



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

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Volume 13  
Number 3

Article 2

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4-15-1987

## Bushes and Briars: Women in Fantasy

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### Recommended Citation

de Lint, Charles (1987) "Bushes and Briars: Women in Fantasy," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 13: No. 3, Article 2.

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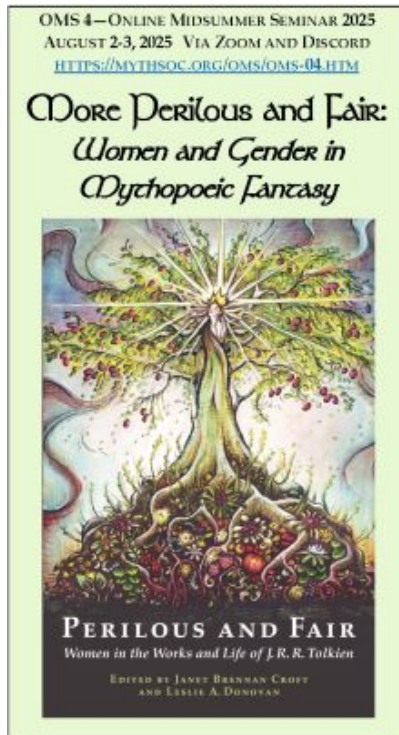
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Online MidSummer Seminar 2025  
More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy  
August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

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## Bushes and Briars: Women in Fantasy

### Abstract

Guest of Honor speech. Notes the changes brought to recent fantasy by the increasing number of women writers, particularly more focus on characterization.

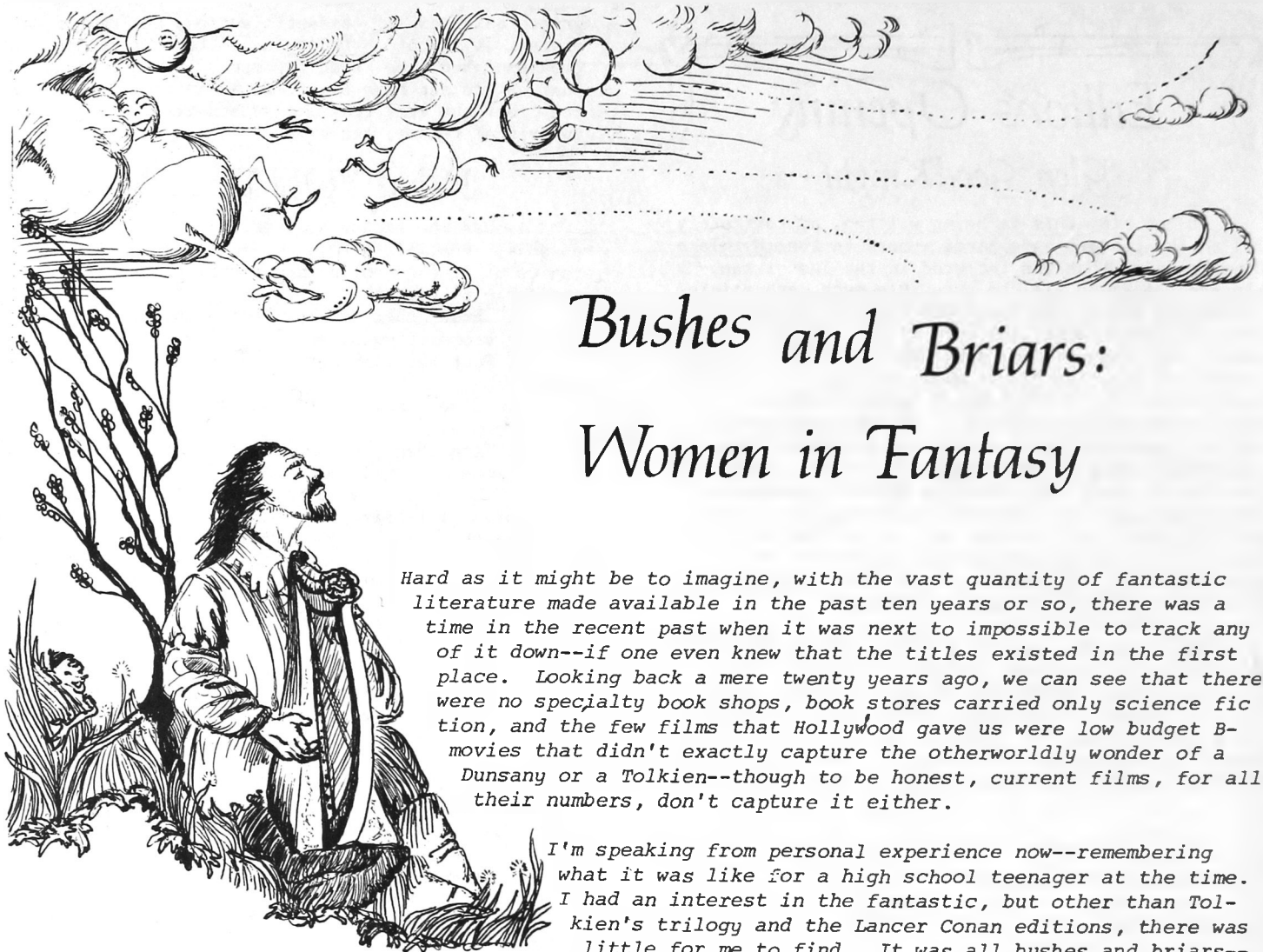
### Additional Keywords

Fantasy—Characterization; Fantasy—Women authors; Women in fantasy

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## Bushes and Briars: Women in Fantasy

Hard as it might be to imagine, with the vast quantity of fantastic literature made available in the past ten years or so, there was a time in the recent past when it was next to impossible to track any of it down--if one even knew that the titles existed in the first place. Looking back a mere twenty years ago, we can see that there were no specialty book shops, book stores carried only science fiction, and the few films that Hollywood gave us were low budget B-movies that didn't exactly capture the otherworldly wonder of a Dunsany or a Tolkien--though to be honest, current films, for all their numbers, don't capture it either.

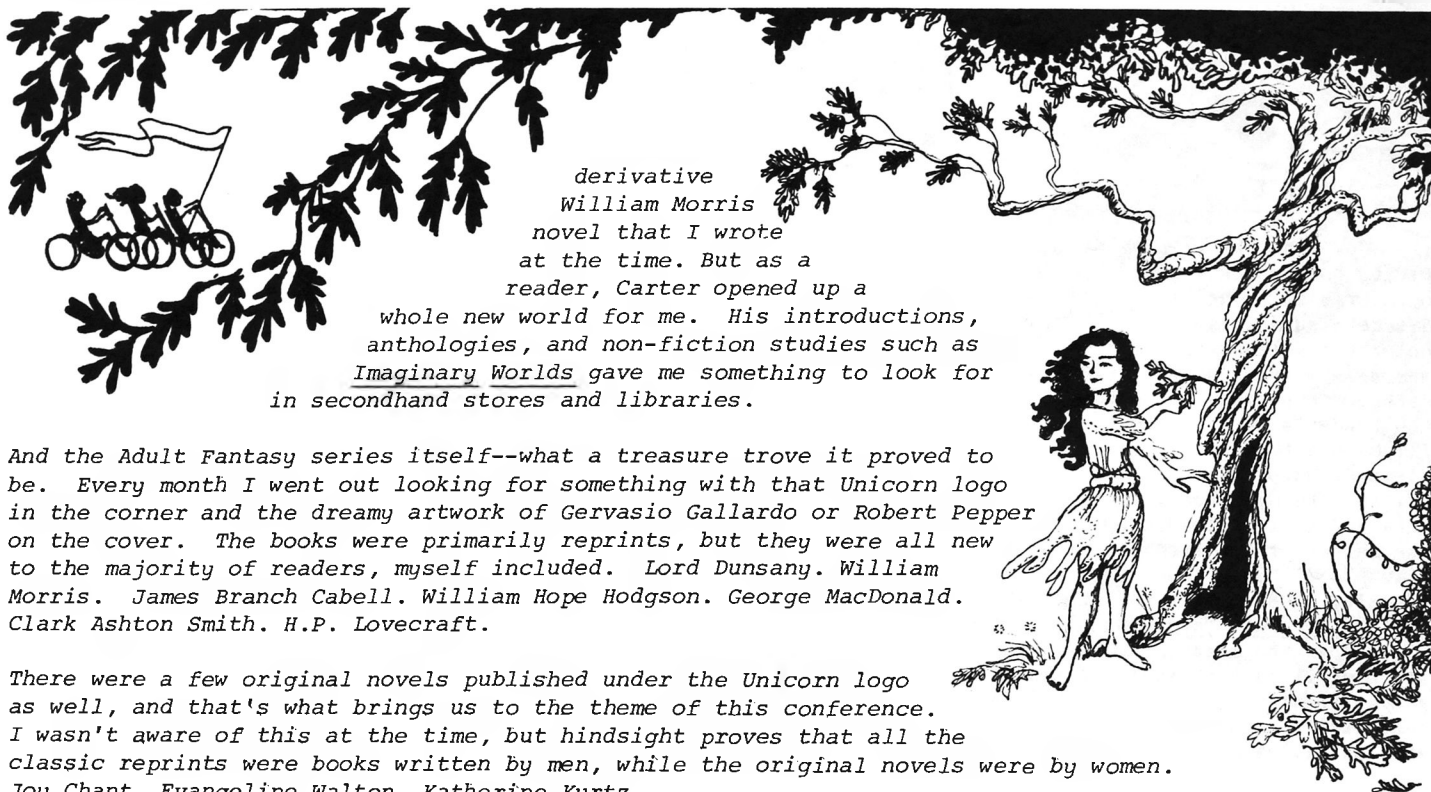
I'm speaking from personal experience now--remembering what it was like for a high school teenager at the time. I had an interest in the fantastic, but other than Tolkien's trilogy and the Lancer Conan editions, there was little for me to find. It was all bushes and briars--looking for roses in the thorns.

I was vaguely aware of the newstand magazines, but they all appeared to be science fiction by their covers. Space ships and bug-eyed monsters did nothing for me. I was looking for Yeats' Celtic Twilight. I knew nothing of fandom until Charles Saunders introduced me to it in 1976. I was aware of Poe and some of his ilk, but their work had none of the resonance that Tolkien's did. The closest I could find to Tolkien were the myths, folk tales and traditional music that I'd already had a keen interest in. Seamus Ennis and K.M. Briggs were my guides. I found that Celtic Twilight through Merlin and other legendary figures; my sense of the strange was fueled by groups like the Incredible String Band.

The turning point came in 1969 when Ballantine Books began its Adult Fantasy series of reprints under the Unicorn logo. No matter what can be said about Lin Carter's derivative fiction, I'll be forever grateful to him as an editor. The entire genre should be. Almost single-handedly, he brought about the upsurge of fantasy that we have today--not simply by showing the publishers that fantastic literature was viable in the marketplace, but by stimulating so many aspiring writers through the publication of classic works of which they had never been aware. Those writers had their own contributions to the genre waiting inside them, but they needed a key to unlock those novels and stories from where they were hidden.

I wasn't one of those aspiring writers at the time. My creative interests ran more towards verse and music, though somewhere in a deep dark drawer I still have forty-or-so pages of a painfully

Guest of Honor Address



derivative  
William Morris  
novel that I wrote  
at the time. But as a  
reader, Carter opened up a  
whole new world for me. His introductions,  
anthologies, and non-fiction studies such as  
Imaginary Worlds gave me something to look for  
in secondhand stores and libraries.

And the Adult Fantasy series itself--what a treasure trove it proved to be. Every month I went out looking for something with that Unicorn logo in the corner and the dreamy artwork of Gervasio Gallardo or Robert Pepper on the cover. The books were primarily reprints, but they were all new to the majority of readers, myself included. Lord Dunsany. William Morris. James Branch Cabell. William Hope Hodgson. George MacDonald. Clark Ashton Smith. H.P. Lovecraft.

There were a few original novels published under the Unicorn logo as well, and that's what brings us to the theme of this conference. I wasn't aware of this at the time, but hindsight proves that all the classic reprints were books written by men, while the original novels were by women. Joy Chant. Evangeline Walton. Katherine Kurtz.

At the time I simply devoured the books, never taking into account the sex of the writer, which is how it should be. But as time passed, and more publishers jumped on the fantasy bandwagon, I realized that I was not so interested in reading about mighty-thewed barbarians--not when I could read more humanistic books by the likes of Ursula LeGuin, Susan Cooper, or Patricia McKillip. And to this day, my favorite writers--be they women like Megan Lindholm, Barbara Hambly or Jane Yolen, or men like Parke Godwin or John Crowley--are those who have more emotional content to their books.

A strong, well-paced plot is always appreciated, though not necessarily essential. Some books--Crowley's Little, Big or James Blaylock's more recent books come to mind--make up for a loose or non-existent plot with the richness of their style. Fascinating ideas can help as well--a curious new world such as Philip Jose Farmer's World of Tiers, or aspects of Zelazny's Amber, for example--or the juxtapositioning of the strange with the real as in R.A. MacAvoy's Tea With the Black Dragon or Jonathon Carroll's Land of Laughs. But without well-rounded, believable and likeable characters (at least one, please!), a story, fantastic or otherwise, falls flat.

To a large degree, that vitally important and often missing aspect of fantastic literature is what women, as both writers and editors, have brought to the genre. Characterization. It isn't that there weren't any well-rounded characters around before that time. It's just that the main thrust of fantasy was more towards the fantastic itself--the odd beings and settings in which the novels took place.

As both a reader and a writer, my main interest is in the characters--first and foremost. My writing always starts with the lead characters. Once I know them well enough, I can move them into the situation that makes up the main thrust of the book. I'm writing to find out how they will react in a given situation. What are they like as people? How do they react with the other characters? What's important to them? How do they think, what do they feel?

I want the same thing when I'm reading a book--real people. I want to see them react against the strange--be it a fantastic setting, or a fantastic being. Horror literature has known this for years. The best horror novels are those in which the characters and everyday settings are so real, that we inevitably accept the supernatural element. Until recently, science fiction has been more concerned with the strange itself--the ideas, the concepts, but not necessarily how they relate to people. Fantasy has lain somewhere in between the two.

(Continued, p. 46)

Charles de Lint



Letters, continued from page 37  
 way to get rid of an ancient artifact of power that is threatening the world is to jump with it inside a volcano in the far southeast. In Williams, it is only a notion, and not really a serious one. In Tolkien, it has become the only righteous choice.

In connection with Melanie Rawls' excellent comparison (Mythlore 48) of Herland with Out of the Silent Planet, I can suggest a possible bridge between Gilman and Lewis: H.G. Wells, whose short novel Men like Gods is also about a Utopia that is briefly (and foolishly) invaded by a small group of people from our civilization. As Rawls stated when she read her paper at the Mythopoeic Conference, it is rather unlikely that C.S. Lewis read Charlotte Gilman's obscure serial. However, H.G. Wells, who was deeply interested in socialist, feminist and utopian issues and writings, may have read it. And we know for a fact that Lewis read Wells -- and enjoyed his writing, though often disagreeing with the ideology.

I do not know if it has been pointed out that some of the names in Peregrina -- Baur' and Barua, Yatsur and Yatsurah -- are Hebrew, and all four mean "created." In standard Hebrew, however, the feminine forms would have been Beruah and Yetsurah. The lack of vowel shift may have been an error in Lewis' part, or a deliberate simplification.

Has anybody ever wondered why the hero of Pilgrim's Regress is named John? Because the name

Bushes and Briars, continued from page 5

That women are responsible for this depth of characterization that has come about since they have entered the field might be construed as a sexist statement, but it isn't meant to be. Women are just as capable of writing shallow stories with flat characters as men are. But because they haven't always been involved with the nuts and bolts, because they came fresh to the genre when men had been reworking the same themes for too long, they've been able to imbue their writing with more realism--read, better characterization--than was originally available.

What this has done for the body of fantastic literature as a whole is given it a new sensibility. The understanding that women are people, too--something so given that one wonders how they could ever have been relegated to the position of second-class citizens in the first place--has added a dimension to the characterization of fantastic literature that gives it a new depth.

Because the fantasy genre--less so than science fiction, but still to some degree--was largely produced by men, for men, the stories tended to be about men, with women relegated to vague support positions, often only as an object to be rescued or chased. Women working in the genre in its earlier years tended to go by their initials or a man's name so as not to scare off the male readership.

(As an interesting--if somewhat depressing--aside, I fill in the odd day at the local sf bookstore in Ottawa and still run into men who won't read a book because it's written by a woman. It's no use trying to tell them what they're missing--that they're losing out on one half of the good writing in the genre because half of its population, like the real world's, is made up of women. Unfortunately, the reverse is true as well and that same bookstore has many woman

comes from the Hebrew Yehohanan, "the Lord is Gracious"? In honor of John Bunyan? The most likely explanation, in my opinion, is that John is the name for which "Jack" is commonly the nickname.



#### COUNCIL OF STEWARDS

A copy of the approved minutes of the November, 1986, Council of Stewards meeting is available by sending a stamped (39c or 44c for 2 oz.), self-addressed letter-size envelope to the Recording Secretary: Anne Osborn, 2750 Orange Street, Riverside, CA 92501.

A copy of the Society's Bylaws is also available by sending a SASE, with postage for 2 oz. to Anne Osborn.

Matters that need Council of Stewards attention or action should be communicated to the Society's Recording Secretary: Anne Osborn, 2750 Orange Street, Riverside, CA 92501.

General questions about the Society's interests and activities should be sent to the Corresponding Secretary: Christine Lowentrou, 1017 Seal Way, Seal Beach CA 90740. Questions about joining or forming discussion groups, should be addressed to our new Steward: David Lenander, 293 Selby Av. St. Paul, MN 55102.

customers who will read only books written by women.)

What's happening now, though, is that there are men writing books with strong sympathetic female leads. I don't think that this is a calculated move. I don't think men are thinking, hey, I'd better touch base with that growing female readership. I do think it's happening because there are more women writing today and anyone reading broadly in the genre will come across both strong male and female lead characters. If such readers are writers themselves, this new trend can't help but have an influence on their own work--perhaps only on a subconscious level, but an influence that makes its presence known all the same.

Or it could be more complex than that.

I use a lot of female leads myself, but it wasn't until sitting down to write this speech for this Mythopoeic Conference that I asked myself why. I realized that my writing from a woman's perspective helped me give a better understanding of women myself. All good writing should be an exploration, a pushing of one's abilities, a search for an understanding of the world at large through the microcosm of stories and novels. Because women make up half our population, and because I'm not one myself, it makes sense that I would want to understand them and would look to do so through my own creative expression--which happens to be writing.

It's been said before, that when one stops learning, one might as well stop living. I expect every book I start--whether it be something I'm writing myself, or something I'm reading--to teach me something. In fact, I demand it. And while the bushes and briars are still out there, albeit in new disguises, I'm happy to say that I'm working in a genre that has a great many roses to offer amongst the world's thorns.