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# Where do Elves go to? Tolkien and a Fantasy Tradition

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## Where do Elves go to? Tolkien and a Fantasy Tradition

### Abstract

The departure of the Elves from Middle-earth haunted Tolkien's imagination, but it has also fascinated many other writers before and since. After Kipling and Tolkien, the twin pivots in recent literary ideas about Elves, the destiny of the Elves is being treated in more and more diverse ways. But Hy Braseal is so hard to imagine, given the Americas in this century: how can the people of the starlight still "go west"? Most go "in" instead, into humanity or into places (and computer programs) with that special Elf-friendly charge.

### Additional Keywords

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They were a race high and beautiful, the older Children of the world, and among them the Eldar were as kings, who now are gone: the People of the Great Journey, the people of the Stars.

J.R.R. Tolkien (1955, p. 415)

All mythologies, cultural traditions and substantial bodies of folklore contain stories about at least one other race than the human. Long-lived if not "immortal", and associated with phenomenal nature, especially deep forests, this is normally an Elder Race, wiser and more in touch with both natural powers and magical Power. In North-Western Europe, the most satisfactory term for this fictional race is Elf, since "fairy" has become degraded and miniaturised. If Tolkien's commentator in Appendix F of *The Lord of the Rings* laments of "Elves",

This old word . . . has been diminished, and to many it may now suggest fancies either pretty or silly, as unlike the Quendi of old as are butterflies to the swift falcon . . .

(Tolkien, 1955, p. 415)

What would he say of "fairies"? Precisely what Kipling, with the same metaphor, had said a half-century earlier (see p. 98 below).

Other "Other races" are identified with mountains and caves and hence with working metal and stone, as with dwarfs, or with oceans, lakes and streams, as with mermaids and naiads. Others are associated with the will of an all-powerful creator divinity, like angels, cherubim and seraphim, or with a menacing opponent to that divine power, like devils, demons and efreets. None of these, not even angels, have Elven glamour or Elven gramary – and these

two words, cognate with "grammar", remind us of the poetic eloquence of that race.

Elves and similar Other races have their own other world, within or contingent with ours, reached by mortals only through a mysterious and dangerous process (usually a journey, perhaps underground or undersea, or even by flight) though sometimes a ritual or a simple invitation will suffice. Oriental, Classical and Celtic traditions, more than the Teutonic, emphasise that the heterocosm is a garden paradise: fountains, birdsong, flowers and great trees, starshine and twilight are appropriate. A palace or high tower, feasting, song, music, jewels, an assured (often hierarchical) social structure and a protected atmosphere, identify the Other-world as cultured, not a bucolic Arcadia.

Elves of the kind that interested Tolkien are humaniform or humanoid, highly cultured but by no means effeminate or decadent, more or less magical, and either immortal or apparently immune to aging. Generally they are both more beautiful and wiser, more spiritually intense, than human beings. This study offers some comments on Tolkien's relationship to the various traditions of elven portrayal, and gives some examples of later variants, more or less "anxiously" influenced by his work.

## I

I could say "elves" to him,  
But it's not elves, exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself.

Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"

It is first worth asking why human tale-tellers and audiences feel a need for Elves; after all, even those who

believe in the literal reality of angels, devils or ghosts are unlikely to claim the same factual status for Elves. Nor, in the way that kindly sceptics explain away Thor as an superstitious attempt to account for thunder, can Elven activity explicate many phenomena either of the external world of nature or of human experience and destiny. Rather, they represent an admirable, unattainable mode of life, a blessed interaction between the self and “unspoiled” nature, such as trees, river, stars, an existence distanced from the mortal and yet similar enough for our minds willingly to suspend disbelief in it. Our present stage of ecological consciousness and conscience welcomes and needs such a fiction.

Second, Elves represent, along with this attunement to nature, a less “earthy” mode of experience, wilder and more inspired than dull, predictable humanity. Because “immortal”, more liberated in both time and physical nature, they perceive a world and live a life unpolluted by most of our deadly sins, especially economic rationalism. Elven values, unlike human certitudes, are not held with any expectation of future (or renewed) global domination, and can thus be justified only by their intrinsic qualities. Again, because Elves are “soulless”, accepting no definition of self at variance with their bodily experience, their criteria of conduct cannot privilege spiritual over physical being. They are at one with themselves, present where they are.

Temporally, Elves are not in a hurry, having many lifetimes of men in which to understand – and complete – the projects they conceive. They do not fear death or have any doubt of their destiny in the Undying Realms, whether in the Halls of Mandos or as living migrants. They have therefore developed an aesthetic, a code of conduct, and a readiness to value nobility and beauty which humans cannot equal. Our limitations are well expressed by two of the condensed, clarified humans called hobbits:

“. . . we can't live long on the heights.”

“No . . . Not yet, at any rate. But at least, Pippin, we can now see them, and honour them. It is best to love first what you are fitted to love, I suppose: you must start somewhere and have some roots, and the soil of the Shire is deep. Still, there are things deeper and higher . . .”

(Tolkien, 1955, p. 146)

This passage, taken ruthlessly out of context, indicates the shift in perspective that stories with Elves in them, like some other aspects of “High Fantasy”, can offer. Elves are best evoked from the outside, through focalisation characters not themselves at all Elvish, whose expectations are more like our own.

Third, to have Elves in a story defamiliarises that story. They are not only different from us, their difference is itself a narrative instrument, expressed in everything from music, poetry, languages and ethical values to artifacts and social conventions. Defamiliarisation, Viktor Shklovsky's “ostranenie”, is a more celebratory distancing than Brecht's “Verfremdung”, alienation; however, both Marxists emphasise the need for fictions that deconstruct the smug bourgeois ideology of “realism”. Such a deconstruction is,

they felt, not only aesthetically pleasing but morally right because a major obstacle to revolution is the bourgeois assumption that empirical normality is necessarily, reassuringly true, and totally confirmatory of the status quo.

Tolkien wanted no revolution, of course, but aimed to estrange us from our habit-ridden mental routines and self-indulgent unresponsiveness so that we might recover our sense of wonder, our spiritual – and physical – mindfulness of the world. In a pleasant twist, we are brought to realise two contrary facts. On the one hand, we have always longed to communicate with some Other, intelligent non-human life in our universe; on the other, our parochial habits of mind have always tempted us to pretend that the Other is evil, to abjure the different or unfamiliar because of its otherness, yet knowing the Other is an essential step to knowing the Self.

Fourth, responsive readers, having deconstructed the “normal”, can thrill appropriately to narrative clues that enable them to construct the Other. Tolkien delights in encyclopedias of philological and cultural wealth, both implied within the narrative and assembled in appendices. The most complex history and the most splendid range of linguistic and orthographic invention by far belong to the Elves, marvellously unlike humanity in so many details. Their history and values are glorious, glamorous and poignant as they fight “the long defeat” against Morgoth and Sauron. Even their past faults intrigue, especially pride, as in their domineering benevolence towards human cultures in earlier ages of Middle-earth; admittedly, the Noldor bias of *The Silmarillion* probably exaggerates this dominance.

The Elves of the Third Age are surrounded and outnumbered, but their attachment to their own culture and languages is the more intense. Their elegiac pride is at least part of the reason why Elf/human marriages are so difficult and ennobling, and why the mortal man that achieves such a marriage must himself become distant from the rest of us.

## II

Pinch him, pinch him, black and blue;  
Saucy mortals must not view  
What the queen of stars is doing,  
Nor pry into our fairy wooing.

John Lyly, song from *Endimion*

The name “elf” comes from the Norse alfr (plural alfar). Two kinds of Elf inhabit and fight over a magical heterocosm, coextensive with but not easily accessible from our own Middle Earth. The lios-alfar, light-elves, are “good”, though not much interested in or respectful of clumsy mortals like us. The svart-alfar, dark-elves, are wicked. They hate light-elves, humans, and most other things; orc-like, when there is no-one else around they pass the time by hating each other. Both races are soulless, so the Christian Norse at least assure us, but they are long-lived and immune to aging, if not actually immortal. They are smaller than humans, and use some kinds of magic, including magical weapons; worse, knowing of certain “gates” between our world and theirs, they can (if they wish) steal human babies and leave changelings in their place. Norse

Christians felt that the alfar should go to either their own world, safely sealed off, or Hell.

An accomplished contemporary narrative, using the changeling motif and Elves (as well as other creatures) taken direct from Norse tradition rather than, from Tolkien, is Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword* (1954, revised 1973). Equally Nordic and vigorously, inventive is the Iceland-and-Elfland series by Elizabeth Boyer that begins with *The Sword and the Satchel* (1984). These may be compared with the consciously post-Tolkien works discussed in parts V and VI of this study, most of which pursue Celtic rather than Nordic otherworlds.

Since Tolkien produced his most influential scholarly work on the Old English "Beowulf" and the Middle English "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", it is significant that both refer only briefly to Elves and that neither sounds much like the Norse tradition. In Beowulf "ylfe" are children of Cain, as Grendel is; a grim and ominous descent, implying a direct kinship with mortal men. The Green Knight is himself described as an "aluish mon", which implies personal and integral magical powers, though it seems to be Morgan le Fay's magic that allows him to survive beheading.

Tolkien shows very keen awareness of the alfar tradition, but adapts it to a very different world-view. The distinction between his "light" and "dark" Elves is historical, not moral: the callaquendi are so called because they lived in the West in the light of the Two Trees, whereas the moriquendi, in the East, never experienced that light. There are no bad Elves in Tolkien's stories; however proud, unforgiving or impulsive, all are devoted enemies of evil. Any who are caught up with the works of Morgoth, or later of Sauron, have been so irreparably marred that the term Elf can no longer apply. The frenetically fighting and breeding hordes of Orcs that serve the two Enemies were made by Morgoth as a parody of Elves, probably from the bodies and minds of horribly misguided, viciously tortured Elves he had entrapped.

Tolkien's Elves are tall, courtly and graceful, wise if somewhat enigmatic, and by no means wholly alien to humans: three major intermarriages are crucial to the history of Middle-earth. In their music and song, their healing and archery, their beauty, wisdom and self-possessed grace, they are strikingly Apollonian figures, if one ignores their delight in laughter. They were once great artificers and artists, but as their hold on Middle-earth comes to an end they prefer only to "make" in the evanescent forms of music and poetry. As the first-born of Ilúvatar the creator, so long-lived as to be almost immortal, and carrying with them always the knowledge of their true home beyond the Western Seas, they understand time and the ironies of success and failure as humans never will. They cannot be expected to revere their short-lived human neighbours; still, in *The Lord of the Rings* if not in *The Hobbit*, they allow their amusement at us with a scrupulous grave respect.

There are no woods in Iceland, Elizabeth Boyer's frame environment, and her Norse Elfland naturally reflects this in being not in the least arboreal; her grim Elves live in fortified farms. The wood-elves in *The Hobbit*, like Anderson's Elves, live in a hill, with prisons, implying a harsh judicial system, still farther underground. However, their forest-dwelling

aspect is crucial. Their keen eyes and pointed ears may be like the alfar, but their love of trees, and that supple woodcrafty elusiveness that is only partly to do with magic, connects them with the higher Elves.

The complex glamour of Galadriel is also emphatically unlike any figure of the Norse tradition. The true ruler of the hidden and time-forgetful dreamwood of Lórien, she really does carry about her some of the menace of the stories that have sprung up among the Rohirrim:

Then there is a Lady in the Golden Wood, as old tales tell! . . . Few escape her nets, they say. These are strange days! But if you have her favour, then you also are net-weavers and sorcerers, maybe.

(Tolkien, 1954b, p. 35)

Tolkien was well aware of the superb British ballads of the Elf-Queen, "Thomas the Rhymer" and "Tam Lin", and also, in spite of his well-known mistrust of Shakespeare, of the ambiguous Faery royalty of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Titania and Oberon will not mitigate a quarrel that has disastrous consequences for all those anywhere near them; both Oberon's attitude to Titania's sexuality during the feud and her own cool reaction at its denouement are markedly at variance with human morality.

As for the Elf-Queen ballads, Thomas the Rhymer cannot utter even a word of protest at the Lady's commands, but must simply submit. Explicitly the ruler of a world that Christian Heaven/Hell oppositions cannot begin to describe, she is all-powerful within that realm. She has presumably sealed her secret ways into Elfland, to emerge no more (unless an equally charming poet attracts her). Tam Lin's Elf-Queen lives closer to evil, and though he has been her special pet she is about to hand him over to the Devil to pay the "tiend to Hell" when Janet rescues him. To defy the Queen's will is very dangerous, for her enmity cannot ever be adulterated with pity. Where so cruel and fatal an Elf-Lady should go is of course Hell, since she has no Tam to hand over – after all, she has sought to enthrall a baptised Christian boy. Janet's ordeal evokes laws that the Elf-Queen dare not transgress, but had she foreseen the frustration of her plan, she says, she would have plucked out Tam's eyes and set wooden ones there instead. Diana Wynne Jones has presented an admirably rich and subtle modern reworking of the story in *Fire and Hemlock* (1985); a somewhat less adroit but still memorable version is Pamela Dean's college romance *Tam Lin* (1991).

Galadriel knows the potential in herself for an Elf-Queen's role and rule, were she to accept the One Ring:

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 Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!

(Tolkien, 1954a, p. 381)

As Christianity and human love checked Tam Lin's Elf-Queen, Galadriel checks herself, and since the ring's coming implies the end of the Elves in Middle-earth, whether by the defeat of Sauron or his victory, she accepts her own ending: "I will diminish, and go into the West, and

remain Galadriel" (Tolkien, 1954a, p. 381). In the ballads, the tall and awe-inspiring Queens give a sinister and voluptuous edge to the mysteries of Elfland: the twilight they rule is erotic as well as frightening and potentially cruel. Presumably because the sex-drive in male Elves is very low, Elven ladies are perennially interested in innocent mortal males; Nick Bottom and Tam Lin escape, but their stories exist because they are not typical. The Belle Dame sans Merci role that Galadriel rejects is obscenely parodied by Shelob's incestuous tyranny as the Terrible Mother to her broods (Tolkien, 1954b, p. 332).

Galadriel is not, of course, the Queen of all Elves. Where Thomas the Rhymer's captor differentiates her realm entirely from the Christian Heaven and Hell, and Tam Lin's mistress pays a tax to Hell, Galadriel and her elven subjects have a theology that is reconcilable with Christianity. They worship the one true God, but through an intermediary High Goddess, Elbereth or Varda, whose symbology and intercessory role markedly resemble the Blessed Virgin Mary (who was, incidentally, the object of Tolkien's special reverence). Virtual queen of the Valar, she is especially associated with starlight, and Galadriel uses her powerful elven-ring not to take power over others but to testify to her devotion to Elbereth. She also identifies herself with the memory of Eärendil, and this celestial mariner, father of her son-in-law Elrond, is Venus, the evening star, sometimes called Stella Maris or Star of the Sea, that Catholic sailors regard as an emblem of Mary.

It is important to add that though Tolkien's Elves have the same declining birthrate as Elves in the ballads, and also regularly lose population as more of them heed the lure of the Sea and of Valimar beyond, Elven-ladies like Galadriel are no more obsessed with sex than are their lords. If few children are born, it is partly because all Elves know they are not long, in their time-scale, for Middle-earth.

### III

Farewell rewards and Fairies,  
 Good housewives now may say,  
 For now foule sluts in Dairies  
 Doe fare as well as they.

Richard Corbet, "The Fairies' Farewell"

The reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* above should remind us of the regrettable degradation of Elves in some late Renaissance texts. The tiny servants Titania set to serve Bottom are suitably trivial, but Tolkien complains in "On Fairy Stories", referring mainly to Drayton, of the assumption that all fairies were so. Ariel, in *The Tempest*, is a wind-elemental of power and shape-shifting ability, but his famous song about lying in a cowslip's bell has also contributed to the idea of the minuscule fairy. Shakespeare's central fairies were of course human-size, and not only because played by humans: at the narrative level, in view of the sexual commerce between mortal and fairy freely evoked by Titania and Oberon, "little people" would seem as grotesque as with Elf-Queens and Elven seducers in the ballads, and Spenser's often amorous (and highly pugnacious) elven knights. Yet in the seventeenth century,

Puritan and Arminian alike adopted the pretence that all fairies were only the size of Mustardseed, Peaseblossom, Cobweb and Moth (who was probably "Mote").

Fays, fairies and other Others were made safely decorative and essentially impotent by this late Renaissance diminution. From flower-haunting, wand-wagging, insect-duelling absurdities like Drayton's *Pigwiggan* descend Pope's Sylphs and Barrie's Tinkerbelle. Shakespeare's – or Oberon's – Puck, that arrogant earthy, formidable trickster, had been contemptuous of all human mortals, even the ruling classes; over-civilised imaginations found it all too easy to shrink even Puck to a mere brownie or lob allowed to bully only slatternly servants and reward only obedient ones. The culture that considered itself "Augustan", "The Enlightenment", knew where they wanted Elves to go: into cowslips – or at least into absurdity, tinsel and lower-class rural superstition.

Milton's "L'Allegro" evokes the Elves of this kind, degraded to small country magics, but Richard Corbet's "The Fairies' Farewell" has a more direct relevance, because of its use in one of Tolkien's major influences, the Sussex stories of Kipling, *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910). Fairy rings prove to the high-church bishop that the fairies had been happy in England until the Reformation and the expulsion of the Roman Catholic faith:

Witness those rings and roundelays  
 Of theirs, which yet remaine,  
 Were footed in Queene Maries dayes  
 On many a grassy playne;  
 But since of late, Elizabeth,  
 And later James, came in,  
 They never daunc'd on any heath  
 As when the time bath bin.

They have all fled the country. Far from being indifferent about or cruel to mortals, these miniature aliens are vulnerable to any change in human affairs.

My complaint against the trivialising late Renaissance writers may have a weak spot. Walter de la Mare cites a passage in Chaucer in which the Elves have not only forsaken England but also speech, and become sinister in the extreme. According to de la Mare's quotation in the first volume of his *Come Hither* anthology, the diabolised Prince Oberon "is of heygth but of III fote, and crokyed shulderyd . . . And yf ye speke to hym, ye are lost for ever." (de la Mare, 1923, p. 391) Squat and misshapen these Silent People may be; they are certainly not trivialised. This is what comes of paying too many "tiends" to Hell! However, I cannot find the Chaucer passage itself.

Puck, producer of Kipling's excellent stories (he tells three), scorns the tinselly creatures spawned by a disempowered tradition and sentenced to hard labour by didactic Victorian children's authors. His own narration of "Dymchurch Flit" agrees to some extent with Corbet's; it evokes a pathetic gathering of enfeebled "people of the Hills", made sick by the human hatred that pervaded the Civil War, and other dogma-based cruelty of human to human, and begging Mrs Whitgift to help them to flee to France. Puck still has a soft spot for Romney Marsh families;

though a trickster, he seems in general a friend to man rather than a cruel or indifferent spirit. Noticeably, halfwits are more on the wavelength of fairies than other, more rational people.

The second book begins with Puck's other major story of the People of the Hills, "Cold Iron", where King Huon and Queen Esclairmonde of Elfland, alien to iron, salt and roofs, raise a protege (not precisely a changeling), to take power as a ruler, wise-man or healer among "folk in housen". However, when a grown boy, by what cannot be chance, the lad picks up and puts on the iron ring of servitude that Thor had cast down long before. Thus he enters our mortal world as a serf and the begetter of a whole powerless, hard-working peasantry. Old Hobden, the children's special working-class friend, who has, incidentally, married into the Whitgifts, is typical of this earthy, shrewd inheritance of cold iron and its divorce from conscious association with magic.

Both these stories, and the self-metamorphic nature of Puck himself, can only be understood as the Grey Havens of the Elves' response to Middle Earth. Puck begins his immersion of Dan and Una into Sussex by eloquently establishing what "the People of the Hills" were, as opposed to "fairies". In British prehistory, when every corner of the wild landscape resonated with power, things were different:

Butterfly wings indeed! I've seen Sir Huon and a troop of his people setting off from Tintagel Castle for Hy-Brasil in the teeth of a sou'-westerly gale, with the spray flying all over the Castle, and the Horses of the Hills wild with fright. Out they'd go in a lull, screaming like gulls, and back they'd be driven five good miles inland before they could come head to wind again. Butterfly-wings! It was Magic – Magic as black as Merlin could make it, and the whole sea was green fire and white foam with singing mermaids in it. And the Horses of the Hills picked their way from one wave to another by the lightning flashes! That was how it was in the old days!

(Kipling, 1905, p. 12)

Kipling's stories directly influenced Tolkien, and not only in that he echoes Puck's scorn of Tinkerbells and presents tall, fierce Elves who are prepared to ride a storm. First, the name Hobson is not unlike "hobbit-son", and both connote small, resilient, dexterous English countryfolk, with a peasant relish for good rich food and drink. Specifically, the grandfather of Samwise Gamgee, the most intrinsically hobbit of Tolkien's heroes, was Hobson Gamgee (Tolkien, 1955, p. 383).

More curiously still, Puck resembles a hobbit. He has tough, hairy bare feet, a short broad stature, elusiveness in the fields and woods and a keen, disinterested observation of Big People. Puck has separated himself off from the vanished Faerie as a genius loci, identified with the country around "Pook's Hill". There he can be summoned only by an odd threefold ritual which mortal learning could not hit upon, but children's luck can:

You've done something that Kings and Knights and scholars in old days would have given their crowns and swords and books to find out. If Merlin himself had

helped you, you couldn't have managed better! You've broken the Hills – you've broken the Hills! It hasn't happened in a thousand years . . .

Unluckily the Hills are empty now, and all the People of the Hills are gone. I'm the only one left. I'm Puck, the oldest Old Thing in England . . .

(Kipling, 1906, pp. 6-7)

Since in "Dymchurch Flit" Puck can, when somewhat enlarged, pass for an old friend of Hobson, his Sussex has strong claims to be an inspirational parallel to the Shire, especially Buckland and the Marish as seen by the genius loci of the Old Forest, Tom Bombadil. The most obvious evidence for this is in his interest in Frodo and his companions, with whom he discusses Shire folk and affairs, history and prehistory (Tolkien, 1954a, p.143), but it is confirmed by "Bombadil Goes Boating", the second poem of *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (Tolkien, 1962), where the jovial silliness of Tolkien's narration contrasts Puck-like with the subtlety of its physical contexting. Among other intriguing connections between Puck and Tolkien is, in his explanation of why People of the Hills don't like being called "fairies", the apt sardonic question, "How would you like to be spoken to as 'Son of Adam' and 'Daughter of Eve' all the time?" Tolkien may well have recalled this with relish when he first read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950)!

Interestingly, Kipling's stories also influenced the finest creation of what might be called "magic historicism" from the Matter of Britain, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958). Tolkien's heterocosm has a joyous, purposeful integrity; White's Arthurian tetralogy swirls together narrative, historical and stylistic registers just as playfully and purposefully. Kipling's authentic historicism, made charming for Dan and Una, is brilliantly plundered in chapter X of the first book, "The Sword in the Stone", as Robin Wood tells the two boys he thinks Morgan the Fay is a "fairy". Kay asks if she is "one of those people with bluebells for hats, who spend the time sitting on toadstools." (p. 98) After the laughter, Robin repeats that she is probably a real fairy (though the word is unlucky), one of the Oldest Ones that were driven underground, into the hills, as Gaels, Romans and Saxons conquered the surface of Britain. Robin accounts for the Renaissance diminution and ruralisation of the Good Folk by this retreat, and adds that their unfeeling ferocity towards humans is because they have, literally, no hearts. To call one is to give it power to take you into its eerie world. White's impudent presentation of Elfland as the Castle of Fat, in a pastiche of the Irish "Vision of Mac Conglinne", disappoints many readers, retaining the alien feel but sacrificing the lofty beauty.

#### IV

Adieu! The Fancy cannot cheat so well

As she is famed to do, deceiving Elf!

John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale"

In the wild rhapsodic assortment of quasi-elvish characters re-discovered or re-invented by Gothic, Romantic and Victorian writers before Kipling, some, like Goethe's

Erl-König, are dark, cruel and treacherous indeed. The ancient Elf-Queen, especially, reappears in such beguilers as the superficially beautiful Geraldine in Coleridge's "Christabel", Keats' spell-weaving Circe in "Endymion", MacDonald's shapeshifting and D.G. Rossetti's heart-entwining Liliths, Tennyson's subtle wizard-beguiling Vivien, and Swinburne's sadistically passionate Dolores, "Our Lady of Pain". Fear and Victorian misogyny chime well with the erotic frisson of horror in such poets as the last three named.

But it is easy to mislead oneself about male presentations of female power and beauty, especially when associated with elvish magic, in the Romantic period. Keats is the master of withheld moral judgments of female protagonists like Lamia and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". What is sure is that they are not immortal, soulless seducers who set out cruelly to entrap and destroy the men who respond to them, whatever the assertions of other, deeply neurotic males in those narratives. In "Ode on Melancholy", similarly, it would be foolish to blame either the mistress or Beauty, Joy and Pleasure, or even the Goddess Delight, for the desires of the male who is determined actively to seek "the Melancholy" through them.

Although the word "witch" is usually worth dissociating from the Elf-Queen, Shelley's "The Witch of Atlas" presents her as the outward and visible form of the muse, like Keats' Psyche, playing elaborate games with perception and common-sense. The magic of the Elven world in which James Hogg's Kilmeny finds herself is unmenacing, even paradisaical, except that she longs for it ever after, and cannot live long in a mortal world that lacks all meaning, sundered from so passionate an experience. That no one intended to beguile her heart away become clear when "Kilmeny" is compared to Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market".

La Motte Fouqué's "Undine" and Matthew Arnold's "Forsaken Merman" provide excellent examples of the Elf as markedly superior in both morality and ethics to humans of Middle Earth that both desire and betray their Other-world lovers. William Morris, very much later, offers a *Wood Beyond the World* ruled by a cruel Elf-Queen, but her servant and rival defeats her and briefly becomes the good Elf-Queen, aiding with her benevolent magic both her mortal lover and the Bear Tribe that worships her. She loses her Elven powers by marrying Walter; in effect, this is Arwen's choice, although Tolkien never refers to sexual magic, or Arwen's virginity.

Tolkien knew most of these narratives, in all probability, well enough to avoid direct resemblances. A more seductive Faery for him was that of the Celtic Sidhe, an Other-world with temporal defences more complex than those of Keats' Lamia and "faery's child", situated beyond or beneath the waves or within the hollow hills. In their timeless proud glamour, passion and freedom they are contemptuous of as well as horrified by church Christianity. The great women of the Sidhe like Fand are fiercely and erotically attracted to male mortals of a certain nobility. Far less moral and ethical than the Elves of *The Silmarillion*, the Sidhe resemble them physically. They are twilight and starlight people, obsessed

by music and song, horses and the sea, war and love. Alienated from their country by the virtuous disaster of Christianity, they flee westward to the Isles of the Blest, Tir Nan Og, Odain Saker or Hy Braseal. Since one of his Elvish languages was Welsh-based, Tolkien is also aware of *The Mabinogion's* rather more disguised Underworld Elves.

Authors influenced by Tolkien now often aim at far more overtly Celtic effects. Incidentally, in Irish tradition sex between mortal and Sidhe was rarely procreative, but Tolkien has interrogated that probability. Narratives discussed in part VI include many cross-breeds, and some, like Katherine Kerr's, depend primarily upon half-elf characters.

## V

The Good are attracted by Mens perception  
And think not for themselves  
Till experience teaches them to catch  
And to cage the Fairies & Elves.

William Blake, "Motto to the Songs of Innocence & Experience"

Tolkien's influence upon later fantasy fiction is too vast to be quantified, and this applies to his extraordinarily detailed sub-creation of Elves as much as to any part of his oeuvre. When a writer looms so inescapably over two generations of successors, the anxiety of influence, to use Harold Bloom's apt term, must affect even the most bare-faced of imitators and purloiners. The unforgettable Elves of Middle-earth are echoed, borrowed, pastiched, misremembered, misunderstood, degraded, betrayed and subverted, in hundreds of fantasies, space operas, science fantasies and role-playing scenarios and modules. As this range of verbs implies, there is nothing wrong with being influenced; it all depends on how the influence is deconstructed and the material re-earned.

Although it may seem injudicious to begin by discussing bad books, Terry Brooks provides an extraordinary example of what Bloom calls "clinamen", metamorphic theft. His Shannara series is a shameful formulaic rehash of major aspects of *The Lord of the Rings*, but his Elves suffer even more from the comparison than the rest of the turgid, dull, ill-expressed and adverb-ridden concoctions. I should add that my comments are derived only from the first three books; there are more, but life is too short.

Why are Brooks' Elves so especially weak? From the evidence of the first book, *The Sword of Shannara* (1983), it is clear that they have no magic, no special skills (a very young "highlander" human called Menion Leah is already superior at both tracking and archery), and give no impression of otherness or distance at all. They are differentiated from the other races only by a slightly prettier appearance and mild good intentions towards nature. When something of their history is eventually revealed, it emerges that they are not Elves at all, but merely humans who would have liked to be Elves! These pseudelves cannot detect or face the book's Absolutely Evil Dark Lord, but merely contribute one of the armies decimated in the dreary climactic battle.



Since all true Elves have been killed off, the hereditary magic elven-sword of the title, and some curious “elfstones”, can only be wielded by the last descendant, a hobbit-sized half-elf called Shea (as in Sidhe, perhaps). He is himself Elven only in having high cheekbones and pointed ears, and uses his Elvish weapons confusedly and with reluctance. The sword works, though: when it inoculates Absolute Evil with self-knowledge, He evaporates!

In the sequel, *Elfstones of Shannara* (1987), Shea’s grandson Wil, a one-eighth-elf protagonist, wields the stones (but no sword). Reluctant and unbelieving, he does so seldom, and only to protect Amberle, a pseudelves princess, ex-handmaid of the one indubitably magical object in the pseudelves’ kingdom, a spirit-tree called the Elcryss. The tree has been keeping demons locked up in other dimensions for millennia, but is dying, so while Wil and Amberle follow their quest many pseudelves massacre and are massacred by the demons. In a spectacular testament to how little magic the pseudelves have, Amberle must be metamorphosed into a new Elcryss, not a true Elf, to shut up the demons again.

The third book, *Wishsong of Shannara* (1988), has two quests: Wil’s daughter and son, both one-sixteenth Elven, use spell-songs instead of magic artifacts to defeat another Absolute Evil in two simultaneous climaxes. This seems to imply that Elven-magic has become genetically imprinted to their family, so that Elves will now manifest themselves in humanity, but there is no indication as to how or why this has happened. Formula fiction is perhaps too wedded to the commoner denominators of audience expectation to cope with such questions.

In Patricia Wrede’s semi-formulaic *Shadow Magic* (1987), the magic-wielding Shee (again Sidhe?) have long ago retreated, like a lost race, from an almost forgotten alliance of four sentient races into a forbidden mountain city. They supply a few woodland Wardens, but most forest work is done by small agile Wyrds, the second of the four peoples; the others are water-dwelling Neisa, who specialise in healing, and Men, plains-dwelling farmers and fighters. Urban and rigidly governed, with a taste for trim white stonework and strict formal gardens, the Shee teach and respect magic. However, supreme power comes with the rediscovery of the peoples’ four emblems, sword, cup, shield and staff, and the single crown that rules them. A young half-elf maiden uses all these to wipe out an invading army controlled by shadowmen, and becomes queen of the renewed alliance. The Shee have returned, both in themselves and within Men, rejuvenated by interbreeding.

A richer work, Marion Bradley’s Arthurian fantasy *The Mists of Avalon* (1983), focuses upon a female magical order in Avalon, ruled by the Holy Mother Vivien and including a striking Morgan le Fay, here Morgaine. Its power is based on natural cycles, visionary enlightenment and various forms of priestly dedication ranging from chastity to ritual sex. However, Avalon is becoming inaccessible, receding farther into the mists as Britain and its court come more and more under the influence of a malevolent, sin-based Christianity: Avalon is geographically coincident with the Christian Glastonbury, whose buildings and fields are now the place’s

primary reality. Mysteries are claimed in Glastonbury and demonstrably active in Avalon, but a third, older Elfland or Faery, totally magical, occupies the same physical space as both.

This Elfland, an earlier, time-misted reality, is only occasionally present. Though the word Elf is avoided, it is an unmistakable Elven Other-world, perhaps the proto-Avalon, but certainly almost timeless. Morgaine is attracted to this realm, either by its Elf-Queen or by her own spiritual temperament, at crucial moments, and advised there, lucidly if not morally. Morgaine is “of the fairies” because of her resemblance to the “little people” who served this lost magical other-world and still row through the mists for the present, equally fated priestesses. By the book’s end, Morgaine has fulfilled her own and Arthurian Britain’s fate, by her own good deeds and bad, courage and fear, wisdom and folly. The Elves have already left Morgaine’s world, not to go into the West but into a past which is still, though almost inaccessible, physically “here”, still Britain. Avalon, already decimated of priestesses, will follow.

Of the many dashing Celtiads that have brandished their Irish orthography in recent years, one of the most indicative of the retreat of the Sidhe is the unpretentious Young Adult story by Diane Duane, *A Wizard Abroad* (1993). Duane’s smart young American wizards find their Irish counterparts have, for the time being anyway, something no other wizards can claim, a wary understanding with the ancient powers of their land. But the Sidhe have been alienated from the country they loved most, that has bound them more than any, and cost them more than the others. Their ancient and elaborate realm within the hill does not often allow human contact, even when the bargains are expressed in their own terms – and the terms of any human bargain with the Sidhe are precarious. Except in emergencies, Eire has become more like the secular human USA than Hy Braseal.

The ferocious relationship between the human protagonists of C.J. Cherryh’s *Faery in Shadow* (1993) and his Sidhe contacts stems partly from his own heroic guilt as a patricide, and partly from the fact that he is therefore bound to the Sidhe’s mixture of the whimsical and the vicious. He sees his role of service to the noble silver-handed Nuallan, of the high Daoine Sidhe, as that of causing murder and mayhem wherever he goes among men. His one constant (but madly inconstant) companion is of the dark Sidhe, a shape-changing pooka called Dubhain, prone to whisky and fond of wickedness, and other powers he meets seem equally liable to lacerate his body and soul, whether they are beautifully innocent half-selkie twins or coldly wicked witches that set on monsters of the lock to do their hunting for them. It is no wonder that Caith spends most of his time cursing, suffering and barely managing to keep battered body and guilty soul together. The Sidhe will not even let him lose his cursed sword, or his memory, and when he becomes their liberating hero no spot of triumph remains upon his imagination. Caith knows the world is changing around the Sidhe, and he would, if he could, build a ship with his bare hands if it would only take them forever oversea.

Any story in which Elf-like beings are thoroughly

menacing, cruel or indifferent to human ethics is almost forced to avoid both the term "Elf" and any hint of direct influence from Tolkien, so much are good Elves now identified with his work. This is especially true of homocosmic fantasy, that which is set in our contemporary world. Two excellent, very independent fantasies provide useful examples. In Gene Wolfe's teasing Arthurian thriller *Castleview* (1990), Morgan has a travelling castle, a little like the Welsh mythological *Caer Sidi*, that haunts a small Illinois town. Except when making a specific demand on mortal humanity it keeps aloof, and only the occasional halfwit (like the "Dymchurch Flit" Bee Boy) can enter uninvited. Morgan le Fay's marvellous, arbitrary, sinister Elf-like people and sub-people are alien to human virtue but rather fascinated by it. Defying the common sense of modern North American life, their challenge evokes from it a hero; like Arthur, Will E. Shields will be struck down and defeated, then taken to the Avalon-castle in all honour, for healing, as a sort of "tiend" to Elfland.

Peter S. Beagle's *The Folk of the Air* (1987) is equally inventive in presenting an Elven invader of contemporary American society. The unforgettably beautiful and sinister "boy", Nicholas Bonner, is called out of atemporal imprisonment by a teenage witch. As well as playing murderous tricks on a medieval role-playing society, he works with the witch to destroy his mother, a timeless earth-goddess in human aspect. Though the term is never used, Nicholas is far more Elf than demon, a totally amoral and alien force loose among the humans, who, as with all Elvishness, good or evil, try not to notice, and usually succeed. As Hamid says,

I have also seen more than a hundred intelligent people steadily denying something . . . right in front of their eyes. Unmaking it, you hear what I'm saying? . . . You ever want to see the real witchcraft, you watch people protecting their comfort, their beliefs. That's where it is.

(Beagle, 1987, p. 237)

## VI

And see ye not that braid, braid road

That winds about the fernie brae?

That is the road to fair Elfland,

Where thou and I this night maun gae.

Anon., "Thomas the Rhymer"

The author best-read in Tolkien, most intensely aware of and intimately subversive of his major works, is Guy Gavriel Kay. His *Fionavar Tapestry* (1985-6), a genuine trilogy as *The Lord of the Rings* is not, offers a multiverse, focused on a rich heterocosm, the proto-world Fionavar, but including legendary Arthurian Britain as well as our contemporary homocosm. The lios-alfar of Fionavar are, as usual, few in number and dwindling. A thousand years ago, after sharing with Men and Dwarves a great and grievous victory, they converted their radiant country, Daniloth, into a misted and shadowy time-labyrinth. When the Dark Enemy, Rakoth Maugrim, is again set free, his most intense hatred is still reserved for the Elves of Light, as his orcs and wolves well

know. Elves love the physical world's beauty, music and spirit but, being almost ageless, they can weary of time. Each Elf will ultimately be called by a personal song to sail alone across the Western ocean to a mystic Other-world only Elves can attain. When the trilogy begins, the last veteran of the great war has just, in the lovely Elven euphemism, "heard his song".

The twist to this charmingly sentimental reprise of the longing Tolkien's Elves feel for Valimar is correspondingly shocking. The song that calls each lios alfar is a fake: Rakoth has set a vast sea-monster, the Soulmonger, far out in the Western Ocean, to sing poignant Elvish melodies as bait for them. When each little boat approaches, its occupant is swallowed and incorporated into the lyric seduction for the rest of the doomed Elven race. Just as Sam laments naively in the second chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, "They are sailing, sailing, sailing over the Sea, they are going into the West and leaving us" (Tolkien, 1954a, p. 54), but in a savagely parodic sense.

In the second book of the trilogy, *The Wandering Fire* (1986a), when this dreadful discovery is made, Soulmonger is destroyed. However, the truth about Elven destiny must still be revealed to the remaining lios alfar, removing the mystic consolation for all their heroic dedication to the cause of the Light. Yet this irony too is not the end: with the Soulmonger silenced, the befouled dream of the Elven West is cleansed. In the third book, *The Darkest Road* (1986b), Leyse, the Lady of the Swan Mark (in our world's version of the story Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat, the Lady of Shalott), meets Lancelot and knows her love for him will never be requited. Ready to leave her life, she "hears her song", not from the hideous maw of the monster but from the authentic mystery her people have been so viciously denied. Leyse's solitary renunciation takes her beyond the physical West to a newly accessible Elvish mystery, distinct from that heterocosm to which the other Arthurian characters in Kay's vigorously post-Tolkien romance are apparently bound.

Even more than *The Mists of Avalon*, Katharine Kerr's Deverry series is based on Celtic material. The texts are *Daggerspell* (1986), *Darkspell* (1987), *Dawnspell: The Bristling Wood* (1990a), and *Dragonspell: The Southern Sea* (1990b). Her narrative, as it relates to mortals, pivots upon the rebirth of spirits in a series of identities, subtly overlapping,

Though Tolkien's Elves are aware of patterns of rebirth, the matter does not become crucial to their conduct, while the souls of his mortal men are taken beyond Middle-earth, so cannot be reborn. Gandalf is a very special case, since he is sent back from death immediately, not in a new being but as himself again – repeated, as Keats put it, in a finer tone. Kerr's Gandalf-like wisdom-character Nevyn, who wields good dweomer (the term used for magic) at the core of most of the opposition to evil, is a special case too: he has lived out many normal lifetimes in this one form, in fulfilling a sacred vow.

The Elves of Deverry, the Elcyion Lacar, live far from most human habitations. They have typical Elven longevity, so the reasons for this are still fresh in their minds. Many

centuries back, they had dwelt in Deverry proper, in seven beautiful cities, but had been driven (West, of course) into the grasslands by iron-wielding, wainriding human invaders. Eschewing literacy and "civilisation", the Elves are in effect pointy-eared Plains Indians, fierce and proud, unsurpassed archers and horsemen, with some dweomer. Those invaders, destroyed by virulent plagues, have no connection with the mortals now inhabiting Deverry, but the Elcyion Lacer still mostly prefer to have no truck with "round-ears". Most humans who trade with them mistrust and despise them in turn. There is no physical barrier between Elf and human, just distance, mutual incomprehension – and often violent dislike.

Nonetheless, there are half-elves; indeed, they play crucial roles in each book of the Deverry series. They are more or less pointy-eared, long-lived, dexterous, ethically responsive, and endowed with dweomer; most humans who meet dweomer fear and deny it. Some half-elves, like all Elcyion Lacer, can see the "wild-folk", grotesque elementals invisible to dweomerless humans, and Elven tradition has it that God created Elves from wildfolk just as He created humans from forest beasts.

The Elcyion Lacer are more complex than their theology because, as with Bradley's Avalon, a further time-level exists. On some etheric or astral plane, still and forever live lordly proto-elves, lethally glamorous to and contemptuous of their degenerate, iron-using descendants. By their wills and within a separate time-state they maintain an etheric version of their seven cities; a living Elf entering this "world" is lost to time and sometimes to sanity, sometimes to life. These proto-elves do precisely what they wish, or so they believe, but their ethical judgment has atrophied and they are unable to take seriously the affairs of the living, even direct conflicts between good and evil. Half-elves, our heroes, are the abomination of the proto-elven Faery.

The same implacability and amorality characterises the quasi-mythical or archetypal denizens of Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* (1986) and its sequel *Lavondyss* (1988). As they become more and more divorced from the "normal" world of mortal humanity, suffering becomes a matter of course rather than of concern. The more archetypal the hero, the more able he is to approach the world beyond the fire, "where time has no meaning"; but to become the almost invincible legendary Outsider seems to entail becoming vilely brutal, and to take on the role of his equal and opposite Kinsman may produce the same degradation. To attain Elflike awareness of story and freedom within time seems to alienate all human bonds.

In "Cold Iron", Puck offhandedly cites the last Elf-Queen, the Lady Esclairmonde, as having been "a woman once, till she followed Sir Huon across the fern, as we say." (Kipling, 1910, p. 9) In Gael Baudino's *Strands of Starlight* (1989), the core of the story is how a mortal female becomes an Elf. Baudino's whole story focuses on Miriam's transformation, set in a shrewdly deconstructed South of France just after the massacre of the Cathars. Archbishop Cranby, sweepingly ambitious, finds fun and profit in persecuting "witches" and other non-approved peoples, including Elves. Since he wants

to lead a crusade against the prosperous and reprehensibly cheerful Free Towns, their cordial relations with the woodland Elves make a good excuse. Elves are, after all, heretics: their theology omits reference to Original Sin and its Supreme Being is female: a star-goddess very like Elbereth. Her worshippers learn to trace the possibilities of the future, the strands of starlight, and act, by and large, wisely.

Though they are called "unnatural", Elves can intermarry with humans. A friend of Miriam's has a child by an Elf-lord, and not just because she is herself a witch. Significantly, the Elves themselves rarely breed; quietist lovers of the world, they have also become too wise to wish to fight, even for survival or vengeance, and whatever the provocation. At least, that is what they think they think. With the passionate Miriam and Cranby's villainy as catalysts, they have to change.

A small, frail teenager, Miriam is imprisoned and tortured by Cranby's clerics because she has healing powers. When she heals an aristocratic hunter, Cranby's ally, of terrible wounds, and he promptly rapes her, her anger suddenly changes her life. She forces the Elves to transform her into a warrior-maid so that she can kill him. The transformation succeeds, but during her weapons training she actually turns into an elf, so her values change too, against physical revenge. Radiant Superwomen, Elf-Queens, do not do murder, and wrath is not the only guide of the spirit. She becomes a noble and discerning Elf, and enters the greenwood with no regrets for her lost human identity. However, Elves are becoming rarer, and there are no young pure-blooded Elves.

Elizabeth Moon's slow-moving and circumstantial trilogy about a female warrior, *The Deed of Paksenarrion* (1982), only reluctantly concedes the possibility of magic, or Elves, and only late in the last book of the trilogy does their history become clear. In the distant past, before ordinary humans arrived, Elves had done great harm in the south of the continent and retreated, shamed, into upland forest areas north of the mountains. Their guilty past involved a civil war in which the Light-Elves, the Sinyi or singers, expelled the Dark-Elves, the Iynisin or unsingers, who worship the Anti-God Nayda, unnamer. The Sinyi's name for themselves and for their High King of Heaven, Adyan, Namer of Names, both closely resemble Quendi, "the Speakers". Not that they always speak or sing truth: they are tempted to pretend that the Iynisin are extinct, which is far from true. These demonic dark-elves follow an intellectual Shelob, the spider-goddess Achyra, deceiver and binder of all virtue, though she hates Light-Elves and paladins most.

The Elder Race here is more neglectful and evasive than in Tolkien, but there are strong similarities to Elves of Lórien. They "own" no land, but Elflands are almost inaccessible to unguided humans; within them times and seasons are quite distinct from those of neighbouring human areas. When the queen moves, her place and time move with her! True Elves are associated with music, light and beauty, especially stars and woodland, while the Iynisin are also called Kuaknom, "tree-haters", and live in caverns. The Elven civil War

between the celebratory Sinyi and the jealous Iynisin began, it emerges, when proto-humans (tree-worshippers, kuakkanni) came to worship the sacred First Tree, and it responded to their worship.

The last book of the trilogy focuses on the one kingdom, Lyonya, traditionally ruled by half-elves. The Elven half of its royal family has been lost, and with it the necessary sensitivity to the "taig" or spirit of the natural environment. Elves have longevity, of course, and a very low birthrate; they are, as might be expected, desperately committed to the cherishing of their few children. Humans are, by comparison, flourishing, and Elves overtly resent this; true Elves also resent half-elves. Of course it is not easy for even the pious among humans to love Elves either. Imbued with intrinsic grace and harmony, they hate and despise – and seek instinctively to avoid – conflict and turmoil that humans can readily endure. They will not long have realms of their own, but will fade away into the deepest woods, leaving subtle, invaluable traces of themselves to glamorise humanity's busy gene-pool.

With all their limitations, Moon's Elves will fight gladly against evil when they are shown unequivocal evidence of it. They end the trilogy with a decisive charge against orcs, various monsters and a wide range of human evildoers:

All at once the piercing sweet call of an elvenhorn lifted her heart, the sound she had heard in Kolobia, and never forgotten. She looked east. A wave of silver light rolled down the forested slope, as if the starlight had taken form. Out of the trees rode what none there had ever seen. Tall, fair, mounted on horses as pale as starlit foam, they cried aloud in ringing voices that made music of battle. Rank after rank they came, bringing with them the scent of spring, and the light of elvenhome kingdoms that is neither sun nor star.

(Moon, p. 1015)

This not only powerful in itself, but eloquent of Tolkien's continued influence. His Elves do not use cavalry, in the last years of the Third Age at any rate, but an Eldar version of the Ride of the Rohirrim, led by cavalier Elf-Lords like Glorfindel, may very well have been in Elizabeth Moon's mind.

## VII

Comrade, look not on the west:

'Twill have your heart out of your breast;

'Twill take your thoughts and sink them far,

Leagues beyond the sunset bar.

A.E. Housman, "The West"

Well, where do Elves go to? According to many writers, to whom Tolkien's challenging ecological ethic has become self-evident truth, they have retreated, disgusted by human crowds, ecological stupidity and our noisy, relatively high-technology urban life. Until recently they would have gone, like weary Noldor gathering at the Grey Havens, on a Celtic-twilit voyage westward over the sea. American writers, in particular, conscious of a largely American readership, can nowadays rarely accept this convention; an honourable exception is the Canadian Charles de Lint, with

*Moonheart* (1984) and its sequel *Spiritwalk* (1992), but his migrants left Celtic Europe in the days of Merlin. Some Elves, like Tolkien's *laiquendi* or green-elves, still seek a haven in deeper and deeper woods, but in proportion as their reasons become better this retreat has become less convincing: our homocosm is limited in scope, and humans are an expansionist race. The Brazilian rain-forest that might have seemed an obvious choice a little while ago is being destroyed apace. A similar limitation of environmental choice faces mer-people, clearly a related species. They too cannot travel much farther into nature.

Our round world offers no Uttermost West, Hy Braseal or Tir Nan Og to go to; Europeans do not go West to the United States, or New Yorkers West to California, in the expectation of Elfland. Elves alienated by our moral world-time, our religious practices (mostly Christian, though Islam must be at least as inimical) or by our allied and equally depressing secular certitudes, may find their magic ebbs or deteriorates like their birthrate. The image of the Last Elf is likely to be of Arwen, bereft of her mortal husband and forever separated from her Elven kin, lying under the withered trees of Cerin Amroth. But there are other, more or less imponderable destinations. In proportion as Tolkien is more influential than Lewis, authors are more wary of the mystical direction "higher up and further back"; it is as hard to write a convincing "deeper time" as a good heaven. However, some writers do present intriguing unheavenly destinations through Nature.

Cyberpunk Elves might seem unlikely to fantasists who avoid contemporary science fiction, but the rapid development of role-playing games and the continuing prosperity of computer games has produced many miscegenations between science, especially of the virtual reality kind, and magic. Indeed, proverbial among SF readers is the reflection that any phenomenon of whose scientific or technological basis the observer is totally ignorant must be indistinguishable from magic. Whether the guidelines and conventions of fantasy role-playing games invite players to confect Elves as sweetly-pretty herbalist heroines or discipline them as spell-wielding valkyries may not much matter, in that it is the players who eventually make such decisions, but there is little either elvishly beautiful or elvishly alien about those presented by authors like Weis and Hickman who "novelise" such games. Perhaps surprisingly, the cyberpunk end of the market is more Elf-nourishing than the TSR Trademark end.

Cyberpunk Elves star in FASA's role-playing game *Shadowrun*, set in a highly-urbanised future world dominated by giant corporations and more openly criminal organisations that have easily outlasted orthodox government and civil power. But this tough context is not "hard SF" in the old sense, because only a little while after our present day, the magic that has been blocked from most human experience comes back into the world again and, to quote the blurb, "Elves, Trolls & Ogres shed their human aspects & assumed their true forms". Mere humans are, alas, called norms; and orcs are, even more alas, spelled Orks. The trilogy called *Secrets of Power* (1990-1) by Robert N. Charrette, has an

excellent range of Elves; this is how the first one in the first volume is introduced:

Darkness had covered the land for some hours when the Elf stepped out under the sky to relieve himself. The forest was full of soft sounds, its life undisturbed by the presence of the lone Elf. A slight breeze meandered among the great dark boles of the trees, tickling their leaves into a soft rustle. The same wayward air played with the strands of his white hair and caressed his skin, making the Elf smile with pleasure.

*Never Deal with a Dragon* (1990, p. 11)

Not very good writing, admittedly, but the naturalistic emphasis of the first sentence is lucidly developed by the revelation that the Elf does not live in the forest but actually works in the highest of hi-tech. His communion with the stars is broken off:

He snugged the surgical steel jack into the socket at his temple and his fingers flew across the keyboard of his Fuchi 7 cyberdeck, launching him into the Matrix. His vision shifted to that dazzling electronic world of analog space . . .

Yes, he's a criminally-employed database decker, and his name is not Dorethuriel but Dodger. And the hero has to dig pretty deep to discover Dodger's long-buried ethics.

The ruler and "paladin" defenders of Tir Tairngire, or Elfland, loosely equivalent to the old state of Oregon, are far more lethal, and perhaps have no long-buried ethics. The scholarly Professor Laverty has much to recommend him, but little inclination to mix it with the bad guys, and certainly not with his ruler, Erhan. In the second volume we find that English Elves are just as tricky, though they have the merit of hating the pseudo-Arthurian renegade druids. But the most remarkable Elf is the Australian Aboriginal Urdli. Nobly anti-urban, unswerving, implacable, he stands out among his Caucasian elvish colleagues. However, he is also corruptible, not through the influence of others, but through his own pride and certitude, a veritable Fëanor of absolutist temperament. His destruction, and the fated love the Elf Dodger feels for Morgan le Fay, here presented as the spirit of Cyberspace, darken and mute the triumph of ancient magical integrity over the loathsome corporation. Elven happy endings are always poignant.

Among contemporary writers the most popular destination for the departing Elves is undoubtedly into humanity, especially in the compromise form of half-elves. The magical skills associated with Elves, such as telepathy, communication with trees, birds and other creatures, and spiritual healing, chime in perfectly with the dreams, and sometimes the claims, of New Age rhetoric about human potential. It is therefore no surprise that writers should find a responsive audience for stories in which Elven traits surface in mortals, even if only certain particularly noble or wise mortals. To recognise our Selves we have always needed the Other, and the Human Other is the most immediately rewarding form it can take. Fantasy by its nature invites audience expectation of a revivifying if not always a happy ending; it is inevitable that writers should seek to mitigate the dark wisdom of Elrond, who saw "a bitter parting beyond

the end of the world" (Tolkien, 1956, p. 340), and celebrate the Elf within, wonderfully defamiliarising our fellow mortals.

### Note

In recent years many more elves have established their various degrees of eerie disdain or fey mockery in fantasy fiction, role-playing games and computer-generated narratives. Dave Duncan's ebullient tetralogies *A Man of His Word* (1990-91) and *A Handful of Men* (1992-94) create a world in which Elves are simply one of the more unapproachable of many races, all capable of wielding magical words of power. The sky trees they dwell in are mountain-high, and their bird-like beauty and aesthetic detachment are just as rarefied and chilling.

Esther Friesner's Welfies (obviously from the jeer Elfywelfy) seem even sillier than the other species in her *Majyk By Accident* (1993), *Majyk By Hook Or Crook* and *Majyk By Design* (both 1994):

Pointed ears and huge, slanted leaf-green eyes peeked out through golden hair so long and flossy I was amazed they could see to aim their weapons . . .

"And how the hell did they hide in the trees when they're all wearing bright pink leotards . . . With sequins, yet."

(Friesner, 1993, pp. 97-98)

These male Welfies are high-camp parodies of High Elves. However, the anti-hero's first female Welfie is tiny, with multi-coloured shimmery wings, so Friesner can mock the boutique flitting-and-sipping fairy as well as the tall, glamorous sylvan archers. Yet the story's central Welfie, Mysti, fleeing the fairy image, turns into a cross-dressing, swashbuckling, wrong-righting hero, whose comic passion and panache defy the spangled absurdity of her people. Welfitude must be forgiven an estranged wife who would win a duel with D'Artagnan! At the end of the trilogy Mysti enters humanity by her renewed, consummable marriage to the protagonist Kendar, a buffoon mage.

The most brilliant sustained attack upon the prestige, morality and personal hygiene of the High Elves is Terry Pratchett's *Lords and Ladies* (1992). With a wittily eclectic extravagance incomparable among writers of comic fantasy, he presents lethally vicious Elves, ultimate aristocrats that dominate and despise the mortal world they use as toybox, prey, and forced-labour pool:

. . . When they get into a world, everyone else is on the bottom. Slaves. Worse than slaves. Worse than animals, even. They take what they want, and they want everything. But worst of all, the worst bit is . . . they read your mind. They hear what you think, and in self-defence you think what they want. *Glamour*. And it's barred windows at night, and food out for the fairies, and turning around three times before you talks about 'em, and horseshoes over the door.

(Pratchett, 1992, p. 163)

No wonder they have to be sealed Beyond The Fields We Know by a stone circle Gateway (a highly magnetic one, necessarily) by the power of Cold Iron and the heroic

rebellion of witches, dwarves, trolls, orang-utans and other sensible species.

them sniffing behind the sentimental cracks in New Age Occultism, clawing at the nightmare underside of folklore-psyche? Brr.

Are Pratchett's vile elves are still trying to get out? Hear

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