
Summer 7-15-1996

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Mac Fenwick

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Recommended Citation

Fenwick, Mac (1996) "Breastplates of Silk: Homeric Women in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 21: No. 3, Article 4. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss3/4>

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Abstract

Notes parallels between women characters in Homer's *Odyssey* and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, especially Circe, Calypso, and Galadriel. All assist the hero and give gifts which allow him to defeat female monsters such as the Sirens and Shelob.

Additional Keywords

Charybdis; Female monsters; Homer—Characters—Calypso; Homer. The Odyssey—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Scylla; Sirens; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Galadriel; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Shelob; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Women; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings

BREASTPLATES OF SULK

Homeric Women in *The Lord of the Rings*

Mac Fenwick

At a meeting of the Tolkien Society of America in 1966, Tolkien's old student and friend, W.H. Auden, delivered a lecture on Tolkien's Middle-earth to the assembled fans. "Tolkien is fascinated with the whole Northern thing," he said, "People seem to divide — they're attracted by either the Northern thing or the Southern thing, by Scandinavia or the Mediterranean — and for Tolkien north is a sacred direction" ("The Elvish Mode").

There can be no denying that for Tolkien North was indeed a sacred direction and that the bulk of his imaginative enterprise is based upon a lifetime's intimate acquaintance with the literature of the ancient North:

In any case if you want to write a tale of this sort you must consult your roots, and a man of the North-west of the Old World will set his heart and the action of his tale in an imaginary world of that air, and that situation. (*Letters* 212).

While remaining firmly rooted in the North, however, Tolkien's imagination encompassed far more than this one corner of the globe: during his years as an undergraduate at Exeter College, Tolkien was enrolled in Classical Moderations and specialized for a year in Creek philology, in which he was awarded an A+ (*Letters* 12). While the "Northern thing" was preeminent in Tolkien's imagination, it was not alone — North and South existed side by side in his mind, one preferred but both familiar.

Beyond the fact that Tolkien was fluent in the language of Homer we can have certain knowledge of only two instances when the epics were consciously in his mind as he wrote of Middle-earth: first, in the margins of an early draft of the chapter "Minas Tirith" from *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien scrawled "Homeric catalogue" next to the description of the Gondorian nobles as they bring in their men for the final defense (*War of the Ring* 229); second, and finally, he consistently refers to the Riders of Rohan as "heroic 'Homeric' horsemen" (*Letters* 154, 159). Beyond these facts we must rely upon critical observation and internal evidence, and, despite Tolkien's dislike of the search for sources, two critics have in this way been able to trace some of Homer's influence upon him.

The lengthy title of David Greenman's article, "Aeneid and Odyssean Patterns of Escape and Return in Tolkien's 'the Fall of Gondolin' and *The Return of the King*" speaks for itself. Greenman compares the homecoming of the hobbits in the final chapters of *The Lord of the Rings* to Odysseus' return to Ithaca. In "'There and Back Again' — Odysseus and Bilbo Baggins," Kenneth J. Reckford finds

an analogue to *The Hobbit's* chronicle of Bilbo's adventures in Odysseus' wanderings during the four "fairy-tale" books of the *Odyssey*. These studies, while useful, find only isolated events or persons that bear some resemblance to equally isolated events or persons in the epics. There are, however, several structural elements of *The Lord of the Rings* that I believe demonstrate extensive and compelling similarities to the structure of the *Odyssey*: one of the most important being the conflict between Galadriel and Shelob, as mediated by Frodo. This battle between an idealized woman and her antithetical counterpart is highly reminiscent of the conflict between Circe/Calyпсо and the female monsters of the *Odyssey* as mediated by Odysseus.

In the *Odyssey*, Circe and Calyпсо both aid and advise the hero, rule and protect a secluded, magical realm of their own, and present challenges to Odysseus' growing wisdom. With the aid of these two women Odysseus is able to escape the female monsters of the epic — the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis — who are themselves anti-types of the Homeric ideal that Circe and Calyпсо represent. *The Lord of the Rings* similarly has a ruler, the Lady Galadriel, whose advice, given in her realm after challenging the hero, takes Frodo and Sam past the female monster Shelob.

The primary function of the queen in both Homer and Tolkien is to aid the hero in the furtherance of his quest, and this aid takes two distinct forms: gifts and advice. There are some standard Homeric gifts that all good hosts give deserving guests: a well-woven cloak, food and drink and, occasionally, if the guest is exceptionally worthy, tripods, cauldrons and other treasure. Although traditionally given by the king, Odysseus consistently receives these things from the hands of women.

Although treasure has the greater monetary value and food and drink the greater intrinsic worth, the only gift that Odysseus receives from Circe before his descent into the Underworld is a "tunic and cloak" (10.397, 585) that she wove in her magical grotto. When in Phaeacia, Odysseus receives a cloak from Arete's daughter, Nausicaa, and is allowed to keep it after the queen recognizes it as her own work (7.250). Of the three queens, it is Calyпсо who provides Odysseus with the most; not only does she give him tools to construct a raft (5.243-246), and a cloth for a sail (5.267-268), she also gives him provisions and, of course, a cloak that she has woven for him: "Stores I shall put aboard for you - bread, water, / and ruby-coloured wine, to stay your hunger — / give you a sea cloak and a

following wind" (5.175-177). Later, as Odysseus relates his tale to Arete in the hall Alcinoos, he describes the cloak as "Immortal clothing" and as "a cloak divinely woven" (7.277-278, 284).

Galadriel gives her heroes many of the same things that the Homeric queens give Odysseus. Galadriel gives the magical food of the Elves, lembas, to the members of the Fellowship (389). Galadriel not only provisions the Fellowship with food and drink, she also gives them several very important, and interestingly Homeric, gifts. Foremost among these are the cloaks that she dresses them in:

"Are these magic cloaks?" asked Pippin, looking at them with wonder.

"I do not know what you mean by that," answered the leader of the Elves. "They are fair garments and the web is good, for it was made in this land. . . . Yet they are garments, not armour, and they will not turn shaft or blade. But they should serve you well: they are light to wear and warm enough or cool enough at need. And you will find them a great aid in keeping out of the sight of unfriendly eyes, whether you walk among the stones or the trees. You are indeed high in the favour of the Lady! For she herself and her maidens wove this stuff; and never before have we clad strangers in the garb of our own people." (390)

It is not too much, I think, to describe these garments as "immortal clothing" or as "cloaks divinely woven".

In addition to the cloaks and lembas that she gives to all the Fellowship, Galadriel also provides each of the heroes with gifts chosen specifically for them: golden belts and brooches for Boromir, Pippin and Merry; a bow for Legolas; the Elfstone and a sheath for Aragorn; and the surprisingly intimate gift of three of her hairs for Gimli. The treasures that Galadriel gives to Sam and Frodo are, however, far and away the more interesting in that they bear striking resemblances to the gifts that Circe and Calypso give Odysseus.

Galadriel's most memorable and important gift is the phial that she presents to Frodo:

"In this phial," she said, "is caught the light of Eärendil's star, set amid the waters of my fountain. It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out. Remember Galadriel and her Mirror!" (397).

Calypso also provides the light of an unfailing star to guide Odysseus through a dark stage of his journey:

Now the great seaman, leaning on his oar,
steered all the night unsleeping, and his eyes
picked out the Pleiades, the laggard Ploughman,
and the Great Bear, that some have called the Wain,
pivoting in the sky before Orion;
of all the night's pure figures, she alone
would never bathe or dip in the Ocean stream.
These stars the beautiful Calypso bade him
hold on his left hand as he crossed the main. (5.279-287)

Such a gift as this is one that the sea-faring Achaeans for whom the *Odyssey* was written would not have failed to appreciate. In an era of small boats and uncertain navigation, Calypso's unerring nautical skill would indeed have seemed to be nothing less than magical.

Galadriel's gift to Sam also resembles what Circe (indirectly) gives Odysseus; at their parting, Galadriel gives Sam a small box, telling him that:

"In this box there is earth from my orchard, and such blessing as Galadriel has still to bestow is upon it. It will not keep you on your road, nor defend you against any peril; but if you keep it and see your home again at last, then perhaps it may reward you." (396)

The reward of the soil is renewal of the Shire after Saruman's Revenge; thanks to Circe's guidance in the Underworld, Odysseus also gains the secret of renewal as Tiresias tells him how to abate Poseidon's Wrath (10.126-146).

Of all the gifts that Homer's and Tolkien's female rulers give, however, what the heroes most highly prize is their prophetic counsel. Circe is a perceptive woman who is able to understand Odysseus' desires and nature, thus enabling her to give effective counsel and guidance. Although Circe needs to be subdued by Odysseus at their first meeting (which Odysseus is able to accomplish only through the intervention of Hermes; 10.295-335), when Odysseus finally approaches her to ask her leave to depart, he "took the goddess' knees in supplication" and Circe, *without any outside influence*, replies, "Son of Laërtes and the gods of old, / Odysseus, master mariner and soldier, / you shall not stay here longer against your will" (10.518, 526-529). Circe then gives Odysseus directions to the Underworld and tells him that in order to hear Tiresias' prophecy he must follow her counsel and "dig a well shaft" (110.545-559).

Galadriel, like Circe, uses a well as her prophetic medium, providing the hero with visions that, like Circe's well in the Underworld, are neither directly controlled nor conjured by herself: "What you will see, if you leave the Mirror free to work, I cannot tell. For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be. But which it is that he sees, even the wisest cannot always tell" (381). Circe and Galadriel are able to provide access to prophetic visions, but neither is the immediate source of them. Once the hero has received the prophecy, it is up to the female ruler to make it somewhat more understandable and, most importantly, to present the hero with the choices that face him. After hearing of his adventures in the Underworld, Circe counsels Odysseus on how to get home, saying, however, that: "One of two courses you may take, / and you yourself must weigh them. I shall not / plan the whole action for you now, but only / tell you of both" (12.60-63). Galadriel responds to Frodo's and Sam's visions in precisely the same manner. "For not in doing or contriving, not in choosing between this course or another, can I avail," she explains; "but only in knowing what was and is, and in part also what shall be"; and later: "I do not

counsel you one way or the other. I am not a counsellor ... Do as you will!" (376, 382), Galadriel, like Circe, does not decide the hero's course, but presents the alternatives that the hero must choose between based upon their prophetic vision.

Although Homer's and Tolkien's female rulers are all wise and perceptive counselors who give guidance and gifts, the similarities between the two visions extend beyond the characters themselves. None of the rulers (in fact, none of the women in either Homer or Tolkien) can be properly examined in isolation — they are all intimately connected to the realms that they inhabit and rule. The relationship between ruler and domain is complex as each is defined by and, in turn, defines the other. Given that the rulers are all so much alike, it should not be surprising that their realms are also similar. In both Homer and Tolkien, the ruler is caretaker and gatekeeper of a realm that is either a vision of, or a monument to the eternal realms that lie beyond the mortal world. Their lands are, therefore, potential gateways to what those other realms represent.

Ogygia, Circe's Island and Lórien are all such realms. The description of Calypso's island of Ogygia (5.69-81) is highly reminiscent of both Homeric afterworlds: Elysium, reserved for those mortals of divine lineage, and Hades. The pleasant breezes, the luxury and lushness of the surroundings, the freedom from seasonal variation, the cohabitation of mortal and immortal (cf. 5.203-211) — these are all aspects of the Elysian Fields. But Ogygia — the island of Calypso: "the concealer" or even "she who buries" — also has "black poplars", which also grow in Hades (10.552), and "pungent cypress": a traditional marker of cemeteries. Finally, the violets and "tender parsley" that fill Calypso's grove are in Homeric literature connected with funerary rites (Anderson).

Circe's island is connected to the Underworld not only as the place where Odysseus begins and ends his trip to Hades; it is also a place of deathlike trance and inaction that cuts off the living from life and the world. Not only are the primal forces of nature quelled and silenced — "and wolves and mountain lions lay there, mild / in her soft spell, fed on her drug of evil" (10.224-225) — so too is Odysseus, to all intents, 'dead to the world', trapped in an Elysian-like land of eternal death: "So day by day we lingered, feasting long / on roasts and wine, until a year grew fat. / . . . / my shipmates one day summoned me and said: / 'Captain, shake off this trance, and think of home — / if home indeed awaits us'" (10.504-510).

Calypso's realm is also a land of natural splendour and domestic industry (5.62-80) where time stands still and change is denied: Odysseus remains moribund on Ogygia for seven years and yet in all that time nothing happens that Odysseus deems important enough to relate. Immortality is about the thing that comes of staying with Calypso (5.212-222).

Like Ogygia, Galadriel's Lórien is a realm where time

seems to stand still: "Frodo felt that he was in a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into forgetfulness"; "The wearing [of time] is slow in Lórien," said Frodo. "The power of the Lady is on it. Rich are the hours, though short they seem, in Caras Galadon, where Galadriel wields the Elven-ring" (370, 409). In homage to the land of Doriath where Galadriel lived for many years learning from the semi-divine Melian (*Silmarillion* 151-153), "[Galadriel] had endeavoured to make Lórien a refuge and an island of peace and beauty, a memorial to ancient days" (*Unfinished Tales* 253). When Frodo enters Lórien ("an island amid many perils"; 367), "it seemed to him that he had stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more. In Rivendell there was memory of ancient things; in Lórien the ancient things still lived on in the waking world" (368). The preservation of this land is due entirely to the power of Galadriel, and not "the slender arrows of elven-bows" (384): "It was at that time The Second Age that Galadriel³ received Narya, the White Ring, from Celeborn, and by its power the realm of Lórien was strengthened and made beautiful" (*Unfinished Tales* 237). In this way, Galadriel's realm is also like her tutor's, for during the tumultuous events of the First Age:

. . . Melian put forth her power and fenced all that dominion round about with an unseen wall of shadow and bewilderment: the Girdle of Melian, that none thereafter should pass against her will or the will of King Thingol, unless one should come with a power greater than that of Melian the Maia. And this inner land, which was named Eglador, was after called Doriath, the guarded kingdom, Land of the Girdle. Within it there was yet a watchful peace; but without there was peril and great fear, and the servants of Morgoth roamed at will. (*Silmarillion* 114)

In the *Odyssey*, the realms of the queens are more than just visions of the "other worlds" — they are arenas for the development of Odysseus' wisdom. In both realms, Odysseus' wisdom is challenged by the queen and his journey forward cannot continue until that challenge has been met. On the islands of Calypso and Circe, Odysseus' wise commitment to his Return is re-inforced and strengthened by his struggles. On the island of Circe his men come to him and tell him that it is time he must leave; Odysseus recalls himself to his responsibilities as their chief and makes the wise decision to continue with his journey. That Odysseus and his men are able to leave at all is due to Odysseus' wisdom during his first encounter with Circe when he followed Hermes' advice and tricked her into aiding and protecting him and his men instead of transforming them all into pigs (10.295-330). On Ogygia, Odysseus' wisdom is once again re-informed when Hermes, at the bidding of Athena and as a direct result of Odysseus' desire to Return, comes to Calypso and tells her to let Odysseus go (1.64-77, 106-109).

Just as the role of the Homeric queen is to provide Odysseus with help in his Return only after they have been compelled or convinced to do so by Odysseus' wisdom,

the rulers of *The Lord of the Rings* provide the heroes with aid and refreshment (both physical and spiritual) only after a period of testing.

Galadriel sees to it that the heroes' stay in her realm is restful and recuperative. Furthermore, her gifts and advice to them are of the utmost importance in the later stages of the narrative. Finally, her land of Lórien is an arena in which both Frodo and Galadriel herself—who in the First Age rebelled against the Valar because "she yearned to see the wide unguarded lands and to rule there a realm at her own will" (*Silmarillion* 98)—are tested. When Frodo offers Galadriel the Ring, her response is as important to any understanding of Tolkien's universe as it is unforgettable:

"Gently are you revenged for my testing of your heart at our first meeting. You begin to see with a keen eye. I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer. For many long years I had pondered what I might do, should the Great Ring come into my hands, and behold! it was brought within my grasp. . .

"And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And 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! Stranger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!"

... Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad.

"I pass the test," she said. "I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel." (385)

By refusing to take the Ring for herself, Galadriel makes the successful completion of the quest possible—for without Galadriel's aid Frodo would never have been able to reach Mount Doom. The epithet that best describes both Calypso and Galadriel is Faramir's own description of the White Lady of Lórien: "perilously fair." While attracted to Calypso, Odysseus must use his wisdom to overcome her desire to possess him. What sets Galadriel apart from Calypso, is the fact that it is Galadriel herself who overcomes her perilous desire for the Ring.

Ironically, the very power of choice that raises Galadriel above Circe and Calypso is also part of the Homeric model. Odysseus' release from Calypso and Circe is a release from the death of inaction that allows him to once again 'choose' his path toward Penelope. In the same way, it is the power of choice—this time however, the Galadriel's own—that frees Frodo from the peril of Galadriel.

The most significant similarity between the rulers of Middle-earth and Homer are their opponents. When Odysseus leaves the island of Circe he must pass by a collection of female monsters—the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis—all of whom attempt to prevent his return by thwarting the

wise counsel of Circe. When Frodo enters Mordor he must confront Galadriel's opposite—the monstrous Shelob—who pitilessly seeks to overcome him and destroy both the Ring-bearer and all hope of the Quest's success.

It is a telling fact that despite the modest variety of positive women in the western heroic tradition, the image of the monstrous woman has remained a relative constant. It is difficult, therefore, to talk about this type without appealing to the archetypes of Jungian psychology or Fryian literary theory. Nevertheless, I believe there is more to say about Tolkien's fascinatingly monstrous Shelob (and her progenitor Ungoliant) than that she is simply an expression of Tolkien's male fears of female sexuality (which I do not doubt she is—at least in part).

Tolkien himself (as usual) provided very little in the way of source information; in a letter to his son Christopher, he asks: "Do you think *Shelob* is a good name for a monstrous spider creature? It is of course only +lob' ('lobbe'=spider [OE]), but written as one, it seems to be quite noisome" (*Letters* 81). The one interesting point of this sentence is that it demonstrates Tolkien's concern that Shelob be two things: monstrous, a "lobbe", and female, a "she"; the gender of this monster is neither circumstantial, nor is it, I believe, merely a case of Tolkien attempting gender parity among his chief villains. The fact that Shelob's very name includes her sex indicates that any consideration of what she represents must take into account the fact that she is a female monster.

That Shelob is female is remarkable; that it is Tolkien who made her so is extraordinary. In his 1936 paper, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics", Tolkien argued eloquently that the poet's decision to put the monsters at the center of the poem is not, as had been previously charged, a fault, but a stroke of genius. The monsters, Tolkien claimed, are the thematic center of the poem. According to his view, Beowulf's triumph over Grendel is the defeat of the Enemy of God, and by facing the Dragon, Beowulf finds "a potent but terrible solution to Man's universal war with a hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time, in naked will and courage" (23, 29). While the merits of Tolkien's argument are not within the purview of this discussion, the total absence of any discussion of what Grendel's dam may represent is interesting. She is dealt with only a few times in the course of the essay, and then only briefly and as ancillary to her son. Tolkien's theory subsumes the female monster to the male almost entirely,² and yet this same man some years later was to create an explicitly and independently female monster, and then place her in the same privileged position that he earlier ascribed to two male monsters. From a secondary and largely ignored monstrosity in *Beowulf*, the female monster becomes in both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* something much more powerful and narratively important.

In contrast to the paucity of female monsters both in the Northern tales that Tolkien loved and in Middle-earth,

the *Odyssey* has several. The Sirens, the sea monster Charybdis and the cave-dwelling, intriguingly spider-like Scylla appear in quick succession to block Odysseus' homeward journey after leaving the island of Circe, just as Shelob stands between Frodo, who has just left the relatively safe confines of the forest of Ithilien, and the completion of his quest.

The first female monsters that Odysseus must survive are the Sirens whose power lies, as Circe warns Odysseus, in the hypnotic enchantment of their song: "woe to the innocent who hears that sound!" (12.44). Taking Circe's advice, Odysseus warns his crew of the "harpies' thrilling voices" (12.56) and tells them that "Seirênês / weaving a haunting song over the sea / we are to shun" (12.175-177). In her lair, the first tactic that Shelob uses against Frodo and Sam is the hypnotic power of her eyes, and like Odysseus, the hobbits avoid that danger only through the counsel of the queen they have recently left:

Frodo and Sam, horror-stricken, began slowly to back away, their own gaze held by the dreadful stare of those baleful eyes; but as they backed so the eyes advanced. Frodo's hand wavered, and slowly the Phial drooped. Then suddenly, released from the holding spell to run a little while in vain panic for the amusement of the eyes, they both turned and fled together; but even as they ran Frodo looked back and saw with terror that at once the eyes came leaping up behind. (748)

Momentarily released from the enchantment of this harpy's "thrilling eyes," Sam and Frodo find themselves trapped by Shelob's own "haunted weaving": "Across the width and height of the tunnel a vast web was spun, orderly as the web of some huge spider, but denser-woven and far greater, and each thread was as thick as a rope" (749).

After Frodo and Sam manage to cut the webs and escape Shelob's lair, the narrative describes Shelob and hints at her history and ancestry:

... and she served none but herself, drinking the blood of Elves and Men,³ bloated and grown fat with endless brooding on her feasts, weaving webs of shadow; for all living things were her food, and her vomit darkness (750).

Similarly, the second female monster that Odysseus must avoid is Charybdis, who (as Circe warns him):

"lurks below
to swallow down the dark sea tide. Three times
from dawn to dusk she spews it up
and sucks it down again three times, whirling
maelstrom; if you come upon her then
the god who makes earth tremble could not save you." (12.111-116)

When Odysseus and his men reach the dwelling of Charybdis, they stare in fascinated horror: "My men all blanched against the gloom, our eyes / were fixed upon that yawning mouth in fear / of being devoured" (12.292-294).

The third female monster that Odysseus must face is the

cave-dwelling Scylla. Again, Circe has words of warning for her hero:

"Midway that height, a cavern full of mist
opened toward Erebos and evening...
.....
but that is the den of Scylla, where she yaps
abominably, a newborn whelp's cry,
though she is huge and monstrous.⁴ God or man,
no one could look on her in joy. Her legs —
and there are twelve — are like great tentacles,
unjointed, and upon her serpent necks
are borne six heads like nightmares of ferocity,
with triple serried rows of fangs and deep
gullets of black death. Half her length, she sways
her heads in the air, outside her horrid cleft,
hunting the sea around that promontory
for dolphins, dogfish, or what bigger game
thundering Amphitrite feeds in thousands.
And no ship's company can claim
to have passed her without loss and grief; she takes,
from every ship, one man for every gullet." (12.87-107)

This horrifying vision is matched by Shelob:

... issuing from a black hole of shadow under the cliff, [Sam saw] the most loathly shape that he had ever beheld, horrible beyond the horror of an evil dream. Most like a spider she was, but huger than the great hunting beasts, and more terrible than they because of the evil purpose in her remorseless eyes... Great horns she had, and behind her short stalk-like neck was her huge swollen body, a vast bloated bag, swaying and sagging between her legs... Her legs were bent, with great knobbed joints high above her back, and hairs that stuck out like steel spines, and at each leg's end there was a claw. As soon as she had squeezed her soft squelching body and its folded limbs out of the upper exit from her lair, she moved with horrible speed, now running on her creaking legs, now making a sudden bound. (752)

Here we find many of the same monstrous elements typified by Scylla: a cave set high in a cliff wall from which to strike, long clasping legs, a bestial appetite and a huge bloated body. Not even a god can "look with joy" on Scylla; likewise, Shelob is the equal of Sauron, living in uneasy truce with her neighbor: "So they both lived, delighting in their own devices, and feared no assault, nor wrath, nor any end to their wickedness" (751).

Like Scylla's mist-filled cavern, Shelob's is full of a stagnant darkness and "as they thrust forward they felt things brush against their heads, or against their hands, long tentacles, or hanging growths perhaps" (744-745; emphasis mine) (interestingly, both caverns also face northwest). Charybdis' whirlpool is also wrapped in gloom (12.292), and just as the Sirens have "bones / of dead men rotting in a pile beside them / and flayed skins shrivel around the spot" (12.48-50), out of Shelob's lair comes "a foul reek, as if filth unnamable were piled and hoarded in the dark within" (744). Lands of death, darkness and rot are common enough in the heroic tradition — Grendel's

dam's cave has dozens of its own skeletons — so it is admittedly unremarkable that Shelob's lair should look like the lairs of the *Odyssey*. What sets Shelob apart from her Northern cousins and makes her more like her Southern is not, therefore, so much where she lives or even what she looks like (although the similarities are compelling), but the remarkable power and strength of Shelob and her exceedingly important narrative role.

Unlike the Northern (especially the Northern female) monsters, Scylla and Shelob are ultimately undefeatable. Whereas Grendel's dam is an explicitly less a threat than her more powerful son — "Terror was the less / by just so much as the strength of women, / attack of battle-wives, compared to armed men" (*Beowulf* 1282-1284) — Shelob's power is equal to Sauron's and inescapable: "Never yet had any fly escaped from Shelob's webs" (751); "no ship's company can claim / to have passed [Scylla] without loss and grief; she takes / from every ship, one man for every gullet." While Shelob and her progenitor Ungoliant disappear from the narrative instead of being defeated in open battle (*LotR* 757; *Silmarillion* 95), Grendel's dam is spectacularly slain and the hero escapes unscathed from her lair. Sam and Frodo are barely able to survive their encounter with Shelob and their suffering at that passage is at least as terrible as Odysseus':

Then as quickly as he could he cut away the binding cords and laid his head upon Frodo's breast and to his mouth, but no stir of life could he find, nor feel the faintest flutter of the heart. Often he chafed his master's hands and feet, and touched his brow, but all were cold.

"Frodo, Mr. Frodo!" he called. "Don't leave me here alone! It's your Sam calling. Don't go where I can't follow! Wake up, Mr. Frodo! O wake up, Frodo, me dear, me dear. Wake up!"

... "He's dead!" he said. "Not asleep, dead!" And as he said it, as if the words had set the venom to its work again, it seemed to him that the hue of the face grew livid green. (757-758)

"She ate them as they shrieked there, in her den, in the dire grapple, reaching still for me — and deathly pity ran me through at that sight — far the worst I ever suffered, questing the passes of the strange sea."

(12.306-310)

It has long been observed that Shelob is no "mere" monster to be overcome by the force of arms like the ores, wargs, trolls and other evil denizens of Middle-earth. Tolkien describes Shelob as, "the offspring of Ungoliant [sic] the primeval devourer of light, that in spider-form assisted the Dark Power, but ultimately quarreled with him" (*Letters* 180). Although some critics have assumed her to be one of the Maiar who were corrupted by Melkor at his fall (Abbot 41; Treloar 59), Ungoliant is clearly something far more sinister and primal: "The Elder knew not whence she came; but some have said that in ages long before she descended from the darkness that lies about

Arda" (*Silmarillion* 85).⁵ Ungoliant and her offspring are not just overgrown arachnids, they are the physical manifestation (Shelob is "an evil thing in spider form"; *LotR* 750) of the Darkness of pre- and anti-creation:

In a ravine [Ungoliant] lived, and took shape as a spider of monstrous form, weaving her black webs in a cleft of the mountains. There she sucked up all light that she could find, and spun it forth again in dark nets of strangling gloom, until no light more could come to her abode; and she was famished. (*Silmarillion* 86)

Indeed it was because of her labours that so little of that overflowing light of the Two Trees flowed ever into the world, for she sucked light greedily, and it fed her, but she brought forth only that darkness that is a denial of all light. (*Book of Lost Tales* 1.152)

Similarly, the danger that Scylla represents cannot be defeated by a mighty warrior; when Odysseus asks how he is to combat Scylla, Circe offers not advice but a rebuke:

"Must you have battle in your heart forever?
The bloody toil of combat? Old contender,
will you not yield to the immortal gods?
That nightmare cannot die, being eternal
evil itself — horror, pain, and chaos;
there is no fighting her, no power can fight her,
all that avails is flight.

.....
No, no, put all your backs into it, row on;
invoke Blind Force, that bore this scourge of men,
to keep her from a second strike against you."

(12.125-137)

As if to underscore the power of Scylla, Odysseus conveniently forgets Circe's injunction against combat and, as he tells Arete, "[I] tied on my cuirass and took up / two heavy spears" (12.273-274). As Circe predicted, they have no effect against the monster and Odysseus' men are slaughtered and consumed despite his promise that, "by hook or crook this peril [like the Cyclops' cave] too shall be / something that we remember" (12.256-257). Scylla is not of the same order as Polyphemus. Against the Cyclops, Odysseus' agile mind and powerful body are enough; against Scylla, "eternal evil itself — horror, pain, and chaos" though, Odysseus' usual "bag of tricks" is insufficient and he is forced to rely on chance and (explicitly) so in his second encounter with the monsters: 13.525-527) the power of Zeus.

In their battle with Shelob, Sam and Frodo also do not 'win' — they survive thanks to the power of Frodo's ancient, magical sword, Galadriel's phial and the invisible yet ever-present hand of Providence (756-757). The battle with Shelob highlights her exact nature; she is an ancient power — like Scylla, who is 'for' neither Odysseus nor Poseidon — who is an eternal denial of everything that both Frodo and Sauron fight and strive for:

Little she knew of or cared for towers, or rings, or anything devised by mind or hand, who only desired death for all others, mind and body, and for herself a glut

of life, alone, swollen till the mountains could no longer hold her up and the darkness would not contain her. (751)⁶

Shelob and Ungoliant seek to deny the world; their mission is its destruction and they are, therefore, against both the forces of Preservation (Men, Elves, Dwarves and Hobbits) and Dominion (Sauron). In the First Age, Ungoliant fights with Melkor and then flees, only to fight with Melian (*Silmarillion* 112-113), after which she finds a permanent home between the two, thus giving her thematic position a geographic parallel: "Beyond lay the wilderness of Durgortheb, where the sorcery of Sauron [then Melkor's lieutenant] and the power of Melian came together, and horror and madness walked. There spiders of the fell race of Ungoliant abode, spinning their unseen webs in which all living things were snared" (*Silmarillion* 197). In the Third Age, Melian, Melkor and Ungoliant are all gone, but the dynamic continues between their successors: Shelob's cave is perched on the edge of Sauron's land, halfway between Sauron's tower of evil, Barad Dûr, and the towers of Mines Tirith; and Sam's principal weapon against Shelob is Galadriel's phial.

Grendel and his mother have received many different interpretations over the years but they all, including Tolkien's own, insist that the Grendels are, thanks to their identification in the text as "of the race of Cain", perversions of something good. In "The Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien typifies Grendel as the enemy of God. Jane Chance's book *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* is a feminist work and could not, therefore, have a more different approach to *Beowulf* than Tolkien; she too, though, typifies Grendel's dam as a perversion, this time of the ideal of woman as a "peace-weaver" and social guardian (see above, note 2). Both views portray the monstrous woman as an ally of evil that must, and can, be overthrown by the forces of good.

Shelob, however, is explicitly *not* an ally of evil (Sauron). She is a force that denies all ends except her own gloom and hunger. The Homeric monster that most closely resembles the Grendels is the Cyclops, Polyphemus. Like them, Polyphemus is a perversion of the ultimate Homeric law of hospitality; instead of welcoming and feeding Odysseus and his men, Polyphemus traps and then feeds on them. Polyphemus is also the son of Odysseus' foe Poseidon. The dynamic is simple: Polyphemus, descended from the hero's chief foe, is bad because he perverts the law and he must therefore be defeated; the Grendels, descended from Cain, are bad because they pervert God's will. There are only two 'sides' in these conflicts. Shelob, however, has no 'side', she denies all 'sides' except her own eternal Night and is therefore in the middle — both geographically and thematically — of the conflict.

In the *Odyssey*, the female monsters likewise have no 'side' except their own. The Sirens desire only to prevent Odysseus' return and they tempt him with the promise of

forever reliving his glorious past and never his future. Scylla and Charybdis are not allies of Odysseus' foe Poseidon but are instead, like Shelob, monstrous forces of Blackness, of pure undistilled Denial whose only action is destruction and devouring. The Grendels' nemesis is the hero Beowulf; Shelob's nemesis is Galadriel.⁷ The conflict between Beowulf and the Grendels is entirely self-contained and without reference to external factors or persons. The battles between Sam and Shelob, Odysseus and the female monsters of the *Odyssey* are fought entirely with weapons provided by women outside the immediate conflict: Galadriel's phial and Circe's advice.

The female monsters of the *Odyssey* and *The Lord of the Rings* do not combat the heroes, but the female rulers. The Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis seek to prevent Odysseus from following the path to Penelope outlined for him by Circe, while Shelob pits her lust against the light of Galadriel. In both, the hero's success depends not on his strength and martial ability, but on his willingness and ability to follow the guidance of idealized women past the dangers presented by the monstrous antitheses of that ideal. ☞

Notes

1. While I use the language of free-will somewhat reluctantly in connection with the Homeric epics, it is the language used by most critics when they discuss Odysseus' "escape" from the Islands of Circe and Calypso. While it is impossible to know truly how Tolkien would have interpreted these sections of the *Odyssey*, when I consider the deep sense of the power of human will contained in Tolkien's writings I find it hard to believe that he would have read Odysseus' flight from Calypso and Circe as anything less than his recovery of free-will.
2. The critical practice of interpreting the battle with Grendel's mother almost as an epilogue to the "real" battle with the male monster was not unique to Tolkien. It is still the practice in *Beowulf* criticism today to talk of the two parts of the poem, the first being the battle with Grendel (and his mother) and the second the battle with the Dragon. A better interpretation of the poem that gives the battle with Grendel's dam its full due is Jane Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature*, chapter 7. Chance argues that the poem should be seen as a three-part narrative: the first, with the battle with Grendel at its center, is an exploration of the male ideal of martial heroism; the second, with the battle with Grendel's dam at its center, is an exploration of the female ideal of peace-weaver and hero-rewarder/comforter; and the third, with the Dragon at the center (discussed only briefly and therefore by implication), is an exploration of the social ideal of peace both inside and outside the confines of the Hall to counter the chaotic nature of reality.
3. I should perhaps note in passing that Grendel's dam, unlike all the female monsters in the *Odyssey*, is not a congenial man-eater, her violence being a reaction to the death of her son. In this fashion as well, Shelob seems to have more in common with her Southern brethren than with Grendel's dam.
4. Despite her monstrosity, Sauron refers to Shelob as "his cat ... but she owns him not" (*LoTR* 751).
5. cf. "The Theft of Melko." *The Book of Lost Tales - Volume I*: "for here dwelt the primeval spirit Mûru whom even the Valar know not whence or when she came, and the folk of Earth have given her many names. Mayhap she was bred of mists and darkness on the confines of the Shadowy Seas, in that utter dark that came between the overthrow of the Lamps and the kindling of the Trees, but more like she has always been" (151-152).

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Footnotes to "BREASTPLATES OF SILK"

continued from page 23

- 6 It is perhaps significant that according to Greek myth, the spider was originally a woman who was turned into an insect for daring to compete with Athena — the patron goddess of all "things devised by mind or hand" — in her weaving ability (Atchity & Barber 25).
- 7 Although the oppositional relationship between Galadriel and Shelob is commented on extensively, one of the more insightful and useful explorations is Peter Damien Goselin's "Two Faces of Eve: Galadriel and Shelob as Anima Figures".

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