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"Her Enchanted Hair": Rossetti, "Lady Lilith," and the Victorian Fascination with Hair as Influences on Tolkien



“**BETTER ENCHANTED HAIR**”:
ROSSETTI, “LADY LILITH,” AND THE
VICTORIAN FASCINATION WITH HAIR
AS INFLUENCES ON TOLKIEN

KATHRYN COLVIN

BORN IN 1892, NEAR THE END OF THE VICTORIAN ERA, J.R.R. Tolkien began to open the material that would become his “legendarium” (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* [Letters] 189, #153)—the totality of his writings on Middle-earth and its history—circa 1917 (*The Silmarillion* 10). With his first book, *The Hobbit*, published in 1937, and its sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*, published in three volumes in 1954-1955, Tolkien wrote well into the middle of the twentieth century—and retained at least one extraordinary aspect of Victorian inspiration all the while. As Tolkien acknowledges in his letters the influence of William Morris upon his writing (*Letters* 7, #1; 303, #226), and as Morris was closely connected to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (McGann, Introduction xix), it is not a stretch to propose that Tolkien likely also encountered the work of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood co-founder Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Both Tolkien and Rossetti were medievalists, although at first glance they appear to be in nearly all other respects an unlikely match: Tolkien’s reputation for chaste writing and his charming if somewhat staid illustrations bear little resemblance to Rossetti’s voluptuous poetry and paintings, the sensuality and sexuality of Rossetti’s written work famously derided as “The Fleshly School of Poetry” and going on to inspire “a furious series of further attacks, defenses, counterattacks, and general public clamour” (McGann, Introduction xxi). Significantly, Rossetti had a particular passion for hair and was described by Elizabeth Gaskell as “hair-mad” (Waller 153), a standout hair enthusiast in an age which was itself marked by the “peculiar force and intensity” (Gitter 936) of a cultural fascination with women’s tresses. When in “The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination” Elisabeth G. Gitter writes of “the grand woman achiev[ing] her transcendent vitality partly through her magic hair,” which is both “enchanting—and enchanted” (936), she is describing Rossetti’s painting *Lady Lilith*—but she could just as well be describing Tolkien’s character Lúthien Tinúviel. One point at which Tolkien’s writing lets down its figurative hair is in its sumptuous descriptions of female characters’ abundantly flowing locks, the desire they inspire in others, and even their weaponization: in his distinct and

sensual attention to women’s hair, Tolkien was inspired by the Victorians in general, while his depictions of the characters of Galadriel and Lúthien are strikingly similar to the femme fatale Lady Lilith of Rossetti’s poetry and painting.

In “‘One Strangling Golden Hair’: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Lady Lilith*,” Virginia M. Allen writes that Rossetti’s “consuming interest in women’s hair evidently reached the proportions of a fetish,” albeit one “widely if not universally shared in his day, and not unknown in ours” (288). A surprisingly pervasive emphasis on hair—especially, though not exclusively, women’s hair—is also not unknown in Tolkien. In a passage from his unfinished writings circa 1968 or later (*The Peoples of Middle-earth* [Peoples] 331), Tolkien, whose character descriptions are often sparse, devotes approximately a third of a page to a description of the beauty and even political ramifications of the hair of Galadriel: an eminent woman of the Eldar (Elves) and secondary character, whose name itself means “[m]aiden crowned with gleaming hair” (*Letters* 428, #348) in Tolkien’s invented languages:

Even among the Eldar she was accounted beautiful, and her hair was held a marvel unmatched. It was golden like the hair of her father and her foremother Indis, but richer and more radiant, for its gold was touched by some memory of the star-like silver of her mother; and the Eldar said that the light of the Two Trees, Laurelin and Telperion, had been snared in her tresses. Many thought that this saying first gave Fëanor the thought of imprisoning and blending the light of the Trees that later took shape in his hands as the Silmarils. For Fëanor beheld the hair of Galadriel with wonder and delight. He begged three times for a tress, but Galadriel would not give him even one hair. These two kinsfolk, the greatest of the Eldar of Valinor, were unfriends for ever. (*Peoples* 337)

For comparison, in *The Lord of the Rings* the initial physical description of Legolas, a male main character, is limited to “a strange Elf clad in green and brown”; in the same paragraph another male main character, Gimli, is introduced simply as “a younger dwarf at Glóin’s side” (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] II.2.240).

In fact, Tolkien imagined his Elves as having a cultural focus on hair to rival the Victorians themselves. In the same unfinished writings from whence comes the Galadriel hair description, Tolkien discusses the Elvish-language etymology of the name of Finwë, a king of the Elves—“Common Eldarin PHIN ‘hair’, as in Quenya *finë* ‘a hair’, *findë* ‘hair, especially of the head’, *finda* ‘having hair, -haired’” (*Peoples* 340)—and goes on to state that “[a]ll the Eldar had beautiful hair (and were especially attracted to hair of exceptional loveliness), but the Ñoldor were not specially remarkable in this respect, and there is no

reference to Finwë having had hair of exceptional length, abundance, or beauty beyond the measure of his people" (*Peoples* 340-341). The sheer degree of emphasis on hair is striking: not only does Tolkien invest his invented Elvish languages with multiple words to describe hair, and not only do multiple characters have hair-related names,¹ but Tolkien goes so far as to create for his Elf characters a cultural fascination with hair and then imagine their detailed assessment of a male Elf's tresses. "There is scarcely a female character in Victorian fiction whose hair is not described at least perfunctorily," writes Gitter, "and often a woman's hair is described repeatedly and in considerable detail" (941); the same could be said of Tolkien, who goes yet a step further by considering also the hair of some of his male Elves.

While the unfinished material above was not published until after Tolkien's death, *The Lord of the Rings*, published during his lifetime, is also full of hair references and contains as well two significant hair-related episodes: one in which Gimli asks Galadriel for the parting gift of "a single strand of [her] hair, which surpasses the gold of the earth" and, "unbraid[ing] one of her long tresses," she surprisingly gives him not one but "three golden hairs" (*LotR* II.8.376); the other when Éowyn, a human woman who rides into battle disguised as a man, pivotally reveals her identity to the evil Lord of the Nazgûl: "But the helm of her secrecy had fallen from her, and her bright hair, released from its bonds, gleamed with pale gold upon her shoulders" (V.6.841). "She should not die, so fair, so desperate!" mentally exclaims Merry, a male hobbit, moved both by her doomed bravery and, it would seem, the beauty of her hair (V.6.841). When Éowyn decapitates the enemy's prehistoric steed, "a light [falls] about her, and her hair [shines] in the sunrise"; after Merry wounds the Nazgûl Lord, thus allowing the valiant woman to deal her killing blow, he gazes through a mist of tears at "Éowyn's fair head" (V.6.842). In the Victorian era, Merry would have been in good company: disorderly hair was to the Victorians associated with sexuality (Gitter 941), flowing tresses signifying "an early form of the erotic icon we now call the femme fatale" (Allen 286); Rossetti wrote of "her loosened hair's downfall" ("Love-Sweetness" l. 1), and according to David Del Principe, "loosening one's hair" in Rossetti's time "implied, not surprisingly, moral looseness and rebellion" (51). Éowyn's unexpected unleashing of concealed hair from beneath a helmet, all the more surprising for its attendant gender revelation, represents a more extreme—and surely, for the

¹ See also *Peoples* page 345: "With regard to *Findekáno* / *Fingon* it may be noted that the first element was certainly *Quenya findë* 'hair'—a tress or plait of hair (cf. *findessë* a head of hair, a person's hair as a whole) [...]. In the case of *Fingon* it was suitable; he wore his long dark hair in great plaits braided with gold."

Victorian man, yet more erotic—version of the Victorian woman letting down her neatly-bound locks.

For all this lavishing of attention upon luxuriant locks, however, it is Tolkien’s seemingly direct inspiration from Rossetti’s 1868 poem “Lady Lilith”² that forms his most remarkable connection to the hair-madness of the Victorian era. In the poem written to accompany his painting of the same name, Rossetti describes Lilith, a demonic figure who was the first wife of the biblical Adam (Allen 286), “the witch he loved before the gift of Eve” (l. 2). Rossetti’s Lilith is a temptress and an ensnarer; the mention of the snake in line 3, “shed” in lines 10 and 11—like the shed skin of a snake, an image associated with transformation and therefore deception—and the hissing consonantal sibilance of lines 3 and especially 11 reinforces her connection to the serpent in the Garden of Eden. A magical figure with “enchanted hair” (l. 4), she is ageless, “young while the earth is old” (l. 5), and is associated with the flowers of “rose, foxglove, poppy” (l. 9): rose for her “aphrodisiac quality” (Allen 291), poppy for sleep, foxglove for poison. She “draws men to watch the bright web she can weave” (l. 7) with that uncannily beautiful golden hair, until “heart and body and life are in its hold” (l. 8). This association of weaving with ensnaring is of great significance in the Victorian mythology of hair, which associates hair with both spinning and weaving—hair-working kits were available at the time, with which “the Victorian lady [...] could weave hair into basket patterns or construct a landscape to hang on the wall” (Gitter 942)—and then subsequently extends that notion of weaving into one of death by spider-like entanglement. “If [the] woman is a spinner,” writes Gitter, “and if some of the threads she spins are her own tresses, the web she produces may prove to be a dangerous snare” (938); elsewhere, Gitter similarly describes that “when the powerful woman of the Victorian imagination was an angel, her shining hair was her aureole or bower; when she was demonic, it became a glittering snare, web, or noose” (936). Rossetti’s “Lady Lilith” concludes with precisely this demonic weaponization of beautiful hair, the “bright web” mentioned earlier becoming the noose and snare: at the poem’s end, a young man whose “eyes burned” at Lilith’s becomes in that moment her prey and victim, her “spell” leaving “his straight neck bent” (ll. 12-13). It is an image of death by hanging, but the noose is displaced to that “one strangling golden hair” around his heart (l. 14). The life of any man who

² Initially entitled “Lady Lilith” in 1868, the poem’s title was changed to “Lilith. (For a Picture)” for its 1870 printing in Rossetti’s *Poems*, then “Body’s Beauty” for its inclusion in his *The House of Life* in 1881 (“Body’s Beauty: Scholarly Commentary”). I reference the original 1868 text, in which line 9 includes “rose, foxglove, poppy are her flowers” (“Lady Lilith”) rather than the later “the rose and poppy are her flowers” (“Body’s Beauty”). Foxglove appears also in Rossetti’s painting *Lady Lilith*, which the poem accompanies.

looks upon Lilith with desire is swiftly forfeit; he is ensnared to the death by that very hair she uses to draw him in.

It is important to note that the iconography of golden hair as a web of entrapment actually predates Rossetti and the Victorians; that much is clear from Rossetti's own translation of Fazio degli Uberti's "His Portrait of His Lady, Angiola of Verona," as well as his interest in (and translation of a brief passage from) Goethe's *Faust*, the latter an important influence on Rossetti's conception of Lilith (Notes to the Texts 409). Similar imagery can also be found, for example, in Bassanio's description of Portia's portrait in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (3.2.124-126). What sets the Victorian brand of hair fascination in general, and Rossetti's in particular, apart from the lingering tradition is a combination of pervasiveness and morbid intensification: as Robert W. Baldwin describes in a letter to *The Art Bulletin*, "the 'femme fatale' after all was a 19th-century revival of the [...] medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque theme," with Rossetti "heighten[ing] the sense of danger," incorporating themes of sleep and death, and "spelling out doom and destruction in the clearest terms" ("Letters" 318). Gitter, on a similar note, writes that "[w]hile women's hair, particularly when it is golden, has always been a Western preoccupation, for the Victorians it became an obsession" (936), a "literary fascination with the magical power of women's hair" which carried even beyond literature and into "an intense popular preoccupation with hair and hair tokens" (942). Never before nor since the Victorian era has hair been so deadly, nor its representation more ubiquitous; and it is this heightened, Victorian-style hair mythology which is exemplified by Rossetti's femmes fatale—particularly Lady Lilith—and echoed in Tolkien. Not only does Tolkien's literary attention to hair rival Rossetti's in its detail and persistence, but it parallels Rossetti's signature inclusions of the themes of sleep, sorcery, and death into the iconography of women's tresses, and at points even echoes phrasings and specific details from Rossetti's work.

Unusual as it seems to imagine Tolkien referencing a figure so plainly aligned with the demonic erotic, especially in constructing characters who are allied with the forces of "good," the similarities are unmistakable in his characters of Galadriel and Lúthien. There is certainly a "Lady Lilith" allusion in Tolkien's description of Galadriel's hair: that "even one hair" she denies Fëanor (*Peoples* 337) and the "single strand of [her] hair" for which Gimli asks (*LotR* II.8.376) are eerily reminiscent of the "one strangling golden hair" around the heart of the man Lilith entraps ("Lady Lilith" 1.14), especially when accompanied by the image of light "snared in her tresses," which gives Fëanor "the thought of *imprisoning*" (*Peoples* 337, emphasis mine). The word choice is significant: this is Lilith's Victorian hair snare, the "bright web" of her woven locks used for entrapment and strangulation. While Tolkien's extended description of Galadriel's hair did not make it into the posthumously-published

The Silmarillion, it is noteworthy that the much-shortened version which editors Christopher Tolkien and Guy Kay (*Silmarillion* 12) chose to include—“her hair was lit with gold as though it had *caught in a mesh* the radiance of Laurelin” (*Silmarillion* 61, emphasis mine)—retains the imagery of capture, and arguably emphasizes more than the extended version the very Victorian idea that the capture may be by means of a woven net.

These dual themes of sorcerous entanglement and weaving persistently accompany Galadriel. “She herself and her maidens” weave supernatural cloaks as gifts for the members of the Fellowship of the Ring, to whom her people also give the gift of Elvish ropes (*LotR* II.8.370-371). While the material of both is unspecified beyond the ropes being “made of *hithlain*” (the Elvish word is left untranslated)³ (II.8.371), the notion of Galadriel and her maidens weaving preternatural cloaks and (perhaps) ropes so closely resembles Lúthien weaving a magic cloak and rope from her own hair (*Silmarillion* 172) that, given especially Tolkien’s tendency to repurpose aspects of what would become *The Silmarillion* into the Middle-earth material published during his lifetime, it is reasonable to speculate that the Fellowship’s gifts may be woven at least partially of hair as well.

Either way, most human male characters in *The Lord of the Rings* view Galadriel as precisely a Lady Lilith-like figure. To Faramir she is the “Mistress of Magic,” “the Lady that dies not,” and it is “perilous for mortal man” to enter her Golden Wood (*LotR* IV.5.667). “What did she see? What woke in your heart then?” he asks of his dead brother, Boromir (IV.5.667), suspecting Galadriel of having played a part in his downfall; while the reader is to understand that Galadriel awakened in Boromir’s heart a fatal desire for the Ring, it remains that Galadriel awakened in Boromir’s heart a fatal desire. Boromir himself states at the time that he thought she was “tempting” all of the Fellowship (II.7.358) when she “held them with her eyes, and in silence looked searchingly at each of them in turn” (II.7.357). While here too the outward implication is the temptation of the Ring and its power, or the temptation to turn back and forsake the quest (II.7.358), the concomitant notion of sexuality is reinforced by the hobbit Sam’s reaction to Galadriel’s gaze: “I felt as if I hadn’t got nothing on, and I didn’t like it” (II.7.357-358). Attempted resistance to temptation is of paramount importance in Tolkien’s moral universe (*Letters* 233, #181; 251-252, #191; 274, #210), and Tolkien, in describing Galadriel’s temptation by and ultimate rejection of the Ring when Frodo offers it to her in a subsequent scene (*LotR*

³ In an earlier manuscript, the ropes are woven from “the fibre under mallorn bark” (*The Treason of Isengard* 249) or “silver fibre of mallorn bark” (251), but as Tolkien made many changes to the chapter prior to publication, it is unclear whether he ultimately retained or rejected this idea.

II.7.365-366), establishes her as a character who is at once temptress and tempted. If in one sense Tolkien reassures the reader of Galadriel's "goodness," clarifying her potential ambiguity by having her "pass the test" of the Ring's temptation and resign herself to the fading of the Elves from Middle-earth (II.7.366), he simultaneously reiterates once more her desire to inspire doomed desire. The fantasy the Ring offers Galadriel is that of dominion: she imagines herself as a "Queen [...] beautiful and terrible," at once "fair," "dreadful," and "stronger than the foundations of the earth" (II.7.366). There is both grand ambition and self-consciousness in her speech, a consideration of her own beauty and power that strongly resembles the Lady Lilith of Rossetti's painting of the same name; not coincidentally, the painted Lilith contemplates herself in a hand mirror, which prefigures (at least in name, if not in specificity of appearance or function) the supernatural Mirror of Galadriel. As Galadriel's Ring-inspired vision culminates in what is perhaps her most famous line—"All shall love me and despair!" (II.7.366)—the Ring reveals her greatest desire to be precisely the desire of Rossetti's Lilith: to attract, and then to overpower.

Much like Faramir and Boromir, the men of Rohan view Galadriel as a duplicitous, supernatural temptress and weaver, and the wearers of her cloaks as dangerous by association: "Then there is a Lady in the Golden Wood, as old tales tell! [...] Few escape her nets, they say. These are strange days! But if you have her favour, then you also are net-weavers and sorcerers, maybe" (*LotR* III.2.432). Later, the villainous Wormtongue comments that "webs of deceit were ever woven" in Galadriel's forest, calling Galadriel the "Sorceress of the Golden Wood" (III.6.514) and appropriately extending the Victorian weaving mythology into a metaphor for deception and dark magic. Much like Galadriel's rejection of the Ring, in which the memory of the vividness of her ambition endures beyond her stated disclaiming of it, here too the recurring image of Galadriel as supernatural femme fatale nearly subverts its stated negation: the heroic protagonists are offended by Wormtongue's disparagement of her, but for the reader the words are still there on the page, the Lilith allusion—and with it, the dangerous, ensnaring sexuality of Rossetti's femme fatale—once again reinforced. "Hair ceases to be a neutral image or even a woman's crowning sexual attraction for Rossetti; it becomes a net," writes John R. Miller (qtd. in *Del Principe* 50), using the same word as do Tolkien's Riders of Rohan. To Miller, the Rossetti Woman's net of hair functions as "an organic trap which is both a physical and symbolic method of enthralling both the young man [...] and, more significantly, mankind in general" (qtd. in *Del Principe* 50). In both Tolkien's Elvish Galadriel and Rossetti's demonic and serpentine Lilith, the inhumanity of the supernatural femme fatale—"Not a drop of her blood was human, / But she was made like a soft sweet woman" ("Eden Bower" ll. 3-4), Rossetti writes in another poem about his Lilith figure—gives "mankind in general" yet further

cause for alarm, as the deadly seductress in question is in fact a type of demon lover, a member of “mankind” in neither gender nor species, the heteroerotic mystery and novelty of the other sex at once allegorized and amplified by doubling down on “otherness.”

In both the notion of Galadriel’s supernatural ability to see into one’s heart and her association with nets, she in fact resembles also another female character connected to Rossetti: the central figure of the medieval Italian poem “His Portrait of His Lady, Angiola of Verona” by Fazio degli Uberti, Rossetti’s English translation of which is “nearly as central a work in [his] corpus as ‘The Blessed Damozel’” (Notes to the Texts 401). “I look at the crisp golden-threaded hair / Whereof, to thrall my heart, Love twists a net” (“His Portrait” ll. 1-2) the poem begins, and Rossetti would later reuse this imagery to voice Lilith’s description of herself in “Eden Bower”: “All the threads of my hair are golden, / And there in a net his heart was holden” (ll. 23-24). Both prefigure Galadriel-like golden hair and the “net” mentioned twice by the men of Rohan; shortly thereafter in “His Portrait,” the speaker states, “I look into her eyes which unaware / Through mine own eyes to my heart penetrate” (ll. 5-6). Though Galadriel seems to be anything but unaware of what she is doing in tempting the Fellowship, she certainly—as Boromir found—has a gaze that penetrates to the heart. Jerome McGann states in his notes on Rossetti’s translation of “His Portrait” that “the iconograph of ‘The Rossetti Woman’ is fully articulated” in Rossetti’s translation of the poem (401); Galadriel’s parallel with this piece from the core of Rossetti’s work, in combination with her strong connection to “Lady Lilith,” positions her as a continuation of that very “Rossetti Woman” iconography. Galadriel even at one point wears “a circlet of golden flowers [...] in her hair” (*LotR* II.8.372), recalling the circlet of flowers resting on Lilith’s lap in the *Lady Lilith* painting and providing the finishing touch to her strikingly Rossettian characterization.

Galadriel’s antecedent in the Tolkien legendarium is Melian, a Maia of Lórien, and amongst Lórien’s people “there were none more beautiful than Melian, nor more wise, nor more skilled in songs of enchantment” (*Silmarillion* 55). As with Galadriel and (as we shall see) Lúthien, again in the character of Melian is enchantment linked to desire, entrapment, danger, and, of course, hair. In *The Silmarillion*, “an enchantment [falls] on” the Elven lord Elwë (later known as Thingol) while he is walking in the forest and, hearing the voice of Melian amid the singing of Melian’s nightingales, his heart becomes so “filled [...] with wonder and desire” that he forgets “all the purposes of his mind” and seeks her, entranced (55). Upon finding her he is “filled with love,” takes her hand, and “straightaway a spell [is] laid on him” which causes him stand with her, quite literally spellbound, for “long years” before either speaks (55). They become king and queen of the kingdom of Doriath, where “the power of Melian the

queen [is] *woven* about his borders” (151, emphasis mine) to create the Girdle of Melian, a concept Tolkien later revisits in Galadriel’s use of Nenyia to preserve and protect her and her husband Celeborn’s realm of Lothlórien (298). While the Girdle of Melian is consistently depicted in a positive light—a fence to keep evil out—there is still a degree of darkness in its description as “an unseen wall of shadow and bewilderment” (97), and the concept of Melian’s “woven” magic wrapping around Thingol’s kingdom implicitly echoes the Rossettian theme of the femme fatale strangling her entranced male lover with “her enchanted hair” (“Lady Lilith” l. 4).

More explicitly similar to Rossetti are Tolkien’s earliest versions of Thingol and Melian’s meeting. In “The Tale of Tinúviel,” Melian (here called Gwendeling) is “very dark of hair,” and “if ever she sang, or if she danced, dreams and slumbers passed over your head and made it heavy” (6). Thingol (here called Tinwelint) follows the voices of Gwendeling’s nightingales until he finds her lying in leaves; looking upon her, he reflects upon her beauty, and “bending forward to *touch a tress of her hair* he snap[s] a twig with his foot” (7, emphasis mine). She becomes aware of him and runs away laughing, singing, and dancing, and he follows “till a swoon of fragrant slumbers [falls] upon him” (7), the entire episode not only conflating the themes of magic, hair, desire, voyeurism, and sleep as in Rossetti’s “Lady Lilith”—“shed scent [...] and soft sleep” (ll. 10-11) certainly entrap Tinwelint after he becomes attracted to Gwendeling’s hair—but also closely prefiguring a similar scene in the story of Lúthien, the daughter of Melian and Thingol. As in the later versions, Gwendeling and Tinwelint marry, and she weaves spells to protect their kingdom (“The Tale of Tinúviel” [“Tinúviel”] 7).

The course of this portion of the story is generally similar in “The Lay of Leithian,” yet the depictions of Melian’s hair and magical powers are in “Leithian” even more closely aligned with Rossetti’s themes. This version places greater emphasis on Melian’s hair in general—“dark and long her tresses lay / beneath her girdle’s silver seat / and down unto her silver feet” (III.414-416)—as well as a heightening of its danger: Melian’s sorcerous sleep-inducing power is now resident not in her song and dance, but in her hair itself. Again Thingol, “enchanted” (III.435) by Melian’s voice, seeks for and finds its source (III.435-448); this time Melian is herself asleep when found, but more remarkable is the speaker’s emphatic urging of caution in regard to her tempting tresses:

There after but an hour, him seems,
he finds her where she lies and dreams,
pale Melian with her dark hair
upon a bed of leaves. Beware!

There slumber and a sleep is twined!
He touched her tresses and his mind
was drowned in the forgetful deep,
and dark the years rolled o'er his sleep. (III.445-452)

The end-rhyme of “hair” and “Beware!” in lines 447 and 448 gains an additional depth of supernatural dread from its evocation of the demonic figure at the end of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “Kubla Khan”: “And all should cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!” (ll. 49-50). Melian’s protective magic in turn becomes both more ominous and more intimate in the later “Leithian” material: in what Christopher Tolkien calls “The Lay of Leithian Recommended,” written by J.R.R. Tolkien after the completion of *The Lord of the Rings* (394), the verse describes not a Girdle around the borders of Doriath but Thingol’s “deathless queen, / fair Melian,” who “wove unseen / nets of enchantment round his throne, / and spells were laid on tree and stone” (1.68-70). While it is possible for “throne” to figuratively refer to Thingol’s kingdom as a whole, the imagery still is shifted from weaving magic around Doriath to weaving Lilith-like—and in the minds of mortal men, Galadriel-like—enchanted nets around Thingol himself.

Lilith’s commonalities with Tolkien’s character of Lúthien, however, are at least as remarkable as the traits she shares with Galadriel and Melian, even down to the similar consonants in Lilith’s and Lúthien’s names. While the latter’s hair (like her mother Melian’s) is dark, not golden, and while none of the three Tolkien women is associated with snakes, Tolkien evokes in Lúthien almost every other detail of Rossetti’s “Lady Lilith,” then adds additional features of Victorian hair mythology. Tolkien’s Elves are beautifully ageless to human eyes, ancient and essentially immortal unless slain by violence (*Letters* 147, #131), and thus Lúthien (and also Galadriel), like Lilith, is “young while the earth is old” (“Lady Lilith” l. 5). Lúthien’s immortality sets up the drama of her epic love story, which begins when the mortal man Beren falls in love with her, and she with him, while he watches her dance—and, of course, her hair is closely involved. In the “Song of Beren and Lúthien,” a poem within the text of *The Lord of the Rings*, Lúthien’s hair is mentioned four times; its first reference, “And light of stars was in her hair” (*LotR* I.11.191), recalls a different Rossetti poem, “The Blessed Damozel”: “And the stars in her hair were seven” (l. 6). The next three references all associate Lúthien’s hair with shadow. While Tolkien conceived this iconic part of the Beren and Lúthien tale watching his wife Edith—whom, not missing a chance for hair detail, he later described as having “long dark hair” (*Letters* 417, #332) or “raven” hair (*Letters* 420, #340), and whom he associated closely with Lúthien—dance “in a small woodland glade filled with hemlocks” (*Letters* 420, #340), and while Lúthien’s hair color is modeled upon Edith’s, the

shadow comparison is nonetheless unusual. In Tolkien's works, the concept or image of shadow is repeatedly associated with at least death, and more often outright evil: in *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron is "the Shadow" (I.2.51); his domain of Mordor is "the Land of Shadow" (II.10.407) and "where the Shadows lie" (I.2.50). The association of hair with shadow, however, occurs multiple times in the sonnets of Rossetti's *The House of Life*. In "Love's Lovers," the speaker is "all-anhungered of / Thine eyes grey-lit in shadowing hair above" (ll. 12-13); in "The Love-Letter," the titular letter is "shadowed by her hair" (l. 1); in "Venus Victrix," the speaker mentions a "poet's page gold-shadowed in thy hair" (l. 4). Tolkien's incorporation of such imagery, when combined with his frequent use of "shadow" to indicate villainy, produces in his descriptions of Lúthien's hair an intriguing complication to a quest story framed by Tolkien as being the ultimate expression of heroic, romantic love. There is a dark deadliness to Lúthien, an undercurrent of supernatural danger: "her hair" is "like shadow following," her eyes are "within the shadows of her hair" (recalling Rossetti's "Love's Lovers"), and the fourth reference is particularly interesting from a Victorian standpoint: Lúthien "about him cast[s] her shadowy hair" (*LotR* I.11.191, 193). The phenomenon of a woman covering her male beloved in her long hair occurs frequently enough in Victorian poetry that Gitter gives it the name "hair tent" (941-942); examples include Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover"—in which the speaker describes Porphyria sitting next to him, making his cheek rest on her bared shoulder, and "spread[ing], o'er all, her yellow hair" (ll. 14-20)—as well as Rossetti's own "The Stream's Secret," in which the speaker mentions the woman's "fall'n hair at last shed round [his] face" and finds himself "beneath her sheltering hair" (ll. 77, 79). Though the hair tent is a more sensual and less foreboding image than the hair snare, "The Lay of Leithian" associates Lúthien with the latter: Beren "gazed, and as he gazed her hair / within its cloudy web did snare / the silver moonbeams sifting white" (III.557-559), recalling both Thingol's gazing upon Melian and the hair snare imagery of Galadriel and Lilith. While it is unclear as to whether or not Lúthien is actively seducing Beren, "draw[ing] men to watch" ("Lady Lilith" l. 7), her story in all its iterations has a strong element of watching and voyeurism in which her ambiguous role both recalls the gazed-upon subject of "His Portrait" and resembles the attitude of Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* painting. In the painting, Lilith combs her abundant hair as if displaying it, her shoulder casually exposed, gazing at herself in a hand mirror while her eyes seem as if they could turn and fix upon the viewer at any moment: there is a distinct and dangerous sense that she is quite aware of the viewer, acutely conscious that she is being viewed and using that fact to lure another admirer into her trap.

As Rossetti’s Lilith in both painting and poem is accompanied by “rose, foxglove, poppy” (“Lady Lilith” l. 9), so the three concepts of love or desire, poison, and sleep are vital to the story of Lúthien. That Lúthien’s tale is concerned with love and desire is self-evident, but the two mentions in “The Lay of Leithian” of the “wild white roses” in Lúthien’s hair (III.626, VI.1789) specifically recall the white roses that frame Lilith’s hair and bare shoulder in Rossetti’s painting. In the various versions of her story, Lúthien is nearly always depicted dancing in or near hemlock,⁴ a better-known poison even than foxglove; in the “Song of Beren and Lúthien,” hemlock is mentioned three times, along with one mention of the also-poisonous nightshade (I.11.191-193). Like Lilith, to desire Lúthien and her hair is deadly, though in this case both to Beren and to Lúthien herself: not only does their mutual, supernatural quest to recover the purposely-exorbitant bride price demanded by Lúthien’s father Thingol prove fatal to Beren, but their love results in Lúthien losing her immortality, “snared”⁵ (“The Lay of Leithian” IV.790)—that word again!—in his mortal doom. His “heart and body and life” are in her hold (“Lady Lilith” l. 8), but so are hers in his.

It is at this point in the story—Lúthien dooming herself by falling in love with the human warrior Beren—that Tolkien not only first introduces the “Lady Lilith”-like theme of sleep, but does so in a passage that strongly resembles John Keats’s poem “La Belle Dame sans Merci”:

But as [Lúthien] looked on him, doom fell upon her, and she loved him; yet she slipped from his arms and vanished from his sight even as the day was breaking. Then Beren lay upon the ground in a swoon, as one slain at once by bliss and grief; and he fell into a sleep as it were into an abyss of shadow, and waking he was cold as stone, and his heart barren and forsaken. And wandering in mind he groped as one that is stricken with sudden blindness, and seeks with hands to grasp the vanished light. (*Silmarillion* 165)

⁴ Michael Flowers observes in “Tolkien in East Yorkshire, 1917-1918” that the “hemlocks” amongst which Tolkien watched Edith dance are likely to have actually been a different species of umbellifer: cow parsley (127-130). Nonetheless, and much as Flowers concludes, Tolkien chose to use the word “hemlock” in the story of Lúthien (129). As Tolkien would almost certainly have been aware of the poisonous properties of hemlock—at least due to Socrates’s death by poisoning via drinking hemlock (129)—it is reasonable to interpret his selection of the word as an acceptance of that connotation and therefore a conscious allusion to poison.

⁵ For the rare example of a strangling “hair snare” turned upon the woman, which this by extension recalls, see also Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover” ll. 38-41.

This is precisely a Tolkienian rendition of Keats's knight-at-arms "alone and palely loitering" ("La Belle Dame sans Merci" ll. 1-2) as he languishes away waiting for his erstwhile faery lover; when last he saw her, she put him to sleep after they made love, and he dreamt—"Ah! woe betide!"—a terrible dream of the ghosts of her previous lovers-turned-enthralled-victims before awakening alone "on the cold hill's side" (ll. 33-44). Julie F. Codell calls Keats "paradigmatic" (345) to the Pre-Raphaelite artists, who "visualized and popularized Keats for their Victorian contemporaries" (341), perhaps with Rossetti himself having initiated the idea of Keats as subject (342). Rossetti thought very highly of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (Scott 503)—indeed, he and his future wife Elizabeth Siddal were the first known to attempt its illustration (Scott 506)—and, true to what would become his form, Rossetti's 1855 drawing of the subject "portrays Keats's Belle Dame as a strangulating *femme fatale* who wraps her hair erotically around the knight's neck, an image that is also followed by John William Waterhouse's later painting of the same name (1893)" (Winters 73), weaving the Victorian hair mythology into the imagery of "La Belle Dame" despite the fact that no hair-enwrapping or strangulation is mentioned in the poem itself. As Rossetti merges Keats's Belle Dame with elements he would go on to develop in his presentation of Lilith (Allen 287)—in "Eden Bower," Lilith tells her serpentine lover to "wreath thy neck with my hair's bright tether" (l. 139), an image which distinctly resembles Rossetti's illustration of Keats's poem—so in turn does Tolkien merge Keats's Belle Dame, her post-Keats Victorian interpretations, and especially her literary descendant, Rossetti's Lilith, into the character of Lúthien. Tolkien being Tolkien, he also adds an additional layer of medievalism by sending his *femme fatale* and her human lover on a quest: unlike the hapless knight, Beren's romance does not end with him left alone on that "cold hill's side"; in Tolkien, he and the perilous "faery's child" ("La Belle Dame sans Merci" l. 14) Lúthien are reunited, and the enthralled warrior gets not just a fatal fling but a daring, doomed adventure.

While the word "witch" ("Lady Lilith" l. 2) is not applied to Lúthien, this is ultimately a matter of semantics, as—in an episode from Beren and Lúthien's quest that also strongly incorporates the "Lady Lilith" themes of weaving, hair weaponization, and sleep—Lúthien certainly performs a type of "spell" ("Lady Lilith" l. 13) and as a result has "enchanted hair" ("Lady Lilith" l. 4) which she weaves into accessories that put foes to sleep. In "The Lay of Leithian," an early version of the story, Lúthien, imprisoned in a house high up in a tree, explains to the male Elven minstrel Dairon how she intends to spin "a marvellous thread, and wind therein / a potent magic, and a spell / [she] will weave within [her] web" (V.1469-1471). When Dairon "fear[s] the dark purpose of her art" (V.1475), Tolkien again recalls the Lilith-like sense of sorcerous danger attributed by the Victorians to the spinning and web-weaving of that

“marvellous thread”—which turns out, naturally, to be Lúthien’s own hair. While the hair-growing and hair-weaving escape episode encompasses over 150 lines of “The Lay of Leithian” (V.1425-1583), in *The Silmarillion* it is presented more succinctly:

[S]he put forth her arts of enchantment, and caused her hair to grow to great length, and of it she wove a dark robe that wrapped her beauty like a shadow, and it was laden with a spell of sleep. Of the strands that remained she twined a rope, and she let it down from her window; and as the end swayed above the guards that sat beneath the tree they fell into a deep slumber. (172)

Although the hair rope is not employed as a noose, the similarity and suggestion are unmistakable and it is nonetheless used as a type of weapon. The hair robe is later utilized in a similar fashion. “Command[ing] to sleep” the monstrous wolf Carcharoth (*Silmarillion* 180) and then utilizing both her singing and her magic hair cloak to “cast down in slumber” the Luciferian arch-villain Morgoth—who looks upon her beauty with “an evil lust”—as well as his entire court (*Silmarillion* 180-181), Lúthien’s adversaries become those whom “soft sleep shall snare” (“Lady Lilith” l. 11). An earlier version of the hair-growing escape scene, written by Tolkien in 1917 as part of “The Tale of Tinúviel” (“Tinúviel” 1), features a bizarre and almost fetishistic volume of hair that eclipses even the Victorian imagination in its abundance: Tinúviel’s magically-growing tresses eventually fill the room while she sleeps, covering and hiding her underneath them, “trailing out of the windows and blowing about the tree boles in the morning” (17). This image of growing hair filling (and in Lúthien Tinúviel’s case, overflowing) a confined and confining space as she sleeps resembles, disturbingly, “the story told after the exhumation of Lizzie Siddal,” Rossetti’s wife, in which “her hair had continued to grow after her death for such a long time and so luxuriantly that it filled her coffin” (Gitter 948). Appropriately for the character of Lúthien, the extended association becomes one of death but also, in a sense, of a form of life after death and therefore immortality.

On the way to Morgoth, Lúthien magically transforms herself into a bat-like female vampire (and Beren into a werewolf) to infiltrate his stronghold, and Beren, looking at her convincing disguise, wonders if she is “a phantom for his ensnaring” (*Silmarillion* 179). In a literary sense he is, of course, absolutely right. Gitter may claim that “the Victorian vision of magic hair did not survive long into the twentieth century” (953), but in Tolkien’s early- to mid-twentieth-century writing it is alive and well, and even embellished upon. In Tolkien’s repeated, sensual, and often lengthy accounts of women’s locks—which are frequently accompanied by a male character who admires or desires them—he

recalls the Victorian-era fascination with women's hair, while his characters of Galadriel and Lúthien resemble Rossetti's Lady Lilith and her enchanted, ensnaring hair with such a high degree of specificity that it is difficult to imagine the similarities being coincidental. In evoking these images, Tolkien creates a legendarium that is at once a little more worldly, a little more supernatural—and more than a little “hair-mad” itself.

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