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Galadriel and Morgan le Fey: Tolkien's Redemption of the Lady of the Lacuna

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Abstract

Looks at Galadriel's role in the text of *The Lord of the Rings*—specifically at what is *not* revealed about her there—finding parallels with the treatment of Morgan le Fey in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, one of the Middle English texts with which Tolkien was most associated as a scholar.

Additional Keywords

Morgan le Fey; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Galadriel

GALADRIEL AND MORGAN LE FEY:
TOLKIEN'S REDEMPTION OF THE LADY OF THE LACUNA

SUSAN CARTER

In that realm [the realm of fairy-story] its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of a traveller who would report them. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost. (Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" 9)

LIKE Chaucer's Miller who advises that a man "shal nat been inquisityf / of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf" (3163-4)—should not pry into God's private affairs, nor those of his wife—Tolkien, traveler in his sub-created fantasy world, averts his reporter's gaze from feminine business. Galadriel, the Elven queen of *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*), is suggestively powerful, yet at enough of a remove that the boundaries of her authority remain unclear. So is Morgan le Fey in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*), a tale Tolkien translated from Middle English. (I have provided a brief summary of the tale at the end of this article for those to whom it is unfamiliar.) In both cases a sense of enigma is generated by the silence surrounding the women's ability to influence events and characters. We are never sure how they do what they do. We are never entirely sure how much they do. Their magic, a feminine faerie force, is thus both sinister and beguiling, a provocative puzzle that lingers as an after-image once the spotlighted heroes' actions have been fully registered. What is going on in the shadowy gaps of the texts?

As much as heroes must shine, these women need textual absence to be effective. Morgan, a model whom I believe influences Galadriel's enigmatic agency, is a good example of a fictional character who works the gap. She functions as a feminine site that receives all that is threatening about the Green Knight once Gawain gets to know him better and to discover that he really is just kidding after all: the Green Knight's menace really was just a sharp-edged Christmas game. The Green Knight is revealed to Gawain as Bertilak the genial host. Morgan remains a stranger: as such, she can be blamed as agent so that the males can bond more effectively. Then we hear nothing more about her, although

arguably that emblematic green girdle that Gawain takes home as a token is imprinted with her power.¹ Morgan remains an ominous shadow figure.

Of Galadriel too we get dark hints that her magic contains menace. Faramir cautions that "If Men have dealings with the Mistress of Magic who dwells in the Golden Wood, then they may look for strange things to follow. For it is perilous for mortal man to walk out of the world of the Sun, and few of old came thence unchanged, t'is said" (*LotR* 652). The Mistress of the Wood is Galadriel: Legolas identifies the eaves of the Golden Wood with Lothlórien, Galadriel's domain (328); Éomer calls Galadriel the Lady of the Golden Wood (953); and Gimli calls her "the Lady of the Wood" (513, 759). Robert Pogue Harrison explicates the forest as a long established locus of subversive magic as well as purity: Galadriel epitomizes a figure who belongs in the forest or wood, startlingly pure, and yet tainted with suspicion because she is both authoritative and elusive.² Faramir implies that Galadriel's power to see into Boromir's soul has pushed Boromir towards his death: "What did she say to you, the Lady that dies not? What did she see? What woke in your heart then?" Faramir cries in grief (652). Faramir fears that Galadriel's association with magic and her ability to see so deeply cause fateful changes in mortal men.

We also get hints that she may be extremely powerful: she is the one who summons the White Council (348); she wields one of the Three Elven Rings (379); she reveals her prescience through gifts that will save their recipients (365-7); and she prophesizes "the tides of fate are flowing" (357). At the end of *LotR* Galadriel departs majestically in a procession of other Elven folk; she is "upon a white palfrey, and was robed all in shimmering white, like clouds about the Moon; for she herself seemed to shine with a soft light" (1005). The description and simile aligns her with the Moon Goddess.³ For the duration of *LotR* Gandalf seems to be ubiquitous, all-knowing, rather like an outmoded representation of

¹ Scholarship about the girdle's symbolism is rich. See Ross Arthur, Priscilla Martin, Sarah Stanbury, Ralph III Hannah and Victor Yelverton Haines for arguments that support the ideas I present here. R. A. Shoaf argues that the girdle is "a sign of relativity and relationship" (6) although he is arguing that commerce is the context.

² Harrison declares that "If forests appear in our religions as places of profanity, they also appear as sacred. If they have typically been considered places of lawlessness, they have also provided havens for those who took up the cause of justice and fought the law's corruption. If they evoke associations of danger and abandon in our minds, they also evoke scenes of enchantment. In other words [...] the forest appears as a place where the logic of distinction goes astray. Or where our subjective categories are confounded. Or where perceptions become promiscuous with one another, disclosing latent dimensions of time and consciousness" (x).

³ See Robert Graves.

God the Father with his dignified age, stern voice and long white beard.⁴ Only after Galadriel has gone, and only upon reflection, we might wonder how much of the action was her responsibility, and to what extent did she, even more than Gandalf, hold pre-knowledge of the epic events, and exert goddess-like influence.

Both Morgan and Galadriel have knowledge, magic and agency that are never fully revealed but are implied. Quite literally reading between the lines—reading the silence—I propose that the lacuna surrounding Morgan, the puzzle generated by her veiled agency, is a trope in its own right. I dub her a lady of the lacuna. My starting point of peering into the shadows of hidden female agency leads me to propose that the Lady Galadriel is yet another female figure whose power is heightened by mystery: Galadriel's textual gap—what remains unspoken in *The Lord of the Rings*—is as dramatic as her shining white beauty, her wisdom, gifts and grace. A productive textual absence places Galadriel on a vector with Morgan; like Morgan, Galadriel is more agentive than what we can tell from her performance in this text.⁵ What is not said about Galadriel marks her as another motivating lady of the lacuna: a literary type. Furthermore, Tolkien recuperates the type that he knew so well from SGGK's Morgan. Who better to do this reclamation than Tolkien? The recuperation is in line with his comments on the potential of stories for recovery (see "On Fairy-Stories" [OFS]).⁶ Galadriel redeems the absent female agent motif that Morgan exemplifies.

It is not new to observe association between *LotR* and medieval material, including where Galadriel is concerned. In fact it is impossible not to be impressed by how much earlier artistry is craftily exploited, remade in her. Leslie A. Donovan emphasizes that in his female character Tolkien recycles the medieval "themes of light, prophecy, physical prowess, self-sacrifice, cultural leadership, unwavering will, public ceremony as a binding commitment, and the support of a chosen hero" (109). Galadriel's beauty associates her with early Celtic heroines. Her Elven link to forests links her to faeries such as Sir Launfal's Tryamour or Thomas of Erceldoune's fairy-queen lady, as well as to the

⁴ Cf. Michael Stanton who declares "Gandalf, of course, [...] is not human" but labels him "a kind of archangel" (47). Yet since archangels are depicted graphically as typically young and beautiful, fresh-faced with no beard, and with short curly blonde hair, I find more similarity to depictions of God the Father. Stanton also points out that when Gandalf challenges the Balrog he calls himself "wielder of the flame of Anor" and that this is the sun. In line with Stanton's observation I note that there is a sense, then, that Gandalf is the patriarchal Sun god and Galadriel the matriarchal Moon goddess.

⁵ She is a more active agent in material included in *The Silmarillion* and several volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*; see Lakowski, this issue, 91-104.

⁶ Deidre Dawson also discusses Tolkien's "project of cultural recovery" (107), a project that I believe is effective in bringing the past into the present and future.

wilderness landscape of SGGK. Her magic authority also associates her with the medieval fairy queens; her mirror of water, with female Celtic deities.⁷ Her brief image of shape-shifting and her king-endorsment provide a slender yet distinct link with the Loathly Lady. This tissue of connections consistently overlaps with Morgan le Fey's network of association. Closer inspection of Morgan illuminates Tolkien's use of her mythic dimension in Galadriel. Yet Tolkien translates what is dark, satirical, and sinister about Morgan into a light-giving figure of hope.

As well as being aware of the restorative potential of stories, Tolkien also famously recognized the importance of monsters to readers as well as heroes (see "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" [BMC]). He noticed that there is something deeply satisfying about the demise of literary monsters. Each time that Grendel's severed arm is hung above the doorway once more we crowd in to rejoice that our hero has overcome the monstrous, the alien, the border crosser, the *mearc-staper*, whatever it is we fear from the borderlands that mark the boundaries of our human world of lived experience. And heroes, by definition hoggers of narrative spot-light, call for combatants.⁸ They prove their worth only by defying and outbidding alternative powers. As heroes set out to grapple, the monsters that a society fears emerge from the unknown and are defeated, at least for the meantime. Of course it is never that straightforward, as, again, Tolkien seems so well aware.⁹ Female testers are an especially distracting challenge, for example, evoking a web of archetypal desire and fear. Female agency has its own kind of darkness. Morgan le Fey's authority, well-known to Tolkien, is submerged, insinuated, and sly. He reclaims the trope of female authority-in-absence through Galadriel, whose authority is submerged, insinuated and salvatory.

What might have attracted Tolkien to use this trope? The shadows, gaps, and atmospheric fogginess of Morgan's agency are highly provocative to the imagination. As the Green Knight shrinks to the size of a companion, Morgan looms larger because we do not hear enough about her.¹⁰ Morgan's role is

⁷ Mary Low notes that "Rivers were often associated with Otherworld women in early Christian Ireland. Many were almost certainly the old 'river goddesses' of Irish primal religion" (66). Low considers wells with Christian and pagan powers, proposing that "water-deities" were "mostly female," despite the fact that "Most holy wells are nowadays associated with male saints" (66-7). See Jean Rudhardt for an explication of the feminine and sexual symbolism of water.

⁸ See J. A. Burrow for a pertinent anatomy of how heroic superlativism works (pp.160 – 171).

⁹ Chance locates the way that Tolkien resists the binary of them and us, and celebrates what is queer.

¹⁰ See Lorraine Kochanske Stock for an investigation of the rather curious links between Morgan and the Green Knight.

perhaps the weirdest thing in this tale of wonder that includes shape-shifting, green-colored, decapitation-surviving flesh. Almost at the end of a most descriptive and engaging tale comes the unexpected denouement in which the Green Knight reveals who he is. That he should be Bertilak the convivial host as well as the Green Knight, the terrifying challenger who gallops off with his head in his hand and later sharpens a huge axe for the return blow, is made even more peculiar because he takes identity from Morgan's might. We are not explicitly told how her chain of command works; is Bertilak a spirit, perhaps the spirit of nature, or is he a mortal given perfectly ordinary material power by her? Instead of spelling out what he means, he goes on to talk about Morgan rather than himself:

Bertilak de Hautdesert I hat in þis londe.
þurȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous lenges
And koyntyse of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned,
þe maystrés of Merlyn, mony hatz taken—
For ho hatz dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme
With þat conable klerk þat knowes alle your knyȝteȝ at hame.
Morgne þe goddes
Perfore hit is hir name,
Weldez non so hyȝe hawtesse
þat ho ne con make ful tame. (2445-55)¹¹

Thus the Green Knight reveals his identity as Bertilak de Hautdesert, but his status is somehow dependent on Morgan le Fey, who stays with him, and has so much power that she is called Morgan the Goddess.¹² She is extremely proud, and there is no one so haughty or proud that she cannot tame him completely. By the stage of the tale at which this denouement is made, the Green Knight has provided a serious and sustained supernatural threat to the Round Table; now, startlingly, he declares that his uniqueness is predicated on an ugly old woman with huge buttocks that Gawain briefly met earlier, who, surprisingly, now turns out to be the Goddess, Morgan.¹³

Why does Morgan live with Bertilak and his lady? Why is his identity so overshadowed by her and her magic? His very odd introduction of himself through nine rather vague lines about her raises a host of questions like a

¹¹ Quotations from Silverstein's critical edition.

¹² The identification of Morgan as a goddess emphasizes her Celtic origins.

¹³ See John Matthews and Ruben Myares Valdes for discussion of Morgan le Fey as a Celtic goddess. Celtic sources for *SGGK* are long established, for example by George Lyman Kittredge who specifies the "two distinct adventures:—1) the exchange of blows with the axe [...] 'The Challenge,' and 2) the experiences at the castle of Bertilak [...] 'The Temptation' (7-8).

convenient Celtic mist.¹⁴ Bertilak goes on to spell out Sir Gawain's link to Morgan, but not his own. All that can be added is that Morgan first appeared briefly at the left hand of Bertilak's Lady, and was with her and Gawain for several meals: not enough of a clue to support this abrupt disclosure of who-done-it. The hasty explanation seems like a piece of flimsy plot work. Or does it?

Action confined to the chasms off the page has an extra-textual imaginative force of its own, bound into the psychological work of mythology and fantasy. The lady of the lacuna is a motif that is laden with suspicion. Chaucer's Miller, through vulgar and barbed innuendo, raises the likelihood that what women do unknown is best kept unknown because it is nasty and damaging. This slur seems true of Morgan. By suggesting that Morgan does more than we see, Bertilak skews the account of Sir Gawain's adventure dramatically, deconstructs it, or reconstructs it under the influence of female agency.¹⁵

Through her agent the Green Knight, it would seem to be actually Morgan who demands of the feasting brotherhood, "Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes, / Your gryndellayk and your greme and your grete wordes?" (311-2). We hear these words from the Green Knight, but once he says that it was all Morgan's idea, she effectively becomes the author. Her large challenge mockingly probes the knighthood's military prowess, their puissance, and, most cuttingly, the bit that shaped national identity and ideals: their rhetoric. Revealing at the end of the tale that it is a feminine challenge to a masculine elite rather than the throwing down of an honorable masculine gauntlet (which is what it seemed to be, coming from the Green Knight's lips) makes the challenge even more vexatious and playful.¹⁶ I propose that Tolkien similarly constructs Galadriel so that only at the end of the story might the reader return to reconsider her role as more central than seems on first reading. Galadriel's covert agency is of course clearly less bothersome than Morgan's, and in her power for good, Galadriel transforms the trope.

Nonetheless, Galadriel also challenges and tests the fellowship in her own tale. Before the Fellowship determine their mission and set off, she tests them individually by looking searchingly at them in turn, a look that only Legolas and Aragorn can endure for long (and it is this look that grief-stricken Faramir suspects caused his brother Boromir's downfall). Sam Gamgee identifies

¹⁴ Michael W. Twomey considers why Bertilak takes his identity through Morgan le Fey's magic.

¹⁵ See too Carolyn Dinshaw's investigation of the homoerotic potential of *SGGK*; Morgan's authority is part of the gender slippage.

¹⁶ Patricia Clare Ingham notes that tales of Arthur often "narrate the impossibilities, the aggressions, and the traumas, of British insular community" (2). The sinister challenge from Morgan demonstrates Ingham's point.

his discomfort later: "I felt as if I hadn't got nothing on, and I didn't like it. She seemed to be looking inside me" (348), and his humbly expressed discomfort is shared: "[a]ll of them, it seemed, had fared alike: each had felt that he was offered a choice between a shadow full of fear that lay ahead, and something that he greatly desired: clear before his mind it lay, and to get it he had only to turn aside from the road and leave the Quest and the war against Sauron to others" (348-9). Galadriel's testing is thus a quasi-divine searching of the soul, a testing of loyalty and fortitude in the face of desire. Her inner probing accords with one of the central themes in *LotR*: the subjugation of personal desire to common good.

Perhaps because her soul searching is discomfiting, Galadriel is suspected of being dangerous: Faramir suspects that she is "perilously fair" (664). Sam Gamgee, a trenchant analyst, vocalizes suspicion of Galadriel, locating her threat in her strength: "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" (665). Arguably Tolkien is working the medieval trick, found in the morality plays for example, of having other characters state their doubts about a character, here Galadriel, so that suspicion of her is pulled into overt expression, and later is allayed in an affirmation of her goodness.¹⁷ For Galadriel proves to be, unlike Morgan, a woman whose strength is on the home side of the hero.

Galadriel shares some pragmatic details with Morgan: Galadriel's first appearance in the *LotR* is similar in several ways to Morgan's in *SGGK*. Both Morgan and Galadriel enter about a third of the way in to their respective texts, and accompanied by figures who seem to be more important than each of them but who prove not to be. Although she is highly influential, there is something strangely tardy about Galadriel's appearance in the work about a third of the way into the book. Galadriel's initial introduction is with her lord, Celeborn, and the pair are equally tall, "very tall they were, and the Lady no less tall than the Lord" (345); both are "clad wholly in white" (345); and their depth of bright eyes bespeak deep wells of memory: wisdom is implicitly associated with the purity of whiteness in *LotR*.¹⁸

Galadriel's entry with her lord suggests that she is kept within the confines of gender roles more securely than Morgan, yet this rather oblique if not untruthful introduction is in accordance with Tolkien's quite Spenserian habit of allowing characters to sidle into the narrative in disguise. Spenser regularly employs the sophisticated tease of misleadingly introducing his characters in the *Faerie Queene* from the perspective of those who see them. For example, the evil

¹⁷ Joseph's cynicism about the pregnant Mary's virginity in the Wakefield *Annunciation* and his subsequent acceptance of divine agency is an example of this. See *The Wakefield Mystery Plays*, 153-59.

¹⁸ See Leslie A. Donovan for close reading evidence of "the immanent brilliance [...] so central to the Elf queen's nature" 113-5.

magician Archimago first appears as an “aged Sire” (I i 29), a self-confessed “silly old man” (I i 30), and a “Hermit” living in a “litle lowly Hermitage,” and “wont to say / His holy things each morne and euentyde” (I i 34), while Britomart the virtuous warrior maiden appears as “a knight” (III i 4), to whom the masculine personal pronoun is applied until she takes off her helmet and reveals herself. Similarly, Aragorn the future king enters only as Strider, “a strange-looking weather-beaten man, sitting in the shadows near the wall [...]. He had a tall tankard in front of him, and was smoking a long-stemmed pipe curiously carved” (153); Strider is a shadowy figure who might be a gypsy. The king in disguise is of course a medieval trope, but I am proposing that so is the lady of the lacuna. Galadriel is, like Morgan, considerably more important than her entrance into *LotR* suggests.

Galadriel is the Lady partnering her Lord in a royal hall. One might expect that he will wield the political force of the two, although this expectation is undermined immediately and later will need to be more seriously revised. Morgan too comes with a partner. With even less of the narrative limelight, she enters as “an oper lady” accompanying a younger and much more desirable lady, the Lady who belongs to Sir Bertilak, Gawain’s rather rowdy host. Bertilak’s lady beguiles and entertains the reader as well as Sir Gawain for a large part of *SGGK*, but at the end is little more than a piece of fluff doing someone else’s bidding rather well.

If physical codes are to be simplistically interpreted, Morgan is identified from her first description as evil: she is old and ugly. Furthermore, she is in a position of extreme contrast, holding the hand of one who is “fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre / And of compas and colour and costes, of alle oper, / And wener þen Wenore, as þe wyze þoʒt” (944-6) [fairest in her skin, her form, her complexion, her bearing, her manner, and lovelier than Guinevere, the man thought]. The “wyze” is Sir Gawain. At the time of entry, Morgan is seen through the subjective eyes of the lusty Gawain, with the shift of narrative voice to his perspective emphasized by “as the wyze þoʒt.” Morgan seems to be there merely as a foil to the beauty of the Lady of the castle. “An auncian” with “[r]ugh ronkled chekez,” features “soure to se and sellyly blered,” a short thick body and notably large buttocks (“hir buttokez balʒ and brode”) one who is both stout yet also “ʒolʒe” [withered with age], Morgan is laughable despite assurance that she is highly honored (947-67). Her introduction, especially the rather bizarre glance at her large buttocks, is unexplained: it simply provides a grotesque backdrop against which the younger Lady’s beauty stands out as more fair. The “auncian” might be set there as a memento mori accompaniment to tempting beauty, or as a misogynist reminder that beautiful women become old and unattractive, but there is little suggestion that Morgan is powerful, or at all consequential, in terms of the plot. On first entry to their respective tales, then, both Morgan and

Galadriel are overshadowed by partners who are more promising according to the (actually rather strict) narrative rules that promote males as more active than females, and younger beautiful women as more significant than older ugly women.

However, from the outset, hints suggest that Galadriel is wiser and more far-seeing than her Lord, Celeborn. Her voice, "clear and musical, but deeper than woman's wont" (346), obliquely signals the chasm that Tolkien must bridge in showing that as well as being young and beautiful as she must be to enchant, she is also (like Morgan) extremely old and therefore wise: her height as well as her depth of voice suggests age, arguably masculinity, and authority. Her first direct speech shows her skilful interpretation of events to which she has no apparent access: before the others in her court are aware that Gandalf has had a misadventure, she adds the facts together that there is no change in counsel, therefore Gandalf should have arrived, and she deduces, therefore, that something has happened to him. Her prescience signals that she is a woman of deep inner ability. Shortly later she directly contradicts Celeborn, declaring his assessment of the situation to be "rash indeed," albeit that her contradiction is couched in the diplomatic passive-voice avoidance of agency. (She actually politely distances Celeborn's rash speech from him, by declaring, "He would be rash indeed that said that thing" [347]; the subjunctive along with the third person pronoun shows that she is an expert at linguistic discretion as well as intelligent comprehension.) From Galadriel's first appearance there are clues that she has an authority independent of her king's, and superior to his: although she is a diplomat like Beowulf's Wealhþeow, she is more than just a judicious cup-bearer.

Like Morgan, Galadriel is, arguably, a woman in a masculinist heroic tale who wields authority. Perhaps it is because this is unladylike that they do so out of reach of readerly attention. Michael N. Stanton, arguing that gender is not important to Galadriel's agency, claims that "the way Galadriel exercises power may be typically womanly, but her possession of that power and her nobility come from her being an Elf, not a female" (132). Although racial peace-weaving is significant to Galadriel, so in that context her Elfishness important, I am suggesting that Galadriel's power and her method of exercising it are in fact signposted as problematically feminine by the fact that they are hidden. Cup-bearing and gift-giving are traditionally the work of royal women, and Galadriel performs these duties with dignified beauty on the page. Her prescience, like her searching of souls, gestures to an agency that is discomforting in a woman, so is not fully explicated on the page.

Yet consideration of gender roles raises another possibility in the case of Morgan at least: the usefulness of women in exchanges between men, and to broker ideas about men. This potential provides a link to the Irish sovereignty

hag, another literary trope, namely the Loathly Lady,¹⁹ and one that both Morgan and Galadriel resemble in their quasi-goddess power over men, their suggested physical duality, and their contribution to a discourse about masculine behavior. Morgan's complexity underpins Galadriel's links with the Loathly Lady.

The fact that Morgan is blamed as the Green Knight becomes an ally of Sir Gawain's suggests that she is a terminal for monstrous aspects of his masculine behavior rather than a female force with a serious power of her own. Her function as a female who can be blamed so that the male agent is free from culpability balances rather tidily against the same paradigm by which Bertilak's lady is the repository for Sir Gawain's misogynist outburst. Gawain too blames women for his own weakness. Gawain first makes a pact with Bertilak, then later promises secrecy to his lady, a secrecy which forces him to break his pact; when the Green Knight reveals his identity, he also knows that Gawain broke their masculine pact while preserving his loyalty to the lady. Confronted by the embarrassing fact that he has been sprung, Gawain lurches into a conventional complaint against women: foolish men "þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe, / For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled" [through wiles of women are brought to sorrow, / For so was Adam on earth by one beguiled] and Gawain continues for another twelve lines citing a litany of treacherous women, and berating women as a species for their "wyles" (2414-2428).²⁰ The outburst is uncharacteristic of the chivalrous Sir Gawain, lending a nice psychological realism to his squirming discomfort at finding himself exposed as a cheat. Yet the unusually testy tone emphasizes SGGK's pattern by which male frailty is twice displaced onto women.

Indeed, I suggest that the sense that Morgan and Bertilak's lady function as one unit with dual aspects of beauty and ugliness, so function together as a Loathly Lady after the ilk of Dame Ragnelle, results from this paradigm of displacement that they share.²¹ (It is not new to make the association between Morgan le Fey and the Irish Sovereignty hag.²²) The Loathly Lady motif, in its

¹⁹ See Whitney Stokes and Edward Gwynn. Sigmund Eisner gives a convenient single description of the sovereignty tales' sources.

²⁰ See Alcuin Blamires for a discussion and demonstration of literary misogyny in medieval texts. Ralph III Hanna and Traugott Lawer also provide *Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyoes: The Primary Texts*. Cf. Howard R. Bloch.

²¹ See Lorraine Kochanske Stock for a fairly recent analysis of Morgan's relationship to the Loathly Lady. See too Susan Carter for a detailed comparison of SGGK and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*.

²² Detectives who chart the terrain of the Loathly Lady include William R. Albrecht, Francis James Child, Arthur C. L. Brown, Eisner, Roger Sherman Loomis, G. M. Maynardier, Alfred Nutt, Stokes, Jessie L. Weston and Bartlett J. Whiting. Note that the poet of SGGK is unlikely to have known of the Irish material. Helen Cooper cautions that it is unlikely that

earliest Irish sovereignty form, is an allegory about the male experience of kingship, so it has always offered a shape-shifting female body to the service of ideas about masculinity. The ugly hag—a quasi-goddess in the Irish tales—teaches the male hero and transforms him to power as well herself to beauty to provide a happy ending. Morgan the hag is blamed for motivating the dangerous fun that launches the tale; Bertilak's lovely lady, for being the wily seducer who keeps the entertaining testing of Gawain alive. Blaming their combined "wyles" allows Gawain and Bertilak to be somewhat cleared of the imperfection that puts them into antagonism, transforming them for a reasonably happy ending, or, at least, an amicable settlement between two blokes with the ladies excluded.²³ The Loathly Lady, noumenal rather than phenomenal, has a time-honored function of re-educating and redeeming the male protagonist; *SGGK* brings in Morgan and Bertilak's lady hand in hand looking like the polarized extremes of the feminine spectrum of beauty and hag; between them they take the rap for the challenge and temptation of the tale. Tolkien, I suspect, was aware of the women's work as blame repositories and allows some of the shiftiness of the Morgan/Bertilak's lady duo to enrich the otherwise exemplary Galadriel.

With about the same amount of understated suggestion, Galadriel too shows a glimpse of the dual figure when she considers the possibility of taking the One Ring for herself and with it corruptive power. Peter Jackson's film slides into cartoon mode to underscore this duality, whereas Tolkien's book gives the glimpse more subtly, and yet with linguistic texture that bespeaks of the Celtic origins of the Loathly Lady. Galadriel describes her own potential for evil: "In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightening! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!" (356). The Irish sovereignty hag is described in terms of the land, her head "like a furzy mountain." Like the figure of Nature in medieval literature, she is of enormous size: "her ear like a sleeping booth," and there is fear that whichever prince takes up her demand for sexual union will be "lost."²⁴ Enormous, bound into land imagery, she is also ugly in human terms, because she represents the kingdom—the grotesque blood-soaked experience of winning it and the beautiful

the Gawain poet would be aware of early Celtic sources, but Elisabeth Brewer makes speculative good sense of the sources of the poem.

²³ Sheila Fisher points out of *SGGK* that "whatever meanings accumulate around the threat of women [...] female sexuality is the source, if not the essence, of them all" (79), but actually Morgan's threat is more oblique than being merely a sexual one, and the truly threatening aspect is the sense of the two women working at both ends of the triple Goddess spectrum as hag and desirable beauty.

²⁴ Maire Bhreathnach considers the darker side of the Loathly Lady.

experience of ruling it. Galadriel's self-description poetically locates the terrible beauty of the Sovereignty hag whose political paradox—the terrible and lovely nature of control—is enfolded in the duality of the Loathly Lady motif. Galadriel briefly invokes this duality with a lyricism that includes aspect of time, cosmology and the foundations of earth, a gesture towards her link with Celtic goddesses of the land.

The Irish sovereignty hag's personification enables the endorsement of the true king of this genealogy tale told to legitimate the actual king within an actual court. Galadriel incidentally performs the king-making function of the Loathly Lady when she identifies Aragorn as leader through her gift of the Elfstone, at the point in the epic when he is still unidentified as future king. Thus Galadriel too, like Morgan, has links to the Loathly Lady.

Hints of Galadriel's power are sprinkled rather obliquely throughout the book, but perhaps the first noticeable clue is her ability to see beyond the confines of time in her Mirror. The Mirror of Galadriel allows her to see and show others a vision of the world: "things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be." This vision is also harsh with prophecy, showing things that are "often stranger and more profitable than things that we wish to behold" (352). Water and magical women go back a long way. Michael W. Maher, S.J. makes a link via the Mirror between Galadriel and the Virgin Mary as the Mirror of Justice (231), yet pagan links to feminine guardians of wells, streams and lakes are perhaps more obvious.

When the Fellowship leave the Elves they look back to see where Galadriel "shone [...] as a remote lake seen from a mountain" (368), and Gandalf later sings "Galadriel! Galadriel! / Clear is the water of your well" (503). Galadriel's metaphorical association with the lake and the well aligns her with Celtic goddesses of water and wells. Perhaps the most complex and beautiful of Irish sovereignty tales, *Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid*, mingles pagan and Christian values in the element of water.²⁵ Through water the power of women is measured out; women control the wells in this twelfth century tale.²⁶ For Niall,

²⁵ For a theological consideration of water, see Tertullian's *De baptismo* (c200), which H. G. Wood notes "tells us more about the practice and doctrine [...] than any previous authority" (386). Mac Cana addresses the problem of "how substantially the characteristic conservatism of Irish tradition has been modified by the externally derived innovations of Christianity" (143).

²⁶ Stokes states that there are two extant manuscripts, "the Yellow Book of Lecan, a ms. of the fourteenth century in the library of Trinity College, Dublin, and the Book of Ballymote, a ms. of about the same age, belonging to the Royal Irish Academy" (172). Stokes also explains that the history of the tale occurred in the fourth and fifth centuries. He proposes that the tale is "clumsily put together" (172), yet "not without simple but poignant pathos"

the hero, water is a life-and-death substance from before his birth. Niall's father, a "wondrous and noble king" begets him on Cairenn Casdub, a young slave, incurring the jealousy of his queen, Mongfind. In the hopes that the unborn child of her sexual rival will die, Mongfind orders Cairenn to draw water for the whole household while she is pregnant. When her son is born, it is outside, beside the well, during his mother's work of hauling up water. Afraid of the queen, Cairenn leaves him there, unattended, and pestered by birds. But the well which was to have broken his mother's strength and terminate his life serves instead to strengthen and bless him.

Water returns to the tale as a lack at the well of the woman, a testing site. Niall and his half-brothers, lost in the forest, are thirsty. The first one to seek water chances upon a well, "and saw an old woman guarding it" (Stokes 197). Old, diseased, with huge strong green teeth reaching to her ears, she is "loathsome in sooth" (197); when the hag demurs that the condition of drawing water is "one kiss on my cheek," the lad refuses, declaring that he "would rather perish of thirst than give [...] a kiss" (199).²⁷ Finally, it is Niall's turn to seek water. When he chances upon the well, he demands "Water to me, O woman," a terse imperative which contrasts with the more oblique enquiry of his elder step-brother: "Dost thou permit me to take away some of the water?" (199).²⁸ His direct approach is compounded in response to her demands; he declares "Besides giving thee a kiss, I will lie with thee!" (199). The virility that Gawain epitomizes springs from this Celtic well-head. Tolkien would have known the Irish material—he cites G. L. Kittredge for those wanting the Irish analogues to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight—so would be aware of how evocative the medium of water is in transactions of female power. Galadriel has sources in Germanic literature,²⁹ but she also has Celtic qualities that align her with Morgan.

Although Morgan and Galadriel are both more agentive than they seem on entry to their respective texts, Morgan's force proves to be pettily malevolent, Galadriel's a salvation. Their clothing signals this, in line with medieval convention. Morgan is lavishly clad in silk, with "chalkquyte vayles" [chalk-

(172-3). I find a greater degree of sophistication in this version, given the organization around the well motif, and the connotations inherent in the element of water.

²⁷ Defending "the hateful *fée* who represents the sovereignty" Arthur Brown proposes in one throwaway footnote that the hag who guards water in this tale "may be a parallel to the damsel guarding the Grail" (210-1). Such a suggestion captures the syncretism of both motifs, and furthermore aligns feminine sexuality—I am suggesting that the Grail is a womblike source of grace—with these two images of women and life-giving water.

²⁸ Kim McCone notes that "female symbols of sovereignty are not infrequently represented as bestowing a drink upon kings-to-be" (109).

²⁹ See Shippey and Donovan.

white veils] (958) swathed around a swarthy chin. Morgan's throatier sounding chalk-white seems less white than Galadriel's. Morgan's chalky white registers the greyer moral fabric of her world, and also her own murkier moral function. Galadriel is "wholly in white" with the echo of "holy in white" spelling out that any inter-textual comparison can not be about better laundry powder but must be about moral purity. Tolkien redeems Morgan's costume of chalk-white to an aspirantly spiritual whiteness for Galadriel.

The brilliance of Galadriel's white clothing is symbolically accurate because she is more truly good than Morgan. This is unsurprising in that the moral scales of the two texts are quite different: *LotR* is an epic in which good and evil forces guide and obstruct the characters, with the world to be lost to evil at stake; *SGGK* is a limited, personal (mis)adventure that nudges suggestively towards the genre of fablieau.³⁰ Within the context of a world saved or lost, Galadriel backs away from control when she is offered the One Ring because the moral pitch is serious, and she must be either good or most terribly evil. She is thus made more clearly good than Morgan. Galadriel redeems the Celtic Moon Goddess from her dark and earthy associations with male bloodshed and elevates her to a figure of the Dawn.

Jane Chance argues (not without contestation) that Tolkien dislikes "most of all [...] segregation of the Other, and isolation of those who are different, whether by race, nationality, class, age, or gender" (172). The case is more complex than this emphatic argument allows, and that superlative "most of all" makes Chance's position less defensible, but nonetheless it is clear that Tolkien frequently subverts the patterns of epic to allow what is alien into the circle of fellowship. He also allows for transformation of some of the earlier material he recycles.

The character of Galadriel shows a recuperation and inclusion of the female agent who governs through magic knowledge. Tolkien's analysis of the affective power of text is evident in his critical commentary. His edition of *SGGK* means that he well understood Morgan le Fey's role as the absent agent who manipulates the plot behind the scene, thereby generating multiple meanings and readings. Galadriel too works behind the scenes, taking a richness and depth of character from the shadowiness that at times contaminates her with suspicion. If she were not a little feared as well as fair, her character would be considerably thinner than it is. Paradoxically more fully dimensioned by what is unstated, she recovers the lady of the lacuna trope that Tolkien knew well in Morgan from *SGGK*.

³⁰ Theodore Silverstein declares that *SGGK* is "a comedy of manners" (1).

A summary of SGGK

After establishing England's link to Rome through Brutus, the poem introduces Arthur as an exemplum of Englishness. It is Christmas and Arthur and his court are about to eat their splendid feast, but Arthur is waiting because he has a practice of not eating till someone has provided an entertainment [cultural identity establishment?]. Suddenly into the hall gallops an enormous handsome green-colored knight on an enormous elaborately decorated green-colored horse [nature personified?]. He says he comes as a friend to offer a Christmas game. Game rules are that one of the Round Table knights will chop off the Green Knight's head this year (and he has an enormous axe) and next year the Green Knight will cut off the Arthurian knight's head. [The decapitation myth is first found in early Irish material so has Celtic origins.] The Round Table knights are stunned to silence, and the Green Knight challenges them with taunts—he can see they are just beardless children despite all he has heard. Arthur is goaded to accept the challenge, but Sir Gawain steps in to take it himself [presumably to protect Arthur]. Gawain decisively decapitates the Green Knight, whose head rolls round the floor. The Green Knight picks it up, and it speaks from his hand saying, "See you at the Green Chapel in a year's time," and then he gallops out. Every one eats their feast.

The year passes. It grows cold and wintry. Gawain's heart begins to sink. He sets out after being suitably armed including with a shield decorated with a pentagon representing Christian motifs and also Gawain's personal virtues. He passes through a symbolic landscape which is icy and bleak [and Tolkienesque]. He sleeps frozen on the ground. On the third day he prays to the Virgin Mary for help, and almost at once a castle appears on the horizon. He asks for a night's lodging there.

The host is genial, and invites him in to a wonderful feast. His lady is beautiful, although accompanied by an older woman clearly of high status but also rather ugly with huge buttocks. The host proposes that Gawain stay for a while. Gawain explains he must get to the Green Chapel by New Year's Day [seasonal myths?] but the host says it is nearby so Gawain can stay for three days and nights and still keep his appointment. [Celtic triads proliferate]. The host sets up a jolly game. Gawain is to stay home cozily with the ladies all day while the host will go hunting, and at the evening meal they will exchange what they both got during the day. Gawain is given a bed luxurious with furs and snuggles down that night.

In the morning, the host leaves for the hunt with lovely lively descriptions of dogs, horses, and snow. He hunts all day with his men through the frozen forest till they have a good heap of deer to bring home.

That same morning, Gawain wakes up aware someone is in his room. It is the host's lady, who launches a serious seduction attempt, challenging Sir Gawain as a sophisticated knight from the royal court to teach her about love-making. She taunts his identity. He remains polite and flirtatious while dodging sex, but does get a kiss.

That night Gawain gets the venison and he gives the host a kiss as sexily as he can manage [yes, the medieval text says this with "as comlyly as he coupe awyse,"

usually translated as “as pleasantly as he could devise”). Both men laugh and they eat the feast. Next morning the host goes hunting. He finally corners a huge boar in a stream and kills this beast himself [does the boar represent lust?], while his lady again attempts to seduce Gawain. The evening exchange is similar: dead meat for sexy kiss. On the third morning the host goes off and catches a wily fox. [Is the fox Sir Gawain? It is obvious that there is a parallelism between the vengery of the forest and of the bedroom.] The lady makes a much more determined effort to win Sir Gawain since it is the last day. She offers him a ring that he refuses because it is so valuable. She asks for a token and he says he has nothing to give her worthy of her beauty. She offers him a lacy green girdle that she says is magical and has the property that the wearer cannot be harmed by iron. Gawain takes the girdle. She calls it a love token and cautions that Gawain is not to tell the knight about the girdle. That night, the host and Sir Gawain swap the kiss for the dead fox. But Sir Gawain breaks his oath by not handing over the girdle. He is loyal to the lady, dishonorable to his masculine obligation.

The next morning Gawain says his prayers, then is taken by a servant in the direction of the Green Chapel, but warned not to go there as he will be killed. He sets off, though, bound by his word. As he approaches there is a horrible rasping noise which proves to be the Green Knight sharpening his enormous axe. The Green Chapel is a natural outdoors space, a sort of gulch. Gawain offers his neck, and the Green Knight makes a forcible stroke. Gawain cannot help but flinch, and when the Green Knight protests that he dodged, Sir Gawain sticks out his neck again, and the Green Knight pulls up short this time so that Gawain is not hurt at all. Gawain is indignant at being toyed with, and insists that the Green Knight proceed in earnest. The final blow gives him a cut that draws blood, but it is just a superficial flesh wound.

Gawain says that is enough. He has fulfilled his part of the bargain. The Green Knight reveals that he was the host at the castle, made as he is by the might of Morgan le Fey, the old woman with the buttocks. He says that the whole challenge was Morgan’s idea as she wanted to “reve” the knights of their wits (shake their complacency perhaps?) and also to cause Guinevere to die of fright. He also knows all about the seduction effort of his lady, and he knows about the green girdle, and he thus he knows that Gawain cheated.

Gawain is mortified and launches into an uncharacteristic misogynist tirade about women as wily destroyers of men. The Green Knight says Gawain didn’t do too badly in the test and shouldn’t be so critical of himself, and invites him home to stay. Gawain refuses. He says he will always wear the girdle as a sign of his shame (girdle is a shifting signifier). When Gawain gets back to Arthur’s court there is celebration at his survival. He recounts his adventures as a story of shame, but they all laugh and say that they will take up wearing the green girdle as a sign of their brotherhood.

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