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Cordial Dislike: Reinventing the Celestial Ladies of *Pearl* and *Purgatorio* in Tolkien's Galadriel

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Abstract

Considers the Celestial Lady characters from *Pearl* and *Purgatorio* as influences on Tolkien's Galadriel, in character, appearance, situation, and allegorical significance.

Additional Keywords

Dante—Characters—Beatrice; Dante—Characters—Matelda; Dante. Purgatory—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Pearl (poem); Pearl (poem)—Characters—The pearl-maiden; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Galadriel



CORDIAL DISLIKE: REINVENTING THE
CELESTIAL LADIES OF
PEARL AND PURGATORIO
IN TOLKIEN'S GALADRIEL

SARAH DOWNEY

TOLKIEN'S FADED 'CORDIAL DISLIKE' FOR ALLEGORY has not prevented a number of readers from debating his engagement with allegorical modes.¹ As a medievalist and a Roman Catholic, Tolkien certainly had a great deal of familiarity with allegorical traditions, and the very fact that he found it necessary to declare that *The Lord of the Rings* was *not* allegory suggests that he had given careful thought to the nature of allegorical literature. In comparing medieval allegorical texts with Tolkien's works, one finds first of all a number of correspondences which suggest influence, conscious or unconscious; more interestingly, comparison with medieval allegory can draw out some key differences and help to characterize Tolkien's assertion that *The Lord of the Rings* is not an allegorical text, at least, not in the same way that some of its medieval influences can be called allegorical. Of the many elements in *The Lord of the Rings* which may have such resonance with the medieval allegorical tradition, one seems to be at the heart of this tradition: the image of an authoritative female character encountered in an earthly paradise, often alongside an encircling stream and/or a garden enclosure. This lady's closest cognate in *The Lord of the Rings* is Galadriel, whose interaction with Frodo and his companions echoes that of her medieval counterparts, but who is, unlike the static and abstract female personifications of medieval allegory, a fully realized character with her own development.

It is a testament to the richness of Tolkien's invention that readers have found many and diverse possible analogues for the character of Galadriel. Leslie A. Donovan, for example, looks to Tolkien's well-attested Germanic influences in order to connect Galadriel with the valkyrie tradition, citing her queenly nature, ritual hospitality, associations with light and with sorrow, and physical attributes including golden hair (112-118). Marjorie Burns proposes connections with Celtic goddesses, linking Galadriel particularly with the Morrígan and her English counterpart, Morgan le Fay (106-116). Susan Carter further develops associations

¹ Tolkien addresses allegory in the "Foreword to the Second Edition" of *The Lord of the Rings* (14-5). Discussions of allegory in Tolkien's writing include those by Weidner, Swazo, Greene; and especially Fleiger and Shippey's "Allegory Versus Bounce."

with Morgan le Fay as characterized in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, noting the importance of both women's authority-in-absence. Romuald Lakowski relates Galadriel to other fairy-queen figures in medieval works such as *Sir Orfeo*, as well as Titania in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* ("Perilously Fair"). Given these similarities with goddesses and supernatural or semi-divine figures, it is not surprising that a much earlier treatment sees Galadriel as embodying the Jungian archetype of the anima (Goselin). Nor, given Tolkien's Catholicism, should we be surprised at Michael W. Maher's attempt to compare Galadriel's character with representations of the Virgin Mary in a medieval litany, even though, as Maher concedes, Tolkien himself was careful to disassociate her from Mary (225).

Each of these connections is well worth considering, but another branch of medieval literature, the Christian dream-vision, seems just as likely, if not more so, to have informed the character of Galadriel as she appears in *The Lord of the Rings*. Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the Middle English *Pearl*, both dream-visions which were well-known to Tolkien, are part of a long and substantial medieval tradition of allegorical literature with prominent female characters.² The best-known early manifestations of this genre are Prudentius's *Psychomachia*, in which female-personified virtues and vices battle each other, and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, in which philosophy itself advises the narrator in the form of Lady Philosophy. Later texts in this tradition include *The Romance of the Rose*, with its similar symbolic personifications and its enclosed garden, and *Piers Plowman*, also a dream-vision in which the narrator encounters allegorical personifications. The *Divine Comedy* and *Pearl* are closely connected with these texts, and, like the *Consolation of Philosophy*, include central characters of a type which might be labeled "the celestial lady." Because these celestial ladies appear in dreams, they have associations with revelation and the apocalyptic genre (Wimsatt 117-128). They offer consolation, guidance, and glimpses of the afterlife to the dreamer-narrators in each of the poems in which they appear.

Dante's *Purgatorio* actually includes two such celestial ladies. His beloved Beatrice informs and motivates the entire *Divine Comedy*, but she does not appear to him in person until he reaches the earthly paradise at the top of Mount Purgatory at the end of the *Comedy's* second book. There, she facilitates the final stages of his purgation from sin and becomes his guide for the remainder of the *Comedy*. Just before meeting Beatrice in the garden, Dante the Pilgrim encounters another celestial lady, Matelda, who eventually bathes him in

² Barney's article on allegory for the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* offers an excellent overview of this tradition, with extensive bibliography. C.S. Lewis's seminal book *The Allegory of Love* is useful for understanding scholarly interpretations of medieval allegory in Tolkien's day.

the river Lethe. While Beatrice is a real person who has died, Matelda appears to be more of a symbolic personification, though no critical consensus on what she might symbolize has been achieved.³ Both women help Dante the Pilgrim reflect and rest before he continues his journey.

Pearl, a Middle English poem of the fourteenth century, was likely influenced by, or at least cognate with, Dante's description of meeting Matelda and then Beatrice in a stream-bounded paradise at the edge of heaven.⁴ In this story, which is more overtly a dream-vision since we see the narrator falling asleep at the beginning, the dreamer finds himself in an otherworldly garden with a clear stream running nearby. The far side of the stream is heaven, and although the dreamer cannot cross the stream, he is able to see and speak across it to a woman, generally called "the pearl-maiden" by readers, who seems to be his deceased daughter. Eventually he is allowed view Heavenly Jerusalem, and his desire for it and for her becomes so overwhelming that he jumps into the stream in an attempt to cross, and thereby ends the dream. As in *Purgatorio*, the celestial lady offers guidance; here she attempts to console him for her own death, though he finds the consolation difficult to understand.

Verlyn Flieger has called attention to the dreamlike quality of the time spent by the Fellowship of the Ring in Lothlórien, noting its otherworldly landscape and timelessness, as well as its onomastic association with Lórien, the Vala of dreams (191-6). She goes as far as to say that "Lórien itself is in a very real sense a dream sent or dreamed by the God of Dreams and that the Company in Lórien is, in one sense at least, inside that dream" (192). Stefan Ekman builds on this idea by pointing out specific similarities between Lothlórien and the dream-world of *Pearl* (65-69). Amy M. Amendt-Raduege not only finds associations between *Pearl* and Lothlórien, she connects Frodo and Sam's visions there with the larger medieval tradition of dream-visions including Dante's *Comedy* and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (44-50). Working more broadly, Deirdre Greene examines Tolkien's writing as part of a long tradition of "vision, epic, and prophecy," encompassing Dante, the *Pearl*-poet, Spenser, and Milton. These scholars' observations are so perceptive that it is surprising that none of them notes that Lothlórien, like the paradisiacal dream-worlds of Dante and the *Pearl*-poet, is presided over by a lady who offers consolation and guidance.

³ Attempts, none of them definitive, have been made to associate Matelda with various historical figures. Glenn gives a summary of these studies before embarking on a substantial overview of symbolic readings of Matelda. See also Dorothy L. Sayers's comments on Matelda in her translation (294).

⁴ On the *Divine Comedy*'s likely influence on *Pearl*, see the introduction to Andrew and Waldron's edition (29), Wimsatt (123-33), Kean (120-132), Newman (19 n.5), and Newhauser (268).

Galadriel is, of course, quite a different character from Matelda, Beatrice, or the pearl-maiden; for one thing, she is not dead, though she is immortal; nor does she occupy a completely static afterlife, though Lothlórien is certainly an echo of Aman, the Undying Lands. In fact, as the following pages will show, examination of her similarities with these medieval analogues helps to point out some essential differences in her character, differences which are deeply characteristic of Tolkien's recrafting of medieval material.

Pearl, Purgatorio, and Tolkien

Perhaps because *Pearl* and the *Divine Comedy* are rooted in the medieval allegorical tradition, Tolkien's anti-allegorical stance has prevented their influence on his work from being as fully explored as it could be. Whatever the allegorical quality of these or Tolkien's own works, it cannot be denied that he knew Dante's *Comedy* well, and *Pearl* intimately.

Pearl's significance for Tolkien is easier to trace and has been better documented because he spent a great deal of scholarly attention on it; Shippey writes that he was "involved with it all his life" (Author 196).⁵ He not only translated the poem, but contributed substantially to E.V. Gordon's edition of it (Drout 129-30, Tubbs). Shippey notes the likely influence of *Pearl's* diction and complex metrical scheme on Tolkien's elvish poetry (Road 161-3, 176-7), and identifies echoes of *Pearl's* imagery and themes in *The Lord of the Rings* (Author 197-200). Other analyses of *Pearl's* influence on Tolkien include those of Amendt-Raduege and Ekman, mentioned above. One of the most perceptive discussions to incorporate *Pearl* is a recent article by Keith Kelly and Michael Livingston, who argue that Middle Earth's Aman is better understood as an earthly paradise, like those just outside of heaven in *Pearl* and *Purgatorio*, than as a true heaven, which Tolkien conceives as being beyond the worldly confines of Middle-Earth.

Kelly and Livingston note that Dante's influence on Tolkien has received almost no attention (94). Merlin DeTardo suggests that part of the reason for this gap may be some of Tolkien's own comments disparaging Dante's "pettiness," but nonetheless DeTardo offers a number of indications that Tolkien knew Dante's work well (116). Tolkien was, along with C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams, a member of the Oxford Dante Society, and one of his letters indicates that he and Lewis used to read Dante to one another (*Letters* 377). Certainly Dante's work was profoundly important to Williams, whose scholarship includes an influential book-length study, *The Figure of Beatrice*, and whose fiction is heavily informed by Dante. Lewis draws on Dante in *The Great Divorce* and

⁵ See also Shippey's "Tolkien and the Gawain-Poet."

elsewhere.⁶ Given that Tolkien was a Catholic and a medievalist, it seems unlikely that he would not have discussed the *Divine Comedy* at length with his colleagues. He may have found parts of it distasteful, but he must nevertheless have been well acquainted with it.

The pettiness which Tolkien disliked is most evident in *Inferno*, and may to some extent be reflected in Tolkien's characterization of squabbling orcs (Caesar 168-9). Certainly one can find similarities between the landscape of Mordor and that of Dante's hell. But if Tolkien admired, and was especially influenced by, any part of the *Comedy*, it would be *Purgatorio*—particularly the scenes which correspond most closely with *Pearl*, those set in the earthly paradise on the edge of heaven, with its clear streams and celestial ladies. Dante's interactions with Matelda and Beatrice can hardly be accused of pettiness. Gwennyth Hood recognizes the likelihood of these scenes' influence on Tolkien, making a direct connection between Tolkien's Aman and the earthly paradise of *Purgatorio*, then linking Lothlórien with Aman (139-42). Tolkien's interest in Purgatory is evident elsewhere; "Leaf by Niggle," with its symbolic natural imagery and allegorical plot, has been called "Tolkien's little *Purgatorio*" (Rogers and Rogers 57).⁷

We will see that Galadriel and Lothlórien share a number of previously unremarked similarities with the celestial ladies and earthly paradises of the *Divine Comedy* and *Pearl*. It is, however, not necessary to assume that such similarities constitute deliberate allusions on Tolkien's part, or even that he was consciously appropriating material from Dante or the *Pearl*-poet. This material was simply embedded in Tolkien's literary psyche, and its presence there seems likely at least to have colored Tolkien's presentation of Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings*, whether Tolkien himself was conscious of such coloring or not.

Narrative Setting, Landscape, and Imagery

Ordeal, loss, and death precede not only Frodo's encounter with Galadriel, but also Dante's meetings with Matelda and Beatrice, as well as the *Pearl*-narrator's meeting with the maiden. In Dante's case, the most immediate loss is of his guide, Virgil, who will be replaced by Beatrice when Dante the Pilgrim continues his journey to heaven (canto 27). Virgil has led and protected Dante through the ordeals of Hell and Purgatory, but his guidance reaches its limit at the top of Mount Purgatory. Gandalf's guidance has also reached a limit of sorts in the mountains (though he will transcend that limit), and interesting

⁶ See Downing ("Perelandra" and "Hideous Strength") and Wicher. (Also Christopher in this issue. —Ed.)

⁷ Kelly and Livingston write at length on "Leaf by Niggle" as a story of Purgatory (89-91). (Also Milburn in this issue. —Ed.)

comparisons might be made between Gandalf and Virgil, who in the Middle Ages was frequently represented as a magician and prophet.⁸ Although Galadriel will not accompany Frodo on his journey in the way Beatrice accompanies Dante, she provides much-needed assistance and consolation after his loss of Gandalf, and her gift of the Phial represents a continued guidance as Frodo makes his own way through Mordor.

The entire *Divine Comedy* is, in many ways, a response to Dante's loss of Beatrice through her earthly death, and *Pearl* parallels this in its opening stanzas. The narrator begins the poem in a confused state, mourning the death of the pearl-maiden as he sits in an "arbor." Tolkien translates:

Pat dotz bot þrych my hert þrange,
My breste in bale bot bolne and bele.
Ȝet þoȝt me neuer so swete a sange
As styлле stounde let to me stele. (17-20)⁹
But my heart doth hurt now cruelly,
My breast with burning torment sting.
Yet in secret hour came soft to me
The sweetest song I e'er heard sing.

This garden scene, immediately before the narrator's vision of the celestial lady, parallels the scenes in which Frodo and his companions mourn for Gandalf in arborial Lothlórien:

As they were healed of hurt and weariness of body the grief of their loss grew more keen. Often they heard nearby Elvish voices singing, and knew that they were making songs of lamentation for his fall, for they caught his name among the sweet sad words that they could not understand. (*LotR* II.vii.350)

The elves' sweet singing inspires Frodo's own poetic lament for Gandalf, and directly precedes his vision in Galadriel's Mirror.

All of these visions, then, take place in a context of death and loss; further correspondences of narrative context with the *Divine Comedy* are worth

⁸ Houghton identifies Virgil's departure in *Purgatorio* as a moment of eucatastrophe according to Tolkien's definition of the term (31); surely Gandalf's death is a quintessential eucatastrophe.

⁹ Andrew and Waldron note in their edition that Gordon and Tolkien interpret these lines to mean that the "swete sange" is the dream-vision and/or the poem itself. Since this interpretation, according to Andrew and Waldron, is not universal, it may give us a glimpse of Tolkien's assumptions about poetry and dreams. Songs, poems, and dreams frequently have healing power in *The Lord of the Rings*.

noting. The Fellowship's passage through Moria, with its discovery of Balin's tomb, its story of the dwarves' destructive greed for *mithril*, its monstrous orcs and demonic Balrog, bears loose comparison with Dante's journey in the dark in *Inferno*. After witnessing the tortures of Hell and then the more hopeful ordeals of Purgatory, Dante the Pilgrim must pass through a final, purgative wall of fire (canto 27). Though its purpose and symbolism have no relation to the fires surrounding the Fellowship's narrow escape across the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, both narratives require a final act of courage in order for the hero to cross through fire, out of trials, and into the respite of an earthly paradise. The hell-like imagery in the escape from Moria may, consciously or unconsciously, have suggested to Tolkien the suitability of following an ordeal of mountains and fire, death and loss, with an earthly paradise and a consolatory female figure.

Tom Shippey has already noted close associations between *Pearl's* earthly paradise and Lothlórien, observing that, like the dream-garden in which the *Pearl* narrator finds himself, Lothlórien is an echo of heaven (in this case, Aman), but is not heaven itself (*Author* 197-200).¹⁰ Stefan Ekman expands on Shippey's points by identifying a number of correspondences in landscape between the *Pearl*-narrator's vision and Lothlórien as a reflection of Aman. These correspondences include natural elements with the qualities of precious metals and gems: for example, *Pearl's* paradise incorporates trees with blue trunks and silver leaves, along with crystal cliffs and a stream with a bed of gemstones (stanzas 7 and 10); the lights of Lothlórien are jewel-like in color and brightness, and the trees have silver leaves and golden trunks (Ekman 66). Also like Lothlórien and the paradise in *Pearl*, Dante's earthly paradise at the top of Mount Purgatory is not heaven itself, but an otherworldly resting-point at the edge of heaven. The "divina foresta" (canto 28.2) of *Purgatorio* has a timeless quality; the sweet and gentle air is "senza mutamento" ("without change," canto 28.7). Shippey (*Author* 199) and Ekman (67-8) both note the similar timelessness of Lothlórien.

Even more significantly, the earthly paradises of *Purgatorio*, *Pearl*, and *Fellowship* all share a key symbolic feature: the boundary-marking stream of pure water. Shortly after Dante the Pilgrim enters the earthly paradise, his path is intersected by a stream so pure that

Tutte l'acque che son di qua più monde
parieno avere in sé mistura alcuna
verso di quella, che nulla nasconde. (28.28-30)

¹⁰ Of course, as Kelly and Livingston rightly note, Aman itself is only another, greater earthly paradise, and Lothlórien is therefore better understood as an echo of an echo.

[...] whatso waters over here we call
Clearest, were cloudy by comparison
With this, which hides not anything at all.¹¹

This is the Lethe, in which Dante's memories of sin are eventually washed away. On the other side of the stream stands the celestial lady Matelda, in a scene which closely parallels *Pearl*: In stanza 9, the *Pearl*-narrator finds his way blocked by sparkling stream which soon lightens the burden of his mourning (stanza 11), and across which he eventually sees the pearl-maiden (stanza 14). Both Shippey and Ekman discuss the Fellowship's comparable crossing of the Nimrodel on the borders of Lothlórien, noting that Frodo feels "the stain of travel and all weariness" washed away as he crosses (*LotR* II.vi.330, Shippey *Author* 198, Ekman 65). In fact, Dante's Lethe may make for even better comparison with *Fellowship* than does the river in *Pearl*, since the *Pearl*-narrator is arguably not cleansed (at least, not directly) by the river in his vision, while Dante and Frodo are. In any case, the river-as-boundary is one of the strongest correspondences among the three works.

Water and light continue to play prominent roles throughout Frodo's encounter with Galadriel. She is the bearer of *Nenya*, the ring of water, and her Mirror is composed of water from a "silver stream" (*LotR* II.vii.352) which runs through the enclosed garden where Frodo's vision takes place. Brightness tends to be associated with the water and with the appearance of the celestial lady in all three works; P.M. Kean, in comparing *Purgatorio* and *Pearl*, remarks that "Both maidens appear in a blaze of light, Beatrice 'clothed in the colour of a living flame,' the Pearl-Maiden in a shining glory of white and gold" (122). At precisely the moment when Galadriel most resembles her medieval counterparts, when she first leads Frodo and Sam into the enclosed garden with its silver stream, we are told that "The evening star had risen and was shining with white fire" (*LotR* II.vii.352); later, the star Eärendil shines on her so brightly that she casts a shadow (*LotR* II.vii.355). As with the pearl-maiden, the colors most closely associated with Galadriel are white and gold, and when she appears in this scene, she is described as "Tall and white and fair" (*LotR* II.vii.352; cf. *Pearl* stanzas 14-19).

Stars recur, first as reflected in the water of the Mirror, and again when Sam sees the adamant ring *Nenya* as a star through Galadriel's finger (*LotR* II.vii.357). It is worth noting that Dante's encounter with Beatrice takes place shortly before the end of *Purgatorio*, when he is washed in the river Eunoë, restorer of good memories, and then turns toward the stars:

¹¹ I have chosen to use Dorothy L. Sayers' translation of *Purgatorio*, as being perhaps the closest in spirit to the interpretations of Tolkien's contemporaries. The edition is Sanguineti's.

Io ritornai da la santissim'onda
rifatto sì come piante novella
rinovellate di novella fronda,
puro e disposto a salire a le stelle. (33.142-5)

From these most holy waters, born anew
I came, like trees by change of calendars
Renewed with new-sprung foliage through and through
Pure and prepared to leap up to the stars.¹²

It is also noteworthy that Galadriel's Phial contains "the light of Eärendil's star, set amid the waters of my fountain" (*LotR* II.viii.367). Sam continues to associate her with light and water, saying to Frodo in Mordor, "If only the Lady could see or hear us, I'd say to her, 'Your Ladyship, all we want is light and water: just clean water and plain daylight, better than any jewels'" (*LotR* VI.ii.897). In all three works, then, the celestial lady seems to be closely associated with light and clear water.

The Celestial Lady

Like Beatrice and the pearl-maiden, Galadriel is an object of chaste, elevating love, which is inspired by both physical and spiritual beauty. Gimli's adoration for her has been much discussed; Rogers and Rogers describe it as "an intense and pure case of courtly love: this kind neither pining nor looking toward marriage, but simply worshipping goodness and beauty where they strike him" (104-5).¹³ Gimli demonstrates one fundamental quality of a courtly lover when he is ready to fight for Galadriel's honor on meeting Éomer (*LotR* III.ii.422, 429). More importantly, as Rogers and Rogers point out, Gimli's love for Galadriel opens him to friendship with Legolas, a step toward reconciliation between their races. One of courtly love's essential characteristics is its capacity to make the lover a better person and, ultimately, to bring him closer to the divine; certainly this finds an ultimate expression in Dante's salvific love for Beatrice, which leads him to Heaven. The legend that Gimli travels to Aman with Legolas suggests a curious parallel consequence of his love for Galadriel (*LotR* App.B.1072). Interestingly, Gimli describes Galadriel as "above all the jewels that lie in the earth" (*LotR* II.vii.347), much as the *Pearl*-narrator refers to the maiden in jewel-terms throughout the poem, and Gimli's treatment of Galadriel's hair as a

¹² Stars are significant throughout the *Divine Comedy*, in which "stelle" is the final word of each of the three books.

¹³ Rogers and Rogers speak more generally about medieval courtly love on p. 34. See also Bornstein's article on courtly love for the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, and Chapter 1, "Courtly Love," of Lewis's *Allegory*.

precious jewel (*LotR* II.viii.367) also seems to echo *Pearl's* abundant jewel imagery.

A primary function of the celestial lady in all three works is to provide consolation and guidance. In all cases this function requires moments of sternness; in Galadriel's case this is the "perilous" part of her nature, as Sam suggests in response to Faramir's questions about her:

Hard as di'monds, soft as moonlight. Warm as sunlight, cold as frost in the stars. [...] It strikes me that folk takes their peril with them into Lórien, and finds it there because they've brought it. But perhaps you could call her perilous, because she's so strong in herself. You, you could dash yourself to pieces on her, like a ship on a rock, or drown yourself, like a hobbit in a river. But neither rock nor river would be to blame. (*LotR* IV.v.664)

In scrutinizing their hearts and intentions at her first meeting with them (*LotR* II.vii.348), Galadriel calls Frodo and his companions to self-examination, an experience which they do not necessarily find pleasant: "I felt as if I hadn't got nothing on, and I didn't like it," comments Sam, and Boromir says, "I do not feel too sure of this Elvish Lady and her purposes" (*LotR* II.vii.348-9). Aragorn, of course, is quick to reply that "There is in her and in this land no evil, unless a man bring it hither himself." The same can easily be said of Beatrice and the pearl-maiden.

Dante the Pilgrim finds himself in a comparable position on meeting Beatrice in the earthly paradise. When he first sees her, she upbraids him for becoming mired in earthly distractions instead of directing his attention toward her and toward heaven. Dante, like Frodo and most of his companions, is unable to meet the celestial lady's eyes:

Gli occhi mi cadder giù nel chiaro fonte;
ma, veggendomi in esso, i trassi a l'erba,
tanta vergonga mi gravò la fronte. (30.76-8)
I dropped my eyes down to the glassy rill,
Saw myself there, and quickly to the brink
Withdrew them, bowed with shame unspeakable.

And later, Dante says that he stands:

Quali i fanciulli, vergognando, muti
con gli occhi a terra stannosi, ascoltando
e sé riconoscendo e ripentuti. (31.65-7)

As children, when they are rebuked, stand dumb
With downcast eyes and penitential sniff
Listening, by consciousness of guilt o'ercome.

The *Pearl*-narrator, too, finds himself being reproached by the maiden throughout his dream-vision. Even in their first conversation she says that he has "mysentente" ("mis-spent") his speech (stanza 22), and she accuses him of "unavysed" ("thoughtless") words (stanza 25). The pearl-maiden, says Tolkien, speaks with "the hardness of truth" (*Sir Gawain* 14); we might compare Sam's description of Galadriel as "hard," above. If the *Pearl*-narrator finds the maiden difficult, the difficulty is all in his own deficiency of understanding or character. She is not to blame for the lack of self-control with which he dashes into the stream at the end of the story and breaks his vision. Galadriel, then, echoes her medieval counterparts by offering consolation and guidance, but not without some necessary hardness.

Comparisons among Galadriel, Beatrice, Matelda, and the pearl-maiden may help to clarify an excerpt from one of Tolkien's letters, quoted by both Maher and Lakowski in their discussions of Galadriel:

I think it is true that I owe much of this character to Christian and Catholic teaching and imagination about Mary, but actually Galadriel was a penitent: in her youth a leader in the rebellion against the Valar (the angelic guardians). At the end of the First Age she proudly refused forgiveness or permission to return. She was pardoned because of her resistance to the final and overwhelming temptation to take the Ring for herself. (*Letters* 407, qtd in Maher 225 and Lakowski, "Fall" 91-92)

If Galadriel is a "penitent" in need of pardon, similarities between her and the Virgin Mary can only go so far. In what way, then, can her character be informed by "imagination about Mary?" One possible answer is that her character is more comparable to *Mary-like* figures in medieval literature. Beatrice and the pearl-maiden share some similarities with Mary, but they are certainly not Mary herself, a point which the pearl-maiden is quick to emphasize in stanza 37. Beatrice has been sent to Dante's aid through a chain of heavenly influence, as he learns in canto 2 of *Inferno*: Mary has seen his plight and pitied him; consequently she has sent Saint Lucy to exhort Beatrice to help her troubled lover. In their associations with light and purity, Beatrice and the pearl-maiden echo Mary, but it precisely because they are *not* Mary that they make for far more plausible "Christian and Catholic" analogues to Galadriel.

Vision and Redemption

Purgatorio, *Pearl*, and the Lothlórien chapters of *Fellowship* all culminate with a vision within a vision. Each of these visions is apocalyptic, and each plays a part in a character's redemption. The medieval apocalyptic tradition is astonishingly complex, and almost entirely overlaps the dream-vision genre. It encompasses ideas and imagery concerning death, the afterlife, judgment, writing, crisis, and especially history (McGinn). Many of these elements are present in the culminating visions of the earthly-paradise encounters in the works under discussion here; in *Purgatorio* and *Pearl*, these visions work toward the salvation of the narrator; in *The Lord of the Rings*, they work toward the salvation of the celestial lady.

For Dante the Pilgrim, the vision within a vision takes the form of an otherworldly mystery play, acted out by members of the symbolic procession with which Beatrice arrives to meet him in the earthly paradise. The procession itself is full of imagery from the Book of Revelation, and before viewing the apocalyptic pageant in canto 32, Dante falls asleep, suggesting that there is a dreamlike quality to the pageant. The pageant is generally interpreted as representing church history, with the church symbolized by a chariot that undergoes attacks and transformations. An eagle dropping feathers on the chariot, for example, represents the Donation of Constantine, and a dragon which takes away part of the chariot represents the rise of Islam (Sayers 326-30). This kind of far-reaching, allegorical representation of history was a key feature of some modes of apocalyptic thought in the later Middle Ages (McGinn 7-9). Viewing this history affirms Dante's own place in it, and Beatrice instructs him to write about it. She tells him that "e sarai meco senza fine cive / di quella Roma onde Cristo è romano" ("Thou of that Rome where Christ a Roman is / Shalt be with me perpetual citizen," canto 32.101-2). The apocalyptic vision-within-a-vision is a significant part of the process by which Dante the Pilgrim is redeemed and prepared for his journey to heaven.

The *Pearl*-narrator experiences his culminating vision when he is allowed to look across the stream toward Heavenly Jerusalem, "As John þe apostel hit syȝ with syȝt" ("as John the apostle did it view," line 985 and repeated). The narrator is able to see inside the city even though he has not crossed the stream, making his vision of the city even more otherworldly than the larger dream which contains it. He observes details of the heavenly city's composition and the happiness of its citizens, including the wounded Lamb. As with Dante's pageant, the imagery of this vision is heavily influenced by the Book of Revelation.¹⁴ The vision's intensity becomes too much for the narrator and he jumps into the stream, causing himself to wake up. *Pearl's* more recent

¹⁴ See Andrew and Waldron's notes to lines 973-1032 (100-103).

editors agree with Gordon and Tolkien that the *Pearl*-narrator is changed by his vision, so that when he wakes up in the garden and the poem ends where it began, he is in a better spiritual state (Andrew and Waldron 29-36, Gordon 19).

For simplicity's sake I have been referring to the vision in Galadriel's Mirror as Frodo's, but of course both Sam and Frodo see apocalyptic visions in the water, each in his degree, and Sam is actually the first to look.¹⁵ His vision is apocalyptic in the sense that it shows crisis and destruction, particularly the destruction of Sam's own world (*LotR* II.vii.353). Like the *Pearl*-narrator, Sam is so overcome with emotion that he breaks the vision; although he is moved by distress rather than delight, desire to take matters into his own hands makes him lose self-control.

Frodo's vision is, fittingly, of a wider scope; he sees "parts of a great history in which he had become involved" (*LotR* II.vii.7.354), including elusive images of Gandalf's resurrection, the fall of Numenor, the city of Gondor and its rescue by Aragorn, and the ship which will take him to Aman. Like Dante, Frodo is viewing major events in a salvation history of which his journey is a part. The images are not allegorical, but they are oblique, with parts standing in for wholes; many of them make little sense to Frodo at the time when he sees them. The final, hellish vision of the Eye of Sauron adds an element of personal threat to this apocalyptic history, and reflects the element of present crisis which is common in medieval apocalyptic visions (McGinn 7). As Frodo becomes too mired in the vision, Galadriel's injunction not to touch the water forms an interesting echo of the *Pearl*-narrator's vision-ending disruption of the heavenly stream.

It is at this point that Tolkien, consciously or unconsciously, turns the tables on his allegorical models. While Dante and the *Pearl*-narrator's celestial ladies offer apocalyptic visions as part of a testing process for the redemption of the narrator, Frodo's vision in the Mirror is followed by a significant reversal. Frodo's own fall and redemption will not come until much later; instead, Galadriel herself is the character tested here, and the test is a final piece in the process of her own redemption. Frodo offers her the Ring, and she refuses. "Gently are you revenged for my testing of your heart at our first meeting," she says, and later, "I pass the test" (*LotR* II.vii.356-7). The full significance of this test is, of course, not immediately evident, but as Tolkien makes plain in *The Silmarillion* and elsewhere, this is the culminating moment in the long process by which Galadriel atones for her part in the rebellion of the Noldor and gains readmittance to the Undying Lands, from which she has been banned (Lakowski,

¹⁵ On the significance of these visions in relation to other dream-visions in Tolkien's work, see Amendt-Raduege.

“Fall”). Instead of working immediately for the redemption of the narrator or seeming main character, this scene works for the redemption of the celestial lady.

Galadriel’s lament in the chapter that follows (*LotR* II.viii.368-9) reflects the overwhelming nature of her own desire to cross the water to “heaven;” at this point she does not know that she has redeemed herself and will be permitted to return to Aman (Lakowski, “Fall” 92). This is, of course, a major point of difference between Galadriel and the medieval celestial ladies, who are already permanent residents of heaven. Both Beatrice and the pearl-maiden died as children, and their static innocence is a key part of their power to aid their poets. Galadriel is not a child; quite the opposite, since her personal history is one of the longest and most complex of any character in Tolkien’s mythos. Although she is one of the most elevated characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, she is also flawed and fallen, as she herself makes plain in her laments. Her longing for the Undying Lands aligns her closely with Dante the Pilgrim and the *Pearl*-narrator. Unlike Beatrice and the pearl-maiden, who do not undergo change, Galadriel is a dynamic character with a “real” history in Middle-Earth, just as subject to pride and the need for redemption as any central male hero.

Pearl and Purgatorio Revisited

These distinctions relate closely to Tolkien’s thoughts on *Pearl*, as published in the “Form and Purpose” section of the introduction to Gordon’s edition, and then reproduced by Christopher Tolkien in the introduction to the translation of *Pearl*. Tolkien outlines then-current scholarly debate about allegory in *Pearl*, saying that some readers have taken the whole poem as a unified allegory, while others, himself among them, understand it as including “allegorical and symbolic elements” (*Sir Gawain* 8). Unsurprisingly, Tolkien works at length to emphasize the poem’s grounding in real events: the narrator’s “real” loss of a child, even if that is only imagined by the poet. He says that “an allegorical description of an event does not make that event itself allegorical,” and that the poem is “incoherent if one seeks for total allegory” (9). He compares the real-life events which he assumes underlie Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: “The *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita* of the opening line, or *la decenne sete* of *Purgatorio xxxii*, are held to refer to real dates and events, the thirty-fifth year of Dante’s life in 1300, and the death of Beatrice Portinari in 1290” (12). In making a similar point about the historical grounding of Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*, he writes: “[I]t is this living drop of reality, this echo of sudden death and loss in the world, that gives to Chaucer’s early poem a tone and feeling that raises it above the literary devices out of which he made it” (13).

For Tolkien, then, the appeal of characters like Beatrice and the pearl-maiden is the element of “reality” that underlies their symbolic presentation. Boethius’s Lady Philosophy, by contrast, is pure personification and not a real

human being. Characters like Jealousy and Courtesy in *The Romance of the Rose* are likewise not meant to be taken as real people. Beatrice and the pearl-maiden, on the other hand, have lived and died as human beings. Other readers nonetheless see Beatrice and the pearl-maiden as being allegorical to nearly the same degree as Lady Philosophy; James Wimsatt declares each of them to be “an embodiment of Revelation” (124), and Tolkien stages his own discussion of *Pearl* as a counter to the idea that the pearl-maiden is an allegorical representation of “clean maidenhood” (8). In Tolkien’s insistence on the “real” existence of these celestial ladies as human beings, we can see why he might have found *Pearl* and *Purgatorio* more appealing than some of the other texts in their tradition, and why he might have used imagery from these works to characterize Galadriel, a character with a significantly “real” existence in Middle-Earth.

If Beatrice and the pearl-maiden provided inspiration for Galadriel, we might interpret Tolkien as taking the quality he liked best about these medieval characters—the “living drop of reality” that distinguishes them from their predecessors—and developing it to a much greater degree in a fully “realized” character, while retaining many of the symbolic elements of the medieval texts. The earthly paradise, light and water, the encircling stream and the stars, and the consolatory lady herself, all have a great deal of symbolic power which is not lost in *The Lord of the Rings*. Readers continue to find symbolism in Galadriel, as in many other characters and events in *The Lord of the Rings*, and it is precisely her pseudo-historical, rather than allegorical, nature which enables the richly diverse ways in which she is interpreted. This is very much in keeping with Tolkien’s declaration, after his statement of ‘cordial dislike’ for allegory, that he much prefers “history, true or feigned.” In this way he allows interpretation to reside not in “the purposed domination of the author,” but rather in “the freedom of the reader” (*LotR* Prologue.14-5).

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