes at the offer to be the keeper of the ring, even though she would prevail as the most powerful ruler against Sauron, the Dark Lord. Her benevolence and power is proven through her actions to refuse the ring and her ability to be the ruler and protector of her own realm. Tolkien comes closer to hitting the nail on the head with his characterization of Galadriel, not allowing her to become subject to his own shortage of experience with women in his life when creating this powerful character.

Although Galadriel is a character of great power and goodness, she is deprived of having a major role in the Legendarium. Truly, she is only present in the main legendarium for a few chapters, and more information on who she is and her accomplishments is only accessible through *The Silmarillion* and Tolkien's other works. As recounted in *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth*, Tolkien did not have her developed greatly as a character. He claims that "the role and importance of Galadriel only emerged slowly, and that her story underwent continual refashionings" (239). To many, even though she is a dominant force, she fails to have a notable role in the plot. This is also an area that Peter Jackson solves for Tolkien through his theatrical adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*. Galadriel is given a much more active role in the plot as a dominant female character. Nevertheless, she might be the one exception to Tolkien's notorious tendency to portray women solely love interests, even though she is not given a main role that would allow her to showcase her power as a notable woman. This proves that Tolkien had the potential to break gender barriers but failed to do so, disappointing many of his readers.

Furthermore, it is useful to examine Tolkien's creation of the "perfect couple" with his story of Beren and Lúthien. As Brian Kenna reveals in his article analyzing the evolution of

these important characters, Tolkien found their story extremely important and relatable to him and his wife, having their names engraved on their tombstones when they died (Kenna). Lúthien tends to embody the characteristics of J.R.R.'s wife, Edith, as Beren is enamored with her ability to sing and dance, just as J.R.R. was entertained constantly by Edith's ability to dance, sing, and play the piano (Fredrick and McBride). Lúthien represents one of Tolkien's more human characters in her development and heroic actions. She refuses to attain the traditional woman gender role familiar with Tolkien's writing, breaking down barriers by saving Beren when he gets into dire situations. Kenna reveals that in earlier versions of Beren and Lúthien's story, Lúthien was more passive and acted as a damsel constantly, unable to accomplish a task on her own (Kenna). The story evolved into a much more suitable environment for Lúthien to be an active main character in. Despite these evolutions from previous drafts, Lúthien still finds herself in need of a man's assistance in the final draft, especially when she becomes imprisoned in *The Silmarillion* and would not have escaped without the help of a hound named Huan (*The Silmarillion* 204). The evolution of the story of Beren and Lúthien from its original draft to the work it is presently gives Tolkien more credit in his awareness of female characters and roles, even if he still misses the mark somewhat. The depiction of Lúthien is the closest Tolkien comes to characterizing a real woman. All the same, this ideal couple was created by Tolkien with his relationship with Edith in mind, further proving that his deficiency of experience with women creeps into his literature.

All-in-all, J.R.R. Tolkien fails women as a writer and a creator of a new world. With his creation of Middle-Earth, women and men should have been emphasized equally, as it takes both biologically to pro-create. Tolkien also fabricates many different races into his Legendarium, such as Orcs, Hobbits, Elves, Dwarves, and many more, but he fails to give each species an equal

representation amongst their genders. This is surprising when considering his religious devotion to Roman Catholicism, as the story of Adam and Eve in the bible promotes the idea that a man and a woman must exist for a race to come about. His shortage of women roles within his works goes hand-in-hand with his upbringing. His lack of exposure to realistic women led him to idealize his mother as the perfect woman and apply this idea to every woman he met from then on, especially his own wife. This clearly impacts his ability as a writer to give women frequent and powerful roles.

Rewriting J.R.R. Tolkien's more sexist plot points and recreating female characters presents a solution to the identified issue at hand. The author Nijhuis dabbles with this idea when she renders Bilbo as female while reading *The Hobbit* to her daughter. Peter Jackson goes even further, taking this idea head-on with his adaption into film when he adds characterization to all females and involves multiple women in the plot where they were originally uninvolved in the written legendarium. The revision of an established, world-renowned work and franchise would be met with public outcry by fans of the legendarium and scholars of Tolkien, but it would be a work that empowers and accurately represents women that I, as a woman, would feel comfortable reading to my future daughters.

Works Cited

- Croft, Janet Brennan (2016) "Bibliographic Resources for Literature Searches on J.R.R. Tolkien," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 2. Available at:
<http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol3/iss1/2>
- Duriez, Colin. *The Oxford Inklings: Lewis, Tolkien and their circle*. Lion Books, 2015. Print.
- Fredrick, Candice and Sam McBride. *Women among the Inklings : Gender, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams*. Westport, Conn. : Greenwood Press, 2001., 2001. Print.
- Kenna, Brian. "The Surprising Evolution of "Beren and Lúthien"." *Los Angeles Review of Books*,
lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-surprising-evolution-of-beren-and-luthien/#!
- Nijhuis, Michelle. "One Weird Old Trick to Undermine the Patriarchy." *The Last Word On Nothing*, *The Last Word On Nothing*, 18 Dec. 2013.
- Pearce, Joseph. *Tolkien: A Celebration. Collected Writing on a Literary Legacy*. Ignatius Press, 2001.
- Tally, Robert, Jr. "Galadriel, Witch-Queen of Lórien." *Los Angeles Review of Books*,
lareviewofbooks.org/article/galadriel-witch-queen-of-lorien#.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994. Print.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981.
 Print.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994. Print.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001. Print.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Two Towers*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994. Print.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth*. New York: Houghton Mifflin

Company, 1980. Print.