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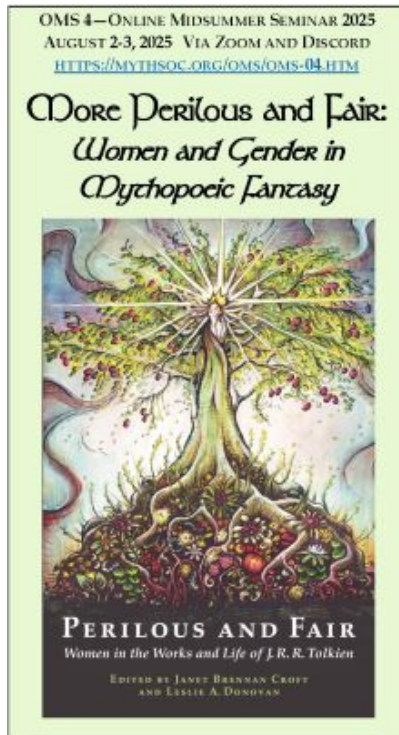
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### Abstract

The powerful, learned woman is a figure of fear in the works of Williams, seen as transgressing her proper role. In Lewis, legitimate authority figures are male, illegitimate ones are female, and gender roles are strictly demarcated. Tolkien, however, not only creates powerful and heroic women, but also suggests that the combination of authority and femininity can be particularly potent and talismanic.

### Additional Keywords

Galadriel; gender; C.S. Lewis; Lucy; women

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# Female Authority Figures in the Works of Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams

Lisa Hopkins

**Abstract:** The powerful, learned woman is a figure of fear in the works of Williams, seen as transgressing her proper role. In Lewis, legitimate authority figures are male, illegitimate ones are female, and gender roles are strictly demarcated. Tolkien, however, not only creates powerful and heroic women, but also suggests that the combination of authority and femininity can be particularly potent and talismanic.

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I intend in this paper to touch only briefly on Williams, look in slightly more detail at Lewis and to concentrate on Tolkien. In the work of Williams and of Lewis, to have an authority figure who is female is seen as being at best a contradiction in terms, at worst a fear of nightmare proportions. This is clearly illustrated in Williams' work by the case of the unfortunate Damaris, the heroine of *The Place of the Lion*, whose pretensions to scholarship are duly put in their place by a surprise visit from a pterodactyl, much to the approval of her fiancé Anthony and, it is fairly clearly indicated, the author. The fates that await Lewis' powerful women are less spectacular, but they are nevertheless unpleasant: the White Witch and the Lady of the Green Kirtle in the Narnia books are both destroyed by the forces of righteousness, as is Fairy Hardcastle in *That Hideous Strength*. Clearly these women will find few mourners, for they are all, in their various ways, virtually personifications of malignity, irrationality and selfishness. Throughout Lewis' work, however, we come across female figures who are far less demonstrably evil than these three, yet who are nevertheless sources of trouble and unease.

The Lady of Perelandra is an obvious example of this phenomenon. She is the second Eve, and even though she has not yet fallen she carries some of Eve's stigma with her: she is perceived instinctively by both the good Ransom and the bad Weston as the vulnerable point, innately corruptible apparently through the very fact of her feminine gender. For all her nobility and innocence, she is still tainted: like the evil witch of *The Silver Chair*, she is green – the colour, in popular iconography, of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, so that, like Milton's Eve, she has a strange bond with Satan inherent in her very nature. The overwhelming message of the book is that only in the safe grip of masculine control can she be made safe, just as Jane in *That Hideous Strength* needs firm handling by her husband Mark to restore her to the role of wife which she has forsaken and the role of mother which she has, disastrously for Logres, never attempted. The

autonomous woman is seen as a terrifying and unnatural figure.

Even the virtuous and admirable female characters in Lewis' work have a troubling air of ambiguity around them. Lucy is, of course, the youngest and most favoured of the four Pevensie Children: she finds Narnia first, and always enjoys the closest relationship with Aslan. Her privileged status could however, be said to be purchased in effect at the expense of her femininity. Despite Father Christmas' dictum that "battles are ugly when women fight" (Lewis, 1959, p. 100), in *The Horse and His Boy*, Lucy, now Queen Lucy, does fight as an archer against the Calormenes, and she is conspicuously detached in that book from the love-intrigues surrounding her sister Susan. Unlike the real Lucy who was the dedicatee of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, Lucy Pevensie never disappoints Lewis by the attainment of mature femininity. Susan, on the other hand, does, and is punished for it by exclusion both from the books and from the family circle, being the only member of the Pevensie clan not to die and enter Aslan's country at the end of *The Last Battle*. Susan's interest in nylons and lipstick, foreshadowed by her initial blindness to Rabadash's unworthiness in *The Horse and His Boy*, clearly count as a far greater betrayal than Edmund's flight to the White Witch, for whereas he is forgiven and readmitted, she is exiled for ever.

For Lewis as for Williams, therefore, femininity is apparently perceived as problematic. He is of course aware of society's changing ideas on the subject: towards the beginning of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* Eustace, complaining in his private diary that Lucy has been given a better cabin than he, remarks "C. says that's because she's a girl. I tried to make him see what Alberta says, that all that sort of thing is really lowering girls but he was too dense" (1965c, p. 32). We of course are by no means too dense to pick up the implication that this sentiment is thoroughly to be distrusted, since it is expressed by the obnoxious Eustace and originates from his equally loathsome mother (so that a

woman's voice is in fact used here to discredit notions of women's equality). It will also not be lost on us that the totally unsuitable head of Experiment House, Eustace and Jill's school, is a woman, who eventually has to be confined in an asylum after her encounter with the animals sent by Aslan. In the world of Lewis' books, while girls – like Lucy, Jill, Polly and the young Susan – may be likeable and even admirable characters, the transition into womanhood invariably turns females into something much more worrying.

In the world of Tolkien, however, attitudes are rather different. His books are of course notable on one level for their paucity of female characters: of the fifteen assorted travellers who set off on the quest in *The Hobbit*, not one is female, and nor is any of the Nine Walkers in *The Lord of the Rings*. And of the various forms of life that we encounter in the course of the books, it is notable that several species seem simply not to have any women: we meet no female trolls, for instance, the Entwives are missing, and an appendix to *The Lord of the Rings* informs us that dwarf-women are remarkably few in number – we certainly encounter none in the stories. Of female hobbits, we hear briefly of Bilbo's mother and of Frodo's, and meet Lobelia Sackville-Baggins and Rosie Cotton, later Mrs. Sam Gamgee; of female inhabitants of Minas Tirith, we meet only Ioreth, of Rohan, only Éowyn, of Rivendell, only Arwen, of Lothlórien, only Galadriel, and of Gondolin, only Idril Celebrindal; the only female inhabitant of Mordor of whom we hear is Shelob, who lives on its borders. And yet this small number of women have a range of parts to play whose importance is remarkably disproportionate to their numbers. Their very scarcity seems to invest them with an air of uniqueness and of almost talismanic status, and in some cases their very femininity, seen as such a disadvantage in Lewis, is in Tolkien the very source of their strength – the chief Nazgûl, who is invulnerable to the hand of mortal man, is destroyed, through some *Macbeth*-like equivocation, by Éowyn.

Power in the works of Tolkien is often to be found in the hands of a woman. In the *Book of Lost Tales*, the land to which Eriol travels is ruled over by a woman, Meril-i-Turinqi, and it eventually became Númenórean custom that the eldest child of the king should succeed him regardless of gender. Galadriel is an even more obvious example: the Lady of the Golden Wood far eclipses her husband Celeborn. It is she, not he, who wears the Ring of Power, and who has access to the insight granted by the Mirror, and ultimately she even acts independently of Celeborn, when she leaves Middle-earth without him. A similar state of affairs prevailed in Doriath in earlier times, where the powerful Maia Melian encircled the land with a Girdle which kept out the power even of Morgoth, providing a considerably more potent protection than any which could have been afforded by her husband Thingol. Melian's daughter Lúthien inherited some at least of her mother's might: she and Beren go to Thangorodrim as equals, and he would undoubtedly never have survived his quest without her help. Thingol, by contrast, is seen as prone to greed and self-will when he will

not accept the restraining influence of Melian. Far wiser is Tuor, who follows unquestioningly the advice of his wife Idril Celebrindal, and so manages to get himself and his family safely away from the sack of Gondolin; and other wise women are Aragorn's mother Gilraen, who sends her son to Rivendell, and Túrin's mother Morwen – though her plans for her family's safety are eventually horribly frustrated in ways she could never have foretold.

What is perhaps even more remarkable is that women in Tolkien are not portrayed solely in the light of their relationships to men. The traditional roles for women in epic narratives are very seriously limited: they can normally appear either to be wooed, to be rescued, or occasionally to be killed. In any of these events, their ultimate fate is decided entirely by the men around them. Classical epic provides clear examples of this: Polyxena is sacrificed on Achilles' grave, Andromache is the grieving widow, Helen the cause of the war, Dido the abandoned victim of Aeneas. It is this tradition that can be seen providing clear structural problems for Spenser when he attempted, in *The Faerie Queene*, to write an epic that was at least nominally woman-centred, and it is also this tradition that Tolkien inherits for the epic aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. It is, therefore, interesting to find him adopting a device that had already been used by Spenser, that of having a heroine actually take part in the fighting by disguising herself as a man. To have a cross-dressed heroine is, of course, a common enough motif: Lewis does it in *The Horse and His Boy*, where Aravis makes her escape disguised in her brother's clothing, and a number of Shakespeare's comedies hinge on the use of such disguise. Éowyn's motivation is, however, unusual in that it is only tenuously related to questions of romance. The Shakespearean heroine is either already in active pursuit of her lover when she adopts male disguise, or soon becomes so; in either event, she avoids as much as she can doing any actual fighting. Éowyn, however, actively wants to be engaged in battle, seeing herself as a shieldmaiden rather than a nurse and longing to prove herself worthy of her descent from Eorl. Obviously her love for Aragorn plays a part in this: but ultimately it is a deeper sentiment, of family and personal loyalty and of integrity, which sends her into her confrontation with the Nazgûl. Although her story ends in romance, with her marriage to Faramir, Éowyn has received that rare distinction for a female character, serious investigation of her psychology and motivation rather than depiction solely as a love-object.

Much the same is true of Galadriel. Considerable parts of Galadriel's earlier history are of course filled in in *The Silmarillion*, but even in *The Lord of the Rings* it is sufficiently apparent that she and Celeborn are no conventional husband-and-wife team of the sort that would have been familiar to Tolkien's contemporary readers. She lives with him, but at their first meeting with what survives of the Company it is obvious that she has access to information which he has not, and that they are accustomed to reach decisions separately rather than together. Moreover, for all her beauty and flowing golden hair, Galadriel is no conventional heroine of romance: she is not innocent but

experienced, and although she rejects Frodo's offer of the Ring, she is astute enough to be able to perceive its superficial attractiveness. In creating the figure of Galadriel, Tolkien seems to benefit enormously from exploiting one particular aspect of his concept of Elves, their agelessness. The traditional older woman of fairy tale and romance is usually relegated to the roles of hag, witch or wicked stepmother; her child-bearing years long over, she retains no attractiveness for men, and her accumulated wisdom only turns her into a more effective threat to them. Galadriel, however, breaks this mould, for though certainly an older woman – she is in fact a grandmother – her Elven blood means that she also retains the beauty, vivacity and charm of a girl, able to enchant Gimli on sight.

Even Galadriel, however, has not been able to break quite free of some at least of the constraints of the female condition. It is notable that she is the only one of the leading characters opposed to Sauron, who suffers from a bad reputation: Boromir is reluctant even to enter Lothlórien, and Éomer is immediately suspicious of Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas on learning of their connection with it. What is more, both men directly cite Galadriel as the reason for their distrust. Even when Éomer learns better, his view of Galadriel is still an oddly limited one: he and Gimli enter the unwitting Galadriel and her granddaughter Arwen into what is in effect a beauty contest, with each deciding on a different winner. It is as if traditional categories of evaluating women and their behaviour are slow to be abandoned, even in the face of such untraditional behaviour as that of Galadriel.

Not all Tolkien's women, of course, are Galadriels. Several of them do indeed accord with the far more conventional pattern of including women in epic narrative simply as partners for men: Arwen, for instance, is a surprisingly shadowy figure, a re-run of Lúthien who takes no active part in her Beren's adventures, and seems only to exist to provide

a suitable bride for Aragorn at the end of the story. Rosie Cotton performs a similar function for Sam, and Merry's and Pippin's wives do not even warrant naming. Even Éowyn eventually is brought back within the framework of convention by being paired off with Faramir in a marriage which may well appear to be born more of narrative convenience than of inspiration. It is notable, though, that considerable status is attributed to these women within their marriages. Many of the most notable heroes of Tolkien's world have their origins in marriages between Elves and mortals, and in these cases it is always the wife who is of Elven or Half-elven blood: Aragorn and Arwen, Tuor and Idril, Beren and Lúthien, or, in a parallel though not identical case, Thingol and Melian. Thus the role of woman as mother as well as wife is markedly stressed, just as we hear of the importance of Míriel to the young Fëanor. In an interesting contrast, it may be instructive to remember that all Lewis' powerful female figures are childless, often pointedly so: both the White Witch and the Lady of the Green Kirtle draw attention to this by their expressed desire to adopt children – and Jane in *That Hideous Strength* is expressly reprimanded by Merlin for her failure to reproduce. The stress in Tolkien on the fortunate motherhood of his dominant female figures is, however, notable, and in many ways sets the seal on the originality of his portrayal of them: not only politically active, not only romantically involved, they are also seen as progressing confidently and capably to the next stage of their lives, and as fully retaining the femininity which Lewis' girl heroines had had to sacrifice in order to render themselves acceptable. While aspects of Tolkien's vision of women may still remain within the realms of the conventional, in other ways his treatment of them shows a powerful clarity and novelty, unhampered by that crippling fear of femininity which besets the works of his fellow Inklings.

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