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## Of Spiders and Elves

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## Online Winter Seminar



### Online Winter Seminar

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### Abstract

A stimulating look at the parallels and contrasts between imagery associated with spiders and Elves, especially female elves, in Tolkien's legendarium, and how this imagery of light and shadow, spinning and weaving, climbing and descending, also underpins themes of sexuality and fertility in Middle-earth.

### Additional Keywords

Sexuality in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Elves; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Spiders; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth—Fertility



## OF SPIDERS AND ELVES

Joyce Tally Lionarons

IN J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Two Towers*, the ent Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin that orcs were made by Sauron in mockery of elves, as trolls were made in mockery of ents (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] III.4.486). A closer look at Tolkien's works, however, would indicate that the evil race corresponding to the elves is not in fact the orcs, but rather the giant spiders who inhabit the parts of Mirkwood that border the land of the wood-elves, and whose progenitor lurks in Cirith Ungol on the borders of Mordor.<sup>1</sup> Although a number of scholars have noted and explored the binary relationship between Galadriel, lady of the elves in Lothlórien, and Shelob, mother of the spiders, to my knowledge none have developed their arguments to deal with the elven and arachnid races as a whole. Peter Goselin and Patrick Grant, for example, see Galadriel and Shelob as light and dark anima figures in their respective Jungian analyses of *The Lord of the Rings*; Mac Fenwick compares Galadriel to the Homeric Circe and Calypso, and Shelob to the Sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis; while Leslie Donovan sees the two figures as representing the benevolent and malevolent aspects of what Helen Damico calls the "Valkyrie Reflex" in Old Norse and Old English literature. Marjorie Burns places the connection between Galadriel and Shelob into the context of a number of medieval and early modern works that Tolkien could have drawn on, and asserts that the opposition between them serves primarily to "[strengthen] and [define] the best of Galadriel" (Burns 88); in contrast, Jessica Burke, while acknowledging the basic opposition between the two, argues nevertheless that Galadriel herself "is not above pride, anger, or the will to destroy" (Burke 23), citing the fact that she joins Fëanor in his rebellion against the Valar. Here I would like to examine Tolkien's complex web of

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of Tolkien's legendarium, of course, Treebeard is absolutely correct; this paper is concerned with the literary and symbolic structure of Tolkien's work rather than his legendary history.

correspondences between elves and spiders in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* to show that these associative characteristics extend beyond the simple opposition of two characters, that they underlie his construction of the feminine and sexuality, and that this in turn prepares for and makes possible the images of fecundity and growth that we find in the final chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien constructs the two races as both opposites and as mirror images. The most obvious opposition between the two is that between light and darkness. As Reno Lauro has demonstrated, Tolkien drew on the “medieval aesthetics of light [...] to express his own aesthetic vision” (55), so that light is consistently related to goodness, divinity, and creation, while the absence of light is associated with evil and sterility. Thus the Mirkwood spiders in *The Hobbit* come out only after dark, when the forest is “pitch-dark—not what you call pitch-dark, but really pitch: so black that you really could see nothing” (VIII.193). The air in Shelob’s lair is “a black vapour wrought of veritable darkness itself” (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] IV.9.718), for Shelob “weav[es] webs of shadow” and “vomit[s] darkness” (IV.9.723). Lauro argues that Shelob’s darkness is more than a mere lack of ordinary light, but is in fact “ontological,” signifying “a privation of being,” since in Tolkien’s world all true being is predicated upon light (Lauro 68). Thus Shelob is physically harmed by the light from the phial of Galadriel: “Shelob’s agony is the undoing of darkness with the creative power of light” (Lauro 70). Shelob is not as powerful as her foremother, the original spider Ungoliant, who “some say [...] descended from the darkness that lies about Arda” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* [S] 73) and who craved and devoured light; in doing so she was able to undo the fabric of Tolkien’s universe with her darkness. Fenwick similarly argues Ungoliant and Shelob can be seen respectively as “the physical manifestation [...] of the Darkness of pre- and anti-creation” (22).

By contrast, the caverns of the wood-elves on the outskirts of Mirkwood are filled with torchlight, and we are told that on the land of Lórien “no shadow lay” (*LotR* II.6.349). Leslie Donovan points out that Galadriel’s name means “lady of light” in Sindarin (112); her hair is said to be “lit with gold as though it had caught in a mesh the radiance of Laurelin” (S 61). The light of Lothlórien surpasses ordinary light in the same way Shelob’s darkness is deeper than ordinary darkness: when Frodo first looks out over the forest, he perceives that “[a] light was upon it for which his language had no name” in which “the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes” (*LotR* II.6.350). Like Shelob’s darkness, Lothlórien’s light has ontological force: “in Middle-earth light is part of the substance of being” (Lauro 75). Following Lauro’s logic, the light of Lothlórien would seem to be indicative not only of the elves’ essential being, but also of the fertility of the land and the harmony and creative powers of its inhabitants: thus, Lothlórien’s trees

and flowers shine with gold and silver, reflecting the light which nourishes them; after nightfall the grass “glow[s] still in memory of the sun that [has] gone” (*LotR* II.7.353). Caras Galadon is built in green, silver, and gold, and lit with “countless lights [...] green and gold and silver” (*LotR* II.7.353). Galadriel’s Mirror also reflects light, both the outer light of the world and the inner light of visions; the elven-cloaks given to the Fellowship seem woven of light and shadow, “grey with the hue of twilight [...] green as shadowed leaves [...] dusk-silver as water under the stars” (II.8.370). The elves are in perfect harmony with their land, although as Sam says to Frodo: “Whether they’ve made the land, or the land’s made them, it’s hard to say” (II.7.360).

Yet the opposition of light and darkness is not a simple binary. As Marjorie Burns has pointed out, “shadows, ‘deepening’ or looming, persistently intrude” into Lothlórien, “and the green hill of Cerin Amroth is in the shape of a burial mound” (Burns 90). Like the shadows Shelob weaves for protection from light and prying eyes, the grey cloaks woven by the elves also protect their wearers by making them seem but “grey shadows in a stony land” (*LotR* III.1.420). Moreover, although the spider Ungoliant hated light, she also hungered for it, and when she had “sucked up all light that she could find [...] she was famished” (*S* 73). Having devoured the light of the Two Trees, she lusted for that of the Silmarils; frustrated, she eventually devoured herself in her hunger. Unlike her progenitor, Shelob does not eat light, but her eyes “glow” with “a pale deadly “ light that comes from within (*LotR* IV.9.720) and her underbelly is “pale and luminous” with a corrupted, almost fungal phosphorescence (IV.9.725).

Despite this opposition, however, the two races also have much in common. The spiders of Mirkwood live in trees, as the elves of Lothlórien do; while the elves on the edge of Mirkwood live in underground caverns, as Shelob dwells in a cave under the pass of Cirith Ungol. Shelob’s lair guards the pass over the mountains into Mordor, as Rivendell guards the pass over the Misty Mountains. The Mirkwood spiders travel through the forest in the treetops, “rac[ing] along the branches, [swinging] from tree to tree, or cast[ing] new ropes across the dark spaces” (*Hobbit* VIII.221). The elves of Lothlórien also travel between the trees of their forest on slender ropes, as the Fellowship discovers to Sam’s dismay when it becomes necessary to cross the Silverlode on a rope strung from tree to tree. Sam’s relieved comment when he manages to shuffle across underscores the parallel: “Live and learn! as my gaffer used to say. Though he was thinking of gardening, not of roosting like a bird, nor of trying to walk like a spider” (*LotR* II.6.346-7).

Most importantly, both elves and spiders spin thread and weave webs: in *The Hobbit*, the spiders spin threads like “strong sticky string” (VIII.207), while Shelob’s webs are constructed of a substance more like rope. Galadriel and her

maidens weave—and thus most likely also spin the thread for—the elven-cloaks given to the Fellowship, and assure them that “the web is good” (*LotR* II.8.370). The elves are generally assumed to weave spells as well, an assumption that their enemies turn against them: Wormtongue tells Théoden that “webs of deceit were ever woven in Dwimordene” (III.6.514), and Éomer’s rash comments to Aragorn include a reference to the “nets” of Galadriel and the inference that the three hunters are also “net-weavers and sorcerers” (III.2.432). Denethor speaks scornfully of the “webs of wizards” (V.4.813), and his rejection of the elves and Númenor for reliance on his own strength may be reflected in the fact that his hall contains “[n]o hangings or storied webs, nor any things of woven stuff” (V.1.754). Although the various comments cited are slanders born out of the fears and imaginings of their speakers, the association of magic with spinning and weaving is clear, as is the further association of such magic with elves. Moreover, when Frodo and his two companions meet Gildor and his company of elves in the woods of the Shire, the constellation “Remmirath, the Netted Stars” shines over their meeting (*LotR* I.3.81).

Both spinning and weaving are, of course, traditional occupations of women, and in Indo-European mythology, both are associated with magic, fate, and death. The Greek fates spin out, measure, and finally cut the course of a person’s life; similarly, the three norns who attend Helgi Hundingsban’s birth in *Helgaqviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* are said to twist the threads of his fate into a golden cord, stringing it from east to west to indicate the extent of the lands he will win. More ominously, in the Old Icelandic *Brennu-Njáls saga*, the poem *Darroðarljóð* describes valkyries, Odin’s choosers of the slain, who weave the course of the Battle of Clontarf on a loom strung with human entrails. Early medieval penitentials clearly saw women’s weaving as dangerous for its use in magic: Hincmar of Rheims considered “weaving skills and colored threads as part and parcel of the equipment [of] witches” (Flint 227), while Burchard of Worms issued a prohibition against women who incorporated spells into their weaving (Flint 238). In Tolkien’s mythology, Námo, or Mandos, keeps the Houses of the Dead and summons the spirits of the slain; surely it is no accident that his wife is “Vairë the Weaver, who weaves all things that have ever been in Time into her storied webs” (S 28). The elves “put the thought of all that we love into all that we make” (*LotR* II.8.370), and perhaps it is this thought that makes the elven-cloaks “a great aid in keeping out of the sight of unfriendly eyes, whether you walk among the stones or the trees” (II.8.370).

Spiders and elves are thus deeply implicated with each other throughout Tolkien’s novels, far more so than elves and orcs, who seem mere opposites—the orcs coarse and ugly, the elves refined and beautiful, and so on. In addition, the Fellowship’s entry into Lothlórien and Frodo and Sam’s approach to Cirith Ungol and Shelob’s Lair are carefully structured to be both

parallel and inverse. In order to gain entry into the East, Frodo and Sam must climb down a steep cliff; when a Nazgûl passes over them, for a moment Frodo feels blinded, but regains his sight when Sam lowers his elven-rope to draw Frodo back from the cliff-side: "It seemed to shimmer somehow," Frodo remarks (*LotR* IV.1.610). Soon after, the hobbits see Gollum attempting to descend without a rope; he falls, and "as he did so, he curled his legs and arms up round him, like a spider" (IV.1.614). At the borders of Lothlórien, the hobbits must climb up a ladder made of elven-rope "glimmering in the dark" (II.6.342) to a flet within the trees; once again Gollum attempts to follow, but is frightened off by the elves. While hiding high up on the flet, the hobbits hear the orc army pass by; in Mordor, Frodo and Sam watch the army of Minas Morgul march by while they lie flat on the ground in terror. The inversion of up the ladder, down the cliff, and above the orc-army and below the Morgul-force provides a parallel to the actions, but a contrast of the two lands. In addition, the Fellowship walks blindfolded into Lothlórien, and with the lack of sight "Frodo found his hearing and other senses sharpened" (II.6.349); he smells the trees and grass, listens to the river and birdsong, feels the touch of sunlight on his face. In Shelob's tunnels, Frodo and Sam are likewise blinded, and "the senses of their feet and fingers at first seemed sharpened almost painfully" (IV.9.718); here, however, they feel only the touch of Shelob's webs and smell nothing but the foul reek of her lair. Finally, to reach Galadriel's hall in Caras Galadon, the Fellowship climbs a "broad white ladder" (II.7.354) of many steps, but are told they may rest along the way; likewise, to reach Shelob's Lair, Frodo and Sam must climb two sets of stairs, the first "as steep as a ladder [...] narrow, spaced unevenly, and often treacherous" (IV.8.708), and the second winding back and forth across a cliff-face—but Gollum allows them to rest between the two climbs. The parallels serve to emphasize the parallels between the two powerful female figures the Fellowship and the two hobbits encounter at the end of these journeys—Galadriel and Shelob.

Both Shelob and Galadriel have extraordinary, even magical, power. Shelob's magic lies in her ability to weave webs of shadow and spew darkness. Galadriel professes that she does not quite understand what Sam means by "magic," offering a look in her Mirror as a possible example of the "magic of Galadriel." Yet she also tells Frodo, "Do not think that only by singing amid the trees, nor even by the slender arrows of elven-bows, is this land of Lothlórien maintained and defended against its Enemy" (*LotR* II.7.364). Perhaps a different sort of web surrounds the land, woven of spells and light. And in fact Galadriel's magic infuses the journey of the two hobbits through Mordor, especially as it concerns Sam: the elven-rope comes when Sam calls it; when Sam tells Frodo that "If only the Lady could see us or hear us, I'd say to her: 'Your Ladyship, all we want is light and water: just clean water and plain daylight'" (VI.2.918), it would seem that Galadriel did hear, for his wish is granted; Sam's vision from her

Mirror recurs as he sees Frodo lying, seemingly dead; and perhaps most importantly, the light from the phial of Galadriel enables the hobbits to fight Shelob.

The fact that spinning and weaving, with all their magical and dangerous implications, are activities performed by female characters in an otherwise male-dominated work of fiction inevitably raises questions of gender, and with it sexuality, at least in the contemporary academic mind. Spiders have long been a symbol for the kind of dark, insatiable female sexuality that devours the male: Shelob mates with her own “miserable” offspring, killing her sexual partners and producing smaller versions of herself that travel as far north as Mirkwood. Several scholars have suggested that Tolkien’s inspiration for Shelob was Milton’s figure of Sin in *Paradise Lost*, and if so, it may be relevant that Sin, like Shelob, guards the way *out* of the dark land, and also that she mates with her own father (Satan) to beget Death, who then sexually pursues his mother (Chance 215). In any event, the sexual imagery of Sam’s fight with Shelob is apparent:

splying her legs, she drove her huge bulk down on him [...] with both hands he held the elven-blade point upwards [...] and so Shelob, with the driving force of her own cruel will [...] thrust herself upon a bitter spike. Deep, deep it pricked, as Sam was crushed slowly to the ground. (*LotR* IV.10.729)

This imagery was commented on first and most notoriously by Brenda Partridge in her 1983 article “No Sex, Please – We’re Hobbits.” Unfortunately, her analysis is weakened by her insistence on extending the sexual analogy too far—there is little need and less textual evidence to assert that the phial of Galadriel is phallic or that Shelob’s webs are analogous to “pubic hair” (Partridge 189)—and by her conclusion that the imagery “reveal[s] Tolkien’s] inner fear or abhorrence of female sexuality” (191). However, her conclusion is echoed by Fenwick, who argues that “at least in part” the giant spiders are “an expression of Tolkien’s male fears of female sexuality” (20); while Catherine Stimpson similarly asserts that the scene has a “distasteful, vengeful quality” (19) that once again would seem to stem from Tolkien’s own views on women and sex. Dan Timmons’s refutation of these arguments is based to a large extent on a reading of Tolkien’s letters to determine what exactly his views on women and sexuality were, but in doing so he seems to deny that the fight with Shelob has the strikingly sexual imagery that it has. I would argue that Tolkien uses the sexual imagery of the battle between Sam and the spider not as a reflection of his views on feminine sexuality, but rather as a conscious artistic choice to provide yet another contrast between Shelob and Galadriel.



Burns characterizes Shelob as “all body, a foul bag of vile and oozing flesh,” whereas Galadriel, she asserts, “seems almost too removed from the physical to have borne a child” (Burns 89). But in fact Galadriel does evoke sexuality, and it can be seen in her gentle testing of the Fellowship when they first arrive in Lothlórien. Sam later describes the experience: “I felt as if I hadn’t got nothing on, and I didn’t like it. She seemed to be looking inside me and asking me what I would do if she gave me the chance of flying back home to the Shire to a nice little hole with—with a bit of garden of my own” (*LotR* II.7.357-8). His hesitation before mentioning the garden is telling, for Sam’s dream includes more than home and garden; it includes a marriage to Rosie Cotton—and thus a very different sort of sexuality from the kind he encounters in Shelob. The connection between Galadriel and Rosie is reinforced by Sam’s description of Galadriel: she is not only as “proud and far-off as a snow-mountain,” but she is also (like Rosie) “as merry as any lass I ever saw with daisies in her hair in springtime” (IV.5.680). The combination of imagined nudity and thoughts of Rosie arouses Sam’s own sexuality and produces a deep blush of shame. Nevertheless, the sexuality evoked in Sam by Galadriel is anything but shameful; it is life-enhancing and infused with delight, in direct contrast to the twisted, death-dealing sexuality of Shelob.

The fight with Shelob can therefore perhaps be seen as a battle between the life-giving sexuality of Galadriel, as symbolized in the light of her phial, and the death-dealing sexuality of the spider. It is carried out through the agency of Sam, and in some ways it is a fight *for* Sam, between the innocent love he has for Frodo and his beloved Rosie, and the devouring lust of Shelob that is reflected in Sam’s parallel lust for her death. Sam’s violent penetration of the spider, seen as a perverse sort of sexual intercourse, would, however, seem to necessitate his own death, just as intercourse ended in death for all of Shelob’s mates, with the female spider devouring the male. The phial of Galadriel and the elven sword Sting save him from that fate, allowing not only for the eventual completion of Frodo’s quest, but also for the marriage of Sam and Rosie, and for the regeneration of the Shire.

If the defeat of Shelob is brought about by Galadriel through the metonym of her phial, the regeneration of the Shire is accomplished through the agency of her gift to Sam. Galadriel tells him that “there will be few gardens in Middle-earth that will bloom like your garden, if you sprinkle this earth there” (*LotR* II.8.375), but the effect of the earth from Galadriel’s garden on both the vegetation and the inhabitants of the Shire astonishes all of the hobbits nonetheless:

All the children born or begotten in that year, and there were many, were fair to see and strong, and most of them had a rich golden hair that had

before been rare among hobbits. The fruit was so plentiful that young hobbits very nearly bathed in strawberries and cream [...]. (LotR VI.9.1023)

The irony that such regeneration should come about through the queen of a race that will soon disappear from Middle-earth was surely not lost on Tolkien; however, it is likely that his main objective here was to emphasize Galadriel's generosity even in the face of her own people's diminishment, in contrast to the absolute selfishness of Shelob, which is demonstrated in her lack of concern for anything outside of herself and emblemized in her arachnid propensity to consume those her sexuality has ensnared.

The regenerative effect of Galadriel's gift on Sam and Rosie comes somewhat later and would seem to have been accomplished less directly. It serves to reinforce the idea that the victory over Shelob is in some way a victory over selfish, deathly sexuality and a victory for life-enhancing, joyful and reproductive sexuality. As Frodo tells Sam before their parting: "You have Rose, and Elanor; and Frodo-lad will come, and Rosie-lass, and Merry, and Goldilocks, and Pippin; and perhaps more that I cannot see" (LotR VI.9.1029). A glance at the Appendices adds Hamfast, Daisy, Primrose, Bilbo, Ruby, Robin, and Tolman—thirteen children in all (App.C.1105). The final opposition between Shelob and Galadriel is thus that between death and life—and the continuance of life—itself. Female sexuality, as represented by Rosie in the newly-regenerated Shire and by Galadriel in the perpetually-flourishing Lothlórien, is thus linked both to reproduction and to the regeneration of the natural world.

Tolkien's love for all that is green and grows is apparent throughout his legendarium; Sam's profession as gardener marks him out for special esteem, and his large family reflects and enhances his powers of generation and regeneration. It is perhaps not too much to speculate that both his fame as a gardener—enabled by the gift of Galadriel—and his prolific procreation are the result of his defeat of the perverse, deathly sexuality of the spider.

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