10-15-1985

Arwen, Shadow Bride

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Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol12/iss1/4

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Abstract
Sees Arwen's story as a “cautionary tale against passivity.” By taking no part in the achieving of Aragorn's kingdom or the risks and rewards of the Ring quest, she has not developed the character or true understanding of mortality (and what lies beyond death) that would make her end less tragic.

Additional Keywords
Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Arwen; Sarah Beach; Paula DiSante

This article is available in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol12/iss1/4
Think of Arwen Undomiel, the Even star of her people. Of all the women who appear in *The Lord of the Rings* we see her least of all. Silent in the Council of Elrond, sending only a brief message to her betrothed Aragorn on the eve of his great battle, and the one glimpse of her sitting in Gondor's Court of the White Tree when she gives Frodo the jewel for his comfort — this is all we see of Arwen; and we hear little more of her from other characters.

We are told that Arwen is beautiful — Luthien come again. And wise, though we see no evidence of her wisdom. She has slight healing powers — the jewel she gives to Frodo can ease his torment but cannot cure him. She has some telepathic powers: "... when Aragorn was abroad from afar she watched over him in thought...." [1] We know that she weaves because she makes and embroiders a banner for him.

Tolkien tells us little else.

Compared to the blaze of glory which was her foremother Luthien, or even the bright golden light which is her grandmother Galadriel, Arwen is such a solitary little star in the evening sky that we wonder why Tolkien treated her as he did. The tragic ending of the *Tale of Aragorn and Arwen* increases her solitude and isolation and elicits the question, "Why does Arwen not end her tale as Luthien did, in hope, in a certitude of faith and transcendence beyond the circles of the world?"

First, let us compare the social milieu of the two princesses. Luthien was born during the First Age when Elves were a vigorous people. The Noldor, in particular, were expansionists, seeking always the frontiers of the lands and their minds and skills; but the Sindar were not far behind. During the First Age the Elves embarked on great journeys, took stupendous risks, accomplished great deeds and pursued many projects.

By the Third Age, however, the Elves had retreated into their various havens — Rivendell, Lothlorien and the Grey Havens — and become a contemplative and conservative race. There is some indication that with the passing of the years since the Rising of the Sun, the power of the people of the Stars, the Eldar, has slowly but steadily waned in Middle-earth even as they yearned for Valinor. Thus, Arwen has inherited a society of thinkers and counselors rather than doers of deeds, a people whose strength appears to be concentrated somewhere other than in the physical world they currently inhabit.

For Luthien there is all the wide world, all deeds to be dared and the energy to dare them. For Arwen there are small enclaves and contemplation and detachment.

Arwen appears to have led a fairly circumscribed life. She visits her kin in Lothlorien, no doubt heavily escorted because of the capture and torture of her mother by orcs during a similar journey; she then returns to her father in Rivendell. Nowhere is it accounted that she does things: she does not even sing and dance as did Luthien, nor act as her father's counselor as did Idril Celebimdal. We may assume that she occupies herself with needlework, since she is skillful enough in this craft to make a banner for Aragorn. This, however, rather puts her in the category of welbred gentlewoman embroidering her days away in a servant-run household.

When Thingol forbids the marriage of Luthien and Beren, he positively invites Luthien's defiance. Luthien lets it be known that her fate is her own to determine. Even Beren cannot dissuade her from participating in the quest. Huan the Hound must tell him, "From the shadow of death you can no longer save Luthien, for by her love she is now subject to it. ...But if you will not deny your doom, then either Luthien, being forsaken, must assuredly die alone, or she must with you challenge the fate that lies before you — hopeless, yet not certain." [2] Before Luthien's love and determination, even the walls of death crumble.

In contrast to Thingol, Elrond does not completely forbid the marriage of Aragorn and Arwen. Elrond is
wiser than Thingol and foresees that once more a powerful fate moves the principals in the drama. Nevertheless, he cannot countenance that his daughter give up her immortal life to live with a ranger in the woods, however worthy a man he is. He, like Thingol, is not able to let go. Therefore Elrond places upon the lovers a condition nearly as unlikely to be fulfilled as is the quest of the Silmaril; and wraps the whole up in a father’s plea of love for his child. It is difficult to see Elrond as a possessive father who desires to prevent his child from achieving autonomy; but this he is. Arwen is not freely allowed to freely decide her own fate — to marry Aragorn and make a family with him and share with him his adventures and the achievement of his kingdom; to wait upon events; or to deny the fulfillment of her love. Arwen is not asked.

And Elrond has a formidable weapon to hand: he appeals to the love and sense of obligation both Arwen and Aragorn have for him.

The choices of Arwen are rending. The decree of the Valar about the disposition of the Half-elven makes it necessary for her to choose between immortality and mortality and then between father and beloved. And she must, as well, decide whether she can bear to become a bone of contention between two persons she dearly loves and who love each other — Elrond and Aragorn.

In fact, the choices of Arwen are much more circumscribed than were Luthien’s. Her father invites no defiance — his request is quite reasonable: the Valar have already decided what fate meets immortal wedded to mortal; and the quest for the Kingdom of Gondor necessarily involves more than the single act of will and personal power which effected the recovery of the Silmaril. Arwen spends the long years of waiting as a dutiful daughter and an obedient wife-to-be, remaining at home and in safety rather than daring the world and the Wild as did Luthien.

But suppose...

Suppose Arwen had defied both Elrond and Aragorn and announced her intention of sharing Aragorn’s life. What if this princess of Elvenkind had said that her life was hers to risk as she pleased and then followed in Luthien’s footsteps, sharing in the achievement of a quest? What if Aragorn had regained his kingdom as a result of direct action taken by and with the assistance of his affianced bride, in much the way that the mortal members of the Fellowship of the Ring contributed to the achievement of the kingdom?

Might Arwen not then have merited a place by Aragorn’s side in death?

For this is the tragedy of Arwen’s tale, that she died alone and uncertain in a forest, far from her husband, her children and her home. Even Merry and Pippin are laid to rest on either side of the great king whom they have assisted to the throne; and their presence is a comforting sign that beyond the circles of the world these comrades may meet again, that even death shall not separate them. Arwen has supplied additional incentive and loving encouragement to Aragorn, but she herself has not been exposed to the uncertainties and risks (and consequent rewards or losses) which are the lot of mortals. Until actually married to Aragorn we may assume that she had the option of retaining her elvish immortality. By the time she is indeed wed, all the chief dangers are over, and she lives her life without overmuch change of status and circumstance, as her father intended. Arwen, in short, is in no way prepared for the troubles of mortality and is most ill-prepared for the fact of death. She admits as much to Aragorn as he lies dying: "But I say to you, King of the Numenoreans, not till now have I understood the tale of your people and their fall. As wicked fools I scorned them, but I pity them at last. For if this is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One to Men, it is bitter to receive." [3]

No event in her life has obliged her to understand and accept mortality. At the end, she is left out in the cold.

We must, however, grant Arwen some dispensation: it is hard indeed to imagine what she may have done, given her circumstances. They are not the same circumstances as Luthien’s. Luthien and Beren are required to retrieve one bright jewel; Arwen and Aragorn must achieve an entire kingdom, an action which they may not undertake alone, but in conjunction with the activities of others, not all of whom they are aware of or whom they influence or control. It is rather difficult to imagine just what kind of assistance Arwen may have rendered Aragorn.

Should she have accompanied Aragorn in the wilderness as he went about his ranger duties? Turned ranger herself in breeches and boots? Who would have countenanced this last princess of Elvenkind risking herself in the perilous wildlands of Middle-earth? Arwen would have had to set herself against the entire scheme of things, everyone and everything she loved.

Yet, being of the Eldar, she is certain to have had talents which may have been of use in such a life. She surely had the keen sight and acute sensitivity to people and places which is characteristic of Elves, and which would have been an asset in a ranger’s life. Elvish stamina would have stood her in good stead.

As a ranger or a ranger’s wife she may have learned early something of the dangers and uncertainties which are a mortal’s lot. She may have earlier faced the possibility of loss, learned to understand mortals and the implications of mortality, understood, before she was faced with her own great loss, Luthien’s choice and Luthien’s faith.

She may have learned how humankind endures death.

It is a truism of fairytales that those who do not dare the quest do not gain the kingdom. Arwen has had the kingdom handed to her by Aragorn; and when he departs the whole becomes ashes to her. The kingdom is not hers for she has undertaken no hard tasks: neither harassed the underworld, faced the dragon of found her way into the wilderness and back — all faery metaphors for the rites of passage which mark maturation and autonomy. Her only test was a test of obedience and endurance, much like that of the princess on the glass mountain who must sit on that high, uncomfortable perch until her suitor performs his deeds. She may encourage her preferred suitor by rolling apples at him, but she cannot really assist him in any substantive manner. Arwen passes the tests of obedience and endurance. But with Aragorn’s passing, there is now no one to obey and no compelling reason to endure. She has been his appendage and his death utterly "quenches" her light.

She finds no comfort in her children or the prospect of grandchildren, unlike mortals who ease the grief of separation with the idea of familial continuity in lieu of personal immortality. Though she

Continued on page 37
much like the Holy Spirit which works in the New Testament miracles underlying the whole Christian faith. (Biblical references will be to the Douay-Confraternity version.)

The Descent of the Holy Spirit in The Acts of the Apostles 2:4 describes how the Holy Spirit appears to human eyes. At Pentecost the apostles of Jesus who, after His death, are all gathered in the upper room which is their meeting place, hear "a sound from heaven, as of a violent wind blowing... And there appeared to them parted tongues as of fire which settled upon each of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in foreign tongues, even as the Holy spirit prompted them to speak." Its effect is to inspire them to become missionaries of the Christian message, whose language will be understood throughout the world even by hearers who do not understand the Hebrew tongue.

Moreover, that central event, the incarnation of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary, it is related by St. Matthew's Gospel 1:18-20 as follows: "When Mary his mother had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit, But Joseph her husband was minded to put her away privately... But behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Joseph, son of David, to take to thee Mary thy wife, for that which is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit.'"

In St. Luke's Gospel 1:35: "And the angel answered and said to her: 'The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee; and therefore the Holy One to be born shall be called the Son of God.'"

This attribution of "parted tongues of fire" and the begetting of Jesus in Mary's womb to the Holy Spirit of Christianity was certainly not lost upon Tolkien. His Catholicism required a close knowledge of all these Biblical passages. And when he came to write his account of the Music of the Ainur, although his mythological approach to the Creation prevented him from naming the Secret Fire and the Flame Imperishable as equivalents of the Holy Spirit, his unspoken intent to do so is plain enough. He derived them from his Christian faith.

The Profession of Faith spoken aloud by the people at every Catholic Mass, after expressing belief in God the Father and in his Son, goes on to declare belief in the Holy Spirit, "the Lord and Giver of Life" (Dominum et vivificantem in the Latin Mass used in Tolkien's youth). In the Music of the Ainur, the Secret Fire and the Flame Imperishable, which are really one and the same, are always necessary accompaniments to Eru's giving of life.

Bible references will be to the Douay-Confraternity version.

Tolkien on Fantasy, continued from page 7

NOTES

1 Clyde S. Kilby, Tolkien and the Silmarillion (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw, 1976), p. 37. I would like to acknowledge the help of Professor Kilby, who provided me with his notes on Smith. Professor Kilby spent several months helping Tolkien prepare The Silmarillion and read the then unpublished draft of Smith, recording his comments of the story at that time. Paul Reker's comments on Smith in Master of Middle Earth (N.Y.: Ballantine, 1972), pp. 184-93, are also very enlightening, especially his discussion of the Tree symbol.

2 This unpublished letter is available at the Marion Wade Collection at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.


5 "On Fairy Stories," The Tolkien Reader (N.Y.: Ballantine, 1966), pp. 18-19. All future references to "On Fairy Stories" (OFS) and "Leaf By Niggle" (LBN) will be noted in the text.

6 Letter to Prof. Kilby, October 1967.

7 "Hoot" is probably derived from the archaic English form of the verb "wit," or "to know," as in the Witan Council.

Arwen, Shadow Bride, continued from page 25

endured the painful separation from her father, she knows that he still lives; and she had, at that time, the comfort of Aragorn. Arwen does not know how to endure the separation of Aragorn because the fate of men is "uncertain" and she cannot know if her sacrifice of immortality will really lead to a reunion beyond death.

At the end she despairingly calls him by his mother's name for him — Eästel, which means "hope." She calls for hope and is given no answer, no assurance or reassurance. For Hope must come from within, a hard won lesson of personal faith, learned by daring and risking. You cannot truly know what you can do — until you do it. Hope for future achievement comes from having, at some past time, achieved, as Luthien learned in the exercise of her power. Having dared the dungeons of Thangorodrim, why lose hope in the halls of Mandos?

Arwen's story is a cautionary tale against passivity. Regardless of how strong the bonds of societally assigned roles and historical circumstances or of parental or the beloved's affection or expectations, we are not allowed to have the kingdom of personal autonomy handed onto our laps. The price of accepting this gift unearned may be higher than we can bear.

NOTES


3 op.cit. The Return of the King, p.428.