Winter 10-15-1996

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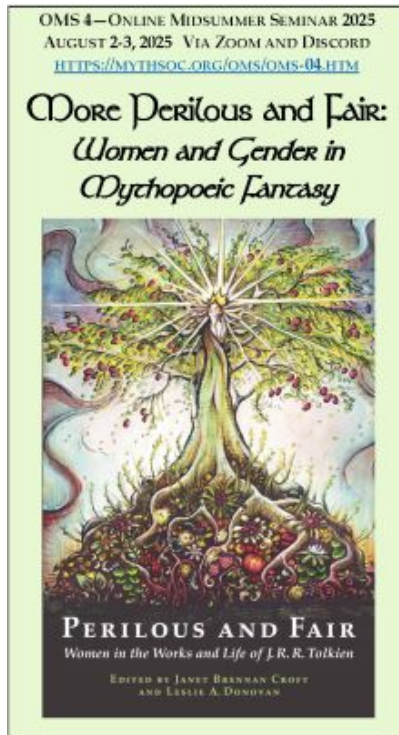To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
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Additional Keywords
conventional hero-figures; dark side of human consciousness; demons; fairy-tale villians; orcs; personal hope and doubt in Tolkien's writing; real-world heroism; Tolkien's ability to transcend doctrine and convention with the personal; war (contemporary); wives (lack of) and the mothers (dead) in Tolkien; woman as hero-figures in Tolkien; women as scapegoat in "Fall" stories

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J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a fairy-tale. A fairy-tale is expected to be ephemeral in its effect if not in its appeal, but Tolkien's writing has a quality of myth. The author spent his life writing *The Silmarillion* and its offshoots, and *The Lord of the Rings* is the cactus-flower of that work, unexpected, brilliant, organised, and seedbearing.

Tolkien's legendary peoples had two beginnings. One was in the *Lost Tales* (Tolkien, 1983 & 1984). The other was *The Hobbit*, where, beside the echoes of older and more conventional stories, we first encounter Bilbo Baggins, Gollum, and three cockney trolls. Compared to these, Thorin and his "Eddic dwarves" have a thoroughly respectable air.

The Hobbit is an outright fairy-tale, but the goblins sing and crack whips, and the elves sing, crack bad jokes, get drunk, and clap people in irons for interrupting their parties. There is an uncompromising quality about *The Hobbit*.

Goblins are traditionally on the malevolent side of fairyland. "Orc" is an Old English word meaning "infernal regions"; an *orc-thyrs* is a hell-devil, a demon (Bosworth & Toller, 1989). The goblins of *The Hobbit* are fairy-tale goblins; but there is a hint of more:

> Hammers, axes, swords, daggers, pickaxes, tongs, and also instruments of torture, they make very well, or get other people to make . . . prisoners and slaves that have to work till they die for want of air and light . . . It is not unlikely that they invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once . . .

(Tolkien, 1966d, pp. 57-8)

Tolkien, as a traditional Catholic, knew about demons, and knew only too well that it is not devils or goblins that manufacture instruments of torture, but mankind.

The orcs of the *Lost Tales* were made originally by the demonic god Melkor. By the time of *The Silmarillion*, they were said to have been bred from captive elves. In this latter scenario, Melkor can corrupt life, but not create it.

But the orcs began their life in Tolkien's creation as automatons, something which continues to inform their behaviour right through the later works. Orcs don't reform or change sides. They seem to be essentially without free will, the vital characteristic of created souls. They personify the malevolent will of the Prince of Darkness, not as servants or followers, but as tools and cannon-fodder, disposable instruments of mass destruction.

But if orcs are the goblins that haunt Tolkien's darker dreams, they cannot be completely separated from the evil that Men do. Nightmares may take the form of bogles or goblins, but they mainly draw upon human experiences for their terror. It was inevitable, therefore, that orcs would take on some of the characteristics of men.

Devils lead souls astray, snare them, and turn them loose to wander the world in living captivity. But they do not snatch hobbits, bandage and feed them, beat them up, or send their luggage to head office for analysis. These are human activities.

It is clear that Tolkien has humans at least partly in mind when he writes about orcs. They have individual

self-interest. They enjoy inflicting damage and cruelty, but can hold back in the pursuit of other goals. They would like to be self-employed. The inhabitants of fairyland are the denizens of our dreams, but we dream mainly of what we already know. Orcs are rather like humans because humans can be rather like orcs.

Yet orcs also behave like automatons. If characters in any of Tolkien's works encounter an orc, they do not ask whether it is friend or foe; they either run, hide, or attempt to kill it. They know that, unless they pursue one of these three options, they can themselves expect to be killed, or worse.

This is not how we would want to treat another human being, or be treated by one, yet the behaviour patterns are recognisable to us.

Professor Tolkien fought in the First World War, and lived through the Second World War. It would be impossible for any reasonably aware person living at that time not to have received an image of real evil active in the real world.

We hope that we are too enlightened to typecast members of another tribe, religion, or neighbouring country as demonic. We acknowledge that we are human and they are human; that they are like us, and we are like them.

But there comes a point when one human is not like another. When a soldier machine-guns a family of civilians, or when a gang kicks or knifes an unarmed victim to death, they are not sharing their likeness. When a child, or an old person, is abused, raped or killed, the common humanity between abuser and victim must seem very remote. Reports have been coming, throughout this year, from the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and Azerbaijan – of men starving, interned, sometimes massacred and mutilated; civilians, old people, unarmed women and children shot in the street or in their homes; teenage girls, as young as twelve and thirteen, taken from their families and systematically raped; some thrown back in a traumatised state, often pregnant; others kept in captivity as sex slaves.

All of this behaviour is cruel; much of it goes far beyond anything that can be explained as a necessity of war. This is not the time to tell the victims that the people who did this are "like them". They may have been once, they may be again; they may themselves have been abused; they may one day be old, or vulnerable. But there still exists that place where one human being can look at another and encounter something utterly alien, cruel, implacable and terrifying. All our darkest images come from this source.

Living people may regret and make amends, where that possibility remains. But the fact and the memory of atrocity also remain, and cannot simply be banished or denied.

There is no evidence that humankind can entirely exorcise the darker side from its consciousness. We can fight cruelty, hate and envy in ourselves as individuals; but to deny that they manifest themselves, horribly, in human experience is to create an illusion which is itself dangerous.

The Lord of the Rings is a straight battle between good and evil, but it is also a battle on several levels. There are the ugly, cruel personifications of our fears, and there are also living people.

Tolkien treats the "Mannish" enemy very differently from the goblin one. We hear remarks about cruel Haradrim, and fierce Easterlings, but we never meet them in the process of being cruel, and only briefly fierce. In *The Silmarillion*, one tribe of treacherous Easterlings is mentioned, but the other tribe from the dark-shrouded east remains loyal to its western allies. Even unlovely people – such as Wormtongue in *The Lord of the Rings* – were not born "bad", but turned bad; usually out of the process of seeking personal power or gain.

Tolkien distinguishes, constantly, between "bad" arising from fear and ignorance, and "bad" motivated by greed and jealousy.

The worst behaviour of all is attributed to the "chosen race" of the Númenóreans. The Mouth of Sauron – "more cruel than any orc" – is a renegade Númenórean. The downfall of Númenor is caused by its own people; Sauron only plays upon their pride and fear. Those who are privileged are given greater responsibility, and made to fall further when they become greedy and cruel.

Although advice, mutual support and loyalty are stressed throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, it is individual choice and action which are most significant in the creation of good as well as of evil, even when it goes against the grain. Both Éomer and Éowyn defy orders to take actions which save the lives of others. Beregond kills a colleague in attempting to rescue Faramir from the funeral pyre.

Even so, the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* are conventional. They have a fairly clear idea of what they need to do, and they follow it through unswervingly; not without pain and doubt, but usually in uncertainty of method rather than of purpose.

These heroes are never found drunk on duty, in the chamber of a colleague's wife, or doing a dirty arms deal. They are old-fashioned heroes. There are such people, and society tends to value them most when its conscience is bothering it. Most, of course, are not kings and princes, but fairy-tale convention (which often rewards virtue by conferring kingship) also allows for shoemakers.

The Lord of the Rings, like *The Silmarillion*, is mainly a chronicle of war. This was a situation that Tolkien had experienced personally. In time of war, people become heroes as often as they become villains.

Where do we find these heroes otherwise?

In the last two or three years, two stories have stayed in my mind. One was of a Liverpool councillor who turned against council corruption. The other was of a Londoner who discovered a council-housing payola scheme in his neighbourhood, an area of high homelessness. He appealed for help to the council, and then to the police and the press.

Both men, predictably, had their homes vandalised and their lives and families threatened. Both could have turned their backs on the situation, but chose deliberately to follow it through, out of a mixture of principle and a sense of identification with their communities.

Stories like this may not rival in scale the saving of the Universe from the forces of Darkness, but the potential cost to the participants is as high as that to any god or hero faced with any imminent world-ending. And though they are not

commonplace, they recur constantly, in every community.

The heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*, under their universalising and mythologising wizards' hats and enchanted swords, are of this kind. Aragorn is the leader of a declining people fighting for survival. Gandalf could have stayed in the office, but chose to go out into the field. Frodo leaves the Shire partly out of fear and partly out of genuine concern for his friends and neighbours. He takes on the bigger task because he is too conscientious to refuse it in front of those who have been kind to him. These are three types of individual who might, in the end, become heroic.

Incidentally, one of many studies undertaken on the effects of television on its audience reported in 1992 that the cult of the attractive villain seems to be communicating not that attractive people can be villains, but that villainy is attractive.

We should perhaps admit that we are vulnerable to appearances. The tall hero in the white hat may become acceptable at respectable dinner tables after all.

One extraordinary thing about the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* is that so many of them, regardless of age group or status, have no wife. Many people postpone marriage in dangerous times, but others marry precisely because they know that time might be short. Tolkien himself was one of these (Carpenter, 1977, p.78).

Yet some of Tolkien's greatest heroes are women; most by virtue of being someone's wife or mother, but a considerable minority in their own right.

Nevertheless, a tally of major characters in *The Lord of the Rings* who have dead or otherwise absent mothers or wives produces startling results. An initial count produces ten: Bilbo (his mother, Belladonna, was apparently dead by the time of *The Hobbit*, although Bilbo was still then a youngish man); Frodo; Sam; Éowyn and Éomer; Théoden's son Théodred, whose mother died when he was born; Faramir and Boromir, whose mother died when they were young; Arwen Evenstar; Aragorn. The mothers or wives of other heroes are rarely or never mentioned. Even Gimli the Dwarf never raises an oath on his old mother's beard.

Moving into *Silmarillion* territory, we have Elrond: separated from his mother at the age of (approximately) three-and-a-half in the assault on Sirion; his mother Elwing: mother and father killed when she's about seven; Fingon: sends his young son away from home for safety, but no mention of his wife; Fingolfin: wife (and daughter) seen briefly getting lost in an early version (the daughter re-surfaces in the published text, where she survives long enough to produce a son and be murdered by her husband); Idril Celebrindal: mother died in the crossing of the Helcaraxë; seven sons of Fëanor: their mother estranged from their father early in the story. They stay with their father. At least one had an offspring (Celebrimbor), who was "estranged from his father", but not a single wife is mentioned; Finduilas beloved of Túrin: we meet her father — two fathers, in fact (the kind of thing we might expect from somebody who gets involved with Túrin) — but not even one mother; Finrod Felagund: his beloved stayed behind in the Land of the Valar, presumably out of a keen sense of self-preservation.

In *The Silmarillion*, the female survival rate is slightly better among the human races. Túrin's mother Morwen is a survivor, but there is a tension in that relationship, a mixture of coldness and intensity, which becomes self-destructive.

Despite the honours accorded to heroic women, the only part that most others have to play is as memories. Natural causes and war don't adequately account, particularly in *The Lord of the Rings*, for the differing survival rates of male and female parents.

Tolkien himself lost his father, and later his mother, while he was still young. He regarded his mother as "heroic" for the hardship she suffered supporting him and his brother. His wife Edith, also, never knew her father, and lost her mother while in her teens.

Tolkien would have learned about day-to-day relationships without the help of a complete family. I suspect he learned much about friendship from his peers, but did not have the same opportunity with women. His friendships with the women he knew seem to have been good-natured. But there is definitely an uneasiness about the part a woman may play in a man's life, as emerges most strongly in the story of *The Mariner's Wife* (Tolkien, 1980, pp. 173-217). But an analysis of that story is beyond the reference of this paper.

The lack of live mothers in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* means much motherlessness, which is poignant, but also places the women concerned largely beyond the reckoning of the story.

A notable exception is Míriel, mother of Fëanor. Her husband Finwë, indeed, has turned out to have an excess of wives rather than a shortage, and yet, perhaps not unexpectedly, as more material comes to light, this story too moves ever further towards unreconciled loneliness. Míriel dies when Fëanor is a baby, but this does not entirely place her beyond the reckoning of the story. Her passing is seen as partly voluntary. She lies down in the garden of Lórien, and becomes, to all intents and purposes, dead. The Valar seem to agree, for in time they give Finwë permission to marry again. He and his second wife, Indis, have two sons. Fëanor grows up to be a gifted and self-centred man. He snubs his stepmother and half-brothers, is fiercely possessive of his devoted father, and centres his life on his achievements, gradually, to the exclusion of all else. He hates the demonic Melkor, but he is a man looking for trouble, and when Melkor creates it, he is quick to embrace it.

Before she dies, Míriel says to Finwë: "Hold me blameless in this, and in all that may come after." These words might be a fitting memorial to every woman who succumbs to fear, sickness or death, and is remembered afterwards only as "not there when she was needed".

But does Míriel's author hold her blameless? There is a very old resonance here, which I am following. *The Silmarillion* is mythic in tone. Myth carries part of the truth when the whole truth becomes too much to grasp in one piece. But it must tell the truth, and we must try to understand what part of the truth it is telling.

In the *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, having described Men's attempt to defy their mortal nature as "a supreme folly and

wickedness", Tolkien calls Míriel "An elf that tried to *die*, which had disastrous results, leading to the 'Fall' of the High-elves" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 286).

No doubt Míriel's absence did nothing to ease Fëanor's sensitive nature. But, even leaving aside that her illness was not of her making or choosing, how is it that Míriel can be blamed for the fall of the High Elves? What about Melkor? What about the many other factors and personalities involved? What about Fëanor himself?

Part of becoming adult is realising that our parents are not gods or demons, put here to answer our desires or take the blame for our own bad behaviour; and that our children are not put here to fulfil our own dreams and carry out our designs. Parents are an enormous influence on children, but each soul remains individual with no ownership rights over others, up or down the generations.

Fëanor also allowed his children to be tied up in his oath-swearing. Tolkien clearly disapproves of Fëanor and his actions, but, faced with Míriel's absence, he allows himself for a moment to forget that Fëanor is an adult, responsible for his own choices. It would be interesting to know to what part of the child/parent relationship Tolkien would trace, for instance, the behaviour of the Biblical Satan.

But what concerns me more is that old, old resonance; it's in the Book of Genesis. There is a man, and a woman, and trouble, and the same thing happens. The trouble belongs to everyone, but the finger of accusation swings steadily round until it points to the smaller participant, and the cry goes up again: "It was all her fault. She dunnit. She made me do it."

This does not sound to me like a myth out of fairyland; not even out of Tolkien's fairyland. This is a myth of Men.

Male-centred philosophy has had considerable currency for a long time. It's in the Bible. Tolkien's friend C.S. Lewis, following hotfoot, created a world in which the first male was "always older" than the first female (Lewis, 1943). Told that, biologically, male is derived from female, somebody in that circle – and I regret that I cannot trace the source, but the comment is commonplace enough – replied that, in that case, the male was obviously the improved version.

If you want a creed of convenience, and you have the means to do so, you can create one. When beliefs of this kind are written into the creed to which you have devoted your life – and are by no means inconvenient – it becomes unlikely that you will turn readily away from them.

However, when Tolkien himself develops female personalities in his writings, his tendency is to admire, even to exalt them. Many of the women he writes about are heroes.

I use the word hero advisedly as well as by preference. We are told – mainly in the later writings – how tall and strong these women are. Idril, "well nigh of warrior's stature" (Tolkien, 1988, p. 148); Galadriel, who was called Nerwen, "man-maiden" (Tolkien, 1980, p. 229); Éowyn, slender but as a steel blade; and tall Nienor; Beren's mother Emeldir the Manhearted; and the tribal chieftainess Haleth (which is an Old English word simply meaning warrior or hero).

Idril Celebrindal best balances the role of wife and mother with that of initiator and fighter. She orders the tunnel by which her family escapes from Gondolin; she fights for her life and her son's life against Maeglin; arms herself and goes around rescuing people. *The Silmarillion* takes the unusual step of referring the reader back to "The Fall of Gondolin" (*The Book of Lost Tales, part 2*) for this part of the story.

As Tolkien's mythology developed, its overall content and movement became truer, as he worked more deeply into it, and maybe also as he saw it through the eyes of his readership.

Tolkien had a personal point of view, beliefs and prejudices like anyone else. Some of them will seem alien to some of us. But despite the undercurrents which I have picked on in this paper, he kept his mythology startlingly free of personal and religious doctrinairism, while mirroring deep layers of personal belief, hope and fear, doubt and determination.

Despite the conventionally, even doctrinally, male-centred aspects of Tolkien's world, he also bucked that same system: by creating active heroines; by allowing himself to look towards faerie at all; by not preaching doctrines; and by allowing his imagination freedom to work, even in the context of his doctrinal beliefs.

I am not talking so much about the imagination as it tells a story, but the mythic imagination as it operates by itself and touches everything in our experience, especially the most personal, resonant, poignant and important things. And while many people seem serenely (or turbulently) unaware of the process in their lives, I believe that it has great force, whether or not we are mythopoeically inclined. Many a plain person, for instance, had recognised the likenesses between love, war and religion long before C.G. Jung arrived to reclassify the operations of the archetype.

Galadriel became more and more powerful as Tolkien's idea of her developed. Late in the day, he called her, "The greatest of the Noldor, except Fëanor maybe, though she was wiser . . ." and further: "These two kinsfolk, the greatest of the Eldar of Valinor, were unfriends for ever." She fights Fëanor's people physically at Alqualondë (Tolkien, 1980, pp. 229, 230 & 232). There are the beginnings here of a duality, an opposition between the less powerful but inherently wiser Galadriel and the destructive Fëanor.

I have not touched on the story of Éowyn in this paper, for abundance of other material. I will only add that I found it largely convincing when I first read it, as a teenager, in the 1970s, and now, twenty years later, I find it completely convincing.

There is a movement in these heroines towards a synthesis of "manly" and "womanly" qualities, as they are often understood: the woman who has virtuous male qualities as well as virtuous female ones. But there is no escaping that this movement is never allowed to take the opposite form. Gentleness in men is admired – in Faramir in particular – but this is never identified with any "female" quality. While certain "manly" qualities (without entering into any discussion on the justice of such attributions) are taken to be good enough for both men and women, "womanly" qualities are very definitely only for women. There is a profound imbalance here. It is part of our culture, and I doubt we will

ever be rid of it. That is not to say that we should accept it.

Lúthien, however, is different again. She is one of the root characters in the cycle, and though she developed and changed, she was from the start the spirited dancer who challenged a demonic god for love of her lover. There is nothing of the warrior about her. She is a half-divine singer and dancer, innately powerful. She does not aspire to discover or conquer, but she outfaces both Morgoth and Sauron. She outfaces Mandos himself. Beren puts his best hand forward, and if it were possible to demonstrate worthiness of such a love, he does so – but ultimately he is helpless without her. But worth, as such, is never mentioned. He does his bit. She does hers. Then they die and go off together, leaving her relations mourning and not a little puzzled.

This is not the end of the story. This is what we have to believe, anyway. This is what Tolkien had to believe. He said that *The Lord of the Rings* was about death. I recall a television programme, *Tolkien in Oxford*, long ago, which I have only seen repeated as a handful of "quotes" in an as-yet-unbroadcast documentary made in the U.K. for the Centenary year. In this (if I remember rightly) he called death "the greatest insult" to a human being. One of the great pleasures of seeing these snatches of interview again was realising that he attributed the quotation to Simone de Beauvoir.

Despite the "supreme folly and wickedness" (as he described it) of trying to capture worldly immortality, Tolkien was himself wrestling with the Gift of Men. The whole of his work is a plea for life to be preserved somewhere, as pure and unchanging as it can be, beyond the reach of time and human frailty. He looks with yearning to the traditions that such a place existed; his mariners search for the land of the young. Of Lórien, an early version says that the travellers saw no fungus or other signs of decay there (Tolkien, 1992, p. 241 fn. 36). This was later altered to "no stain." But in the world we live in, if nothing decays, nothing can grow, either.

Our hope must be that it is the physical which changes, falls to pieces and dies, and not the heart and the spirit.

The western isles are only a mythic form, but a mythic form for something he hoped for, longed for, and doubted. His mariners get lost or find nothing. Eriol finds lovely isles and kind people, but their stories are full of doom and disaster. Eärendel, in the early versions of his story, comes to Eldamar – and finds it empty. Not temporarily empty because the elves are away at a festival, but completely empty – they have gone.

In "The Sea Bell" (Tolkien, 1962, p.57) – quite erroneously subtitled *Frodos Dreme*, as the oldest published version (called, incidentally, "Looney") (Tolkien, 1934, p. 340) is much older than Frodo – the mariner comes to a far, green country, but nobody will speak to him, and he sees no-one. He hears them running from him. Eventually he finds the sea again, and sails home. No-one will speak to him there, either.

This is a dark dream by any standards. It has the same motifs as his other western-isle poems and stories, but it concentrates despair with alarming intensity. What I do not detect, though, is any sign that the traveller regrets the journey, despite its uncertain outcome.

Tolkien spoke more often of his other dark dream, apparently a literal one – the green wave rising and overwhelming the land (Carpenter, 1977, p. 170): Atlantis falling, the Golden Age crashing in ruins. It seems to have had a stronger grip on his imagination than any other mythical image from any source, and appears in more diverse and more complete forms (I am excluding transitional drafts) than anything else he wrote.

The underlying tension is always there, between the wickedness and folly of longing for life, free from change and decay, and the continued presence of that longing.

Myth and fairy-tale traditionally encompass the extremes of longing and beauty, terror and ugliness in the human imagination. If it often appears that the beauty and hope go somewhat beyond the real world, while much of the horror only skims the surface of what humans have achieved, consider that we can only produce from our imaginations what we are capable in some degree of experiencing. It makes a certain amount of sense that literature should stress hope, even in the face of experience, while confronting horror in some form that is overwhelming but not completely and irreparably so.

The gap between life and story is mainly in the longing for permanence: that something felt and seen for a moment can become crystallised into something indestructible, as embodied in the classic ending: "And they lived happy ever after." But only the major religions and the simplest fairy-tales dare to claim this ending for themselves.

Tolkien's strength is that he has taken the material and language of folklore and folk-memory, and impressed on it a personal reality of hopes and fears, animating the images and figures that he uses, relating his dreams in a way that can be shared on a number of levels, and making no easy promises.

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