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## To Grow Together, or to Grow Apart: The Long Sorrow of the Ents and Marriage in *The Lord of the Rings*

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## Online Winter Seminar



### Online Winter Seminar

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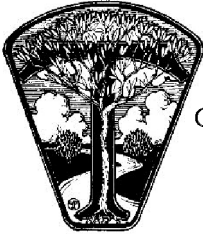
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### Abstract

Explores Tolkien's thoughts on love and marriage as expressed through the Ents and Entwives. Our understanding of their relationship and long sundering is enriched by considering Lewis's thoughts in *The Four Loves* on *philia* and *eros*, yet in the end both Tolkien's lived experience of marriage and parenthood and his Catholic background enhance his picture of the Ents with more realism than Lewis's somewhat (pre-Joy) theoretical approach.

### Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. *The Four Loves*; Marriage in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, Edith; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Attitude toward marriage; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Ents; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Entwives; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Relation to Edith Bratt Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R. *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*



TO GROW TOGETHER, OR TO GROW APART:  
THE LONG SORROW OF THE ENTS  
AND MARRIAGE  
IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

NICOLE DUPLESSIS

OF THE PAIRS OF LOVERS IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* AND *THE SILMARILLION*, the couple most closely associated with J.R.R. Tolkien and his wife Edith are Beren and Lúthien, the names inscribed on the couple's tombstone. Underscoring this connection, Tolkien explains, famously, in a letter to his son Christopher that Edith "was (and knew she was) my Lúthien," and elaborates, outlining the comparison with mention of "the dreadful sufferings of our childhoods," "wounds that later often proved disabling," "the sufferings that we endured after our love began," "the lapses and darkneses which at times marred our lives," and "how these never touched our depths nor dimmed the memories of our youthful love" (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien [Letters]* 420-421). Poignantly, Tolkien writes that "[f]or ever (especially when alone) we still met in the woodland glade, and went hand in hand many times to escape the shadow of imminent death before our last parting" (*Letters* 420-421). From the story of Beren and Lúthien, and all of the marriages in Tolkien's legendarium—of which there are many that emerge in some detail—it is possible to move toward a philosophy or theology of marriage in Middle-earth, something that Tolkien, unlike C.S. Lewis, did not articulate outside of his fiction and letters. Rather than starting from Tolkien's ideal vision of himself and his wife, this consideration of marriage in Middle-earth addresses the story of the Ents and the Entwives, a model of marriage that presents a kind of foil to the example of Beren and Lúthien. In the tale of Beren and Lúthien, the two lovers are united by a common purpose, suffer, and become separated; later they are accorded a reunion and happiness before they depart Middle-earth. To the Ents and Entwives, Tolkien's guardians of the trees, this is denied. In their tale, Tolkien seems to ask: what if one lover went to the woodland glade in search of the beloved, and the beloved was not there?

Although a happy union, Tolkien's marriage shows, by many accounts,<sup>1</sup> how the interests and talents of husband and wife could be at odds and cause division. That men and women have been divided in work and knowledge throughout most of history is a topic C.S. Lewis discusses extensively in *The Four Loves*, in which Lewis explains the nature of love, examining in particular Affection, Friendship, Eros, and Charity.<sup>2</sup> It is in this work, in his extensive consideration of Friendship, that Lewis offers contrasting images of friends and lovers in which "Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest" (60-61). It is this image that stands as a contrast to the problem that Tolkien sets up in *The Lord of the Rings*—the separation of the Ents and the Entwives, who are neither face to face, nor side by side, and this image that we can interrogate using the tale of the Ents, and vice versa. As he discusses in "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien creates myth that is capable of "Recovery"—the process by which something familiar is depicted in such a way as to strip away what is familiar, allowing readers to "[regain] a clear view" ("On Fairy-stories" 146). In the Ents and Entwives, the reader is invited to recover, in a fantasy context, a vision of marriage that emphasizes the strength of the marriage bond, the unity of marriage, and the work that that unity entails, and—if only as a footnote—the importance of children. In an overlap between the writings of Pope Pius XI—whose 1930 Encyclical *Casti Conubii* defined marriage for the generation of Catholics following its publication—and C.S. Lewis is another useful insight for consideration of the Ents: what might be termed the "work" of marriage as an active rather than passive state.<sup>3</sup>

While readers and critics of *The Lord of the Rings* have long been fascinated by the Ents, there are few who have considered how their tale—the Long Sorrow of the Ents and their search for their sundered spouses—represents the nature of marriage. Tolkien's correspondence with various readers, early critics, and friends highlights key points of interest during his

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<sup>1</sup> Generally, accounts of Tolkien's marriage owe a significant debt to Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Tolkien.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis's account of the division of men and women represents the division as a casualty of both unequal education and sexual attraction, and upholds it in the interest of preserving high-level discourse among male friends.

<sup>3</sup> See *Casti Conubii* par 23, in which Pius XI identifies conjugal fidelity, of which the first element is *unity* as one of the great blessings of marriage, and speaks of the work of marriage not only in "mutual help," but also "that man and wife help each other day by day in forming and perfecting themselves in the interior life." C.S. Lewis states that Eros is not sufficient for the maintenance of a long-term relationship such as marriage, and that lovers must "do the work of Eros when Eros is not present" (115). Specifically, lovers should be unified by adherence to common principles (124-125).

lifetime, indicating, for example, Edwin Muir's favorable response to the Ents in his early review of *The Two Towers* (*Letters* 445n157). In his letters, Tolkien recounts his inspiration—both linguistic and Shakespearean—for the Ents, while his biography records how Tolkien “modelled Treebeard’s way of speaking, ‘Hrum, Hroom’, on the booming voice of C.S. Lewis” (Carpenter 197-198). Additional correspondence addresses potential connections between Bombadil and the Entwives,<sup>4</sup> how Treebeard uses (and modifies) the elvish languages, and the mythological origin of the Ents that Tolkien would later develop in *The Silmarillion* (*Letters* 307-8, 334-5). Of continued scholarly importance is Tolkien’s note to W.H. Auden that the Ents derive from “a mere piece of experience, the difference of the ‘male’ and ‘female’ attitude to wild things, the difference between unpossessive love and gardening,” which insight figures prominently into discussions of the gendering of the Ents and Entwives (*Letters* 212n).

Most scholarly treatment of the Ents maintains some balance between the Ents as representative of Nature, Tolkien’s creative inspiration for the Ents, the Ents’ overall function within the power structures of the narrative, and the gendered division of nature that the Ents and Entwives seem to represent. Less common is specific consideration of the Entwives—likely because of their conspicuous absence from the narrative—or considerations of the Ents and Entwives that treat them as characters rather than abstractions, and remarkably absent is a discussion of the Entwives as wives.<sup>5</sup> In *Ents, Elves, and Eriador*, for example, a work concerned with Tolkien’s environmental vision, Dickerson and Evans discuss at length the Ents’ role as model for preservationism, while their loss of the Entwives—and, indeed, the Entwives’ role in the narrative—is summarized as “a rift that stems from the male and female Onodrim’s unresolved argument concerning preservation of the wilderness versus its conservation for practical use,” a cautionary tale of how “[e]nvironmental positions should be held with conviction, but divergent views should not be adhered to so fiercely as to threaten one’s very survival” (Dickerson and Evans 144, 252).

Uniquely, in *Tolkien in the Land of Heroes*, Anne Petty situates the Ents and Entwives among the “tales of love and loss” in the legendarium, seeing the story of the Ents and the Entwives as “Tolkien’s veiled way of saying that one should not take their [sic] lovers for granted” (210), and Corey Olsen identifies

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<sup>4</sup> Tolkien rejects any such connection, but speculates that Bombadil is “in a way the answer to them in the sense that he is almost the opposite, being say, Botany and Zoology (as sciences) and Poetry as opposed to Cattle-breeding and Agriculture and practicality” (*Letters* 179).

<sup>5</sup> See Olsen’s “The Myth of the Ent and the Entwife,” which provides an overview of the ways in which the Ents have been represented as symbolic of abstract concepts.

in the Ents' and Entwives' relationship a squandered opportunity for each to complement the efforts of the other as stewards of Middle Earth.<sup>6</sup> When the Ents and the Entwives are discussed, scholars typically focus on what Petty identifies as an "unresolved problem": the "domestic" Entwives, who "tame the land with gentle understanding while Ents prefer the wild, untamed, undisturbed side of nature" (242). In her influential work *The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power*, Jane Chance hearkens back to Tolkien's letter to Auden identifying "the difference of the 'male' and 'female' attitude to wild things," elaborating on the gendered divide between the Ent and Entwife by distinguishing the "female principle, which Tolkien identifies with the cultivated garden, order, and plenty, as opposed to the wildness of the distant wood, adventure, and distance" (*The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power [Mythology]* 61-62). Chance, however, complicates the simple association between "man" and "woman" and these "'male' and 'female' attitude[s]." On the one hand, she sees in Tolkien's identification of "cultural and biological differences between male and female Ents" an anticipation of feminists Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cixous (*Mythology* 55). On the other hand, in attributing the "female principle" to "the creativity of the elves" and "the pastoral Shire" (62), she moves beyond traditional gender roles that would limit the Entwives' labors to the merely domestic. For Chance, the masculine is neither dominant, nor upheld as inherently good: the Ents "incarnate the idea of growth that stultifies because its intelligence cannot tolerate female difference" (*Mythology* 61). In dialogue with Chance, Olsen observes that Tolkien "goes beyond the mere association of the masculine with wildness and the feminine with domesticity" (42). Instead, the masculinity of the Ents, which avoids the traditional correlation between passivity and the feminine and activity as the masculine, emerges from the narrative as "a less intrusive appreciation" than the feminine "desire to domesticate" (42). What Olsen terms a "less intrusive appreciation," C.S. Lewis terms "Appreciative love," describing this feeling in relation to an individual's experience of nature, though without reference to gender: Appreciative pleasures "make us glad of unspoiled forests that we shall never see" and "anxious that the garden or bean-field should continue to exist" (Lewis 16). Lewis specifies that "[w]e do not merely like the things; we pronounce them, in a momentarily God-like sense, 'very good'" (16), a rhetorical gesture that reads as commentary on Treebeard's song in *The Lord of the Rings* that represents, for the hobbits, the ways of the Ents regarding nature:

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<sup>6</sup> In making this observation, Olsen agrees with Petty's reading of the Ents as stewards akin to the Stewards of Gondor (Petty 17).

*In the willow-meads of Tasarinan I walked in the Spring.  
Ah! the sight and the smell of the Spring in Nan-tasarion!  
And I said that it was good.  
I wandered in Summer in the elm-woods of Ossiriand.  
Ah! the light and the music in the Summer by the Seven Riders of Ossir!  
And I thought that was best [...] (III.4.469)*

Put into a less theoretical context, Tolkien's observation on the "difference between unpossessive love and gardening" can be considered in reference to Tolkien's own love of gardening, which he did not see as a specifically feminine impulse or occupation, and in which he participated most often with the aid of his son John.<sup>7</sup>

The gendering of differences being crucial to the representation of the marital relationship between the Ents and Entwives, it is necessary to consider the Entwives' gendered identity beyond their gardens and attitude toward nature. Chance argues convincingly that the gendered divide is largely to blame for the Ents' long sorrow: "When the Darkness came, gradually the difference between male and female widened until the Entwives became only a memory—lost entirely to the Ents" (*Mythology* 61). That Ents are divided into male and female, even if it is presumed, is not directly revealed until well into the chapter "Treebeard"; this revelation is first indicated by their naming. In his initial answers to Merry and Pippin about the nature of Ents, Treebeard uses only the term "Ents," suggesting either exclusive reference to male Ents as a collective, as he does in his narrative of the situation and separation of the Ents and Entwives, or the use of the term "Ents" in the manner of "humans," to designate a species or race, which would thus encompass Entwives as well. While this distinction would be useful in analyses of the Treebeard's attitude toward the Entwives, the question cannot be answered definitively. Nevertheless, it is only when Treebeard is at rest in his domestic space, his Enthouse at Wellinghall, that he asks Merry and Pippin whether they have seen any Ents, or "not Ents, *Entwives*" in their country of the Shire (*Lord of the Rings [LotR]* III.4.472). As Treebeard's self-correction emphasizes, the Entwives are distinguished from the male Ents linguistically by the fact of their being *wives*. They are further distinguished from *Entmaidens*, though it is unclear whether this differentiation is based on their unmarried state or their youth. Here, following feminist criticism derived from Irigaray or de Beauvoir, it is possible to perceive a linguistic dependence on the masculine that defines feminine identity exclusively with reference to the masculine, or based on relationships with men.

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<sup>7</sup> In *The Tolkien Family Album*, John and Priscilla Tolkien describe the family garden at 20 Northmoor Road, and how "John and Ronald worked at landscaping and redesigning the garden over many years" (55).

In this construct, the failure of the Entwives to be defined by their husbands could suggest a parable of failed wifeliness and womanhood, though such a reading contradicts the independent usefulness of the Entwives' agriculture and validation by the human races of Middle-earth. The Entwives do not, in fact, depend on their male counterparts for their identity, and there is no implied code of wifely behavior by which to measure a deviation; while their naming corresponds, then, to early feminist theories of language and identity, the correspondence fails to hold significant explanatory power. Rather, the naming of the Entwives, which serves practical and thematic purposes, also fits linguistically with the structure of the language that Tolkien theorizes for the Ents. Old Entish is an agglutinate language—almost absurdly so—in that it is based on the aggregation of words to form a “story” of what the word designates. The designation “Entwife,” though presumably a word in the Common tongue, differentiates the feminine from the masculine in a manner representative of Entish while stressing common identity: the Entwives are Ents because they share an essential identity—the common identity represented also when Treebeard says, “their eyes were still the eyes of our own people” (III.4.476). Nevertheless, they are different in their biology—without them, there are no Entings—and in their natures, which define their vocations and preferred dwelling places. The name of *Entwives*, while expressing common identity with gendered or biological difference *added to* that identity, also stresses the primacy of marriage in the story of the Ents, drawing attention to the marital relationship itself and to the role that each individual plays in the union/unity of marriage.

If the Entwives' naming points to the primacy of marriage in the story of the Ent and Entwife, *The Silmarillion* and Tolkien's intended epilogue to *The Lord of the Rings* reinforce this emphasis. Though largely absent from the scholarship, the two drafts of Tolkien's epilogue to *The Lord of the Rings*—an addition that was rejected by Tolkien's earliest readers and ultimately abandoned by Tolkien himself—reorient the reader to marriage as a central focus of the tale of the Ents and the Entwives. The epilogue, set several years after Frodo's departure from Middle-earth, records the questions of the next generation of hobbits—the children of Master Samwise Gamgee—about the events surrounding the War of the Ring, as well as Sam's speculative answers. In these drafts, Sam's daughter Rosie-lass expresses her particular concern for the possible reunion of the Ents with the Entwives, prompting Sam to speculate that theirs is “an old trouble, too old and too deep for folks like us to mend,” and to write in his notes that “maybe, Entwives do not want to be found; and maybe Ents are now tired of looking” (*Sauron Defeated* [Sauron] 116, 123). Sam's speculation is more than readers and critics know or can speculate from the final



text of *The Lord of the Rings*, however,<sup>8</sup> and Sam is revealed as a somewhat unreliable narrator, admitting even as he offers these speculations that he's "never heard of anyone as has ever seen an Ent since those days" (*Sauron* 116). In the questions of Sam's young children, which center on the sorrows of Middle-earth, the fate of Ents and Entwives is grouped with the fate of Arwen and the presumed sadness of Celeborn after Galadriel's departure, which firmly situates the Ents among other pairs of sundered spouses, revealing that the story of the Ent and Entwife is one of the more compelling "loose ends" at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* in the mind of the author.

Mythically, the division between Ent and Entwife is anticipated in the story of their creation by Yavanna as a result of spousal absorption in separate rather than collective interests. From *The Silmarillion* come what details we have about the origins of the Ents—their relationship to the creation of Middle-earth by Ilúvatar and the sub-creation of the Valar. Conspicuously, this is a tale of jealousy and mistrust in a marriage that lacks the provision for progeny in the ordinary sense. In *The Silmarillion*, Aulë creates the dwarves out of his impatience to see the children of Ilúvatar, hiding his creation from Iluvatar and from his wife Yavanna. He is unable, however, to give them life, and the dwarves are as puppets to him. Ilúvatar discovers his illicit creative act, reprimands him, and ultimately forgives him, accepting the dwarves and granting them life with the provision that they will lie in sleep, awakening only after the creation of the elves. Aulë is pacified, but Yavanna is troubled.

When Aulë "at last [...] opened his mind to Yavanna," Yavanna acknowledges Eru's (Ilúvatar's) mercy and Aulë's happiness that his creations will have life, but remarks also that because Aulë was secretive and hid his work from her, the dwarves, Aulë's "children," will "have little love for" her own creations (*Silmarillion* [*Silm.*] 44-45). Rather, "[t]hey will delve in the earth, and the things that grow and live upon the earth they will not heed." She laments that "[m]any a tree shall feel the bite of their iron without pity" (45). It is in response to the creation of the dwarves, and as a direct result of a secret kept by one spouse from another, that the Ents come into being. Yavanna petitions Manwë for a protector, and he affirms that when the Elves awake, "then the thought of Yavanna will awake also, and it will summon spirits from afar, and they will go among the *kelvar* [or fauna] and the *olvar* [or flora], and some will dwell therein, and be held in reverence, and their just anger shall be feared" (46). The contention between husband and wife becomes evident as Yavanna returns to confront Aulë:

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<sup>8</sup> Tolkien's statement in a letter that "what had happened to [the Entwives] is not resolved in this book" seems definitive (*Letters* 179).

“Eru is bountiful,” she said. “Now let thy children beware! For there shall walk a power in the forests whose wrath they will arouse at their peril.”

“Nonetheless they will have need of wood,” said Aulë, and he went on with his smith-work. (46)

So it is that from their inception until, arguably, their end in Middle-earth, the Ents’ existence is framed by a discourse on marriage—specifically, on the right relationship between husband and wife, and how the attitudes of husband and wife towards each other and toward their vocations—whether as sub-creators or stewards—affect the marriage bond.

For the reader of *The Lord of the Rings*, the story of the Entwives begins with Pippin’s inquiry as to “how [...] they all died.” Though Treebeard takes offense, quickly correcting Pippin—“I never said *died*. We lost them, I said. We lost them and we cannot find them” (*LotR* III.4.475)—Pippin shows, if not his insight, then the nature of his understanding. In part because of their relative relationships with time and distance, for a hobbit, to lose a beloved could only mean losing the beloved to death. As Treebeard tells it, the story is brief, though it spans the history of Middle-earth from the First Age, when they were young and the Entwives were Entmaidens, through the Second Age, when the Entwives’ gardens were destroyed during the war with Sauron, and into the Third Age, in which the Entwives are a memory. Treebeard’s first telling reveals how the Ents and Entwives housed together “[w]hen the world was young, and the woods were wide and wild,” and how their hearts “did not go on growing in the same way,” as the Ents became more devoted to wild nature while the Entwives pursued the cultivation of nature, forming gardens while the Ents roamed the wild world (III.4.475). Thus, the spouses separated voluntarily to pursue their separate paths, becoming lost to one another when the Entwives’ gardens were wasted by Sauron. This initial telling betrays several things that are not directly spoken about the relationship between the Ents and Entwives, and also about Treebeard’s reliability as a narrator. He begins in a somewhat detached, formal oral storytelling mode, using third person to refer to both the Ents and the Entwives, with only a parenthetical reminiscence to show his connection to and emotional involvement with the tale. Beginning as he does in third person, shifting later to use of “we” to refer to the Ents alone as “we Ents went on wandering” (III.4.476), Treebeard’s use of first person plural to refer to the Ents and Entwives in the second sentence of his tale is striking when he says, “our hearts did not go on growing in the same way” (475). It is only in mentioning their hearts, and more specifically, in stressing their different paths and choices—not, notably, their inherent differences—that Treebeard identifies the Ents and Entwives (rather than the male Ents alone) as a collective. Here, Treebeard’s pronoun use suggests an equality of choice, and perhaps mutual

fault. Cloaked as an objective tale, Treebeard's account also betrays his bias, validating the particular path that the Ents have chosen, refusing—as both Chance and Olsen have pointed out—to get “inside” of the perspective of the Entwives, who are so like them, in the way that they are able to see inside of other things (particularly the trees).<sup>9</sup> A typical reading of Treebeard's account—that it privileges wild nature over agriculture—cloaks the relationship to the Other that is also represented.<sup>10</sup> Belief in the strangeness of the spouse—by virtue of or corresponding with gender—seems, here, incompatible with unity. In “No Triumph Without Loss: Problems of Intercultural Marriage in Tolkien's Works,” Hope Rogers argues that repudiation of difference in marriage unions is a particularly destructive force in Tolkien's work; Rogers points to Túrin Turambar's preference for his own race of Men over the Elves who fostered him to show how, at its most extreme, preference for sameness over difference can resemble or even produce incest (73-74). Rogers's discussion of the privileged position of multicultural unions in the *legendarium* points to a need for the Ents and Entwives to embrace their differences rather than desire the spouse to mirror the self, as when Treebeard sees through the physical changes of the Entwives by focusing on their most characteristic racial feature—their eyes. In the case of the Ents, their different interests and inclinations—differences that correspond with gender—render a wife less “knowable” than trees, an entirely different species or being (however closely associated). Treebeard's obvious and stated preference for “the great trees, and the wild woods, and the slopes of the high hills,” as opposed to the “lesser trees” favored by the Entwives (*LotR* III.4.475), tells a story of estrangement in the denigration of what the Other values because it differs from the preference of the speaker. As the Entwives' trees are “lesser” and their passion for things in their place is less noble (and possibly dictatorial in Petty's estimation), so the Entwives themselves seem, in Treebeard's telling, to be common and willful. Even as Treebeard acknowledges that the Entwives were valued and praised by the human race while the Ents remained legend, he ends with the affirmation that “here we still are, while all the gardens of the Entwives are wasted” (III.4.476). Survival, in Treebeard's telling, has favored the Ents' passion for wandering.

Treebeard is not alone in his attachment to the Ents' wanderings at the expense of the wives' preference for gardens; predictably, this seems common to the male Ents. Bregalad, whom the hobbits meet during Entmoot, speaks of how the Ents planted rowan trees to try to please the Entwives, “but they looked at them and smiled and said that they knew where whiter blossom and richer fruit were growing” (III.4.483). This reminiscence is particularly damning—and

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<sup>9</sup> See Olsen p. 44-46.

<sup>10</sup> See Chance's “Tolkien and the Other: Race and Gender in Middle-earth.”

shows that the long sorrow contains long memory of resentment—given the context of Bregalad’s mourning for the rowan-trees of his home, his favorite trees, which have been destroyed by Orcs. In Bregalad’s tale, the reader perceives the Entwives’ potential fault—dismissiveness towards their mates—while showing that the Ents did attempt, at least on one occasion, to please and to reconcile. There is no way to recover the Entwives’ version of the tale; their perspective has been lost. Taken together, the Ents’ testimony hints at attempted reconciliation, but does not leave them blameless; if not for wandering, they are at fault for their stubborn insistence on the superiority of their own path.

According to Olsen, the elvish song of the Ent and Entwife reveals the most about the “tragic estrangement from the Entwives” and “offers some of Tolkien’s most compelling insights on the complexities and conflicts of life in a fallen world” (41). In his analysis, Olsen begins by outlining how the song reveals the difference in the Ents’ and Entwives’ sensibilities, focusing specifically on the song’s representation of the activity of the Entwife and the passivity of the Ent. He continues by noting that if the song is considered as a debate, it is unclear who is winning, the elves’ unbiased representation of the two perspectives suggesting complementarity rather than inherent conflict (43-44). Olsen identifies the lack of “pro-Ent bias” as one of Treebeard’s two criticisms of the song, which in turn reveals Treebeard’s own bias (44-45). For Olsen, an important function of the song, and especially of its neutrality, is to reveal to the reader the merits of both sides as well as the implied competition between the two parties: “The Ent and the Entwife of the song are so lost in their own loves that they are blind to other things that are equally lovely and other perspectives that are equally valuable” (45). Finally, Olsen reveals the corruption that derives from these various factors—sensibilities, interests, values, bias:

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. In isolation, they are at risk of stagnation, even calcification. Having failed in the humility that would have led them to “take on the colour” of their mates, their pride in their own little worlds could lead them to become genuinely imbalanced. (46)

From Olsen’s analysis, a reader learns what Entish *sin* might look like, and how the Ent and Entwife should reorient their priorities in favor of their vocations in Middle-earth and eternal realities. While there is an ideal—the Beren and Lúthien version, perhaps—of the Ents’ sorrow, alluded to by Legolas, this

particular song, according to Olsen, “says nothing about the grief of the Ents and their long and fruitless search; rather, it depicts the stubbornness and self-absorption that led to the rift in the first place. It is a cautionary tale, not a lament” that finally reveals, in the “winter-apocalypse,” the “true and everlasting world” that lies behind the temporal (47-48, 50).

The song sees the Ent and Entwife united at the end as a result, Olsen argues, of the apocalypse of winter. While he does not explore the possibility thoroughly, Olsen anticipates the idea of a cooperation as husband and wife that would lead to the “true and everlasting world” when he writes that “[a]lthough it is only the grim and violent winter that finally pushes the Ent and Entwife to change and to seek for their true and permanent homeland, they could have come to this realization earlier” (Olsen 50). With Olsen’s considerable insights in mind, it is useful to return to Petty’s brief claim that the Ents and Entwives stand as an admonition not to neglect one’s spouse: to consider how the long sorrow of the Ents specifically and deliberately points the reader toward the challenges of marriage in a fallen world, and especially in Tolkien and Lewis’s world of gendered divisions, implying an ideal of lovers walking side by side in friendship and common pursuit.

Though it might not seem as apparent as their differences, evidence of the bond between the Ents and the Entwives permeates the narrative. While he is no longer actively searching, Treebeard’s questions to Pippin and Merry on whether they have seen Entwives signal his continued—if characteristically passive—search. Treebeard’s refusal to entertain the possibility that the Entwives have died—called “empty hope” by Petty (210)—is nevertheless a hope born of great affection and memory of their time together. In telling his tale, Treebeard conveys his ages-long desire for Fimbrelthil, first in his parenthetical tribute to her loveliness, and then in his description of the Ents’ searching. Early in their separation, relatively speaking, “[t]he Ents went on wandering, and we only came to the gardens now and then” (*LotR* III.4.476). But he tells how he was drawn, even after long separation, to see his own wife: how “long ago—in the time of the war between Sauron and the Men of the Sea—desire came over [him] to see Fimbrelthil again” (III.4.476). He describes how “[v]ery fair she was still in my eyes, when I had last seen her, though little like the Entmaiden of old” (476), suggesting an affection that has grown, and transcends physical attraction. In Treebeard’s expression of their connection, and his recognition of Fimbrelthil, in the remark that “their eyes were still the eyes of our own people” (III.4.476), it is possible to hear an echo of Lewis’s description in *The Four Loves* of lovers who are face-to-face, absorbed in one others’ eyes. However, as a contrast and complement, a reader might note that Tolkien places, in his description of the Ents’ eyes, their defining racial characteristic and the visual sign of their soulful intelligence and slow

consideration of all things within their knowledge. The search and sorrow of the Ents—the very sense of loss—provides testimony to the bond between the Ents and Entwives, in spite of their estrangement. And though Treebeard says that “as time passed, we went more seldom and wandered less far. And now the Entwives are only a memory for us, and our beards are long and grey,” he shows his continued desire for Fimbrelthil in his queries and his sad wistfulness. This continued connection suggests that the differences are not irreconcilable. The bond is, in fact, permanent, lasting beyond the Ents’ residence in Middle-earth. The permanence of their bond is expressed in the Ents’ belief that “we may meet again in a time to come, and perhaps we shall find somewhere a land where we can live together and both be content,” even if this occurs “only when we have both lost all that we now have” (III.4.476). In the Elvish song, this permanence is expressed when the Ent and the Entwife finally sing together: “Together we will take the road that leads into the West,/ And far away will find a land where both our hearts may rest” (III.4.477). As the Ents march to Isengard, Treebeard says that he “should have liked to see the songs come true about the Entwives,” and “should dearly have liked to see Fimbrelthil again” (III.4.486). Though the “wild woods call” and ages pass, the bond between Treebeard and Fimbrelthil remains. Yet separation has taken its toll. The Entwives are not far from Treebeard’s mind, but when Pippin first inquires about Ents, he does not mention them. Treebeard also has some confusion about how to describe the Entwives. When Pippin asks whether they are like Treebeard (or Ents) at all, Treebeard answers hesitantly that he does not really know *now* (III.4.472)—the Entwives may have changed, even since Treebeard last saw them, “bent and browned by their labour; their hair parched by the sun to the hue of ripe corn and their cheeks like red apples” (III.4.476). Long years of separation have not, however, softened memory of their differences, as Treebeard and Bregalad indicate.

Because of their differences in passions and preferences, or a difference in their approaches to living things, the Ents have been sundered. But we see also that this was a slow process. As Treebeard says, they did not “go on growing in the same way.” This particular phrase—and the idea that separation is a process—deserves attention: what it might mean to “go on growing in the same way,” what it looks like to grow differently, and how that process results in growing apart. For perspective on the question of “growing apart,” or failing to grow together, it is useful to turn again to Lewis’s *The Four Loves*. In his discussion of Affection, Lewis tells a story of growing apart using siblings (of any gender) as an example. The siblings initially share everything until, according to Lewis, “a dreadful thing happens. One of them flashes ahead—discovers poetry or science or serious music or perhaps undergoes a religious conversion” (46). What follows this shift in interest—this jumping ahead—are

two jealousies: first, the estranged sibling's "jealousy of the thing itself," and later of the friends that come as a result of the new interest (46). Lewis notes that the jealousy is often expressed through mockery of the interest, or of the sibling with the interest, and that in drawing one member apart, the new interest can divide a family in anger that "He who was once Us has become one of Them" (46-47). Considering the extreme example of a family's rejection and anger, it is difficult to see how the "unhasty" Ents might share in this. They do not mock the Entwives' gardening, though the language of Treebeard's tale betrays a certain petulance, and perhaps a hint of jealousy of the admiration that the Entwives receive from the human races. Strikingly, however, it is an interest that the two—previously unified—do not share that leads to estrangement. What Lewis relates with specific reference to siblings, in contrast to the love that friends share because of a common interest, Tolkien depicts in a context that is beyond Lewis's consideration. For Lewis, Eros—the love of lovers or spouses—is not a love that is founded—or even primarily focused on—interests. When Lewis evokes spousal relationships at this moment in *The Four Loves*, it is to claim that for the siblings, one's new passionate interest causes "a more miserable sense of desertion or a fiercer jealousy" than "the infidelity of a wife or husband" (46). In Tolkien, we find that there can be in marriage the same jealousy, with the same cause, particularly in Bregalad, hurt deeply by the Entwives' preference for their cultivated trees over the rowan. Here, we might consider Lewis's model of lovers: a model of mutual absorption, Tolkien seems to suggest, is inadequate for an eternal bond, and falls apart when the lovers pursue individual interests. As in Lewis's next stage of friendship, in which familial relationships give way and the individual's personal growth becomes a "growing together" of friends in pursuit of a common interest, it seems possible to read the story of the Ents as implying, if only as an ideal that cannot be realized in a fallen world, a model of marriage in which husband and wife can proceed on a path, facing forward, journeying as friends joined by a common interest, or engagement with each others' interests.

This bond of common interests is something both authors acknowledge as difficult or impossible. Lewis points to traditional difference in education: referring generally—and with pity and contempt—to women who seek to interact with men in intellectual contexts, he describes the "woman who has had merely school lessons and has abandoned soon after marriage whatever tinge of 'culture' they gave her—whose reading is the Women's Magazines and whose general conversation is almost wholly narrative" and her difficulty entering the male circle, even if the men "deem" her to be a full member by virtue—seemingly—of another relationship. Because of the woman's difference, two potential situations arise—the better of which succeeds in dumbing-down the men's intellectual discourse (Lewis 74-75). Lewis's attitude toward women's

entry into men's society, later modified for Lewis by Joy Davidman, frames Humphrey Carpenter's discussion of Edith Tolkien's place in her husband's life. In a chapter that begins with an epigraph from C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves*,<sup>11</sup> Carpenter describes how Edith had "only been given a limited education at a girls' boarding school which, while good in music, was indifferent in other subjects," how she had "spent a period in a markedly non-intellectual middle-class household," and how her companion after had been her "poorly-educated middle-aged cousin Jennie" (156). Carpenter's commentary makes clear that "there had been no chance either to continue her education or improve her mind" (156). While she had been trained to be a music teacher or soloist, as a "middle-class wife," working would have undermined her husband's status as breadwinner (156). Carpenter indicates that while her husband enjoyed her music, he did not encourage—or see any need for—Edith to be an intellectual. The chapter continues to relate how Edith's shyness prevented her from engaging even as a hostess or moving at all within Oxford society. At the end of her life, Edith as "shy, uncertain, sometimes troubled wife of an Oxford professor" gives way to "the sociable good-humored Miss Bratt of the Cheltenham days," but only in a "setting where she really belonged"—one in which her husband was intellectually deprived (Carpenter 251). Even when discussing the couple's mutual friends, Carpenter felt it necessary to record that "[s]he and Ronald did not always talk about the same things to the same people, and as they grew older each went his and her own way in this respect, Ronald discoursing on an English place-name apparently oblivious that the same visitor was simultaneously being addressed by Edith on the subject of a grandchild's measles" (161). Strikingly, Carpenter's judgment comes seventeen years after Lewis's *The Four Loves*, and, though published in 1977, continues to shape how contemporary scholars—including those who consciously adopt feminist perspectives—view and represent Edith Tolkien.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The epigraph reads: "What were the women doing meanwhile? How should I know? I am a man and never spied on the mysteries of the Bona Dea" (156).

<sup>12</sup> For example, Fredrick and McBride, taking Carpenter as a model, assert baldly that Tolkien "did not wish for his wife to enter the intellectual side of his life," and that "[h]e had grown comfortable with the separation between his intellectual pursuits, associated with male companionship since his school days, and his domestic life." They further claim that "Tolkien assumed Lewis's dictum to be true that women entering into men's conversation would spoil things," and accuse Tolkien of commitment to a "sexist double standard—that a man should enjoy both an intellectual and a domestic life but that a woman should find satisfaction solely within the domestic sphere," which "prevented [Tolkien] from encouraging his wife's intellectual development" (Fredrick and McBride 49-51). Uniquely, John D. Rateliff contests Carpenter's representation of Tolkien as "a man who, by choice, spent most of his time, most of his life, in exclusively male company" (Rateliff 41). Rateliff cites Tolkien's description of himself as "a man surrounded by [...]"



In spite of Carpenter's representation, the Tolkiens' differences in education and interest, division of labor, and separation of work and home, seem less exceptional when viewed according to the norms of the early Twentieth Century, and their marriage hardly a failure. Though they were not necessarily joined either by the wife's absorption in her husband's work or desire to play hostess to his colleagues, a different powerful bond in the Tolkiens' marriage connects Tolkien's experience of marriage to his vision of the sorrows of the Ents. Carpenter states what the *Tolkien Family Album*, a collection of photographs curated by John and Priscilla Tolkien, conveys: that the Tolkiens shared a lifelong bond through their children, and their children's children. Children—or their absence—also inform a reader's understanding of the Ents and Entwives' separation. In the unfolding of the story of the Ents and Entwives, the absence of children provides the motivation for the storytelling, and suggests an element of Tolkien's ideal vision of marriage. While it quickly becomes lost in the larger story, the long sorrow is bound up with procreation from its initial revelation. It is in response to Pippin's question of why there were so few Ents, and whether many have died, that Treebeard explains, "there were never many of us and we have not increased. There have been no Entings—no children, you would say, not for a terrible long count of years" (*LotR* III.4.475). Here, he first mentions the loss of the Entwives. That children are a visible sign of the unity of the spouses, and that they are a powerful unifying force in the home, seems implicit in the story of the Ents and Entwives. Children provide a bond, albeit one that is unable to unite the couple for eternity. Tolkien dramatizes a kind of empty-nest syndrome in which having children together no longer,<sup>13</sup> the Ents and Entwives have gone their separate ways and lost each other—and, consequently, the ability to have children. Considering again the Ents' creation, Yavanna and Aulë are, like all of the Valar in the final version of *The Silmarillion*, childless—and yet it is their separate desire to create that yields strife between them and between their "children." Children thus have a special place in marriage, as might be expected for a writer who was also devoutly Catholic. Though the emphasis in Treebeard's story is on the Ent and Entwife, the marriage is about more than the couple—it is about the family unit. It might

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wife, daughter, grandchildren" by way of introducing his subject, Tolkien's "lifelong support for women's higher education," and contrasts Tolkien's support of women with "the starkly dismissive attitude of C.S. Lewis" (Rateliff 42). Offering a nuanced view, Melissa Smith compares Edith to an international war bride, citing John Garth's account of the various barriers to acceptance that Edith faced when marrying, and verifying in a different context—that of the pre-Inklings group of friends, the TCBS—Lewis's claim that women destroy men's society (Smith 213).

<sup>13</sup> That Entmaidens seemingly disappeared before Entwives suggests that the problem of procreation pre-existed the complete disappearance of the Entwives.

seem possible to overstate what C.S. Lewis nevertheless overlooks in *The Four Loves*—that marriage, rather than positioning a couple as eternally face-to-face, positions the lovers side by side on a common road—which includes the work of maintaining a family unit—and requires that they grow together or risk growing apart. Here we might theorize two competing models of marriage: the very modern conception of marriage in which husband and wife are still seen primarily as individuals, according to which Carpenter’s account passes judgment on the Tolkiens’ marriage, and the model of a marriage in which the couple or family as a unit merges the interests of two individuals, which modifies the inward-gazing model of lovers that C.S. Lewis represents negatively as being inferior to the love of Friends. In the Ents, as, arguably, elsewhere in his works, Tolkien reaches for a compromise between the two.

This ideal exists against the backdrop of Tolkien’s social reality. As Lewis admits, Carpenter indicates, and history confirms, there typically have been barriers to intellectual equality between men and women. In spite of the indication that Edith Tolkien did have an interest in her husband’s creative work—in 1917, when he was on sick leave from the War, Edith “made a fair copy of ‘The Fall of Gondolin’, writing it out in a large exercise-book” (Carpenter 103)—this interest and engagement seems to have waned; whether this occurred because of the demands of the family that was their primary bond or because he “left her behind” by growing in his profession cannot—and need not—be judged conclusively. As with the Ents, there may be some fault to be found with the husband; even Carpenter suggests that if Tolkien “had shown her more of his ‘bookish’ face and had taken her into the company of his male friends, she might not have minded so much when these elements loomed large in their marriage” (75). Nevertheless, Lewis’s commentary, Carpenter’s representation, and Edith and Ronald’s married separation of spheres seem related to the self-segregation of the Ents and the Entwives according to gendered interests, as the Ents and Entwives separate not as individual couples, but *en masse*. Thus, the Ents and Entwives’ separation can be read as a critique of the gendered divisions of society that separated men and women, making it difficult if not impossible, as Lewis claims, for the two to meet successfully in personal relationships based in broader shared experiences, such as intellectual pursuits and friendships. Here, we might compare the estrangement of Aldarion and Erendis in *The Unfinished Tales*, of whom Rogers notes that “[t]heir inability to find a place where they can live together destroys their relationship, which splits along both cultural and gendered lines as Erendis ensconces herself in Emerië in a solely female household while her husband lives on his ship Eämbær with the male Venturers” (Rogers 77). Similarly, the Ents long for a place “where both our hearts may rest.” While Rogers casts it as a cultural difference, and does not mention the Ents and Entwives at all, Erendis’s withdrawal from her husband

into a female-centered household comes as a direct result of conflict over Aldarion's vocation—arguably both a calling and an obsession—as a mariner. The withdrawal of the Entwives seems a more benign form of the gesture of separation along gender lines; there is no indication that the Entwives reject the masculine as such.<sup>14</sup> The song of the Ent and Entwife—an Elvish composition, not an Entish one—positions the Ent and Entwife on a shared road while also suggesting that the world is unfit to nurture a marriage that is divided by personal interests. Though the Ents travel the road separately, “work of love”—for mutual perfection in Catholic thought, for maintenance of the relationship in *The Four Loves*<sup>15</sup>—suggests a responsibility on the part of spouses: work which, for the Ents, might have been manifest in the planting of the rowan trees. Failing in that work, the overwhelming sense is that the Ents' unions—on a grand scale—were allowed to simply fade from apathy or from the “long march of years” and the supernatural nature of near-immortals.

Contradicting more contemporary Western tradition regarding marriages, Tolkien writes in a letter of advice to his son Michael that “nearly all marriages, even happy ones, are mistakes: in the sense that almost certainly (in a more perfect world, or even with a little more care in this very imperfect one) both partners might have found more suitable mates” (*Letters* 51). In contrast to this seemingly unromantic notion, Tolkien reveals that “the ‘real soul-mate’ is the one you are actually married to” (51), the one with whom you grow, perhaps, or the one with whom you do the work of Eros. As the letter continues, he considers literary romance, and how it “still dazzles us, catches us by the throat”:

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<sup>14</sup> The story of Aldarion and Erendis suggests, in addition to a critique of the existing gendered divisions, a possible critique of perceived feminist gender segregation. In C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*, the plot division between husband and wife into gendered character groupings comes as a result of the wife's rejection of domesticity, and the resolution ultimately challenges feminist withdrawal from men into female-centered groups. By comparison, the Ents are threatened as a race and as husbands by the withdrawal of the Entwives; Aldarion's succession and his status as husband are threatened by his wife's rejection and withdrawal into a female-centered household. The important distinction is that the more “feminist” gesture in Tolkien's and Lewis's works is the drawing away of one woman (Erendis or Jane Studdock), each in anger. The Entwives' pursuit of agriculture is guileless, by comparison, and not a rejection of either a particular man or men in general.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Lewis describes Eros as a godparent who “makes the vows,” while “we [...] must keep them” (115). To maintain romantic love, “We must do the works of Eros when Eros is not present” (115).

[P]oems and stories in multitudes have been written on the theme, more, probably, than the total of such loves in real life (yet the greatest of these tales do not tell of the happy marriage of such great lovers, but of their tragic separation; as if even in this sphere the truly great and splendid in this fallen world is more nearly achieved by 'failure' and suffering). In such great inevitable love, often at first sight, we catch a vision, I suppose, of marriage as it should have been in an unfallen world. In this fallen world we have as our only guides, prudence, wisdom (rare in youth, too late in old age), a clean heart, and fidelity of *will* . . . . (*Letters* 52)

As with other aspects of Tolkien's world-building, his depiction of marriage overwhelmingly acknowledges the "long defeat" of life in a fallen world, but gives a reader glimpses, as he writes to Michael, of marriage as it should have been. Some of these—Aragorn and Arwen, Galadriel and Celeborn, or Beren and Lúthien, perhaps—show the "great inevitable love." By contrast, Tolkien offers as a guide the long wisdom of the Ents—or, indeed, the insights of their self-deception—dramatizing their long separation; not the apex of passion but a slow, solitary decline and sorrow at a loss that may have been preventable. Here, we learn that the fallen nature of the world does not allow for an easy connection between spouses, and that marriage is active—requiring work much like the tending of the Entwives' garden in order to bear fruit—rather than a passive state, the ideal of a love that will simply continue in bliss as ages pass. In this long defeat, we have, nevertheless, a glimpse of hope: the possibility that an involvement in or connection by way of mutual interests and pursuits—that which, for C.S. Lewis epitomizes the distinction between Eros, which lacked this connection, and Friendship—is the ideal for husband and wife, particularly lacking the presence of children and grandchildren. Again, Lewis helps to clarify the peculiar inclusion of a tale of estrangement, and explain its poignancy. Lewis tells of how all loves can distract from the eternal—how love of things (even trees) and love of a lover may turn one away from God. As most people, Lewis argues, believe that our "natural loves," the "general fabric of our earthly life with its affections and relationships," are, in fact, part of heaven, there must be a process of conversion involved, since, he says, "nothing can enter there which cannot become heavenly" (136). The Ents' love for the Entwives, while good, and valid, and natural—that we, as readers, can respond to—is nevertheless selfish, and biased, and must be perfected.<sup>16</sup> Olsen argues that the Ents' and Entwives' disunity detracts from their earthly work, which has distracted them (individually) from the eternal; a reading of the Ents' marriage as a Sacrament

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<sup>16</sup> Again, Lewis approximates Catholic theologies of marriage with an important distinction: whereas for Lewis the work of marriage moves the love toward perfection, the Sacramental work of marriage is leading the spouses toward perfection.

would claim, instead, that the work of the lovers for *each other* has been disrupted, and that it is not their work of the land, but their work for each other that will point them to eternity. Through the Ents and their sorrow, Tolkien finally points the reader toward a model of marriage that functions also as a critique of Lewis—a model in which lovers, like friends, in order to grow together, need to discover, or perhaps forge, a common road.

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## MYTHIC CIRCLE

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