



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

Volume 21
Number 2

Article 49

Winter 10-15-1996

Explorations into the Psyche of Dwarves

David A. Funk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Funk, David A. (1996) "Explorations into the Psyche of Dwarves," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 21: No. 2, Article 49.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss2/49>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

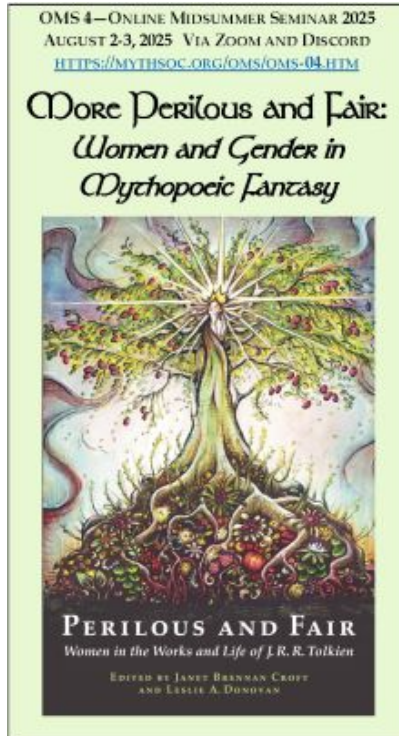
Online MidSummer Seminar 2025

More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy

August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



Explorations into the Psyche of Dwarves

Abstract

An attempt to explain the characters of the roles played by, and the major reasons for the creation of, Dwarves as presented in Tolkien's three major works of fiction concerning Middle-earth. The argument is heavily biased in favour of Dwarves' indispensability.

Additional Keywords

beauty; crafts; creativity; Dwarves; mithril; perception; smiths

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Explorations into the Psyche of Dwarves

David A. Funk

Abstract: An attempt to explain the characters of the roles played by, and the major reasons for the creation of, Dwarves as presented in Tolkien's three major works of fiction concerning Middle-earth. The argument is heavily biased in favour of Dwarves' indispensability.

Keywords: beauty, crafts, creativity, Dwarves, mithril, perception, smiths

Preface

Before I begin reading I must acknowledge a debt of gratitude to my mother Grace for her encouragement and constructive criticism. Without her assistance I would not have come to Oxford and without access to her library I could not have made this presentation. My paper owes much to numerous authors who paved the way for me, in particular David Day who wrote *A Tolkien Bestiary* and J.E.A. Tyler who compiled *The Tolkien Companion*. Most of all I am indebted to Christopher Tolkien for his tireless efforts in editing and publishing the many posthumous volumes of his father's works. Let me stress that I approached this paper from a reader's point of view.

Foreword

When we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight nor for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for; and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when these stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say, as they look upon the labour and wrought substance of them, "See! This our father did for us." – John Ruskin

Introduction

First of all I must describe the way in which I was introduced to Dwarves. My mother narrated *The Hobbit* to an older brother and me before I could read. Later she read aloud to us *The Lord of the Rings* chapter by chapter as the volumes became available at the local library. I didn't consume these stories in one sustained gulp as I often do now. I had time to mull over the action and absorb it. The characters were alive for me; as real as English history, as close as the pioneers of colonialism. It was almost a year before I realized (and pointed out) that there was no 'r' in Gandalf. 'G' for 'grand' – remember the words of the hobbit children?

The events in these tales seemed so natural. Dwarves provided a link from prosaic everyday life to adventures filled with wonder and terror. The fireworks that Gandalf brought to Shire celebrations were accompanied by Dwarves, characters that Tolkien used because his protagonist and the reader could easily accept them. Dwarves are down-to-earth;

understandable. Bilbo was familiar with Dwarves before he actually had a lot to do with them. In his younger days Bilbo had often met and discoursed with travellers before he became sedentary and set in his ways. Dwarves lived near the borders of the Shire and there was commerce between the two races.

No doubt Bilbo knew more of them than other inhabitants of his peaceful little country. They were regarded as makers of clever toys, smiths, taciturn wanderers on their way to or from the colony at the Blue Mountains. To quote T.A. Shippey,

. . . men [Hobbits] dealt with dwarves in a way they could not with elves, on an equal basis marred often by hostility.

(Shippey, 1982, p. 47)

The reader learns, as does Bilbo, more about Dwarves and their importance as the story progresses. But *The Hobbit* is basically a children's story, supplying only glimpses of the grand history concerning Dwarves.

Dwarves provide a counter-point to the elegance and nobility of Elves. They supply an underlying strength. One gets the feeling in times of crisis (the Battle of Helm's Deep for example) that all cannot be lost if the Dwarves or Dwarf, in the person of Gimli, are still in the thick of the fight. In fact, Tolkien uses this feeling to great effect when during the battle we almost believe the good guys could lose. Gimli has been lost temporarily and the situation looks very desperate.

Nature of Dwarves

Dwarves are practical and pragmatic; not easily swayed by high-flown rhetoric. The remark that Gimli made in response to Saruman's wily persuasions, "The words of this wizard stand on their heads" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 235), was exactly the blunt grating tone of voice needed to remind the Riders just how badly their forces had been mauled in the recent struggles.

Even Sauron found them "untameable" despite the gift of Seven Rings. A quote from Appendix A reveals:

Though they could be slain or broken, they could not be reduced to shadows enslaved to another will; and for the same reason their lives were not affected by any Ring, to live either longer or shorter because of it. All

the more did Sauron hate the possessors [of the Rings] and desire to dispossess them.

(Tolkien, 1965b, p. 446)

No doubt their powers of resistance are attributable to the virtues instilled in them at their creation.

The most significant clues to the existence of Dwarves are in a somewhat lengthy passage from the *Valaquenta*:

Aulë has might little less than Ulmo. His lordship is over all the substances of which Arda is made. In the beginning he wrought much in fellowship with Manwë and Ulmo; and the fashioning of all lands was his labour. He is a smith and a master of all crafts¹, and he delights in works of skill, however small, as much as in the mighty building of old. His are the gems that lie deep in the Earth and the gold that is fair in the hand, no less than the walls of the mountains and the basins of the sea. The Noldor learned most of him, and he was ever their friend. Melkor was jealous of him, for Aulë was most like himself in thought and powers; and there was long strife between them, in which Melkor ever marred or undid the works of Aulë, and Aulë grew weary in repairing the tumults and disorders of Melkor. Both, also, desired to make things of their own that should be new and unthought of by others, and delighted in the praise of their skill. But Aulë remained faithful to Eru and submitted all that he did to his will; and he did not envy the works of others, but sought and gave counsel. Whereas Melkor spent his spirit in envy and hate, until at last he could make nothing save in mockery of the thought of others, and all their works he destroyed if he could.

(Tolkien, 1977, p. 27)

This explains the animosity between them and their creatures that had its roots even at the creation of Arda. A further quotation taken from Chapter 2 of *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien, 1977, pp. 43-44) gives Aulë's reasoning in the making of Dwarves.

. . . And Aulë made the Dwarves even as they still are, because the forms of the Children who were to come were unclear to his mind, and because the power of Melkor was yet over the Earth; and he wished therefore that they should be strong and unyielding . . . Since they were to come in the days of Melkor, Aulë made the Dwarves strong to endure. Therefore they are stone-hard, stubborn, fast in friendship, and in enmity, and they suffer toil and hunger and hurt of body more hardily than all other speaking peoples . . .

It seems clear that Aulë anticipated the need for such a sturdy race to aid in the travails of the First-born and of Men in the ages to come. Though there were tragic tales of woe between these peoples the fiercest hatreds were always reserved for the creatures of Morgoth, the Dark Enemy.

The quotations explain the reasons for Dwarves within the context of the story. What about Tolkien himself? A strong argument can be made supporting the theory that the author

had a high regard for craftsmanship and esteemed the role of artisan. The progress of all the races is closely linked to their skills at building. They built ships, fortresses, great houses, extensive caverns, roads and bridges. The theme is (human) manipulation of the environment. If Hobbits embody the English farmer then surely Dwarves represent the English craftsman.

But why Dwarves specifically? Would some variation or evolution of Elves have done as well? Dwarves were not initially part of Tolkien's stories. *The Book of Lost Tales* makes no reference to them as such. The idea of them was present instead as Gnomes or Noldoli who had much the same relationship as in later versions but were not the "Children of Aulë". Dwarfs and dwarf-lore are an integral part of European mythology. Tolkien cleaned them up and generally made them more appealing just as he revised the modern image of Elves to distinguish them from sprites and fairies. In a letter drafted in response to comments by Robert Murray, S.J. (1954), Tolkien says this:

Even the dwarfs are not really Germanic "dwarfs" . . . and I call them "dwarves" to mark that. They are not naturally evil, not necessarily hostile, and not a kind of maggot-folk bred in stone; but a variety of incarnate rational creature. (Tolkien, 1981, p. 207)

Someone had to do the dirty work, so to speak. Dwarves were miners, engineers, metalworkers. It was Dwarves who tunnelled under mountains unearthing rare minerals, jewels and the materials of work-a-day life. Iron and other minerals were essential commodities. Men and Elves did some of their own mining but it is with Dwarves that we associate labour underground. Indeed, as a people they preferred caverns to open plains, carving through rock as readily as might the settlers of Rohan cut sod to roof their buildings.

It was Dwarves who were reckoned cunning smiths and great engineers. Given their propensity for travel who knows what influence Dwarf masons may have had on the builders of Man's great cities?

Very little of legend or mythology exposes a psychology that is truly alien to human thought. Dwarves had essentially human personalities as did all Tolkien's people. They identify for us (the reader) the attributes of stoicism, courage, perseverance, physical and mental toughness and a love of crafts. They also reveal less endearing traits: stubbornness, avarice, secretiveness and a reluctance to admit to the competence of others, at least in the areas of Dwarvish expertise. As Gandalf explains to Gimli and the hobbits in a conversation at Minas Tirith after the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*,

This Dwarvish conceit that no one can have or make anything "of value" save themselves, and that all fine things in other hands must have been got, if not stolen, from the Dwarves at some time, was more than I could stand at that moment

(Tolkien, 1980, p. 334),

thereby precipitating the inclusion of Bilbo on the Quest of

¹ Originally the term "smith" was applied to anyone who made anything. The large family of Smiths are honourably descended from people who in early times had accomplished something notable.

Erebor.

But Dwarves have an importance to the story that goes beyond being instrumental in the finding of the Ring. They are the agents of Smaug's destruction and a crucial element in re-arming (re-populating) the region of the Lonely Mountain in time to divert or engage some of Sauron's forces who might otherwise have laid waste to many precious places left undefended while the war raged in Gondor. Gimli's presence at the Council of Elrond was no accident. As the men of Dale were approached by emissaries of Sauron, so were the Dwarves of Erebor. The choice was not whose side they were on but whether to get involved. Hence the need to consult with Elrond. They became part of the alliance yet remained on the edges of the main narrative. Given the malice and power of Sauron and his forerunners, the forces for "Good" against "Evil" needed all the help they could get. Dwarves were staunch allies, undaunted in the face of overwhelming odds, historically (within the context of the stories) credited as withstanding even the onslaught of the great fire-drakes at the Battle of Unnumbered Tears². As smelters and refiners of ore they were accustomed to great heat and had invented protective gear. But as worthy as their armour was their strength of spirit.

Joy of Making

An aspect of dwarvish character I will focus on is what I term "the joy of making". Tolkien was a craftsman – a wordsmith. The evidence is the multitude of versions he produced for almost every piece of writing. He gave his work the care and attention to detail that he admired in the work of good craftsmen. He spent most of his life surrounded by the results of men's efforts that had lasted centuries. Certainly his own labours in fiction and non-fiction will stand the test of time.

Was Tolkien a crafty wanna-be or did he have the knack of getting inside the heart (head) of people he wrote about? Where does the concept "the joy of making" come from? The very first reference is (as one might expect) at the beginning of all things, when Eru made the world according to the Music of the Ainur. *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien, 1977, p. 19) describes their wonderment at the substances of which Arda was formed and goes on to say: "but the delight and pride of Aulë is in the deed of making, and in the thing made . . ." It is a phrase that strikes me as indicative of the author's attitude.

The joy of making as I know it is very real; a powerful incentive. The drive to create something: a toy, a tool, a tower of stone, is compelling. Not only is the urge a strong one, but as one's skills improve the created object must become more refined. Tolkien understood this, being a perfectionist in his own right. The finished product is only part of the satisfaction.

The use of the device "mithril" explains this more fully. As a material it was valued above all others – including gold. In the words of Gandalf to Sam:

The wealth of Moria was not in gold and jewels, the toys of the Dwarves; nor in iron, their servant . . . For here alone in the world was found Moria-silver, or true-silver as some have called it: *mithril* is the Elvish name . . . Its worth was ten times that of gold, and now it is beyond price . . .

(Tolkien, 1971, p. 331)

Note that Dwarves placed their highest values on a substance not only pleasant to look at but also rewarding to work with. Its virtues were strength, ductility, toughness and incorruptibility. It was rare but worth the energy required to find it. They dug for the ore because the process of finding it was part of the joy of working with it. It was part of an ingrained need to create things and so enrich their lives.

Unfortunately it was also their downfall. Tolkien writes in his letters to his son Christopher about a development of the human condition he refers to as "the machine". His particular point is about the (impersonal) destructive capabilities of aircraft but he says it shows a human failing to recognize that the worst destruction is to their own nature (spirit). A parallel can be observed in the actions of Dwarves (who exhibit human characteristics) when their desires to manipulate the fabric of the earth degenerate into excessive pride. They delved too deep in search of mithril and awakened an ancient evil which destroyed their greatest creation – the city of Khazad-dûm. Was this hubris? Tolkien kindly allows the possibility that the Balrog may already have been aware and the Dwarves merely unleashed it from imprisonment (1965b, p. 439). The example does imply that there is a danger in allowing the desire to create to become an obsession. Dwarves had a tendency towards possessiveness as well; a further perversion of the joy, demonstrating that Dwarves showed faults of a human kind. At any rate the joy of making is incontrovertibly a part of Dwarf nature.

Indeed, there are "Dwarves" alive and kicking in the world today. Who among us does not know of at least one person whose passion reflects "an almost dwarvish obsession with craft"³ Not the painter or the sculptor but the talented amateur who labours countless hours reproducing classic furniture in meticulous detail or the mechanic who restores a vintage automobile to original condition.

The value of a Dwarf is the willingness to go beyond discomfort, inconvenience or simple utility. A diamond is after all only a rock, no matter how large or flawless. It has its uses as a very hard material and in the right setting can attain great beauty in human (dwarvish) eyes. The ability to recognize and utilize the potential of a material is a Dwarvish trait.

Hidden Beauty

The other aspect of Dwarves that describes their essential nature is what I will term "hidden beauty". Tolkien declined to use flattering physical descriptives for Dwarves. They were not considered handsome or fair to look upon; "unlovely" was more apt. What does this reveal about the

² Nirmaeth Arnoediad "Tears Unnumbered", the fifth battle in the Wars of Beleriand near the end of the First Age.

³ An expression used to describe Celebrimbor, Lord of Erebor, an elven smith of renown circa 750 to 1697 of the Second Age.

author's thoughts on surface appearances? Unlovely exteriors could conceal admirable inner qualities. Dwarves perhaps best embodied this idea. Of particular relevance is the position that Dwarves occupied in Middle-Earth. Some Elves made long and perilous migrations (in rebellion) but Dwarves had always inhabited the world, indeed passed centuries with little or no contact with others. They were not "the Chosen" or First-born; had no quarrel with their Creator and did not have the same personal relationship with the Valar as did the Eldar. Having spent hundreds of years left to their own devices – left to evolve their own culture – perhaps made them insular; a little shy of revealing too much.

A prime example concerns Mîm the Petty-dwarf's sack of roots during his encounter with Túrin and his band of outlaws. "They are of great worth," he said. "More than gold in the hungry winter."

And earlier is written:

But when they were cooked these roots proved good to eat, somewhat like bread; and the outlaws were glad of them . . . "Wild Elves know them not; Grey-elves have not found them; the proud ones from over the Sea are too proud to delve," said Mîm.

(Tolkien, 1980, p. 103)

The roots looked like nothing more than lumps of rock when harvested yet in the midst of winter famine had more to offer than precious metals. Considering that Dwarves generally disdained farming, preferring to trade for such goods, the quiet secret of a readily available, sustaining tuber seems very Dwarvish. Remember also the opening line of Tolkien's second most famous verse: "All that is gold does not glitter". The One Ring itself seemed only to be a plain gold band with no hint of its powers.

Dwarves are long-lived; not interested in transitory beauty. They made things to last. While not beautiful in themselves they appreciated beauty and were capable of great depths of feeling. One reason for Gimli's fascination with Galadriel was her timelessness, going beyond her physical appearance. Her poise and grace were acquired through ages of turmoil. The other reason was this: Galadriel is one of the central figures in the struggle against evil in Middle-earth. Of all the Eldar it was she who had the most wisdom regarding Dwarves. This played a part in the overwhelming impression she had on Gimli. To quote *Unfinished Tales*:

In any case, Galadriel was more far-sighted in this than Celeborn; and she perceived from the beginning that Middle-earth could not be saved from "the residue of evil" that Morgoth had left behind him save by a union

References

- Shippey, T. A. 1982. *The Road to Middle-earth*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1971. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Toronto: Methuen Publications.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1965a. *The Two Towers*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1965b. *The Return of the King*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1977. *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1980. *Unfinished Tales*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1981. *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter. London: George Allen & Unwin.

of all the peoples who were in their way and in their measure opposed to him. She looked upon the Dwarves also with the eye of a commander, seeing in them the finest warriors to pit against the Orcs. Moreover Galadriel was a Noldo, and she had a natural sympathy with their minds and their passionate love of crafts of hand⁴, a sympathy much greater than that found among many of the Eldar: the Dwarves were "the Children of Aulë", and Galadriel, like others of the Noldor, had been a pupil of Aulë and Yavanna in Valinor.

(Tolkien, 1980, p. 235)

Gimli's conversion to an appreciation of all things Elvish – a result of being smitten – is not surprising. Reverence for the beauty of Creation is common to all humans. Gimli was inspired to depict the underground wonders of Helm's Deep (another instance of hidden beauty) in words that moved even Legolas to comment. Elves exhibit joy in existence. Dwarves exhibit joy in the fabric and manipulation of material substance.

Conclusion

Aulë created Dwarves "in his own image"; skilled at crafts and imbued with a need to use those skills. Their capacity for vengeance and their martial powers had to be triggered. They were not empire-builders nor did they seek to impose their will on others. They were most content when left in peace. However it should be noted that they reached their highest attainments during the Second Age through collaboration with the Noldorin Elves of Eregion. It was Sauron who eventually shattered that accord, beginning the long chain of events that culminated in the War of the Ring. The reign of peace that followed its conclusion allowed for a return to the true nature of Dwarves and as noted in Appendix A regarding Durin's Folk:

After the fall of Sauron, Gimli brought south a part of the Dwarf-folk of Erebor, and he became Lord of the Glittering Caves. He and his people did great works in Gondor and Rohan.

(Tolkien, 1965b, p. 451)

So as Middle-earth began a new age, the need for craftsmen, appreciation of beauty, willingness and patience for hard labour – all the best qualities of Dwarves – still had a place, both to repair the ravages of conflict and to explore new territories of splendour. "Hidden beauty" describes what they (Dwarves) are and "the joy of making" describes what they do.

⁴ Recall the cloaks woven by Galadriel and her maidens given to the Company upon leaving Lórien (writer's note).