Tolkien Sidelined: Constructing the Non-Combatant in The Children of Hurin

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Abstract
Gives close attention to Morwen, Niënor, and Aerin, comparing them to Éowyn before she rode to battle and to Tolkien's own mother Mabel and wife Edith. Also considers the situations of several male characters unable to or uninterested in serving in war, particularly Sador, Gwindor, and Brandir, and Tolkien's own experiences on being sent home to England with trench fever.

Additional Keywords
As Théoden prepares to leave Éorlas and ride to war, he summons his sister-daughter Éowyn. She kneels before him, and he gives her a sword and a corslet of mail, saying “Farewell, sister-daughter. [...] Dark is the hour, yet maybe we shall return to the Golden Hall. But in Dunharrow the people may long defend themselves, and if the battle go ill, thither will come all who escape” (The Lord of the Rings [LotR] III.6.523). As Théoden and the leaders of the Rohirrim depart through the gates of Éorlas, “Éowyn [stands] before the doors of the house at the stair’s head; the sword [is] set upright before her, and her hands [are] laid upon the hilt. She [is] clad [...] in mail and [shines] like silver in the sun” (III.6.523). The sword and corset are tokens of authority given to her at the request of her people, for as Háma says, “she is fearless and high hearted. All love her” (III.6.523). The tokens of warfare mark Éowyn as a defender and protector of her people. These tokens contrast sharply with the role she fulfills in Théoden’s household when Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli arrive. In Meduseld, they see a “woman clad in white” (III.6.512) who stands behind Théoden’s chair. She is the concerned and dutiful niece who helps the king’s “faltering steps” (III.6.515) as he follows Gandalf out of the darkness of his hall, and she is the cupbearer who offers both the wine of hospitality and the cup of parting to the king and his guests: “Ferthu Théoden hal!” she says to her uncle. “Receive now this cup and drink in happy hour. Health be with thee at thy going and coming!” (III.6.522). Here, Éowyn’s actions and her role in the rituals of hospitality mark her as a woman performing a woman’s duties.1

Éowyn’s role is strikingly dual. She bears both cup and sword; she is both domestic and martial. In the Houses of Healing, Aragorn recognizes her dual nature when he recalls the first time he had seen Éowyn. Having called Éowyn back from shadow and darkness after her confrontation with the

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1 For example, Wealhtheow, wife of Hrothgar, in Beowulf, is shown offering a similar gesture of hospitality to the Geats when they are welcomed at Heorot (lines 555-565) and again, as they celebrate Grendel’s death (lines 1030-1044).
Nazgûl, but uncertain about her survival, he says to Éomer and Gandalf that “it seemed to me that I saw a white flower standing straight and proud, shapely as a lily, and yet knew that it was hard, as if wrought by elf-wrights out of steel” (V.8.866). Aragorn sees in Éowyn both flower and steel, both the beautiful, white-clad lady of Rohan and the fighter, tough as steel.

Through Éowyn’s contrasting portrayals, Tolkien provides a glimpse, not only of Éowyn, but of women, and by extension non-combatants, in wartime. Tolkien knows that the hard job of survival falls to them, both in the times of difficulty and uncertainty that go with war and in the cruel fate that may find them, should their warriors fail. It is not a job for the faint-hearted, nor is it a job many would want. Éowyn articulates the problem clearly:

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... I do not fear either pain or death [...]. I fear a cage [...]. To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire. (V.2.784)

With Éowyn’s embittered complaint to Aragorn, Tolkien raises a question often implied, but rarely addressed, in epic narrative: what is the lot of those waiting at home or in hiding during war time or living beyond the defeat of their warriors?

The situation is a common one, both in life and in literature. For every warrior in battle, there is likely a family at home or in hiding; for every defeat, there is suffering, not just for warriors, but for the people who remain behind. For example, turning to classical literature, The Iliad offers the heartbreaking final conversation between Hektor and his wife. Hektor has returned, briefly, from the battle before the walls of Troy. He finds his infant son, Astyanax, “a rosy baby still,” and his wife, Andromache, at the Skaian gates. She says to him

Oh my wild one, your bravery will be your own undoing! No pity for our child, poor little one, or me in my sad lot— soon to be deprived of you! [...] Better for me, without you, to take cold earth for mantle. No more comfort, no other warmth, after you meet your doom, but heartbreak only. (Homer 154)

Her complaint is real. Hektor knows it, and he responds “Not by the Trojans’ anguish on that day / am I so overborne in mind [...] as by your own grief,
when some armed Akhaian / takes you in tears, your free life stripped away” (156). His knowledge of the doom his family faces should the warriors fail cannot turn him aside from warfare or from his responsibilities to his city. Hektor recognizes what Aragorn admits to Éowyn: a day may come “when none will return. Then there will be need of valour without renown, for none shall remember the deeds that are done in the last defense of your homes. Yet the deeds will not be less valiant because they are unpraised” (V.2.784).

On the morning after their conversation, Aragorn leaves Éowyn, “still as a figure carven in stone, her hands clenched at her sides” (V.2.785) and follows the Paths of the Dead to battle at Pelargir on Anduin and later at the Pelennor Fields. For her part, Éowyn watches the Grey Company until it passes into the shadows of the Dwimmorberg and then, “stumbling as one that is blind,” she returns to her tent. Éowyn abandons her duty—assigned to her by the love and trust of her people, by obedience to her much-loved uncle and lord, and by her gender—and disguised as Dernhelm, rides with Théoden and Éomer in search of the glory and renown she knows will elude her in her domestic role.

In epic narratives, women typically bear cups, advocate peace, weave shrouds, and are given in marriage. It can be a bitter role, as Éowyn points out, to maintain social stability. Her bitterness about her lot is reflected in her word choice. She is weary, she says of “skulking in the hills.” “Shall I always be chosen,” she complains, “to mind the house [...] while [the Riders] win renown, and find food and beds when they return?” (V.2.784). While some of her bitterness may, as Gandalf suggests, have its source in months of hearing Wormtongue’s poisoned words in her ears, the similarity between her peril and Andromache’s is difficult to miss. Both women face death or captivity, should the men fail at war, and neither lives in a society that offers its women an effective role in turning back that fate. In The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien gives us only hints of what non-combatants endure: a glimpse of the lives of the people of Édoras as they await news of battle; Éowyn’s brief mention of hard words spoken by people sent suddenly into hiding by the threat of war; a description of long lines of wains slowly bearing the women, the children, and the infirm away from Minas Tirith before the siege begins. The true circumstances of life for those left behind when the men go to war is, however, the subject of more detailed consideration in The Children of Húrin. In the stories of Morwen, the long-suffering wife of Húrin, of their daughter Niënnor, and of their kinswoman Aerin, Tolkien departs from the epic pattern of silence about women’s lives.

As Húrin’s preparations for the desperate Nirnaeth Arnoediad progress, it becomes apparent that responsibility for the well-being of his people and the future of his line will depend on Morwen. Húrin knows of “her
courage and her guarded tongue” (The Children of Húrin [CoH] 45), and he turns to her to discuss the plans of the Elven kings with whom he is allied against Morgoth. More significantly, he speaks with her about the future should warfare fail:

When I am summoned, Morwen Eledhwen, I shall leave in your keeping the heir of the House of Hador [...]. If things do go ill, I will not say to you: Do not be afraid! For you fear what should be feared, and that only; and fear does not dismay you. But I say: Do not wait! I shall return to you as I may, but do not wait! (45-46)

Morwen is clearly a woman of intelligence, resourcefulness, and endurance. Morwen rejects Húrin’s suggestion that she seek refuge with his mother’s family in Brethil, saying “I must take counsel for myself” (47). Húrin speaks to Morwen as an equal, concluding “[t]hings will not go so ill; but if they do, then to your courage and counsel all is committed. Do then what your heart bids you; but do it swiftly” (47-48). Although Morwen’s role in their world differs from his, Húrin relies on her abilities as a clear complement to his own.

In victory, Morgoth takes Húrin captive, and enraged by Húrin’s refusal to reveal the location of Turgon’s hidden kingdom, he curses him, Morwen and their children saying, “[t]he shadow of my thought shall lie upon them wherever they go, and my hate shall pursue them to the ends of the world” (63). Then he binds Húrin to a chair of stone in Thangorodrim, and curses him, saying

Sit now there [...] and look out upon the lands where evil and despair shall come upon those whom you have delivered to me. For you have dared to mock me, and have questioned the power of Melkor, Master of the fates of Arda. Therefore with my eyes you shall see, and with my ears you shall hear, and nothing shall be hidden from you. (65)

Húrin, Morwen, and their children are cursed equally. Húrin will spend the next thirty years reduced to a passive role, forced to observe the consequences of his defiance of Morgoth, and fully aware of Morgoth’s malicious intentions.

The political situation for Húrin’s people is bleak. Morgoth floods his lands in Dor-lömin with savage Easterlings, who plunder goods and enslave all but the old, the very young, and the ill, whom they leave to glean a meager survival under a brutal occupation. When, many years later, Túrin returns to Dor-lömin on the malicious misinformation of Glaurung, he finds his home empty and dark, the house plundered. Seeking news and shelter, he goes to Brodda’s house, where he is quietly given a seat by the fire and warned to be wary of speaking “the old tongue” (184-85).
Tolkien shows the desperate lives of two of Húrin’s kinswomen under the rule of the “strawheads.” Túrin’s aunt, Aerin, is forced into marriage with Brodda, a leader of the Easterlings. While her life is hard, she has used her position to soften the suffering of many. She secretly sends food to Morwen, whose pride can accept it only for the sake of her children. Húrin’s beggared folk, Sador tells Túrin as they crouch near Brodda’s hearth, would receive neither fire nor broth were it not for the secret kindness of Lady Aerin. Enraged by the suffering of his people at the hands of Brodda’s men, Túrin kills Brodda and breaks up the hall, satisfying his immediate need for vengeance, but doing little to right the wrongs the people of Dor-lómin have suffered. His impulsiveness contrasts with the patient, and effective, endurance of Aerin. She says to him

You have learned what you would. Now go swiftly! [...] For ill though my life was, you have brought death to me with your violence. The Incomers will avenge this night on all that were here. Rash are your deeds, son of Húrin, as if you were still but the child that I knew. (189)

As Túrin escapes to the mountains, he and his companions look back and realize that Aerin has set fire to Brodda’s hall. Of her, whom Túrin has accused of having a faint heart, one man observes “[m]any a man of arms misreads patience and quiet. She did much good among us at much cost. Her heart was not faint, and patience will break at the last” (190). In defeat, Aerin has suffered the loss of her freedom, the indignity of a compelled marriage, and the brutality of her husband and his men. But rather than simply accepting her fate, Aerin has used her position, often at cost to herself, to ease the suffering of those around her.

Morwen’s tale is equally tragic, but more complicated, and it reveals Tolkien’s intimate and sympathetic understanding of life for non-combatants either in wartime or in defeated lands. She must decide how to protect her children, and she must decide whether to wait for Húrin in Dor-lómin, under enemy rule, or to go into exile in Doriath. She fears that the Easterlings will enslave Túrin before he is much older. At first, she keeps him close to home, but ultimately must make the difficult decision to send him on the long journey to Doriath, where she hopes Thingol will shelter him within the Belt of Melian. Túrin protests, saying that it is his responsibility, as his father’s heir, to remain and defend their home, and then, because he is a child, he begins to cry, asking his mother how, if she is able to follow him later, she will find him in the wilderness. She scolds him for crying, and then she tells him “[i]t is hard, Túrin my son. [...] Not hard for you only. It is heavy on me in evil days to judge what is best to do. But I do as I think right; for why else should I part
with the thing most dear that is left to me?" (72). Morwen often appears hard and unemotional, but here, she shows both her love of her son and her determination that, no matter the cost, he be given some chance to grow up a free man rather than a thrall. Only later are we told, through Sador, that he “remember[s] the day when Húrin’s boy was sent away, and how he wept; and she, when he was gone” (184).

Morwen’s choice for herself is more difficult, ruled by circumstance, uncertainty, and pride. At first, she realizes that the long journey over the mountains would be complicated, and perhaps even compromised, by her pregnancy. Then, for nine years after Túrin’s departure, Morwen and his sister Niënnor wait in Dor-lómin, under the rule of the Easterlings because the roads remain too dangerous for anyone to travel, let alone a woman and a small child, and even life at home under occupation likely seems preferable. Finally, in the fragile peace earned by Túrin, now known as “Black Sword,” Morwen and Niënnor chance the dangerous journey to Doriath.

Morwen’s life under occupation, and later in sanctuary in Doriath, is characterized by uncertainty. She cannot know whether Hurin is alive or dead, and she cannot know about the fate of the son she sent into exile. When she arrives in Doriath, she learns that Túrin has left due to disagreement and wounded pride. Rumor has it that he had been living and fighting in Nargothrond, under the name of Mormegil, the Blacksword, when the kingdom was defeated and sacked by the dragon Glaurung, but she can gain no certain knowledge of his fate. She complains that the doubt about his fate “is the very work of Morgoth! May we not learn the truth, and know surely the worst that we must endure?” (198). Yet, work of Morgoth or not, doubt brings her to leave the shelter of Doriath, against all advice, and search for the son she fears may be hungry, in bondage, or unburied (199).

Morwen’s delay in fleeing Dor-lómin also reflects the pride, affection, and independence she shares with Hurin. The contrast between herself and her husband, Morwen has said, is that he looks high, but she fears to fall low (48). When Thingol and Melian send for her,

she would not depart from her house, for her heart was yet unchanged and her pride still high [...]. Therefore she dismissed the Elves of Doriath with her thanks, and gave them in gift the last small things of gold that remained to her, concealing her poverty; and she bade them take back to Thingol the Helm of Hador. (77-78)

Morwen conceals her poverty out of pride, and she turns down the offer of sanctuary, partly due to stubborn independence, and partly, one suspects, because she still hopes to hear Húrin’s feet on the floorboards of their home
one night. She knows how difficult it will be for him to find her, should he return and find her fled into exile.

Niënnor is another study of the lives of women during wartime. She is, for all practical purposes, a war orphan, born after her father left for battle, and growing up not knowing his fate. Her story reaches its climax when, as Níniel, she faces the event she has most feared: the departure of Turambar (yet another name for Túrin) to fight Glaurung before the dragon reaches Ephil Brandir, their community in the Forest of Brethil. Turambar had promised to give up fighting if she would marry him, reserving only the circumstance of defending her and their home. Níniel had hoped that, as his wife, she might have some ability to restrain him, but faced with Glaurung’s straight course across country toward their community, Turambar concludes that the moment to return to the fight has come. Having ignored Brandir’s advice to wait awhile before marrying Turambar, and now two months pregnant with their child, Níniel finds both waiting at home for news of her husband and the prospect of survival without him equally excruciating:

[W]edded or unwedded, mother or maid, my dread is beyond enduring. The Master of Doom is gone to challenge his doom far hence, and how shall I stay here and wait for the slow coming of tidings, good or ill? This night, it may be, he will meet with the Dragon, and how shall I stand or sit, or pass the dreadful hours? [...] If ill befall, I shall not wish to escape. [...] I will not wait here. If my lord fails, then all hope is false. [...] Therefore why tarry here? Now I go to meet the tidings and whatever doom may send. (231-32)

Turambar had requested that his community remain behind at home; should he succeed, they would know soon enough, and should he fail, the distance between the point on the River Teiglin where he intended to confront the dragon and Ephíl Brandír was great enough to allow them time to disperse into the forest and to gain survival for at least a few of them. Níniel’s position is difficult: if Turambar does not defend her and their unborn child, neither will survive; if he does defend them, he will likely die, leaving them without his protection.

Tolkien is not unique in mentioning the lives of non-combatants under defeat, occupation, or war. However, Tolkien gives the situation more sympathetic attention than is, perhaps, common. To understand Tolkien’s grounding for his handling of Mírwen, Aërlín, and Niënnor, and for that matter his insightful portrayal of Éowyn’s frustration at her situation, a turn to some of the shaping events in his life, however little he may have approved of such approaches, proves instructive. I would argue that the grounding for his
perception is in the examples of his mother and his wife and in his first-hand experience as a non-combatant in both world wars.\(^1\)

Tolkien’s admiration of his mother and her care for her sons is well known, as is his sorrow that, due to her 1900 conversion to Catholicism, and her insistence on instructing her sons in the Catholic faith, she was ostracized by her family. The tensions of the situation seem to have made even simple communication a fraught situation. For example, in the 1903 Christmas letter she sent to her mother-in-law she wrote “Ronald is making his First Communion this Christmas—so it is a very great feast indeed to us this year. [...] I don’t say this to vex you—only you say you like to know everything about them” (qtd. in Pearce 19). The apologetic tone coupled with the acknowledgement that the occasion she mentioned might cause vexation give some indication of the response she anticipated.

The specific reasons for Mabel’s conversion to Catholicism are unknown, but the hostility she faced is not surprising. In early twentieth-century England, many viewed Catholicism with suspicion, among them Mabel Tolkien’s Methodist and Baptist family members. Writing in 1926, for example, G.K. Chesterton described the attitude of many families towards the potential conversion of their children: “The worthy merchant of the middle class, the worthy farmer of the Middle West, when he sends his son to college, does now feel a faint alarm lest the boy should fall among thieves, in the sense of Communists; but he has the same sort of fear lest he should fall among Catholics” (17). Chesterton recognizes that, for many of his contemporaries, thieves, communists, and Catholics rank almost equally among things to be feared.\(^3\) While communists may have been a fairly recent addition to the list, the fear and suspicion of Catholics was grounded in several centuries of

\(^1\) It is tempting, because Tolkien had seen combat, to align him with heroic combatants; however, his historical situation, where an invisible disability like persistent trench fever made one vulnerable to accusations of malingering, and his depiction of such side-lined warriors does not permit such a characterization. Tolkien’s physical inability to meaningfully do as other men his age were doing aligns him with sidelined fictitious characters like Sador or Gwindor. He presents them as weak and their efforts as ineffectual, not as heroic returning heroes. Even Húrin, having defied Morgoth, is impotent. He can observe what is happening to his family, but he cannot protect them, and in fact, their suffering is occasioned by his refusal to reveal the location of the Hidden Kingdom.

\(^3\) It is worth noting that, while the palpable suspicions remained potent, there was also a growing interest in Catholicism. Mabel Tolkien and G.K. Chesterton are only two names on a fairly long list of Catholic converts. One indicator of growing acceptance is the gradual restoration, between 1896 and 1938, of the pilgrimage destination and Catholic Shrine at Walsingham. See Gary Waller, *Walsingham and the English Imagination*.

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religious division dating back at least to the English Reformation in the sixteenth century. For Catholics like Tolkien, this history of division and religious strife can make England seem, in some respects, like occupied territory—that is, a country that, given its history, should rightly have remained Catholic rather than suffering under the rule of religious interlopers.4

In Mabel Tolkien’s case, the anti-Catholicism was expressed when her brother-in-law Walter Incledon and some members of her late husband’s family, who had been providing some nominal financial support to her and her sons, withdrew that support, presumably hoping to force her to reconsider her religious commitments. Mabel’s financial situation had been precarious since the 1896 death of her husband; her family’s response to her conversion made it markedly worse.

Nine years after Mabel’s early death at the age of thirty-four from diabetes, Tolkien wrote “My own dear mother was a martyr indeed, and it was not to everybody that God grants so easy a way to his great gifts as he did to Hilary and myself, giving us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith” (qtd. in Pearce 21). Tolkien describes his mother’s persistence in raising her sons in her adopted Catholic faith and over the objections of her relations as a kind of religious warfare and her death a kind of martyrdom. He maintained this view throughout his life. In 1967, he wrote to his son Michael:

When I think of my mother’s death [...] worn out with persecution, poverty, and largely consequent, disease, in the effort to hand on to us small boys the Faith, and remember the tiny bedroom she shared with us in rented rooms in a postman’s cottage at Rednal, where she died alone, too ill for viaticum, I find it very hard and bitter, when my children stray away [from the Church]. Of course Canaan seems

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4 Something of Tolkien’s understanding of Catholic England can be found in his disagreement with friend Christopher Wiseman. John Garth recounts a serious disagreement between the two:

“Typically, [the grand old quarrel] started from a small observation and became a battle royal between rationalism and mysticism. Tolkien found the most mundane human misunderstandings depressing, and blamed ‘a clash of backgrounds’ arising from what he called ‘the decay of faith, the break up of that huge atmosphere or background of faith which was common to Europe in the Middle Ages’. Wiseman was scornful: ‘That huge atmosphere of magic that ghastly atmosphere of superstition: that it is that has gone.’ This was a religious dispute, with Tolkien speaking for the pre-schismatic Roman Catholic world, Wiseman for the Protestant Reformation and its legacy” (251).

Chesterton outlines similar tensions in The Catholic Church and Conversion.
different to those who have come into it out of the desert; and the later inhabitants of Jerusalem may often seem fools or knaves, or worse.

(Letters 354)

In her dogged persistence in raising her sons as Catholics, despite persecution and poverty, Mabel Tolkien may have given her son a model of survival that served him well when he turned his attention to writing about women in his tales of the tragic end of Húrin’s family.

World War I further shaped Tolkien’s sympathy for non-combatants during war time. Wartime is unavoidably a time of privation and uncertainty—uncertainty of victory, of survival, of the next meal. The Tolkiens were married in March 1916; in June of 1916, after three months more characterized by separation than not, Tolkien left for France with little expectation of survival. Looking back on his departure many years later, he wrote “[j]unior officers were being killed off, a dozen a minute [...] parting from my wife then . . . it was like a death” (Garth 138). During his absence, Edith Tolkien was not living under occupation by hostile forces, but she was living with the uncertainties, shortages, difficulties, and separations of wartime. Her husband’s departure made Edith an example of what Melissa Smith describes as a “war bride-left-behind” (161).

One view of Edith Tolkien’s life during the war years comes from her daughter Priscilla. She points to Tolkien’s picture “High Life at Gipsy Green” as indicative, and characterizes those early years as happy ones for her parents (Tolkien, John and Priscilla 5). The picture is a collection of domestic vignettes showing Edith playing the piano, washing, and doing her hair, drawings of Tolkien in uniform on his bicycle, baby John in his cradle and being carried by his mother, along with depictions of the cats, jackdaw, and rabbits with whom they shared their home on the Teddesley Estate in Staffordshire (Hammond 26-27).

The idyllic depiction this picture offers of springtime on the home front cannot tell the entire story. Hammond and Scull tentatively date the picture to the spring of 1918, relatively late in Edith’s war experience. Looking back from 1918 offers a more sober picture. When her husband was posted to France in the spring of 1916, a short three months after they were married, Edith surely was as aware of the grim casualty reports as her husband was, although no letters or accounts have survived to record her anxieties. The

5 Tolkien’s use of the word death here echoes that of many of his contemporaries. Anna Smol points out the “liminality” of war time figures who cross the boundary from the peaceful world to the unknown world of war and the common references to death in World War I poetry (39-40).
initial anxiety, shared with thousands of other families, was for simple survival. Among junior officers from Oxford, like Tolkien, Garth reports that “[o]f every eight men mobilized in Britain during the First World War, one was killed. The losses from Tolkien’s [school rugby] team were more than double that, but they bear comparison with the proportion of deaths among King Edwards’ Old Boys and among former public schoolboys across Great Britain—about one in five” (8-9).

The initial anxiety was followed by others. Among those who survived the Somme, many returned with debilitating injuries or illnesses. Would her husband, who was sent home in November 1916 suffering from trench fever, recover, or would he remain an invalid? Alternatively, would he recover and be sent back to the front, perhaps to be killed? Edith was clearly aware that persistent illness was a mixed blessing: it prevented a return to a normal and predictable life, but, as she pointed out to him in a letter in 1917, “every day in bed means another day in England” (Carpenter 95).

Another difficulty Edith faced alone was her first pregnancy. John Tolkien was born in Cheltenham in November 1917. It was a difficult and life-threatening birth, but her husband could not be with her. He was in Hull, where army officials evaluated his medical condition and concluded that, while still troubled by persistent pain in his limbs and occasional fever, he was at least fit for duty in England. Many years later, in a 1941 letter to his son Michael, he wrote of Edith’s situation:

Think of your mother! Yet I do not now for a moment feel that she was doing more than she should have been asked to do—not that that detracts from the credit of it. I was a young fellow, with a moderate degree, and apt to write verse, a few dwindling pounds p.a. (£20—40), and no prospects, a Second Lieut. on 7/6 a day in the infantry where the chances of survival were against you heavily (as a subaltern). She married me in 1916 and John was born in 1917 (conceived and carried during the starvation-year of 1917 and the great U-Boat campaign) round about the battle of Cambrai, when the end of the war seemed as far-off as it does now. I sold out, and spent to pay the nursing-home, the last of my few South African shares, ‘my patrimony’. (Letters 53)

In this letter, Tolkien recognizes two crucial elements of Edith’s experience. First, like many war brides, she had married him in haste. Because the war dictated their timing, their financial situation was far more precarious than either of them would have liked as they began their lives together. Second, he recognizes and credits Edith for the way she handled the difficulty of carrying a pregnancy to term when food was scarce, life was uncertain, and her
husband lived at the whims and dictates of military orders. It wasn’t until Tolkien was demobbed and went to work as a lexicographer for the Oxford English Dictionary that Edith once again had a fixed home.

Tolkien offers few direct clues about how he thought about his years of military service. Some evidence about how he thought about his soldiering can be gleaned from his correspondence with Michael:

On the night of my 21st birthday I wrote again to your mother—Jan. 3, 1913. On Jan. 8th I went back to her, and became engaged, and informed an astonished family. I picked up my socks and did a spot of work (too late to save Hon. Mods. from disaster)—and then war broke out the next year, while I still had a year to go at college. In those days chaps joined up, or were scorned publicly. It was a nasty cleft to be in, especially for a young man with too much imagination and little physical courage. No degree: no money: fiancée. I endured the obloquy, and hints becoming outspoken from relatives, stayed up, and produced a First in Finals in 1915. Bolted into the army: July 1915. I found the situation intolerable and married on March 22, 1916. May found me crossing the Channel [...] for the carnage of the Somme. (Letters 53)

Given the heated patriotism of the early months of World War I, Tolkien’s attitude seems markedly reluctant. He had risked public scorn to complete his final year at Oxford despite the fact that most young men of his age had already enlisted. He had “endured the obloquy” and the outspoken hints from relatives, and instead avoided immediate enlistment by signing up for an officers’ training program for Oxford students during his final year. Finally, he tells Michael he “bolted” into the army, and he describes himself as an “inefficient and unmilitary” soldier (Letters 54). This letter does not recount the actions of an enthusiastic soldier in search of heroism, but rather the reluctant compliance of a man who would really rather study languages.

Tolkien’s health record, as it is recounted by John Garth, shows numerous relapses into the fever and pain associated with trench fever. Each bout was accompanied by a stint of bed rest and consequent loss of muscle fitness. Due to the combination, he was repeatedly found unfit for military

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6 Because Edith had agreed to give up her permanent address in Warwickshire in order to take lodgings close to wherever her husband was posted, she was constantly moving. According to Priscilla Tolkien, her mother remembered living in twenty two different places in the first two years of her marriage (5). Tolkien himself described the period as “a long nomadic series of arrivals at houses or lodgings that proved horrible—or worse: in some cases finding none at all” (Garth 246-47). At one point, wearied by caring for baby John, and still not fully recovered from his birth, Edith wrote “I’ll never go round with you again” (Carpenter 98).
service, a conclusion that likely saved his life, but one that could not help but frustrate him too. Little record remains of what Tolkien himself thought about remaining in England while other men his age, many of them his friends, were fighting and dying in France. One intriguing clue remains in a letter from Christopher Wiseman, a close friend,7 who wrote that he was “unreservedly glad” to learn that Tolkien continued unwell. He told him to “[m]alingering to your utmost” (Garth 231). “Malingering” was a common accusation lodged against victims of persistent symptoms from trench fever. Since Tolkien’s health was under close scrutiny, it is likely that he faced such accusations. Possibly, Wiseman’s words respond to worries that Tolkien had expressed to his old friend.

Too weak for service in France, Tolkien was assigned to the Humber Garrison, where, according to Garth, more than half of the officers, like Tolkien, were unfit (234), and most of the remaining men were members of the Royal Defence Corps, organized in 1916 and made up of men too old to fight (235). Their job was to defend the mouth of the Humber River, historically a location that had given Viking invaders access to the interior of the country, against possible penetration by Germany. Was this assignment, though boring and only occasionally risky due to treacherous footing during night patrols, a welcome refuge from warfare or a demeaning failure to perform as other men his age did? The historical record gives few clues, but perhaps Tolkien reveals something of his thoughts through three characters who are unable to serve as soldiers. Sador was lamed by an accident with an axe, and he remains behind as a servant and wood carver in Morwen’s household when Húrin and his men ride off to war. Húrin himself is suspicious of men who injure themselves with their own tools. Is he, Húrin wonders, trying to exempt himself from combat? Is he, in the language of Tolkien’s time, a malingerer? Gwindor has suffered torture in Angband, and after his escape, he remains a mere shadow of his former self. On his return to Nargothrond with Túrin, he finds himself increasingly displaced by Túrin’s military prowess. He has “[fallen] into dishonour, for he was no longer forward in arms, and his strength was small; and the pain of his maimed left arm was often upon him” (CoH 163). The elves of Nargothrond no longer respect his cautious views about confrontation with Morgoth, and they accept Túrin’s demand that they build the bridge at their

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7 Christopher Wiseman, Rob Gilson, and G.B. Smith were school friends of Tolkien’s at King Edward’s School, Birmingham. Together, they formed the “Tea Club and Barrovian Society.” Initially a social club, the friends also exchanged ideas and poems, and thought themselves intended by God for a “greatness” that would redeem society. Gilson and Smith did not survive the war. After the war, Tolkien and Wiseman drifted apart.
gates that allows an easy crossing of River Teiglin. This bridge is ultimately their downfall because it also allows easy entry by Glaurung when he comes. Gwindor points out that he has lost everything—home, kin, the love of Finduilas—to Húrin the warrior. Brandir of Brethil “was no man of war, being lamed by a leg broken in a misadventure in childhood; and he was moreover gentle in mood, loving wood rather than metal, and the knowledge of things that grow in the earth rather than other lore” (193).8 He tries to rule his people in peace and to avoid confrontation with the orcs of Morgoth. Túrin, speaking as Turambar, accuses him of weakness instead of prizing his abilities as a healer and wise leader. They argue over defense, over the loyalty the people of Brethil, over the love of Niniel; ultimately, Brandir loses. All three of these men are sidelined by disability and lose the respect of their people. As a man who spent the closing years of the war of his generation sidelined by illness, Tolkien seems to understand these characters intimately.

Tolkien’s experience during World War II similarly informs his understanding of the frustrations and difficulties of those waiting at home for the warriors to succeed or fail. He developed an acute understanding of the anxieties of a parent with sons at war, and he recognized how this war wasted their finest abilities, just as World War I had devastated his own generation. For example, in June 1944, writing to his publisher Stanley Unwin about their sons:

First about Rayner [Unwin]. I was both delighted and grieved at your news [that he is reading English at Oxford as a naval cadet]. Delighted because I shall have a chance of seeing him. […] Grieved because it is abominable to think that the passage of time and prolongation of this misery has swept him up. My youngest boy, also Trinity, was carried off last July—in the midst of typing and revising the Hobbit sequel and doing a lovely map—and is now far away and very wretched, in the Orange Free State […] I have at the moment another son, a much damaged soldier, at Trinity trying to do some work and recover a shadow of his old health. (Letters 85-86)

None of the Tolkien sons escaped the war untouched, although their “luck” was greater than that of many young men, and all three of them survived. In 1939, John had gone to Rome to study for the priesthood. He found that, while Italy was not yet formally at war, the increasing numbers of German troops in the city made it “clear that it was not safe to be an English student in the city.”

8 Flieger offers an insightful analysis of the debilitating and long ranges effects of war wounds—both obvious and hidden—in her discussion of Frodo’s wounds, his withdrawal from the life of The Shire, and his ultimate departure from Middle-earth.
He escaped Europe with other English seminarians on the last boat to leave Le Havre, in France, in 1939 (Tolkien, John and Priscilla 70). Michael, the “much damaged” son, had received military training at Sandhurst, been decorated for his bravery defending aerodromes during the Battle of Britain, and by the time of the 1944 letter had, according to Carpenter, “been judged unfit for further military service as a result of ‘severe shock to nervous system due to prolonged exposure to enemy action’” (Letters 439n74). Christopher, the youngest son, had been conscripted in 1942. To his father’s great sorrow, he was sent by the Royal Air Force to South Africa for training. Much of Book IV of The Lord of the Rings was drafted and sent out to Christopher during this time. While many scholars have connected the war-blasted landscape and the immense suffering that Frodo and Sam endure in this part of the narrative to Tolkien’s wartime experiences, it is tempting to suggest that one can also trace in those passages something of a father’s vicarious suffering for his son.

In writing to both of his soldier sons, Tolkien alludes to the dangers they face and to the possibility that they would be killed. In a letter to Michael, in words that are echoed closely in a later letter to Christopher, he writes

Still, let us both take heart of hope and faith. The link between father and son is not only of the perishable flesh: it must have something of aeternitas about it. There is a place called ‘heaven’ where the good here unfinished is completed; and where the stories unwritten and hopes unfulfilled, are continued. We may laugh together yet . . . (Letters 55)

There is both hope and great sorrow in Tolkien’s words. For a man who was orphaned as a child to place his hope in a link between parent and child beyond “perishable flesh,” cannot be anything but difficult, but the difficulty is suppressed. His adult experience reminds him that the risks his sons face are daunting and, perhaps, do not bear close scrutiny.

Tolkien was sidelined, not by illness, but by his age. There had been some possibility that his expertise might have been called upon by government cryptographers, but in the end, it came to nothing. Instead, he spent the years of World War II, while his sons were fighting, mowing lawns and serving as an Oxford air raid warden and as a member of the Fire Watching service. Oxford was not bombed, but his daughter recalls her father describing “an ever-increasing fiery glow over the horizon one night when he was working late […] The next day we heard that Coventry, only forty miles away, had been devastated by German incendiary raids” (Tolkien, John and Priscilla 71). Perhaps Tolkien came to sympathize with Cary Gilson, the father of his dead school friend Rob Gilson and head of King Edward’s School. In 1916, at the school’s annual Speech Day, after a minute’s silence to honor the forty two former students who had died in the previous year, he said “[h]eaven grant
that enough of you may be left to carry on the national life. [...] Would to God that we men ‘past military age’ could go and do this business instead of you young fellows” (Garth 183).

Tolkien recognizes both the sorrow and the frustration Gilson expressed. Writing to Michael in 1941 he said:

One War is enough for any man. I hope you will be spared a second. Either the bitterness of youth or that of middle-age is enough for a lifetime: both is too much. I suffered once what you are going through, if rather differently: because I was very inefficient and unmilitary (and we are alike only in sharing a deep sympathy and feeling for the ‘tommy’, especially the plain soldier from the agricultural counties). I did not then believe that the ‘old folk’ suffered much. Now I know. I tell you I feel like a lame canary in a cage. To carry on the old pre-war job—it is just poison. If only I could do something active! (Letters 54-55)

His choice of words is revealing. He knows now that the “old folk” suffered, although he didn’t know it when he was a young man; he complains that he can’t even be of use as a member of the Home Guard. One hears echoes of Éowyn’s language in his words; one sees something of Morwen’s fears for her son, of Aerin’s quiet resistance, and of Niënnor’s desperate wish either to keep the man she loves from danger or to die with him. Tolkien shows that these women have no more, and no less, wisdom, virtue, or insight than any other human being in difficult circumstances, but he also cannot exempt them from the suffering of war.

The view of women that Tolkien offers here is one that is built on a lifetime of experience, and it is consistent with Tolkien’s explicit characterizations. In his 1941 letter to Michael,9 he tells him that women are “companions in shipwreck,” and should be understood as “fallen human-being[s] with [...] soul[s] in peril” (Letters 49). As before, his choice of words is revealing. Men and women, Húrin and Morwen, Ronald and Edith, share a human existence equally threatened by war and suffering, equally vulnerable to the shortcomings of the human condition.

9 This letter has a great deal to say about men and women that current readers may find difficult to accept. In it, Tolkien outlines what he sees to be some of the fundamental differences between men and women, focusing on a passive and complementary role for women. These views were common among men of his generation, and while I cannot agree with his overall description of the relationships between men and women, the balance of the letter does not fundamentally contradict my characterization of his view that, ultimately men and women share equally in the sorrow and suffering of human existence.
Works Cited


About the Author

Victoria Holtz-Wozdak earned her doctorate from the University of Missouri-Columbia in medieval literature. She teaches literature and writing classes at Viterbo University in La Crosse, Wisconsin. She dates her love of Tolkien from her earliest days as a reader when she was given her first set of his books at the age of seven. One of the very first things she learned from Tolkien's books was that the best thing to do when you reach the end of a good book is to start over from the beginning.
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