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## Tales of Anti-Heroes in the Work of J.R.R. Tolkien

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### Abstract

Considers two stories which seem uncharacteristically anti-heroic in comparison to the rest of Tolkien's legendarium—the story of Túrin Turambar, and in particular, the portrait of the failed marriage of Aldarion and Erendis in “The Mariner’s Wife” and its ecological implications.

### Additional Keywords

J.R.R Tolkien; Anti-Heroes



## TALES OF ANTI-HEROES IN THE WORK OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN

PHILLIP FITZSIMMONS

THE MAJORITY OF STORIES IN TOLKIEN'S LEGENDARIUM offer dramatic examples of heroic behavior which can instruct the reader on how to conduct one's life. He draws engaging characters that never stop in their struggle to defeat evil, even when facing insurmountable odds. The reader encounters characters who are dedicated to serving others, who continue to plod onward despite the apparent futility of their actions, and who rely upon faithful friends. In contrast, "The Mariner's Wife" in *The Unfinished Tales* and "Of Túrin Turambar" in *The Silmarillion* are stories about anti-heroes that demonstrate what *not* to do in life. Similarities between the stories suggest that they were written to perform similar purposes. Both stories have tragic human heroes and story elements that are surprising for a J.R.R. Tolkien composition. The former is about the break-up of a marriage; the latter includes an incestuous marriage between the hero and his sister.

Although unfinished, "The Mariner's Wife" is an absorbing profile of filial relationships. It is no story about idealized children of Ilúvatar who stay on their path and get things right. Instead, it is a representation of marital relationships as we see them today. It shows that, even in paradise, unhappiness and conflict can cut to the quick of an individual life.

While this essay will focus on "The Mariner's Wife" and the story of Aldarion and Erendis, it is useful to note some similar points about "Of Túrin Turambar." In this story, the hero wallows in defeat and separates himself from the people who loved and fostered him. The acts of focusing upon how wrong things have gone and severing himself from the nurture and support of friendships lead him to unknowingly marry his sister.

Of the two story elements, the incest found in "Of Túrin Turambar" is more jarring to the reader than the dissolution of marriage found in "The Mariner's Wife" because incest is taboo in contemporary society. A first reading of either story sparks surprise and causes the reader to question Tolkien's purpose in adding each element to the story. Yet the style and degree of development of both stories indicate they were not passing thoughts

(though unfinished, “The Mariner’s Wife” is quite polished). Tolkien’s well-documented conservative character leads the reader to believe the elements must be important or they would not have remained in their respective stories. Indeed, “Of Túrin Turambar” was rewritten in different versions, such as the book length *The Children of Húrin*, and holds primacy of place by being included in *The Silmarillion*, intended by Tolkien to be the definitive presentation of his myth cycle.

One purpose of the element of the incestuous marriage is to show the magnitude of Morgoth’s evil in his curse of the children of Húrin. Similarly, the purpose of showing a failed marriage in “The Mariner’s Wife” is to show the resulting wrong when an individual will not work for unification and instead retreats to self-isolation. This is shown to be true even in a blessed realm, with all of its advantages, such as the island society of Númenor. In “Of Túrin Turambar,” the starkness of the incest element reinforces Tolkien’s theme of the apparent all-pervasive power of evil in the world. Even Túrin—a young man of great physical and leadership abilities—is shown to fail because he did not have the mental discipline to perform the deeds of a hero. Like Aldarion, he blames others for all his designs going wrong. He does not step outside of himself to get a better perspective, nor does he rely upon a positive network to help him in his goals. When Túrin begins to go astray, King Thingol, his foster father, sends messages calling him to return home to a place of honor at court. The messenger, Beleg Strongbow, repeatedly tracks him to aid him in battle and urge him to return home. But Túrin ignores or dismisses the network of loved ones that could have saved him.

Túrin is a slave to Morgoth’s curse because he believes he is its slave. The apparent lesson is to show what happens when the hero does not respond to adversity with all of his faith, talents, courage, and friends. Túrin can be contrasted to Boromir, who stumbled and failed, in *The Lord of the Rings*. He betrayed the fellowship but is remembered as a hero because he took responsibility for his actions and died protecting his two defenseless companions. Boromir could have wallowed in shame and believed his fate was final and slunk back to Gondor in despair. Instead, he corrects his betrayal by sacrificing himself to protect his friends, the weakest members of the fellowship.

The reader can see, in both stories, what happens when a person devotedly cultivates self-defeating thoughts and isolates himself from a positive social network. Boromir’s victory could have been mirrored by Aldarion and Erendis or by Túrin son of Húrin. Overcoming adversity would have made them heroes. Instead, we see in the notes of the story “The Mariner’s Wife” that Aldarion, planter of trees, denudes them from Middle-earth (*Unfinished Tales* [UT] 262), and Erendis ends her days alone, neglected

by her daughter and drawn toward and longing for the man she thoroughly rejected earlier in her life (*UT* 212).

The reader can imagine what the story “The Mariner’s Wife” would have looked like if Aldarion and Erendis had overcome their conflict by finding a middle ground in which Erendis did not view the sea as a rival and in which Aldarion had been more sensitive to the needs of a wife with a shorter life-span than he enjoyed. We do know from Frodo’s example in *The Lord of the Rings* that the resolution would have made them even greater than what they would have been if there had been no conflict. The moral of Tolkien’s stories is that a person is matured by facing adversity. Despite the physical and psychological scars from a quest, such as Frodo’s in *The Lord of the Rings*, the character develops new strength and depth because of the struggle.

#### THE TREE-LOVER AND THE MARINER

The dual conflict between Aldarion and Erendis hinges on their contrasting outlooks on nature. She has an over-riding empathy for trees as individual living things, while Aldarion is unable to see trees as anything other than raw materials. On the other hand, Aldarion’s love of the sea and sea-craft causes Erendis to view the sea as a rival. By the end of the story, Erendis retreats to a meadow that she uses as a haven to separate herself from the hurt of losing her imagined rivalry with the sea, which she perceives as the challenge to her marriage. She wants to be where she will have no experience of the sea and cannot see where trees have ever been felled. She distances herself and her daughter from contact with her husband’s family, withholds information about the child’s father, and actively instructs the child to hate and mistrust men.

Elizabeth Holem writes:

This marriage pattern [...] can be observed throughout Tolkien’s writing. His adventure tales usually revolve around the actions of a central, racially mixed, male-female couple whose success depends upon their partnership: Eärendil and Elwing, Beren and Lúthien, Thingol and Melian, Tuor and Idril. In contrast, many of the people who fall prey to the desire for domination are not only lacking a partner, but have tension with the opposite sex: Fëanor is estranged from his wife, Melkor was rejected by Varda, Maeglin is obsessed with a woman who marries another man, and Túrin lives in all-male company and later unknowingly marries his sister. (Holem 81)

She goes on to say, “Remember that Tolkien’s heroes come in pairs, creating unity through the coming together of difference: man and woman, elf and human [...]” (Holem 82).

While both Aldarion and Erendis are human, the marriage is coded as “racially mixed” because Aldarion is of the long-lived line of Elros, while Erendis is not. Aldarion’s insensitivity to the difference in their life-spans is key to their conflict. Again, as Holem reminds us, “Aldarion’s desire to stray from home is both a temporal and spatial yearning as he rejects both the present moment in which he lives and his homeland Númenor for an imagined future and distant lands” (78). His longevity gives him a luxury not open to Erendis:

Preferring to live firmly in the present, Erendis sees her love for their mutual homeland in a different light from Aldarion. By taking opposing positions toward imperialism, they present a debate in the form of a lover’s quarrel. [...] Because Aldarion is long-sighted he has a radically different perception of value from Erendis—and it is a definite character flaw. (78)

The notes to the story record, “It is said that this ordinance [allowing his daughter to succeed to the throne] arose directly from Aldarion’s disastrous marriage to Erendis and his reflections upon it; for she was not of the line of Elros, and had a lesser life-span, and he believed that therein lay the root of all their troubles” (*UT* 209). Aldarion’s understanding of the problem within his marriage comes far too late to be helpful in any way.

At first, the flaws of their relationship are not recognizable to them as obvious signs of the necessary failure of their marriage. The inability of humans to foretell how relationships will turn out was a topic addressed by Tolkien in a letter to his son Michael in 1941, when he wrote that not everyone was as fortunate as he was in finding his true love in Edith Tolkien. However, even their love had its difficulties. He wrote, “Nearly all marriages, even happy ones, are mistakes: in the sense that almost certainly [...] both partners might have found more suitable mates. But the ‘real soul-mate’ is the one you are actually married to” (*Letters* 51). He outlined the many ways that he had not been the most suitable partner for his bride when they married.

The content of the letter expresses an understanding that marriage is not only for couples who seem perfect for each other. In fact, according to the same letter, just because a couple appears right for one another at one time does not mean it will continue to be so unless there is a “deliberate conscious exercise of the *will*” and “self-denial” (*Letters* 51, emphasis in original). He recognizes that success can be achieved despite the misgivings of everyone involved. This letter is a useful aid in interpreting the conflicted marriage of Aldarion and Erendis as compared to ideal relationships found in the rest of Tolkien’s writing and listed by Holem in the quotation above.

The courtship of Beren and Lúthien is a fitting beginning to describe ideal relationships in the legendarium because the scene in which Beren first sees Lúthien was inspired by an experience of Tolkien's in which his wife danced for him in the woods while he was on leave during his service of fighting in WWI. According to Humphrey Carpenter, the moment is iconic in *The Silmarillion*, because of the degree to which Tolkien identified the heroine with his wife (Carpenter 97). In the story of *Beren and Lúthien* the man Beren is smitten by the sight and sound of the singing and dancing elf maiden that he comes upon in the forest. The couple stand together against Lúthien's father, King Thingol. They are partners in a dangerous adventure, and their relationship stretches the boundaries of mortality for both man and elven-kind.

In "Of Túrin Turambar," Húrin and his wife, Morwen, are separated for decades of distress and hardship but remain faithful and desire to be with one another until the end, when Húrin is briefly reunited with Morwen before she dies.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, harmony between Tom Bombadil and Goldberry is an expression not just of love between husband and wife but is also an essential part of the health of the land, as discussed at length by Dickerson and Evans: "In the joyful spousal relationship between Tom and Goldberry [...] we see a rare picture of spousal harmony, a picture that is crucial to the environmental harmony it signifies" (160).

The disintegration of a marriage in "The Mariner's Wife" thus seems to be inconsistent with the themes and motifs of other Tolkien stories. Again and again, he portrays marriages as remaining romantic, sometimes for centuries. Yet, occasionally, in stories such as in "The Mariner's Wife," he grapples realistically with matrimonial issues. The legendarium frequently points to the steadfast facing of adversity, with faith, action, and the support of friends as the path to heroism and spiritual development. "The Mariner's Wife" illustrates the opposite, showing the results of allowing adversity to fester, of not working together, and of withdrawing from the very families that have an investment in the success of their marriage. Aldarion and Erendis had the opportunity together to have matured individually and as a couple to have set good examples for the people of Númenor and their child. Instead, they resigned themselves to the apparent impossibility of overcoming their differences.

Aldarion does not find a way to master his desire to dominate others. He embraces his arrogance and encourages the same characteristic in his daughter. Aldarion's legacy sets the precedent for ruler after ruler of Númenor to believe he owns the land and is entitled to press his domination upon the people and the resources of Middle-earth. This is contrary to earlier Númenorians, who brought aid and instruction to the people of the continent.

For Erendis's part, her spiritual appreciation of trees is an empathy Tolkien shared (Dickerson and Evans 130). She had the chance to influence a future King of Númenor. She fails because she focuses upon the sea as a rival instead of finding a way to broaden her own spiritual love of nature beyond her home island. Her resentment diminishes her character, and each action contributes to a doom of unhappiness.

Aldarion and Erendis's mutual spite does their daughter a disservice. The notes to the story say of Ancalimë, "As she grew older she became ever more willful [...]. She was clever, and malicious, and saw promise of sport as the prize for which her mother and her father did battle" (*UT* 208). Douglas Kane, in his essay on the presence of legal knowledge in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, writes that, in "The Mariner's Wife,"

One of the most interesting elements of their separation is the issue of the custody of their daughter, Ancalimë, who would become the first ruling queen of Numenor [sic]. Ancalimë herself is described as having disastrous relationships with men, showing that Tolkien was well aware of how dysfunctional relationships tend to propagate themselves. (Kane 53)

"The Mariner's Wife" demonstrates the same conflict of feraculture (defined by Dickerson and Evans as the conscious preservation and cultivation of wild nature [32]) versus conservationism found in the relationship of the Valar Yavanna and Aulë (110). Aulë creates the Dwarves secretly, and Yavanna is unhappy because she has no influence in the development of their nature. She knows they will have no regard for living things. Consequently, she pleads to Manwë for the protection of her creations, and the Ents are made for that purpose. When she reports her success to her technologist/craftsman spouse, Aulë's tactless answer is "Nonetheless they will have need of wood." Despite the similarities of their story to that in "The Mariner's Wife," the immortal couple remain together (*Silmarillion* 43-46).

Also echoing the same theme is the story of the Ents found in *The Lord of the Rings*. The male Ents represent what Dickerson and Evans describe as preservationist ecological values. They protect and preserve the trees. The female Ents were involved with cultivation of the land and agriculture. The male Ents remained in the shrinking confines of the forests, while the female Ents moved on to other lands. At some point the Entwives were lost. This meant there would be no more Entings and spelled the eventual extinction of their species, because the spouses would not find a way to relate to each other's core values—as we see with Aldarion and Erendis (*LotR* III.4.475-78). Corey Olsen explores the schism between Ents and Entwives:



Their estrangement not only demonstrates the corruption of their values; it also exacerbates it. The Ents and the Entwives, if unified, would balance and complete each other. Together, they would cherish and protect both the forests and the fields, and their complementary outlooks, their active and contemplative relationships to nature, would inform and instruct each other. (Olsen 46)

“Aldarion and Erendis: The Mariner’s Wife” and “Of Túrin Turambar” are worth the attention of readers because they contribute to the legendarium by providing a contrast to Tolkien’s usual story-telling strategy of instructing the reader on a moral and good life through good example. In both stories the reader is shown how not to behave through the dramatization of a failed marriage and the disastrous isolation of a promising young man. We can conclude with Richard Mathews’s observation that “Aldarion and Erendis: The Mariner’s Wife” is, in fact, a gem with qualities that require a setting to augment them for display (Mathews 30). He was referring to the scholarly work of Christopher Tolkien. But the primary setting is the legendarium itself. Both stories and their setting augment each other reciprocally. The left-handed approach to moral instruction contributes to the larger structure as much as the larger structure gives the individual stories their place of purpose and of beauty.



## NOTES

This paper was read at Mythcon 44, East Lansing, Michigan, July 2013.

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