

10-15-2010

Corrupting Beauty: Rape Narrative in *The Silmarillion*

Lynn Whitaker

*University of Glasgow, Scotland*Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Whitaker, Lynn (2010) "Corrupting Beauty: Rape Narrative in *The Silmarillion*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 29: No. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol29/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Online MidSummer Seminar 2025

More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy

August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



Corrupting Beauty: Rape Narrative in *The Silmarillion*

Abstract

Describes the themes and traditions Tolkien was drawing on as a storyteller in the tales of Aredhel and Lúthien, but more importantly, examines the theological implications suggested by his depictions of the women in these stories and how these “rape narratives” serve to underscore the sacredness of the created world in Tolkien’s legendarium.

Additional Keywords

Rape in J.R.R. Tolkien; Rape in mythology; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Aredhel; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Lúthien Tinúviel; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



CORRUPTING BEAUTY: RAPE NARRATIVE IN *THE SILMARILLION*

LYNN WHITAKER

THIS ESSAY EXPLORES THE USE OF RAPE NARRATIVE in *The Silmarillion*: with specific reference to the female characters Aredhel and Lúthien, I analyze the range of literary techniques by which Tolkien simultaneously exploits yet constrains the power of rape (threatened or actual) as a narrative motor and dramatic spectacle.

The reader's first reaction to my title might well be "What rape narrative?", such is the subtlety of Tolkien's representation and the cultural pervasiveness of rape in fiction. Indeed it is this ambiguity that I find fascinating because, through it, Tolkien can advance a plot around the notion of rape without actually representing the act itself. Several feminist critics (e.g. Horeck, Projansky) argue that it is difficult to represent rape in art without creating a vicarious pleasure in sexual violence; they argue that the purview of the reader/spectator itself objectifies and offers power, pleasure, and mastery in the narrative event. Avoidance of rape-representations does not necessarily resolve the problem, however, as refusal to represent the act can serve as titillation where the event is withheld so as to tantalize. Thus the writer of rape narrative must navigate a tricky course to ensure that the representation of rape (even as a structuring absence) is not a misogynist act. I believe that Tolkien, through utilization of a range of literary techniques that suggest an 'authenticity' and balance in narrative and that resist genre conventions, *does* successfully navigate this course, but that his positing of female beauty as the catalyst for violent seduction or unrestrained lust remains problematic other than as understood in mythic mode.

Following Projansky's model, I use the term 'rape narrative' in its broadest sense of including "representations of rape, attempted rape, threats of rape, implied rape and [...] coercive sexuality" (Projansky 18). A rape narrative need not therefore contain actual rape, but will have at least a threat or implication of coercive or non-consensual sex as a driving element. By using this wide definition, both the Eöl/Aredhel narrative and the Curufin and Celegorm/Lúthien narrative can be treated as rape narratives wherein the male succeeds in or attempts or desires sexual violation or violent seduction of a resistant female. In both these examples the women are considered beautiful, and it is this beauty that ignites the destructive male desire.

As is the moot question in the legal definition of rape in any jurisdiction, much is at stake in our understanding of female non-consent and its mode of expression, and our inference of non-consent (unequivocally in the case of Lúthien, but perhaps less so in the case of Aredhel) is important to the construction of 'good woman as victim' which serves as a springboard for themes of romance and heroism and suggests a greater archetypal or mythical reading of the rape tragedy. As is the case with both of Tolkien's examples discussed here, genre conventions relating to the representation of gender roles and attendant notions of beauty, innocence, and love shape our expectations of proper male/female relationships in the text, so as to normalize or naturalize the element of sexual violence: paradoxically it can be the very ubiquity of rape narrative that makes it difficult to spot when embedded in a rescue/romance trajectory. One of the more problematic aspects of this 'normalization' is the use of female beauty as a mitigating aspect and inevitable trigger of male sexual aggression (at its most extreme, male sexual aggression may be theorized as the logical validation of woman's beauty in narrative terms), as this is one of 'myths' of rape that feminism has struggled to dispel in relation to the lived experiences of historical women.

Aredhel

I will consider first the narrative relating to Aredhel in Chapter 16 of *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin." Aredhel is first introduced to us as a character who wishes to leave the "guarded city of Gondolin" of which her brother, Turgon, is king. Although this is not a transgressive desire (the narrator stresses that freedom to roam was a former right of Aredhel), we might construe Aredhel's wanderlust as resistance to male authority; indeed one might contend that Aredhel's subsequent capture and her death at the hands of Eöl (enacted in front of Turgon) is effectively an ironic narrative punishment for resisting/escaping the series of male strictures imposed by her brother, her guards, her husband and even her son. Tolkien creates a certain precocity in Aredhel, although it is framed as feistiness, e.g. in her 'uppity' retort to her brother's provisional permission: "I am your sister and not your servant, and beyond your bounds I will go as seems good to me. And if you begrudge me an escort, then I will go alone" (151). (She does not want to visit her brother Fingon as suggested by Turgon; she wants instead to seek her male friends—the tempestuous sons of Fëanor.) This precocity is reiterated as Aredhel being headstrong and without fear—"she was fearless and hardy of heart, as were all the children of Finwë" (152)—but it is also possible to read Aredhel's unsated appetite for new experiences and for male company other than her brothers as an awakening sexual curiosity and desire:

There [in Himlad] for a while she was content, and had great joy in wandering the woodlands; but as the year lengthened and Celegorm did not

return, she became restless again, and took to riding alone ever further abroad, seeking for new paths and untrodden glades. (153)

That Aredhel, in the absence of a male figure (Celegorm) is dissatisfied with what she has, but does not know what it is she seeks (*new* paths and *untrodden* glades), confirms her innocence of sex, as was perhaps previously implied in Turgon's warning that "there are many perils in Middle-earth of which the Lady knows nothing" (151). Nonetheless, even an innocent curiosity is 'improper' and attracts narrative punishment if acted upon, as suggested in the feminist analysis of classic fairytales such as Bluebeard, Goldilocks, and Little Red Riding Hood (see, for example, Maria Tatar or Marina Warner). That Aredhel remains increasingly attracted to glades and darker areas of the forest, despite having only just escaped with her life when previously "enmeshed in shadows" (152), may serve to underline either Aredhel's continuing innocence or—conversely—her growing knowledge and desire for boundary-pushing thrills. In folk and fairytale the child's journey through the forest connotes a loss of innocence, a journey towards adulthood with the lure of sex as the symbolic act thereof, see e.g. *The Robber Bride*. Such is Tolkien's repeated motif of the dark forests of Middle-earth as a site of potential evil or transgression that it is difficult to support a reading of Aredhel as fully innocent in her explorations at the edge of Nan Elmoth, a forest where "enchantment lay upon it still" and where the trees are "the tallest and darkest in all Beleriand, and there the sun never came" (153).

The folly of Aredhel's wanderlust is predicted by her brother: "it is against my wisdom, and I forebode that ill will come of it both to you and to me" (151). This may be interpreted as typical Elvish foresight/pessimism, but it posits Aredhel's desire as the source not only of her own downfall but of Gondolin's also, which, as it results in the birth of the traitorous Maeglin, may be read as such. Lewis and Currie contend that "the tale of the fall of Gondolin contains a definite thread of the idea that sexual degeneracy brings down civilisations" (Lewis and Currie 201). While the destruction of Gondolin may seem a disproportionate price to pay for Aredhel's personal choice and desire, the framing of Aredhel's narrative within the greater doom or curse of the Noldor somewhat diminishes Aredhel's *personal* responsibility, as we can no sooner fully account her responsible for the consequences of her actions than any of the Noldor "ensnared in an evil that [they] did not aid" (149): she is an archetypal figure that serves to illustrate the insidious nature and diverse manifestations of the curse.

Nonetheless, despite Aredhel's function as a specific archetype (that of the curious and headstrong young woman), Tolkien clothes her in sufficient personal detail that we also may make personal judgment of Aredhel and of her

actions at the more local level of the wayward teenager experimenting with self identity. Tolkien's technique of alternate focalization between Aredhel and Turgon during the expository section of narrative helps to maintain the fiction of narrative neutrality and balance that will later privilege the reader's sympathetic judgment of Aredhel as the preferred reading, but it initially brokers a somewhat negative reading. We see the pain that is the consequence of Aredhel's willful actions: her companions "hardly escaped with their lives" (152); "Turgon's heart was heavy at her going" (151); "Turgon sat long alone, enduring grief and anger in silence" (152). The peril of her companions and Turgon's genuine heartfelt anguish is in contrast to Aredhel's somewhat superficial or selfish desire born of ennui: "she wearied of the guarded city of Gondolin, desiring ever the longer the more to ride again in the wide lands and to walk in the forests, as had been her wont in Valinor" (151). That Tolkien has already established Gondolin as a paradisiacal sanctuary "fit to compare with Elven Tirion beyond the sea" (145) would seem to further support the reading of Aredhel's personal desire as selfish and petulant, particularly as, having gained her wish, "she became restless again" (153); later, when experiencing a different captivity, under Eöl, she "marveled that she had grown weary of the light of Gondolin" (155). Such selfish superficiality is in contrast to Turgon's anguish which is both personal and political—the safety of the kingdom and his subjects is his responsibility. In setting up Aredhel's actions as selfish, reckless folly, the narrator could be implying that Aredhel deserved to be taught a lesson or 'was asking for trouble': this recklessness, combined with her beauty and her attire (twice Eöl is attracted to her because of the visibility of her white dress, so it is, in a sense, 'provocative') would seem consistent with a rape narrative in which the maiden's sexual curiosity (and availability) is 'punished.'

Although Aredhel's selfish desire may suggest some 'guilt' in the consequences of her actions, the structure of the narrative works against this to invite sympathy for Aredhel's plight. Throughout the narrative, Aredhel's subjectivity is defined mostly in relation to the male figures in her life—as sister, wife, mother—she lacks true autonomy as a character or as a narrative agent. In terms of narrative structure she moves from the protective surveillance of Turgon (and his proxies) to the predatory surveillance of the Dark Elf, Eöl, in the first half of the chapter: the culmination of this expository sequence is the 'rape' that signals the end of the first half of the story (note that the chapter title, 'Of Maeglin,' confirms that this is not Aredhel's story but that of her son: the first half of the story is a necessary explanation of the 'bad blood' of Maeglin). The rape sequence moves focalization to Eöl, denying Aredhel character subjectivity, effectively objectifying her in relation to Eöl and his desire. In focalizing Eöl we are given insight into his strange powers and twisted motivations, and his desire is directly linked to Aredhel's beauty:

[H]is eyes could see deep into shadows and dark places. [...]He saw Aredhel Ar-Feiniel [...], a gleam of white in the dim land. Very fair she seemed to him, and he desired her; and he set his enchantments about her so that she could not find the ways out, but drew ever nearer to his dwelling in the depths of the wood. (154)

Tolkien sets up a series of oppositions between Aredhel and Eöl that position the characters respectively as 'good' and 'evil,' or 'victim' and 'aggressor.' Where Aredhel is clad in white and is "the White Lady of the Noldor" (151), Eöl is clad in "*galvorn* [...] black and shining like jet" and is a "Dark Elf" who "shunned the Noldor" (153). Where Aredhel is "very fair," Eöl is "dark and grim" (158). Significantly, it is the *sight* of the "very fair" Aredhel that incites Eöl's lust, her beauty inflaming his desire, her dress drawing his eye; his avowed hatred of the Noldor coupled with this lust would support that Eöl's desire has an angry edge—it is a desire to violate. Although Tolkien's term 'Dark Elf' connotes those who did not see the light of Valinor and does not usually connote evil, it is clear in this instance that Eöl is a malevolent presence and an especially 'dark' Elf. The sunless setting of Nan Elmoth where Eöl lives "in deep shadow, loving the night and the twilight under the stars" in "dim halls [with] such servants as he had, silent and secret as their master" (153), warns us of his sinister and secretive nature. Eöl is reminiscent of the folk legend of the 'Erking', the forest-dwelling evil elf who ensnares the innocent and unwary; or the Scottish 'Hind Etin' who takes to wife and imprisons the aristocratic maiden who strays in to his forest (as punishment for breaking twigs in his domain).

Tolkien confirms Eöl's malevolence by subtly stressing the duplicity by which Eöl plots to ensnare the vulnerable Aredhel: having spied on her unawares and having prevented her leaving the forest, he will offer her welcome and "[take] her to wife." The inclusion of five instances of 'and' in the two sentences describing this plot creates tension and excitement, and suggests that, consensual or not, the sexual conquest of Aredhel is the *inexorable* outcome of Eöl's dark desire:

And when Aredhel, weary with wandering, came at last to his doors, he revealed himself; and he welcomed her, and led her into his house. And there she remained; for Eöl took her to wife, and it was long ere any of her kin heard of her again. (154).

The description of the meeting begins with Aredhel as the subject—but she loses her subjectivity when she arrives at "Eöl's doors," as the sentence continues in the active voice with Eöl as subject and Aredhel as object – "he revealed himself"; "he welcomed her"; "he led her"; and (significantly) "Eöl took her to wife."

Likewise, the verb choices suggest an inevitable *progression* of Eöl's masculine action, culminating in the 'taking' of Aredhel. The single reinsertion of Aredhel as subject just before the climactic action of Eöl's taking—"there she remained"—may confer some notion of agency and therefore consent on the part of Aredhel, but the reversed syntax serves to diminish this ('she remained there' would import greater agency). The emphasis on property, ownership, and possession ("his doors"; "his house") further contributes to the sense that Aredhel is merely an object, a thing to be possessed and used by Eöl at his will.

Having thus ended the first section with this encounter, Tolkien creates something of a narrative ellipsis in which we ponder the implication of Aredhel being taken "to wife" in the sinister circumstances, i.e. we consider whether this is a rape. Lewis and Currie also note this coy ellipsis and its tacit suggestion of rape as an expected narrative punishment for the headstrong woman within literature:

[I]t would probably be worth comparing Eöl to masculine literary stereotypes to see where he stands in relation to the sorts of adventures women like Aredhel meet with. Whatever the exact details, the next time we see them Eöl and Aredhel are married and they have a son, Maeglin. (Lewis and Currie 201)

The narration of the second section begins by answering the 'question' of consent (or the question, as Lewis and Currie put it, of "the adventures women like Aredhel meet with"): "It is not said that Aredhel was wholly unwilling, nor that her life in Nan Elmoth was hateful to her for many years" (154). The negative construction here is slippery—"not said/ unwilling" "nor/hateful," and the qualification of the nouns and adjectives therein ("wholly unwilling," "many years") further obfuscates rather than clarifies the meaning. We cannot categorically say that Aredhel was raped or that her life as wife is hateful, only that if consent *was* given it was not fully informed (she is unaware of Eöl's plot to ensnare her, she is "weary" and lost) and there is certainly some doubt over her willingness ("not/wholly unwilling"). The seemingly honest report of an omniscient Elven narrator serves to verify the authenticity of this statement in the absence of any character focalization (i.e. we are not given either Eöl or Aredhel's perspective) yet also draws attention to the hearsay nature and negative formulation of the testimony ("it is not said"). These multiple techniques all cast doubt on the existence and extent of Aredhel's consent or lack thereof, confirming the encounter as a rape narrative but without narrating the act itself. In the absence of a direct account of the act itself, the reader is forced to accept the narrator's confusing statement and infer that Aredhel's willingness was at best compromised and at worst non-existent.

It is not until later that we are given corroborating (if conflicting) evidence as to Aredhel's consent. Perhaps Eöl's own remonstrance to Maeglin that his son is "ill-gotten" suggests admission of rape on the part of Eöl: "So you forsake your father and your kin, ill-gotten son!" (160). What is interesting is Eöl's understanding of the circumstances in which Aredhel left Gondolin, for it is clear that he perceives her to have been 'trapped' there, as he exclaims to Turgon, "Yet if in Aredhel your sister you have some claim, then let her remain; let the bird go back to her cage, where she will soon sicken again as she sickened before" (159). If Eöl believes Aredhel to have been a caged bird in Gondolin then did he perceive her subsequent life with him as liberation? as kindness? as emancipation from a certain sort of societal stricture (which is, after all, his own lifestyle choice)? Certainly, despite the incredulous response of the court company to "a tall Elf, dark and grim, of the kindred of the Sindar: yet he claims the lady Aredhel as his wife" (158), Aredhel would seem to defend Eöl: "He speaks but the truth. He is Eöl and I am his wife, and he is father of my son. Slay him not, but lead him hither to the King's judgment" (158). Based on this defense, Turgon's welcome is not that which would be given to a rapist: "Turgon treated him with honour, and rose up and would take his hand; and he said 'Welcome, kinsman, for so I hold you'" (159).

Such welcome is clearly predicated by Aredhel's personal defense as it contrasts greatly to that given by another of the Noldor, Curufin, while Eöl is in pursuit of Aredhel and Maeglin. Curufin clearly implies that Aredhel was raped. He upbraids Eöl thus: "Do not flaunt the title of your wife before me [...] for those who steal the daughters of the Noldor without gift or leave do not gain kinship with their kin. [...] [M]y heart warns me that if you now pursue those who love you no more, never will you return" (157). However even here, where Aredhel is posited as 'stolen' (again this imports the notion that she is property, existing only in relationship to the men who claim her) and where she is so stolen without "gift or leave" (but whose gift or leave? Her own or her brother's?), Curufin would seem to suggest that there *has* previously been some love between Eöl and Aredhel and the family unit they constitute with Maeglin (though they now "love you no more"). Still there is clear inference in the description of action that the "sun-shy" Eöl (156), "driven by anger and the shame of his humiliation" (157), is an evil figure and uses illicit surveillance: "they knew not that he followed them [...] and Eöl saw from afar the white raiment of Aredhel" (157).

An important aspect of this inference of evil, in addition to the initial construction of Eöl as malevolent, is Tolkien's characterization of Eöl as 'other' or unnatural (e.g. his isolation from other Elves, his relationship with dwarves) and as an abusive, possessive and paranoid male who seeks to control, restrict and dominate his wife and to keep her isolated from her family and kin:

For though at Eöl's command she must shun the sunlight, they wandered far together under the stars or by the light of the sickle moon: or she might fare alone as she would, save that Eöl forbade her to seek the sons of Fëanor, or any others of the Noldor. (154)

The lexical choices of "command," "must," and "forbade" suggest Eöl's control of his wife, and while it is not sinister that Elves should wander under stars, the imagery of the "sickle moon" and the imperative that "she must shun sunlight" both contain associations with the unnatural from which we infer that Aredhel is, at best, in thrall to Eöl: in Tolkien's oeuvre a sickle moon is a motif in the castigation of Beruthiel, and of course evil creatures such as orcs shun sunlight. The sense of the unnatural extends to the prohibition against Aredhel visiting her kin, and is further compounded by the prohibition on the "forbidden tongue of the Noldor" (albeit this prohibition comes from beyond the authority of Eöl). We read these prohibitions as unnatural or unreasonable and no less than a subjugation of Aredhel's Noldor identity; being with Eöl effects abjection of Aredhel's true self. In these narrative details we recognize the abused, constrained existence typical of what might now be termed the 'battered wife.' It is ironic too that the very thing she set out to achieve—meeting with the sons of Fëanor—is the thing that is expressly forbidden to Aredhel. The control and stricture exerted by Eöl is an important element in our reading of the Eöl/Aredhel narrative as a rape narrative and thereby eliciting sympathy for the Aredhel character and positioning her as victim.

That Eöl's relationship to Aredhel is abusive and violatory at base is reinforced in various narrative elements including the character arc of Maeglin, Eöl and Aredhel's "ill-gotten son" (160), who also is denied his Noldor identity by Eöl. Maeglin would seem doubly doomed—as the child of rape for his father's part and under the curse of the Noldor for his mother's part. There is a literal and metaphorical aspect to his being born "in the shadows" (154) and his *unspoken* (one might say unspeakable) Noldor name is "child of the twilight" (154). Maeglin will grow to be a shadowy, liminal, treacherous figure like his father, with similarly 'unnatural' appetites as shown in his taboo desire for Idril, his first cousin, Turgon's daughter: "it seemed to her a thing strange and crooked in him, as indeed the Eldar ever since deemed it" (161). It is explicitly stated that Maeglin is like his father "in mood and mind" (154) and, although laconic, he has a power of seduction in his voice, and the ability to read thought (Maeglin means "Sharp Glance" [154]). Maeglin can manipulate his mother readily; he aims to "read her unguarded mind" (155) and persuades her to leave Eöl thus:

"Lady, let us depart while there is time! Here we are held in bondage, and no profit shall I find here; for I have learned all that my father has to teach [...]" [...]

Then Aredhel was glad, and looked with pride upon her son; and [...] they departed and rode away to the north eaves of Nan Elmoth. (156)

The successful entreaty that they are held "in bondage" acts as corroborating source that Aredhel is effectively a captive of Eöl, and the extension of this bondage to Maeglin's own situation would seem to confirm Eöl's absolute and abusive dominion and tyranny. Maeglin too is denied his desire "to speak with the sons of Fëanor, his kin" (155), and rebuked by his father thus: "'You are of the house of Eöl, Maeglin my son,' he said 'and not of the Golodhrim [...]. I will not deal nor have my son deal with the slayers of our kin [...]. In this you shall obey me, or I will set you in bonds'" (155). The ensuing dramatic irony is that Aredhel and Maeglin's escape will result in Eöl too becoming a slayer of kin, as, in his attempt at filicide of Maeglin (surely the worst category of kinslaying), he instead kills Aredhel. The heavy phallic symbolism of the scene in which Aredhel *knowingly* faces death by jumping in front of the poisoned javelin targeted at Maeglin, in the house of her brother, for the sake of her son—and *still pleads for mercy* for the murderous Eöl—says much for how the masculine and the feminine archetypes are constructed: the 'beautiful woman' must welcome trouble; the 'good woman' must willingly endure such abuse to recuperate previous transgression; it is the right of the male to enact the law. Each of these tropes further obscures the issue of 'consent' because through them 'woman' is not only *expected* to be a victim of male sexual violence, but to forgive it, indeed both Aredhel and Idril display that they are 'good women' as they have "moved Turgon to mercy" (160) despite the severity of the crime. (It should be noted too the narrative transformation of Aredhel's former feistiness in to compassion and mercy—Aredhel is now a 'better person' for her experiences with Eöl.)

As Maeglin goes on to betray Gondolin for his "crooked" desire of Idril, and is put to death on the rock like his father before, there is a chilling circularity to the rape narrative, that, like the curse of the Noldor, confirms such action as an evil on the scale of the archetype rather than the personal. Several elements of the Idril/Maeglin narrative mirror that of the Aredhel/Eöl narrative. Again, with Maeglin, the sight of beauty is a motivating factor in his dark desire: "the bliss and splendour of Gondolin surpassed all that he had imagined from the tales of his mother, and he was amazed by [...] the many things strange and beautiful that he beheld. Yet to none were his eyes more often drawn than to Idril the King's daughter" (158). That Maeglin does not have the instinctive taboo

surrounding a forbidden degree of relationship confirms him indeed as perverse, and we see this in Morgoth's corruption of Maeglin:

to Maeglin he promised the Lordship of Gondolin as his vassal, and the possession of Idril Celebrindal, when the city should be taken; and indeed desire for Idril and hatred for Tuor led Maeglin the easier to his treachery [...]; and he abode in the halls of the King with smiling face and evil in his heart, while the darkness gathered ever deeper upon Idril. (290)

The narrator is ambiguous as to how far Maeglin is successful in his desire to 'possess' Idril, saying only that "Tuor sought to rescue Idril from the sack of the city, but Maeglin had laid hands on her" (291), but the violence of the 'rape' of Gondolin serves as a dramatic substitute for the destruction and corruption of the feminine. The technique is used previously in the description of Eöl's rage at the beauty of Gondolin, where "though he was amazed no less than his son at all he saw, his heart was filled the more with anger and with hate of the Noldor" (158). Through his figurative association, Tolkien allies unchecked male lust with rage, with duplicity ("he abode with smiling face and evil in his heart"), and with a desire to destroy or corrupt beauty. My title "Corrupting Beauty" is an attempt to capture the ambiguity of this theme: beauty can be corrupted; but beauty can also corrupt by igniting male desire.

Lúthien

Now I will consider the rape narrative of Lúthien that occurs in Chapter 19 of *The Silmarillion*, 'Of Beren and Lúthien.' Throughout the tale, Lúthien has several episodes which can be read as rape narrative: her encounter with Celegorm and Curufin is perhaps the most obvious, but her encounters with Sauron and Morgoth also have elements of sexual violence. From the outset, Lúthien, of all Tolkien's women, is established as most beautiful, and this beauty is critical to the context of rape narrative as an archetypal story. Lúthien's beauty is more than a personal attribute; it is symbolic of the divine, of her connection to the Valar and Eru. It is worthwhile looking at the first mention of Lúthien (in Chapter 4, 'Of Thingol and Melian') as various patterns of characterization are established here. It is interesting to note the descriptions of Lúthien's mother, Melian, and of her union with Thingol, as they establish the feminine capacity to entrance the male with beauty in different forms. Melian also is beautiful, and wise and gifted: "there were none more beautiful [of the people of Lórien] than Melian, nor more wise, nor more skilled in songs of enchantment. [...] Nightingales went always with her and she taught them their song" (54). In a recuperation of the Philomele rape narrative of classical mythology, Thingol (Elwë Singollo) is attracted first to the song of the nightingale and then to the song of Melian (in the very wood where in later ages Eöl will ensnare Aredhel).

The song casts a powerful spell, awakening desire, and suggesting the male's ability to 'lose' himself when seduced by beauty:

[S]uddenly [...] he heard the voice of Melian, and it filled all his heart with wonder and desire. He forgot then utterly all his people and the purposes of his mind, and following the birds under the shadow of the trees he passed deep in to Nan Elmoth and was lost. (54)

Here the concept that Thingol "was lost" is literal and metaphorical; he has lost "the purposes of his mind" as well as his path in the forest. It is the sight and touch of Melian that deepens the spell, indeed it elevates Thingol's desire to that of love; and throughout the rest of the passage the transcendent power of vision when beholding divine beauty is emphasized:

[O]ut of the darkness he looked at her, and the light of Aman was in her face.

She spoke no word; but being filled with love Elwë came to her and took her hand, and straightway a spell was laid on him [...].

[H]e alone of all the Sindar had seen with his own eyes the Trees in the day of their flowering [...]. And of the love of Thingol and Melian there came into the world the fairest of all the Children of Ilúvatar that was or shall be. [End of chapter] (55)

Here, too, the use of 'And' to begin the last sentence of the chapter suggests an inexorable conclusion to this holy union: Lúthien. Interestingly, though, we are not told her name at this stage, only that she is "fairest of all the Children of Ilúvatar"; having built up anticipation, Lúthien is not 'revealed' to us until many chapters later, in the tale that is her own.

When Beren encounters Lúthien dancing in the woods of Neldoreth in Doriath, this too is the first 'sight' of Lúthien for the reader. The sense of sight—and its association with (divine) enchantment—is emphasized in the many visual descriptors in the passage:

[A]ll memory of his pain departed from him, and he fell into an enchantment; for Lúthien was the most beautiful of the children of Ilúvatar. Blue was her raiment as the unclouded heaven, but her eyes were grey as the starlit evening; her mantle was sewn with golden flowers, but her hair was dark as the shadows of twilight. As the light upon the leaves of trees, as the voice of clear waters, as the stars above the mists of the world, such was her glory and her loveliness; and in her face was a shining light. (193)

The only descriptor other than visual is aural (“as the voice of clear waters”), and, in echo of Melian (and also Philomele), there is the association of feminine physical beauty with the beauty of song and of the nightingale in particular. Denied the sight of Lúthien, Beren becomes “dumb, as one that is bound under a spell,” but his “spell of silence” is dispelled when Lúthien sings a song that “released the bonds of winter” (193). The description of their subsequent meeting continues to play with the idea of ‘love at first sight’ as a holy power, and with notions of enchantment. When Lúthien beholds Beren, “doom fell upon her, and she loved him,” but, after she embraces him, “she slipped from his arms and vanished from his sight even as the day was breaking” (193). Thus denied the sight of Lúthien, the effect is devastating to Beren, striking him blind, just as earlier he was struck dumb:

Then Beren lay upon the ground in a swoon, as one slain at once by bliss and grief; and he fell into a sleep as it were into an abyss of shadow [...]. And wandering in mind he groped as one that is stricken with sudden blindness, and seeks with hands to grasp the vanished light. (194)

In allying Lúthien’s beauty to the concept of a divine power, Tolkien establishes any threat to Lúthien or her beauty as intrinsically unholy. In this way, the jealous betrayal of Lúthien and Beren by Daeron can be read as a malevolent act; and the ensuing wrath of Thingol, full of revulsion that “such as these [men][should] lay hands” (196) on his daughter, which leads to her ‘price’ of a Silmaril from the crown of Morgoth, is a sign that a greater evil is at work: “thus he wrought the doom of Doriath, and was ensnared in the curse of Mandos” (196). Thingol’s subsequent action of imprisoning his daughter would also suggest that his judgment is awry: as Melian has noted, “you have doomed either your daughter or yourself. And now is Doriath drawn within the fate of a mightier realm” (197). Lúthien will escape her father’s restraint in order to aid Beren, but she suffers further capture throughout the narrative on account of her beauty and power.

Especially relevant to my enquiry is the capture of Lúthien by Curufin and Celegorm, vengeful sons of Fëanor. Celegorm and Curufin are already positioned against Beren, in that they have reiterated that though their cousin, Finrod Felagund, should help Beren in his quest for a Silmaril, they will kill any that dares to seek or withhold the jewels. As the reader knows this but Lúthien does not, the ensuing encounter between Lúthien and the two brothers creates immense narrative tension and reinforces the notion that Lúthien is naïve, innocent, and powerless—the reader wants to ‘shout out’ to warn her. The idea of duplicity is once again presented as indicative of malevolent desire, as

Celegorm dissembles his true intentions towards the trusting Lúthien. Present too is the idea of Lúthien's beauty as a powerful force that is the root of desire:

[Huan] brought her to Celegorm, and Lúthien, learning that he was a prince of the Noldor and the foe of Morgoth, was glad; and she declared herself, casting aside her cloak. So great was her sudden beauty revealed beneath the sun that Celegorm became enamoured of her; but he spoke her fair, and promised that she would find help in her need, if she returned with him now to Nargothrond. By no sign did he reveal that he knew already of Beren and the quest, of which she told, nor that it was a matter that touched him near. (203)

Holding Lúthien captive is further sign of the brothers' evil intent, and this is made explicit in the narration, "they held her fast, and took away her cloak, and she was not permitted to pass the gates or to speak with any save the brothers Celegorm and Curufin" (203). While the stripping of her enchanted cloak may be read as a practical gesture by which to restrain Lúthien, it is also possible to read the act as a humiliation and degradation; the stripping of the cloak literally divests Lúthien of some power and makes her all the more visible and vulnerable for the brothers to enjoy. Celegorm and Curufin's purpose in capturing Lúthien is certainly made explicit, as is their treachery: "they purposed to let the King [Finrod Felagund] perish, and to keep Lúthien, and force Thingol to give her hand to Celegorm. Thus would they advance their power, and become the mightiest of the princes of the Noldor" (203). One is not told how the brothers might "force" Thingol to give his daughter's hand, but rape would seem a plausible measure, and a *fait accompli* if resulting in pregnancy, though it is ironic that earlier in the book it is Curufin who has railed against such practices (in his encounter with Eöl).

Of course, Lúthien escapes from Nargothrond and rescues Beren, though not before attracting the desire of Sauron who also knows of "the fame of her beauty" and who wishes "to make her captive and hand her over to the power of Morgoth" (205) in a continuation of the motif of capture as unholy violation. Together Beren and Lúthien bury Finrod Felagund, and these actions, even without the later fetching of a Silmaril from the crown of Morgoth, amount to a tremendous humiliation of the brothers Celegorm and Curufin, further clouding their attitude to Beren and Lúthien. The reader may construct the escape of Lúthien as a doubly humiliating failure for Celegorm—he has lost his prisoner and his potential 'wife.' But Lúthien's 'maiden' status is coded as a further affront, for the citizens of Nargothrond turn against the brothers, and banish them, "saying that a maiden had dared that which the sons of Fëanor had not dared to do; but many perceived that it was treachery rather than fear that had guided Celegorm and Curufin" (207). The linkage of Lúthien's 'maiden'

status to the brothers' humiliation and banishment acts as a tacit motivation for their actions in the next section of the narrative wherein the sexual violence directed towards Lúthien becomes still more apparent.

Once again the malice and duplicity of the pair is established as, banished from Nargothrond, Celegorm has "a light of menace in his eyes; but Curufin smiled" (207). The insertion of the Curufin/Celegorm banishment into the narrative of Beren and Lúthien builds tension so that when all four characters meet in the forest of Brethil, we are prepared for trouble. Again, the account is specifically framed as not witnessed by the narrator directly: "Now it is told that Beren and Lúthien came in their wandering into the forest of Brethil" (207). Although, indeed, *all* of the 'Quenta Silmarillion' is framed in this way—i.e. as a written account of an earlier oral history and mythology—that we should be reminded of it at this point in the narrative of Beren and Lúthien has a specific effect of authenticating the narrator's account as impartial—this is important because it means the (sexual) violence can be represented without 'relish'—the narrator, although omniscient, is not 'responsible' for the content of the tale. We are denied focalizing insight into the brothers' motivations and are presented only with their actions:

Celegorm and Curufin rode up, hastening through the forest; and the brothers espied [Beren and Lúthien] and knew them from afar. Then Celegorm turned his horse, and spurred it upon Beren, purposing to ride him down; but Curufin swerving stooped and lifted Lúthien to his saddle, for he was a strong and cunning horseman. (208)

Thus denied other explanation, we can only assume that Curufin seizes Lúthien (as opposed to attempting to kill her) with a malicious intent that relates to the scheme to "force" Lúthien's hand in marriage (so he is seizing her either for himself or his brother to rape). The scene has a mythic quality; the horse and horseman, the swerving and stooping, the maiden caught unawares, are reminiscent of the abduction of the maiden by the centaur. Importantly this abduction is constructed as both opportunistic but also planned: the brothers see the couple "from afar" and *choose* to pursue them unawares—this is no sudden loss of control or a 'crime of passion' in their quest for vengeance; it is an unprovoked and calculated attack.

The sexual violence is emphasized in the imagery: Celegorm rides down upon his male sexual rival "with a spear" (208), but, saved by Huan the wolfhound, Beren escapes and instead "despoiled [Curufin] of his gear and weapons" (208) *at the request of Lúthien*. Again there is the emphasis on female mercy as a quality intrinsic to the good woman—any depredation to self or loved ones might be threatened but still the good woman will plead for mercy. In this case the mercy takes the form of the symbolic castration of Curufin in the

removal of his knife, Angrist; likewise his steed is removed from him—for the use of Lúthien. In an almost comic inversion of Curufin's attempted abduction of Lúthien, Curufin must now ride as (unwilling) passenger behind his brother Celegorm. The humiliation of this feminine mercy would seem to be worse than death for Curufin who, "being filled with shame and malice, took the bow of Celegorm and shot back as they went; and the arrow was aimed at Lúthien" (209). The narrator spells out that the arrow was aimed at Lúthien, and, were we in doubt as to that, it is confirmed that he aims at her again: "but Curufin shot again, and Beren sprang before Lúthien and the dart smote him in the breast" (209). Lúthien will save Beren (again) just as he has saved her in this attack.

But though Beren and Lúthien enjoy a brief respite after this event, there are further elements of rape narrative in Lúthien's tale as she undertakes with Beren to face Morgoth. As readers we need no narrative 'guidance' as to how we should read Morgoth, but it is worthwhile picking out a few details which particularly chime with the notion of sexual violence. One is that, yet again, the innocents are subject to unknown surveillance for "Carcharoth espied them from afar" (212). This is followed, however, not by the capture or humiliation of Lúthien as might be expected, but instead a willing and frank divestiture by Lúthien whereby her true and divine beauty is revealed from under her disguise:

But suddenly some power, descended from of old of divine race,
possessed Lúthien, and casting back her foul raiment she stood forth,
small before the might of Carcharoth, but radiant and terrible. (212)

This same device, wherein truth, beauty, and nakedness are aligned, forms part of Lúthien's approach to Morgoth, in a scene that dares to imply female sexual power as a positive force. Lúthien faces Morgoth naked and unflinching, naming herself and offering herself like Scheherazade:

Lúthien was stripped of her disguise by the will of Morgoth, and he bent
his gaze upon her. She was not daunted by his eyes; and she named her
own name, and offered her service to sing before him, after the manner of
a minstrel. (212)

Although the passive voice is used for the stripping of Lúthien, and she is the object of Morgoth's gaze, Lúthien's subjectivity is restored in both language and meaning in the sentence that follows these actions—so "She was not daunted by his eyes" rather than 'his eyes did not daunt her.' The restoration of active voice subjectivity to Lúthien is a powerful narrative technique and her actions—naming herself, offering to sing—have a self-conscious knowledge of her own power and desirability; Lúthien presents herself as a subject rather than an object of desire, and she does so knowingly and with cunning purpose, in another

inversion of what might normally be expected of the good woman/victim narrative. Because Lúthien is shown to have knowingly planned to enchant Morgoth with beauty and song, Lúthien is not constructed as a victim; nonetheless the use—whether unwitting or calculated—of beauty as a trigger for male sexual aggression is not easy to reconcile with a feminist appraisal of rape narrative.

Morgoth does indeed respond to Lúthien's (al)lure:

Then Morgoth looking upon her beauty conceived in his thought an evil lust, and a design more dark than any that had yet come into his heart since he fled from Valinor. Thus he was beguiled by his own malice, for he watched her, leaving her free for a while, and taking secret pleasure in his thought. Then suddenly she eluded his sight, and out of the shadows began a song of such surpassing loveliness, and of such blinding power, that he listened perforce; and a blindness came upon him, as his eyes roamed to and fro, seeking her. (212-13)

As before, the beauty of Lúthien (like Melian before) is blinding and likewise her song (like that of Melian before) is of immense power, lulling even Morgoth to sleep so that Beren may rescue a Silmaril. The thematic connection of “beauty” to “evil lust” and “dark design” points unequivocally to the intended rape of Lúthien by Morgoth; but what is interesting is the construction of this desire as the *most evil* of Morgoth's designs “since he fled from Valinor.” There are some 120 pages between Morgoth's flight from Valinor to his encounter with Lúthien, most of which narrate the fell deeds arising from the curse of the Noldor and the struggle between good and evil afflicting Middle-earth from its inception. That this focalization on Morgoth suggests the rape of Lúthien to be “a design more dark than any that had yet come into his heart” places such a crime in the realm of the symbolic and equates the heinous depravity of the act with the destruction of the sacred trees of Valinor or of the marring of the music of the Ainur or of the wrongful possession of the Silmarils—it is a challenge, corruption or violation of the divine. In this way the centrality of Lúthien to the fate of Middle-earth is still further confirmed—the union and progeny of Beren and Lúthien is the saving of Middle-earth but the union and progeny of Lúthien and Morgoth would be its annihilation. Although ‘beauty as a trigger of sexual violence’ is a problematic concept if understood in a realist mode relating to the lived experience of historical women, within mythic, symbolic or archetypal mode it expresses something of our imperfect human understanding of the beauty of the divine—and its potential if not inevitable corruption.

Conclusion

Tolkien's use of rape narrative throughout *The Silmarillion* is carefully judged so as to avoid a literal representation of rape while still maximizing the narrative and symbolic impact of the crime. Indeed Tolkien posits that, in mythic mode at least, rape is one of the most heinous crimes, tantamount to an assault on the divine. Through a range of literary techniques including focalization, narrative structure, narrational style, lexical choice and syntax, imagery, and characterization, Tolkien provides a mainly mythic mode for our reading of the two central rape narratives discussed here; and this mythic mode is central to our assessment of the problematic positing of beauty as a trigger for sexual violence. Tolkien may use some of the characteristics of a typical rape narrative trajectory wherein the man will save or avenge the female victim, and where rape is almost a logical expectation for the beautiful woman, but his representation is never facile, never gratuitous, and never straightforward. In this way he plays with the conventions not just of rape narrative, but of romance and gender. As Maureen Thum argues in her comparative study of women in Tolkien's legendarium and their representation in Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*: "Tolkien by no means underwrites [...] binary views of gender construction [...]. [He] almost invariably portrays powerful women positively" (Thum 235); such an approach favors a generous assessment of Tolkien's representation of rape narrative relating to the two very different characters of Aredhel and Lúthien, as even the somewhat more mundane character of Aredhel can be read in an elevated mythic context through Tolkien's use of recurring motifs of beauty, surveillance, duplicity, captivity, and corruption. It is in the story of Lúthien, however, that the true significance of rape narrative (and the role of beauty within it) as myth is explored by Tolkien, with rape as the ultimate corruption of beauty—and therefore of the divine. In this way Tolkien has successfully negotiated the demands of using rape narrative in a non-misogynist and meaningful manner.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Horeck, Tanya. *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Lewis, Alex, and Elizabeth Currie. *The Uncharted Realms of Tolkien: A Critical Study of Text, Context and Subtext in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Oswestry: Medea, 2002.
- Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2001.
- Tatar, Maria, ed. *The Classic Fairy Tales*. Norton Critical Edition. New York and London: Norton, 1999.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: Harper Collins, 1999 (1977).
- Thum, Maureen. "The 'Sub-Subcreation' of Galadriel, Arwen and Éowyn: Women of Power in Tolkien's and Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*." *Tolkien on Film: Essays on Peter Jackson's The Lord of the Rings*. Ed. Janet Brennan Croft. Altadena, CA: Mythopoeic Press, 2004. 231-256.
- Warner, Marina. *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2004.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LYNN WHITAKER is in the final stages of a Ph.D. at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, investigating the production of children's public service broadcasting, and is also a research assistant at the Centre for Rural Childhood, Perth UHI. In addition to her formal research interests in all aspects of children and media, she enjoys Tolkien scholarship and is an active member of the UK Tolkien Society; Lynn is Chair of their 2012 event, 'Return of the Ring.'

