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The New Image of Women in J.R.R. Tolkien's Classic Epic Fantasy Work *The Lord of the Rings*

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Abstract:

There are many worldwide best-selling fantasy novelists are there, among them J.R.R. Tolkien is the most best-selling fantasy novelists in twentieth-century literature. His major works are and *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. This paper discusses about the new image of women in his famous work *The Lord of the Rings*. In his works, the female is actually very independent, strong, and important to the central plots of each novel. Tolkien's characters Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen, Eowyn, and Shelob are good examples of strong females. These characters are taken from old Germanic and Norse mythology, and Catholicism. He gives new shape through demonstrate qualities of spiritual, physical power, and self-determination. Tolkien makes it clear that only by embracing both 'feminine' and 'masculine' qualities can one be a truly strong individual.

Keywords: J.R.R. Tolkien, Fantasy, Femininity, Masculinity, Germanic, Norse mythology, Catholicism, Middle-earth, fertility, and individual.

Women describe as beautiful, gracious, caring, giving, brave, forfeit and other typically feminine traits. The common characteristic of women means the enchanting beauty. In Tolkien works the powerful women characters are Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen, and Eowyn. They are all described at some point as being fair women, as well as holding some enchanting power over those who are in the presence of their beauty. This powerful trait is not exclusively attributed to the women in Tolkien's works. Some critics are solely described with feminine traits, while others share a blend of masculine and feminine characteristics. In that, Galadriel, Eowyn, Arwen, and Shelob are all, at some point, presented with traditionally masculine characteristics in Tolkien works.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* have been criticized for their lack of major female characters, as well as the conventional nature of those females present. This paper discusses the female characters present in Tolkien's work, actually very independent, strong, and important to the central plots of each novel. Tolkien's characters Galadriel and Arwen are good examples of strong females. It is important to keep in mind the background from which Tolkien drew his characters, such as old Germanic and Norse mythology and Catholicism. If one takes into account these ancient ideas, as well as Tolkien's personal background, his women actually demonstrate qualities of spiritual and physical power, self-determination, and wisdom. Here the paper deals with the new image of women in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The idea of power in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is not only about physical strength, and the ability to rule over others, although there is plenty of that in the story. Power is also portrayed in a much deeper and the power and the ability to sacrifice oneself for the greater good. It is this latter type of power which Tolkien found superior. Beauty and grace can be considered a powerful thing. Some critics feel that focusing on a woman's beauty and graciousness takes away from other stronger qualities she might possess, sometimes submitting her to religious idolization. The feminist Partridge gives great meaning to alleged sexual innuendo concerning females in Tolkien's works, and use these analyses to condemn Tolkien as a misogynist. The special focus on Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen, Eowyn and Shelob, five of the most significant female characters in Tolkien's works, this paper will reveal how Tolkien made his female characters stronger, wiser, more powerful, and more important to the central plot of the story.

Tolkien certainly felt that wisdom was something to be proud of. The wizards of Middle-earth tend to be very wise, as well as the Elves, and there is no Elf in *The Lord of the Rings* wiser than Galadriel. It is Galadriel, for instance, who forms the idea of creating a council in which to discuss the fate of the One Ring. The wisdom of Galadriel is very much equal to that of Gandalf and Elrond, which makes her a very strong character. Galadriel even comes off as being more proactive than Elrond, as she actively defends Lothlorien against orcs, and Sauron himself. The vivid description about Galadriel's radiant eyes and hair is as "serve to emphasize the brilliance inherent to Galadriel's character as reflective of her enhanced physical and moral state" (Tolkien, Letters 231). Such physical descriptions are typical for Valkyrie figures, and many of Galadriel's descriptions reflect such an image, which help to elucidate wise and powerful. Galadriel is not merely wise, but she has prophetic talents. She can look into the minds of those she meets, and can sometimes see into the future via her Mirror.

Another wise figure in the novel is Arwen, although she does not appear as often as one might like. She is very intuitive, and is, for instance, the first to notice that Frodo is in a state of unrest. She freely offers Frodo her jeweled necklace to comfort and heal him and her passage west if he still feels uneasy when it is time to sail (Tolkien, *Rings* 304). The wisdom that Galadriel and Arwen display comes from their innate ability for independent thought. Shelob is one of the most over-analyzed characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a giant spider. Both Shelob and her lair have been criticized for embodying some evil, sexual undertones. Partridge discusses Shelob's lair and its apparent similarity to the female sexual organs. According to him, Shelob's cave symbolizes the womb; the cobwebs are the pubic hairs. Frodo's penetration of Shelob's cave is obviously misconstrued as some sort of intercourse, and Frodo's sword the symbolism of his inadequate manhood.

Tolkien's women are very independent and exert their independence in spite of those who would dominate them. Arwen's tale is similar to Luthien's. Her father, Elrond, wishes her to venture to the West along with her kin, but she will not leave Aragorn (*Rings* 419). Her decision to stay is, of course, immensely important to the future of Middle-earth. Eowyn is quite autonomous, despite the will of others to talk down to her and tell her what to do. Not only is she a woman, but she is fairly young. Theoden loves her, of course, but his attempts to protect her also hold her down. Theoden does choose Eowyn to lead the people in his stead while the men are at war, but he makes it clear that he feels her place is not in battle. Eowyn disguises herself as Dernhelm, a male warrior, in order to fight, but since it is most likely that she disguises herself in order to hide her personal identity from Theoden. "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... I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death" (*Rings* 55).

These are powerful words, and Tolkien made it clear that women do not have to do as men power them. Eventually, Eowyn rides out to battle anyway and becomes an honorable hero. Galadriel is quite independent, although she and Celeborn are partners. No one speaks down to Galadriel, as she is one of the most powerful characters in *The Lord of the Rings* of either gender. Not only is she older and wiser than most who come across her, but she also has great magic. With independence, however, some difficult decisions, and sometimes these strong women are forced to choose between ultimate power and humility.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Galadriel and Celeborn are first introduced in as "equally tall, grave, and beautiful" (*Rings* 465). They have equally attributed two traditionally masculine qualities (tall and grave), as well as a traditionally feminine trait as

too beautiful. Celeborn and Galadriel are described as keen, profound, and accrediting wisdom. Madill explains that such descriptions about them: "...suggest that both the male and female characters are equal in status and that they both admirably share masculine and feminine qualities" (Madill, *Gendered* 4). In *The Fellowship of the Ring* Galadriel is further described as having a voice deeper than most women (*Rings* 466), as well as being wise and fearless (*Rings* 484). When Frodo offers the Ring to Galadriel she momentarily transforms into a "terrible and worshipful... tall beyond measurement" (*Rings* 480). Her power renowned in the midst of the Men of Middle-earth and Aragorn must explain to the fellowship that "although she may be powerful, she is not evil" (*Rings* 470). Samwise describes Galadriel as "strong in herself and explains how anyone who thinks her a threat will find themselves threatened, although he knows she is not dangerous" (*Rings* 857). Galadriel may be beautiful, but these descriptions portray a powerful and wise being beyond any mortal man.

Eowyn is likewise given some masculine descriptions. She is often described as fair, and her hair is a tribute to its golden beauty. She speaks very and said to be as "strong, and stern as steel" (*Rings* 544). King Theoden describes Eowyn as "fearless and high-hearted" (*Rings* 551). The King suggests that she should lead the people while the King is away from the country. Throughout *The Return of the King*, there are many descriptions of Eowyn that can be interpreted as generally masculine terms, such as stern, proud, hard, courageous, valiant, and high (as in regal). These are not the descriptions of a stereotypical woman, but of a woman who has won renown amongst her kin, and respect from the men around her. These qualities are Faramir falls in love with her, not to her external beauty. Arwen, Galadriel, and Eowyn are quality of graveness. Arwen bears many masculine qualities and she and Luthien are the beauties of Middle-earth. Shelob is beautiful as Tolkien mention in his work, "Shelob is dark and evil, but great" (*Rings* 615). Shelob is also thicker and stronger than a dragon. She too is fearless as Eowyn, although in a different way, as she in confederacy with Sauron.

Femininity and masculinity are not always so cut and dry. Many of the characters in Tolkien's works have a mixture of traditional feminine and masculine characteristics. Tolkien does not only credit feminine qualities to his women, but also to his men like Celeborn, Faramir, Finrod, etc. They have some qualities which could be interpreted as feminine. In that, we should think less of them as strong male figures. In fact, Tolkien believed that he mentioned in his letters as, "If any of his characters resembled him it was Faramir, with the exception of lacking Faramir's courage" (Letters 232). Tolkien associated himself with the characters and bearing qualities as he mentioned, "some may think traditionally feminine, such as gracious and gentle" (*Rings* 891). But being gentle in some situations does not mean

one cannot be strong in others, as Tolkien illustrated through some of his female characters. Tolkien's inspiration came from a wide range of old mythology, including the epic poem *Beowulf*. Although it may not be fair to continue to place women in passive roles in literature, it cannot be denied that history has unfairly placed women into these roles for many years.

Women in western society have only recently begun to serve as soldiers in war. Women in the early 1900s in Britain were homemakers, worked as clothing manufacturers or secretaries, and during World War One they worked mainly as nurses. British women were not permitted to serve in combat alongside men until 1990. During the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) were women in the British military did not participate in the battle and yet Tolkien has a human woman participating in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. Eowyn is a woman born of kings. She is small and fair, but courageous and strong. She wields a sword is one of the most important figures in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. Eowyn is the only one in the battle capable of killing the Witch-king of Angmar. The study argues that Eowyn's participation is one of the most glorious battles of Middle-earth. It is a large step forward in the literary history of women in war. Hypothetically, Eowyn is paving the way for other women of Middle-earth to become soldiers and heroic figures themselves, and to show their quality. Tolkien is somewhat in advance of his time in western feminist thinking.

In *The Two Towers*, where Faramir is addressing Samwise and Frodo, Tolkien uses Faramir's voice in order to punctuate his own love and respect for those who enjoy nature; "your land must be a realm of peace and content, and there must gardeners be in high honour" (*Rings* 751). Eowyn becomes a gardener after the war of the Ring. Eowyn becomes a gardener after the war. Samwise settles down and does some rather dazzling gardening with the seeds Galadriel gave him. Fertility is something that Tolkien found immensely important, and integrated it into his work. He portrays the importance of fertility to Middle-earth through Galadriel and her preservation of Lothlorien and the relationships formed between his male and female characters.

There are several marriages that take place at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance, those of Aragorn and Arwen, Samwise and Rosie, and Eowyn and Faramir. These matches are important to the continuation of men, hobbits, and a few Half-elves in Middle-earth. This punctuates the importance of marriage and fertility that comes with pairing off. In this same respect, the seeds that Galadriel gives to Sam an important to the continuation of nature after much of it has been destroyed by the war. Fertility plays a major role in the rebuilding of all things. It has been lost during the war of the Ring. Women, of course, are

essential to continuing life on Earth, and having strong women breed can only help Middle-earth. Luthien, for instance, bears a child (Dior) who is the beginning of a long line of strong Men and Elves. Arwen and Aragorn's children will most likely be both wise and vigorous. Knowing Eowyn's past, her children will almost certainly be brave and independent. Both male and female (human or otherwise) are important to fertility and the continuation of life in Tolkien's Middle-earth. In his world, it is clear that power goes hand in hand with sacrifice and those who sacrifice the most tend to be the strongest. Tolkien emphasizes the importance of healing and fertility throughout his works. It is clear that femininity is not the only characteristic women bear, but also they share a range of masculine traits as well. Feminine traits are also attributed to some of the most heroic men of Middle-earth.

Some critics claim that the pure lack of female characters in Tolkien's works made him a sexist or a misogynist. Galadriel and Arwen are the two main elvish women, and Éowyn is the only human heroine in the story. There are also several other female characters including Shelob, Goldberry, Rosie, Lobelia, and the Entwives. If one's focus is on *The Lord of the Rings* alone, it is true that there are not as many female characters as men, but the fact that the women are fewer helps draw attention to each woman's uniqueness and importance. This comparison, however, does not help to improve the view future readers may have of Tolkien and his female characters. It is necessary to review his personal background, as well as his academic background in order to understand where his female characters came from. Only then can we make assumptions about their strengths and weaknesses.

During Tolkien's college years he associated mainly with men because many women attended university at that time. There was a strong sense of male camaraderie as a result of the all-male schools, and further established because of the all-male British Army in which Tolkien served some time during World War One. Another source of Tolkien's strong sense of male camaraderie came from his participation in the literary discussion group called the *Inklings*. Lewis and Tolkien were good friends for some time, but after Lewis developed a close relationship with Charles Williams, another member of the *Inklings*, Tolkien and Lewis had a falling out often resenting them for their general interference in intellectual discussion and friendship between men. It was not uncommon for men to think of women as intellectually inferior at this time since many women lacked extensive education. Tolkien agreed that it did not seem that women could go as far as men intellectually, but that did not discourage him from treating his female students equally to their male counterparts and aiding them in their education. Edith was not an intellectual, and their marriage was far from perfect, but it is clear they had a deep love and respect for one another. According to

Tolkien, “the relationship with his wife Edith was a loving one. He explains in a letter to his son Christopher that Edith knew how much she meant to him” (Letters 420).

Tolkien attributes a great amount of strength to the women of Middle-earth. Many of Tolkien’s female characters are derived from the strong women of Old Norse and Germanic literature, which helped shape his own opinion of women. Tolkien also had a great amount of respect for his wife who was a muse for much of his work. Tolkien’s suspected beliefs about a woman’s intellect; he presented Galadriel and Arwen with an enormous amount of wisdom and intelligence. These are not the only strong qualities that Tolkien attributed to his women. He gives Eowyn a tremendous amount of physical strength for someone so slender and small, as well as extending qualities of courage, sacrifice, and power to his female characters. Bravery and brawn are strong traits, but they are merely strong in the traditional sense. Tolkien tended to have other opinions of what could be considered as strength.

Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is important to keep an open mind in our modern way of thinking. Tolkien spent much time with other men who had unsavory views of women, as was common at that time. However, that did not stop him from creating some genuinely strong female characters in his works. It may be argued that the small number of major female characters in his work actually aided in their uniqueness. The women and men in Middle-earth share more than just the world in which they live together. Both men and women sexes show courage, strength, and wisdom in the face of adversity, as well as sharing a deep love and respect for each other. They share feminine and masculine qualities which strengthen them as individuals. Luthien, Galadriel, Arwen and Eowyn symbolize all that is good in the world, as well as being leaders within their communities, and conserving the traditions and culture of their people. Tolkien’s major female characters display some strong qualities. What Tolkien shows us by way of his work is that only through the joined strength of men and women are we able to overcome the many obstacles we face in life.

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