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Fair Lady Goldberry, Daughter of the River

Abstract

Examines Goldberry as an intermediary figure between noble or ethereal female characters like Galadriel and Éowyn and everyday women like Rosie Cotton, and shows how her relationship with Tom provides Sam with a paradigm for the ideal marriage. Considers Goldberry an Eve-like figure.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Goldberry

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AIR LADY GOLDBERRY,
DAUGHTER OF THE RIVER

ANN MCCAULEY BASSO

"Come, dear folk!" she said, taking Frodo by the hand. "Laugh and be merry! I am Goldberry, daughter of the River." (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* [LotR] 1:7, 121)

CRITICS HAVE TAKEN J.R.R. TOLKIEN TO TASK for the paucity of female characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, with some analysts even going so far as to charge him with misogyny. Catherine Stimpson asserts that Tolkien's women are built upon "the most hackneyed of stereotypes" (18), and Edith L. Crowe maintains, "The most problematic aspect of Tolkien is indeed the disappointingly low percentage of females that appear in his best-known and best-loved works, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*" (272). Close analysis of the text, however, reveals a roster of women whose characters are rich and diverse, well drawn, and worthy of respect. In fact, as Lisa Hopkins notes, "their very scarcity seems to invest them with an air of uniqueness and of almost talismanic status" (365). Tolkien creates two kinds of women: the noble woman of elevated stature—Galadriel, Arwen, Éowyn—and the rustic, down-to-earth women, typified by female hobbits, such as Rosie Cotton. All of the female characters in the novel can be neatly divided between these two categories, with one exception: Goldberry, Tom Bombadil's "pretty lady," daughter of the river. Although Goldberry appears only briefly in the novel, both her character and her actions are thematically significant, providing symmetry with later events and characters, bridging the gap between the Anglo-Saxon, noble women and the rustic women of the Shire, and providing an Eve figure who parallels the Mary figure Galadriel.

We as readers are aware of Goldberry's existence even before we meet her. Tom Bombadil sings of her as he walks home:

Down along under Hill, shining in the sunlight,
Waiting on the doorstep for the cold starlight,
There my pretty lady is, River-woman's daughter,
Slender as the willow-wand, clearer than the water.

(*LotR* 1:6, 117)

After rescuing the hobbits from Old Man Willow, Tom invites them to his home, but insists that Frodo postpone his tale until they are seated at the dinner table, for “Goldberry is waiting” (I:6, 116), and Tom, the considerate spouse who brings flowers to his wife, does not want to be late. Bombadil appears to be a good husband, and he and Goldberry seem to enjoy a happy marriage. Although *The Lord of the Rings* does not specifically state that Goldberry and Tom are married, Tolkien’s “Adventures of Tom Bombadil” gives us the history and marital status of this couple:

Old Tom Bombadil had a merry wedding,
crowned all with buttercups, hat and feather shedding;
his bride with forgetmenots and flag-lilies for garland
was robed all in silver-green. (“Adventures” 16)

Tolkien had very specific ideas on marriage for his hobbit characters:

As far as I know Hobbits were universally monogamous (indeed they very seldom married a second time, even if wife or husband died very young); and I should say that their family arrangements were ‘patrilinear’ rather than patriarchal. [...] But the government of a ‘family’, as of the real unit: the ‘household’, was not a monarchy (except by accident). It was a ‘dyarchy’, in which master and mistress had equal status, if different functions. (Tolkien, *Letters* 293)

This formula seems to have extended beyond the borders of the Shire into the Old Forest as well, for Tom and his wife exhibit mutual consideration and respect. Bombadil’s song focuses on Goldberry’s appearance, but we soon learn that she is wise and perceptive as well. As Frodo and his friends enter the home of Tom Bombadil, his wife jumps up to greet them, instinctively going directly to Frodo, who, as Ringbearer, represents the most important individual in the group: “‘Come dear folk!’ she said, taking Frodo by the hand.” Moreover, Goldberry recognizes him as an elf-friend, telling Frodo “the light in your eyes and the ring in your voice tells it” (*LotR* I:7, 121-22).

On one level, Goldberry embodies domesticity and hospitality. Impeccably dressed in a green and silver gown, she awaits the arrival of her husband. Dinner is on the table when Tom comes home from work, and she graciously hosts her unexpected guests, providing an ample supper and comfortable accommodations. Moreover, she excuses herself from the masculine company, retiring to bed early and leaving the men to their talk. Although by today’s standards her behavior seems hopelessly outdated, Goldberry is, in many ways, quite typical of the 1950s homemaker. Candice Fredrick and Sam

McBride comment on Goldberry in *Women Among the Inklings*: “In some ways she resembles Edith Tolkien: her husband idealizes her as a great beauty, but on a more practical level she is cook and maid, appropriately retiring before the men begin serious conversation” (110). By relegating Goldberry to the status of cook and maid, however, one fails to recognize Bombadil’s contribution: “At last Tom and Goldberry rose and cleared the table swiftly. The guests were commanded to sit quiet, and were set in chairs, each with a footstool to his tired feet” (*LotR* I:7, 123). Goldberry’s actions, along with Tom’s, are more indicative of hospitality than of subservience.

Goldberry represents much more than a Middle-earth housewife. She bridges the gap between the highborn, noble, or magical females in the novel and the ordinary women. Éowyn, Arwen, and Galadriel typify the former category, and Leslie Donovan notes the heroic qualities of these women: “Tolkien’s primary women characters in *The Lord of the Rings*—Galadriel, Shelob, Éowyn, and Arwen—are narrative agents charged with the authority of distinct heroic women figures from Old Norse mythology and literature called the valkyries” (108), “Odin’s shield maidens,” who “often fell in love with mortal heroes” (Cotterell and Storm 214, 245). Jane Chance notes Éowyn’s resemblance to Anglo-Saxon royalty: “Like the Old English queen Wealhtheow in *Beowulf*, wife of Danish king Hrothgar, Éowyn in Tolkien’s text passes the cup at a hall ceremony to knit up peace after feasting in a joyful gift-giving” (183), and Leslie Donovan asserts that “Galadriel’s ritual aspect further resembles the court functions of valkyrie figures when she grants gifts to each member of the Company” (116). Moreover, not only Éowyn, but also Galadriel is a cup-bearer; as the fellowship prepares to leave Lothlórien, she and Celeborn share a picnic with the travelers: “Now Galadriel rose from the grass, and taking a cup from one of her maidens she filled it with white mead and gave it to Celeborn. ‘Now it is time to drink the cup of farewell,’ she said. [...] Then she brought the cup to each of the Company, and bade them drink and farewell” (*LotR* II:8, 365). Clearly, the Anglo-Saxon tradition of woman as cup-bearer influenced Tolkien’s creation of Éowyn and Galadriel, but these women have a stronger presence than ritual mead-hall behavior would indicate. Donovan declares, “Tolkien constructs them as reflective of moral good, heroic ideals, noble behavior, and responsible leadership by means of a female identity concordant with contemporary perceptions of women as significant forces within society and the world” (109). However, Fredrick and McBride maintain that “although Tolkien provides what, at first glance, appear to be strong female characters in Galadriel and Éowyn, Galadriel lacks the necessary detail to serve as model for an active, well-rounded female Elf. Éowyn, depicted with plenty of detail, embraces traditional female roles rather than asserting herself as a warrior” (114). Fredrick and McBride do not mention, however, that although Tolkien deliberately renders her somewhat

mysterious, Galadriel's presence is sprinkled throughout the novel after the reader's initial encounter with her in Lothlórien, giving the impression that she remains with the fellowship in spirit. When Aragaorn, Legolas, and Gimli encounter the Riders of Rohan, Gondor's future king informs them, "[...] we have passed through Lothlórien, and the gifts and favour of the Lady go with us" (*LotR* III:2, 422). When Gandalf asks Gwaihir to take him to Lothlórien, the eagle replies, "That indeed is the command of the Lady Galadriel who sent me to look for you" (III:5 491). Frodo employs the phial of Galadriel to ward off Shelob's attack, and Sam invokes her name as the final blow in his fierce battle with the massive spider: "'Galadriel!' he said faintly, and then he heard voices far off but clear: the crying of the Elves as they walked under the stars in the beloved shadows of the Shire" (IV:10, 712).

In contrast to Éowyn and Galadriel, the ordinary hobbit-women of the Shire exhibit qualities that are less exotic; common sense, devotion to family, and hard work are the hallmarks of these characters. The pragmatic Rosie Cotton, blissfully unaware of the ordeals that Sam has endured, gently berates him for being away so long: "Hullo, Sam!" said Rosie. "Where've you been? They said you were dead; but I've been expecting you since the Spring. You haven't hurried, have you?" (*LotR* VI:8, 985). Rosie continues to take the practical approach when she realizes that Sam has left Frodo's side: "If you've been looking after Mr. Frodo all this while, what d'you want to leave him for, as soon as things look dangerous?" (985). These moments may seem inconsequential to the story as a whole, but Tolkien saw them as very important; he planned for Rosie and Sam's relationship to serve as a foil to the high and noble love between Aragorn and Arwen. In a letter to Milton Waldman, the author explains his intent:

But the highest love-story, that of Aragorn and Arwen Elrond's daughter is only alluded to as a known thing. It is told elsewhere in a short tale, *Of Aragorn and Arwen Undómiel*. I think the simple 'rustic' love of Sam and his Rosie (nowhere elaborated) is *absolutely essential* to the study of his (the chief hero's) character, and to the theme of the relation of ordinary life (breathing, eating, working, begetting) and quests, sacrifice, causes, and the 'longing for Elves', and sheer beauty. (*Letters* 160-1, emphasis in original)

This observation is highly indicative of Tolkien's overriding theme: the elevation of ordinary people to the extraordinary. Tolkien names Sam, his most humble of characters, as the true hero of *The Lord of the Rings*. Sam's interaction with Rosie upon his return to The Shire brings him right back down to earth, and although she later expresses admiration for his heroic deeds, she initially reacts in a no-nonsense and sensible manner. Other examples of the ordinary women of *The*

Lord of the Rings include Mrs. Maggot, who generously provides hospitality as well as a basket of her famous mushrooms, the covetous yet innocuous Lobelia, and Ioreth, the wise-woman of Gondor.

In between the two extremes of the practical and noble women lies Goldberry, daughter of the river. The hobbits' first impression of Goldberry is one of awe: "They came a few timid steps further into the room, and began to bow low, feeling strangely surprised and awkward, like folk that, knocking at a cottage door to beg for a drink of water, have been answered by a fair young elf-queen clad in living flowers" (*LotR* I:7, 121). However, after Goldberry speaks with them, Frodo's perception of her changes:

"Fair lady Goldberry!" said Frodo at last, feeling his heart move with a joy that he did not understand. He stood as he had at times stood enchanted by fair elven-voices; but the spell that was now laid upon him was different: *less keen and lofty was the delight, but deeper and nearer to mortal heart; marvellous and yet not strange.* (*LotR* I:7, 121, emphasis added)

Goldberry represents the middle ground between the two feminine types in *The Lord of the Rings*. The hobbits symbolically enter through a portal to another world, the hedge gate into the Old Forest; in doing so they leave behind the "normal" realm of The Shire and cross the threshold into the unknown. Goldberry paves the way for them to accept and appreciate spectacular female figures like Galadriel, Arwen, and Éowyn.

Exactly who is Goldberry, anyway? Tolkien first introduces her in "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" as a "pretty maiden" who pulls Tom into the river by his hair and teases him for frightening the fish; she is the River-woman's daughter whom Tom takes home to be his bride. Tolkien first published the "Adventures" in *Oxford* magazine in 1934, and he incorporated the story and most of its characters—Tom, Goldberry, Old Man Willow, and the Barrow-wight—into *The Lord of the Rings*. However, the author deliberately left Bombadil somewhat mysterious: "And even in a mythical Age there must be some enigmas, as there always are. Tom Bombadil is one (intentionally)" (*Letters* 174). It follows, then, that Goldberry's status will also remain enigmatic, although critics certainly have their opinions. Ruth Noel, in *The Mythology of Middle Earth*, maintains that Goldberry is a water sprite (129), while Gene Hargrove argues that she must be a Valar, specifically Yavanna (23). Melissa McCrory Hatcher dismisses Goldberry as a "mystical washer woman" (44), and Maureen Thum does not include her among the women of power "hidden in plain view." However, Goldberry does represent one of the four perils Tom encounters in the "Adventures," along with Old Man Willow, Badger-brock, and the Barrow-wight. Noel comments on Goldberry and danger:

While Bombadil was a forest god, Goldberry was as unmistakably a watersprite. She was a nixie, the Riverwoman's daughter, discovered by Tom among the pools of the mysterious Withywindle. As all the other creatures Tom met in "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" were dangerous, so Goldberry must have been. (129)

By the time she appears in *The Lord of the Rings*, however, "Goldberry no longer appears dangerous, but is a modest and beautiful hostess. She remains a water spirit, but the water she represents is no longer the treacherous Withywindle, but the rains and streams that replenish plant life" (Noel 129). Nevertheless, the suggestion of a lingering danger about Goldberry adds depth and interest to her character, just as it does for Galadriel's.

Susan Carter has observed that Galadriel shares her introduction with Celeborn (77): "Very tall they were, and the Lady no less tall than the Lord; and they were grave and beautiful" (*LotR* II:7, 345). I submit that Tolkien also initially introduces both Éowyn and Arwen with a man—Théoden in the case of Éowyn, and Elrond in the case of Arwen. However, the reader first encounters Goldberry completely alone, surrounded by water and flowers, clearly representing the natural world. Tolkien himself qualifies her as a part of nature, stating that "We are not in 'fairy-land,' but in real river-lands in autumn. Goldberry represents the actual seasonal changes in such lands" (*Letters* 272).

At first glance, the early chapters of the *Fellowship* do not seem particularly relevant to the main plot; in fact, Peter Jackson eliminated much of the initial eight chapters for his film version. However, the episodes contained in the first book provide a structural symmetry with later events that constitutes an important element of the rising action. For example, Frodo, Sam, and Pippin unexpectedly find help on the road, when Gildor and the elves offer them counsel and sanctuary for the evening. This episode is mirrored in Book Four when, as Elrond has foretold, Frodo and Sam obtain unexpected help and hospitality from Faramir. The terror of the Barrow-downs, in which Tom Bombadil rescues Frodo from the horrifying yet amorphous Barrow-wight, parallels the invasion of Weathertop, in which Aragorn rescues Frodo from the horrifying yet amorphous Black Riders. The Old Forest of Book One closely resembles Fangorn Forest of Book Three, and Tom Bombadil, the old and wise guardian of the Forest, mirrors Treebeard, the old and wise shepherd of the trees. Then we have Goldberry, reflected in Book Two by her counterpart Galadriel.

We could almost call Goldberry "Galadriel Lite." The initial descriptions of the two characters are very similar, and their names alliteratively signal their resemblance. Goldberry's name denotes a combination of the precious with the natural, and Galadriel's name is translated by Tolkien as meaning "Glittering garland," thus linking the two names thematically as well. L. Eugene Startzman,

in his article "Goldberry and Galadriel: The Quality of Joy" calls Galadriel "Goldberry's counterpart" (5); Tolkien introduces her as a resplendent figure of nature:

Her long yellow hair rippled down her shoulders; her gown was green, green as young reeds, shot with silver like beads of dew; and her belt was of gold, shaped like a chain of flag-lilies set with the pale-blue eyes of forget-me-nots. About her feet in wide vessels of green and brown earthenware, white water-lilies were floating, so that she seemed to be enthroned in the midst of a pool. (*LotR* I:7, 121)

Galadriel's introduction is remarkably similar:

The chamber was filled with a soft light; its walls were green and silver and its roof of gold. [...] On two chairs beneath the bole of the tree and canopied by a living bough there sat, side by side, Celeborn and Galadriel. [...] They were clad wholly in white; and the hair of the Lady was of deep gold [...]. (II:7, 345)

Other parallels between the two women include their musical ability; Goldberry sings to Tom Bombadil and the hobbits, and Galadriel possesses a voice that is "clear and musical" (II:7, 346), singing to the company before they depart from Lothlórien (II:8, 368). The most striking symmetry between these two characters, however, is the manner of their final farewells to the hobbits:

[T]hey saw Goldberry, now small and slender like a sunlit flower against the sky: she was standing still watching them, and her hands were stretched out towards them. As they looked she gave a clear call, and lifting up her hand she turned and vanished behind the hill. (I:8, 133)

As the Fellowship heads south on the Great River, Frodo sees Galadriel on the shore:

She shone like a window of glass upon a far hill in the westering sun, as a remote lake seen from a mountain: a crystal fallen in the lap of the land. Then it seemed to Frodo that she lifted her arms in a final farewell, and far but piercing-clear on the following wind came the sound of her voice singing. (II:8, 368)

Galadriel raises her arm in salute on the road home from Gondor as well: "[T]here came out of the gathering mist a flash; and then they saw no more. Frodo knew that Galadriel had held aloft her ring in token of farewell" (VI:6, 963).

Critics have noted Galadriel's similarity to the Virgin Mary; Michael Mahler's article "'A Land without Stain': Medieval Images of Mary and Their Use in the Characterization of Galadriel" enumerates the traits recounted in the Loreto Litany and ascribes them to Galadriel. Tolkien himself acknowledges the parallels: "I think it is true that I owe much of this character to Christian and Catholic teaching and imagination about Mary" (*Letters* 407). However, Tolkien also famously stated, "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence" (*LotR* Foreward xvii), and clearly he has created, in Galadriel, not an allegorical character but one who shares qualities with Mary. Goldberry, who precedes Galadriel in the story, recalls Mary's predecessor Eve, and Milton follows Christian tradition by connecting Mary and Eve in *Paradise Lost*: "On whom the angel 'hail' / Bestowed, the holy salutation used / Long after to blessed Mary, second Eve" (5.385-87).

Tom Bombadil tells his hobbit guests that he is "Eldest [...]. Mark my words, my friends: Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn" (*LotR* I:7, 129). This fact, coupled with his connection to the natural, Eden-like world of the Old Forest, renders him analogous to Adam. It follows, then, that Goldberry, the daughter of the river, relates to Eve; significantly, Milton's Eve first awakens beside a river-fed lake:

That day I oft remember, when from sleep
I first awaked and found myself reposed
Under a shade of flowers, much wondering where
And what I was, whence thither brought and how.
Not distant far from thence a murmuring sound
Of waters issued from a cave and spread
Into a liquid plain, then stood unmoved
Pure as the expanse of Heaven; [...] (4.449-56)

Startzman recognizes Tom and Goldberry's similarity to the couple from Genesis: "Tom and Goldberry simply are, an Adam and Eve, free and unfallen, caretakers, left in the world as a reminder of man's true state" (8). Goldberry prepares a meal for the travelers: "Is the table laden? I see yellow cream and honeycomb, and white bread, and butter; milk, cheese, and green herbs and ripe berries gathered" (*LotR* I:7, 122). This meal that Goldberry prepares for their guests recalls the one Eve prepares for the angel Raphael:

She gathers, tribute large, and on the board
Heaps with unsparing hand; for drink, the grape
She crushes, inoffensive must, and meads
From many a berry, and from sweet kernels pressed
She tempers dulcet creams. (Milton 5.343-47)

Much like Adam and Eve, Tom and Goldberry appear to be the only people in the Eden-like Old Forest, but they are happy to welcome guests and are very hospitable.

Critics have lamented the treatment of the feminine in Tolkien's work and some claim that the early chapters of *The Fellowship of the Ring* have little relevance to the central plot. However, several incidents in the early chapters—the hobbits' encounters with Gildor, Tom Bombadil and Goldberry, and the Barrow-wight—parallel and adumbrate similar, more significant events that occur later in the narrative. Goldberry has drawn little critical attention, but she occupies an important place in Tolkien's cast of female characters, a group that can—for the most part—be divided into two categories: the high-born women of elevated status and the simple country women of Gondor and the Shire. Goldberry represents the *via media* between the two types of women, exhibiting characteristics of both. She resembles Eve in her lush Garden of Eden and serves as a more human precursor and parallel to the "superelven" Galadriel, preparing both the reader and the four hobbits for the wonders that are to come. Furthermore, the happy and compatible partnership she shares with Tom Bombadil conforms to Tolkien's ideas about married life for hobbits—the "dyarchy" in which each person has equal status but different roles—and anticipates the fruitful contentment that characterizes Sam's marriage to Rosie.

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