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"A Bleak, Barren Land": Women and Fertility in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Critics, and even the general public, have noted the absence of women in *The Lord of the Rings*, an absence so glaring that it could hardly be overlooked. Many feminist scholars have, as a result of this deficiency, denounced J.R.R. Tolkien, interpreting this lack of female characters as indicative of repressed misogyny. Others, however, have defended the author, pointing out that the female characters that do exist could be considered role models. This essay offers an alternative interpretation and contends that the absence of women in the novel, though potentially reducing its appeal to modern readers, reinforces one of its central motifs: the barrenness and infertility of Middle-earth. Overawed by Tolkien's landscape descriptions and the extent of his worldbuilding, readers have overlooked just how empty this world is, how rarely the Fellowship encounters settled districts or even lonely habitations. Replacing the farms, villages, and markets a reader would expect to encounter are vast stretches of wilderness and the ruins of forgotten nations. The almost total absence of women, of wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers, reinforces this sense of desolation, suggesting to the reader that Middle-earth has no future. The novel's few women actually contribute to this impression, for they are all, for different reasons, childless. Compared to the infertile and declining populations of elves, humans, and dwarves, Tolkien's orcs display a shocking and unnatural fecundity, reproducing—in a manner only hinted at—in enormous numbers. The novel's conclusion, which begins with Aragorn's long-desired wedding and ends with Sam's return to Rosie Cotton, generates a flurry of contented relationships, suggesting not misogyny on the author's part, but a

veneration for sex, romance, and family life. That Frodo is unable to partake in any of these makes his sacrifice all the more poignant.

Additional Keywords

Barrenness; Ecocriticism; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Attitude toward nature; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Women; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Ecocriticism



“BLEAK, BARREN LAND”:
WOMEN AND FERTILITY IN
THE LORD OF THE RINGS

DYLAN L. HENDERSON

INTRODUCTION

READERS CAN ALMOST COUNT THE NUMBER OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *The Lord of the Rings* on one hand, the most important to the plot being Bilbo’s overbearing cousin, Lobelia Sackville-Baggins; Tom Bombadil’s fairy wife, Goldberry; the Elven queen of Lothlórien, Galadriel; King Théoden’s niece and the slayer of the Witch-King, Éowyn; Aragorn’s half-Elven bride, Arwen; the garrulous healer, Ioreth; and Sam’s sweetheart, the Hobbit Rosie Cotton.¹ It might be going too far to assert, as Alfred Leo Duggan does in his 1954 review of *The Two Towers*, that “women play no part” in Tolkien’s epic (817), but Melanie A. Rawls is surely correct when she states that “none are pivotal characters,” there being “no female counterparts for Gandalf or Sauron, Aragorn or Saruman, Frodo or Gollum” (99). Many of the female characters that do exist, moreover, lack independence: readers encounter them not as individuals, but as appendages attached to more prominent male characters. Arwen, for example, exists as an extension of Aragorn’s character in much the same way that, to put it bluntly, Farmer Maggot’s dogs are an extension of his. Her role in the narrative is to provide more information about Aragorn, to add depth and roundness to *his* character. Without him, she would not exist and would have no reason to

¹ Shelob, the monstrous spider, presents readers with a special case. Tolkien uses the pronoun “she,” as opposed to the gender-neutral pronoun “it,” to refer to the creature and thus draws attention to the arthropod’s femininity, if the word can be used in such a context. Consequently, many scholars, including Brenda Partridge, have approached Shelob either as a female character or as symbolic of human femininity. More recently, Leslie A. Donovan has included Shelob, alongside Galadriel, Éowyn, and Arwen, in her discussion of the Valkyrie, and Christopher Hansen has used both Shelob and Ungoliant as a lens through which to examine Tolkien’s conception of gender. And yet, while Shelob is female, she is obviously not a woman in the same sense that, say, Rosie Cotton is, though she, too, is not human. As a result, this essay discusses Shelob separately, grouping her with the Orcs (with whom she has much in common) and not the Free Peoples of Middle-earth.

exist, and the same could be said for Rosie Cotton and perhaps even Goldberry, who is, first and foremost, a wife and a homemaker. And yet, I would argue that the conspicuous absence of women in Tolkien's epic, while potentially unsatisfying, nevertheless shapes the reading experience by emphasizing the threat that Sauron's forces, with their limitless growth, pose to the Free Peoples of Middle-earth, whose small and masculine populations seem shockingly sterile by comparison.

BACKGROUND

The subject has not failed to attract critics, and considering the scarcity, and apparent superficiality, of women in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is hardly surprising that many feminist scholars, beginning with Doris T. Myers and her 1971 essay "Brave New World: The Status of Women According to Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams," have condemned Tolkien's depiction of women as inadequate and denounced Tolkien himself as a misogynist.² Kenneth McLeish, for instance, considers Tolkien's female characters no better than stereotypes, paper dolls that never live and breathe in the way that Sam or Frodo or even Gimli does (125). An ungenerous reader might say, not entirely without justification, that most of Tolkien's women belong to one of two types: the shrew and the goddess. The former irritates and troubles the men in her life; the latter inspires them with her love and, even more so, her beauty. At times, Goldberry, Arwen, and even Galadriel certainly feel more like archetypes, symbols of domestic bliss and feminine wisdom, than flesh-and-blood women. And yet, to complicate matters further, even the romantic relationships that these women symbolize seem shallow compared to the rich friendships that bind the novel's male characters together. Rosie Cotton, as Brenda Partridge points out, constitutes a poor replacement for Frodo, and her marriage to Sam a poor substitute for the emotionally intimate friendship Sam and Frodo share. Going one step farther, Candice Frederick and Sam McBride assert that "Middle-earth is very Inkling-like, in that while women exist in the world, they need not be given significant attention and can, if one is lucky, simply be avoided altogether" (108). For the perceived inadequacies of Tolkien's female characters, scholars have not hesitated to blame Tolkien himself, charging him with the promotion of misogynistic or, at best, antiquated conceptions of women. Even Melissa Hatcher, who argues for the centrality of Éowyn to some of Tolkien's most cherished themes, admits that "Tolkien himself, in reality, probably *was* the stodgy sexist Oxford professor that feminist scholars paint him out to be" (44).

²For a more detailed history of this debate, see Reid.

Taking a different tack, other critics have insisted that, though only a few female characters appear in *The Lord of the Rings*, they play crucial roles or, in some cases, act as role models (Benvenuto; Lakowski).³ Lisa Hopkins argues, for instance, that readers should not fixate on the scarcity of women in the novel, for their "importance is remarkably disproportionate to their numbers" (365). In one of the most influential essays on the subject, Rawls contends that Tolkien promotes neither patriarchy nor misogyny, as commonly understood, and suggests that, in his Secondary World, a balance between masculine power and feminine understanding promotes good while an imbalance, represented by the all-male Sauron and the all-female Shelob, always leads to evil. Building upon Rawls, Edith L. Crowe notes that, while Tolkien divides the masculine and the feminine into different spheres, he does not denigrate the feminine or prize the former over the latter, "their relationship [being] one of linking, not ranking" (146). Going one step farther, Nancy Enright claims that, in Tolkien's world, feminine power triumphs, and deserves to triumph, over a more masculine conception of power, for it derives its strength not from force, but from Christian submission. Other scholars, acting as peacemakers, stress the complexity and ambiguity inherent in Tolkien's depiction of women. In her comprehensive examination of the issue, Weronika Łaszkiwicz concludes that the women of Middle-earth, and Tolkien's depiction of them, defy categorization: "If all of the above-mentioned examples are taken into consideration," she writes, having just examined each of the novel's female characters in turn, "the images of females and femininity present in Tolkien's works becomes an ambiguous one, including both passivity and empowerment" (20). Antithetical though they may seem, none of these interpretations are necessarily wrong—theoretically, Tolkien's female characters could be both empowering and insipid at the same time—but they overlook the effect that women, and their absence, have on the reader and his conception of Middle-earth, a world that, without women and children, appears disturbingly sterile and depressingly barren.

AN EMPTY CONTINENT

The Shire, being Tolkien's ideal, radiates fertility, being blessed with both food and families in abundance—indeed, as Daniel Timmons points out, "Everything connected with the hobbits exhibits fecundity and growth"—but as soon as the four Hobbits who form the nucleus of the Fellowship leave its borders, they enter a world that is frighteningly empty (74). This is, as Celia

³ Though outside the scope of this essay, another branch of scholarship has focused on defending Tolkien as an individual and refuting claims of misogyny. John D. Rateliff, for instance, takes issue with Humphrey Carpenter's depiction of Tolkien as a man isolated from women and happiest in the company of other men, noting Tolkien's work with female students and his approval of higher education for women.

Devine rightly notes, “a world in decline” (10). East of the Brandywine Bridge, the Hobbits encounter no villages, no farms, no homesteads, only a wilderness that stretches, uninterrupted, to the village of Bree, which consists of little more than a single inn and about a “hundred stone houses of the Big Folk” (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* [LotR] I.9.150). This village and its three neighboring hamlets form the Bree-land, “a small inhabited region, like an island in the empty lands round about” (I.9.149). Readers, following in the footsteps of the Fellowship, will encounter nothing but a series of such islands, outposts like Rivendell, Isengard, Edoras, and Minas Tirith, in a vast sea of hills, mountains, marshes, forests, and plains. Knowing nothing else, readers may miss just how bare this land is.⁴ Consider, however, a hypothetical journey through, say, Anglo-Saxon England, a time and place similar, in so many ways, to Middle-earth. Even in the sparsely populated north, a traveler at that time would have passed villages and market towns, would have stayed at inns, slept in barns, and purchased food from roadside farms. Aside from the outposts mentioned, however, the Fellowship encounters only a few settlements outside of the Shire, subsisting on provisions obtained at Bree, Rivendell, and Lothlórien, and sleeping outdoors.

Indeed, what is most striking about the iconic map of Middle-earth drawn by Christopher Tolkien is how empty it is. Mountains, hills, rivers, and forests abound, as do the names of regions, but where are the cities, the settled districts? Virgin forests, like Mirkwood, sprawl over vast areas, and even places one would assume to be fertile, like the banks of the Anduin River, appear uninhabited. To some extent, we can even quantify Middle-earth’s barrenness by looking at the frequency of certain terms: by my count, the word “mountain” appears 575 times in *The Lord of the Rings*; “hill” 539 times; and “forest,” when combined with “wood,” 518 times.⁵ The word “village,” however, appears only 41 times in the novel, and the word “town” a meager 14. Even rarer are words related to agriculture and rural life: Tolkien uses the word “farm” 14 times, “meadow” 9, “barn” 8, and “pasture” 4. As for the rural inhabitants one would expect to encounter on the road, outside of the Shire, they cannot be found. Missing are the shepherds, farmers, peddlers, and tradesmen, not to mention their sheep, cattle, pigs, chickens, and other livestock. These absences are made all the more glaring by the detailed picture of agricultural civilization that Tolkien creates for the Shire, a world, as Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans

⁴ It is telling, for instance, that Kath Filmer, in her analysis of the wasteland in mythopoetic literature, discusses C.S. Lewis but not Tolkien. The beauty and majesty of Middle-earth, as Tolkien describes it, effectively masks its emptiness and hides its affinity with the dry, dusty wasteland immortalized by T.S. Eliot and evoked by subsequent generations.

⁵ A simple word search, performed on a Kindle edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, generated these numbers.

point out, of "mills, such as Ted Sandyman's in Hobbiton; farms such as the one at Bamfurlong worked by Mr. Maggot and his family in the Marish; and vegetable gardens such as those tended by Sam Gamgee and his father, the Gaffer," all of which give way to a rugged and inhospitable wilderness, the divide "between the friendly, cultivated fields of the Shire and the wild, untamed realms" being "one of the most important environmental contrasts in Middle-earth" (72, 151). If, as Sofia Parrila argues, Tolkien imbues natural features with "personhood," with both personality and agency, he also gives them an alarming heft: the natural world, as he depicts it, dwarfs the "human" or civilized element, making it appear insignificant and miniscule by comparison (7). Over the course of the novel, the Fellowship travels from one end of the known world to the other, starting in the northwest corner and ending in the southeast, but east of Crickhollow, its members never really leave the wilderness or enter a fertile, populous region. Casual readers may associate Middle-earth with medieval Europe, but this is not a land, as Oxfordshire or Burgundy were, of vineyards or manors or even castles. If a historical analogy is needed, it is more akin to Kievan Rus, a vast but empty land, its small settlements separated by leagues of forest and prairie.

Outside of the Shire, what dots Middle-earth are not homes or farms or towns, but ruins. Instead of encountering an agricultural civilization, in other words, readers encounter the remains of one. Indeed, encounters with ruins are so common that, according to Deborah Sabo, they "contribute to the successful evocation of a sense of history in Middle-earth" by creating a realistic impression of "time-depth" (91). As a result, Tolkien's world appears not just vast, but ancient—impressive both spatially and chronologically. Examples abound, but consider the following passage, which describes some of the stories told to the Hobbits by Tom Bombadil:

They heard of the Great Barrows, and the green mounds, and the stone-rings upon the hills and in the hollows among the hills. Sheep were bleating in flocks. Green walls and white walls rose. There were fortresses on the heights. Kings of little kingdoms fought together, and the young Sun shone like fire on the red metal of their new and greedy swords. There was victory and defeat; and towers fell, fortresses were burned, and flames went up into the sky. Gold was piled on the biers of dead kings and queens; and mounds covered them, and the stone doors were shut; and the grass grew over all. Sheep walked for a while biting the grass, but soon the hills were empty again. (*LotR* I.7.130)

Once part of Arnor, this country reared castles and cities, whole kingdoms, in fact, but by the time of *The Lord of the Rings*, nothing remains but graves.⁶ Even the animals have apparently departed, and the Hobbits, though they live nearby, have forgotten Arnor completely. According to Tom Bombadil, only the Rangers of the North, the “sons of forgotten kings walking in loneliness” (I.8.146), remember it now, a people so scattered and so few in number that, when Halbarad assembles “all of our kindred that could be gathered in haste,” he finds only thirty men (V.2.774-5).⁷ As the Hobbits journey east to Bree and, afterwards, to Rivendell, they pass through the southern reaches of what was once Arnor, in the process encountering, time and time again, signs of ruin and desolation. One thinks of the dike near the Barrow-downs, which the Hobbits mistake for the main road and which once marked the edge of a kingdom, or the North Road just outside of Bree that, on account of its lack of traffic, is now covered in grass and called “the Greenway” (I.9.150). Six days east of Bree, they catch sight of “green-grown walls and dikes” and “ruins of old works of stone” (I.11.184-5). Of course, Weathertop, where the watchtower of Amon Sûl once stood, comes to mind, as do the “ancient walls of stone, and the ruins of towers,” seen from the other side of the River Hoarwell, near the Ettenmoors (I.12.201). Away from Arnor, these last, unencouraging signs of civilization vanish, and the wilderness reigns.

As for the “outposts,” as I have called them, they are small in size and number, and even Gondor and Rohan, the heartlands of human civilization, seem all but depopulated. Consider, for instance, Tolkien’s painting of Rivendell, which appeared in *The Hobbit*: the settlement, if it can be called that, consists of a single modest house, adorned with a colonnade and topped with a cupola or belltower. Elsewhere, of course, Tolkien calls it the “Last Homely House east of the Sea,” a clear indication that Elrond’s home is cozy rather than grand, but it plays such a pivotal role in the narrative that readers can be forgiven for imagining it to be much more impressive than it is (II.1.225).⁸ Though much larger and more imposing than Rivendell, even Lothlórien is overshadowed by its larger neighbors. As a result, Haldir refers to it as an

⁶ Tolkien hints at the causes of this desolation in Appendix B. In addition to the Witch-king of Angmar’s attacks, which spanned centuries and culminated in the capture of Fornost in T.A. 1974, Arnor was also battered by the Great Plague, a pestilence that spread north after ravaging Gondor in T.A. 1636 and which left much of Eriador “desolate” (App.B.1086). Very little of this, however, appears in the novel proper, and both the reader and the Hobbits encounter an eerie landscape, unnaturally and inexplicably empty.

⁷ It is unclear whether or not we should count Elrond’s two sons. If we do, the total is lowered to twenty-eight.

⁸ Of course, the sprawling complex depicted in Peter Jackson’s *The Fellowship of the Ring* encourages such an interpretation.

"island amid many perils," and its sole city, Caras Galadhon, consists of only a single hill, though, to be fair, it makes for an impressive sight, being topped with the tallest mallorn trees in the forest (II.6.348). And yet, even here, there are signs of decay: before reaching Caras Galadhon, the Fellowship passes through Cerin Amroth, a tree-studded mound that Haldir describes as "the heart of the ancient realm as it was long ago" and the site "where in happier days [Amroth's] high house was built" (II.6.350). Despite Galadriel's power, even Lothlórien, it seems, is not what it once was.

As for Rohan and Gondor, I suspect they loom large in the reader's mind because they dwarf, in size and importance, the places hitherto encountered. Unlike Rivendell or Caras Galadhon, these are countries, not isolated settlements. And yet, Rohan can boast of only a single city, Edoras, and although the Fellowship cross and recross the country in *The Two Towers*, its members pass through only two hamlets: Underharrow and Upbourn. Indeed, despite being a settled country, much of Rohan resembles the wilderness that readers encountered outside its borders. Consider, for instance, the following passage, which describes the borderlands between Rohan and Gondor:

In the willow-thickets where Snowbourn flowed into Entwash, twelve leagues east of Edoras, they camped that night. And then on again through the Folde; and through the Fenmarch, where to their right great oakwoods climbed skirts of the hills under the shades of dark Halifirien by the borders of Gondor; but away to their left the mists lay on the marshes fed by the mouths of Entwash. (V.3.804)

Here again, we find trees and rivers, hills and mountains and marshes, but no farms, villages, or markets. The entire host, which is riding to save Gondor, consists of only "five and fifty hundreds of Riders fully armed, and many hundreds of other men with spare horses lightly burdened," the total number of soldiers being, presumably, less than a thousand (V.3.802).

In Gondor, Minas Tirith remains an impressive sight, to be sure, but much of the country, the heart of Middle-earth, lies desolate. Abandoned is its former capital, Osgiliath, and captured is Minas Tirith's sister city, Minas Ithil, now known as Minas Morgul. All of Ithilien, a once prosperous region west of Mordor, has been deserted. The northern plains, which the Steward of Gondor awarded to Eorl the Young and the Rohirrim in T.A. 2510, had been depopulated for centuries. According to Appendix A, its inhabitants "had become few since the Plague, and most of those that remained had been slaughtered by the savage Easterlings" (App.A.1064). In this case, the dates tell a story easily overlooked: by T.A. 2510, the northern region of Gondor had not yet recovered from an epidemic that occurred *almost nine hundred years earlier* in T.A. 1636, a powerful testament to Middle-earth's ongoing demographic

collapse. The agricultural core of Gondor is, by the time of *The Lord of the Rings*, doing little better. “The townlands,” Tolkien assures us, “were rich, with wide tilth and many orchards,” yet even these areas, despite their agricultural wealth, are declining demographically and have been for some time: “the herdsmen and husbandmen that dwelt there were not many, and the most part of the people of Gondor lived in the seven circles of the City, or in the high vales of the mountain-borders, in Lossarnach, or further south in fair Lebennin” (V.1.750). Of course, when describing these places, Tolkien never provides the reader with any figures, which would make for dull reading, but he does list the vassals who, in its hour of need, arrive to help Gondor, and he counts the men in their service. The greatest of these, Prince Imrahil, can muster only a single company of knights and seven hundred infantrymen. When all the vassals and their men have been enumerated, they number “less than three thousands full told” (V.1.771). Like the Byzantine Empire on the eve of its fall, Gondor appears to be no more than a shell of its former self, a nation consisting not of millions, but of thousands.

MEN WITHOUT WOMEN

The absence of female characters in *The Lord of the Rings* should be understood within this context, should be understood, in other words, as another indication of Middle-earth’s ongoing decline, its increasing barrenness and infertility. Consider, for example, how readers experience the Fellowship’s arrival in Bree. “At the Sign of the Prancing Pony” begins with a description of that town and the surrounding country. At first glance, the village appears small but thriving, an oasis compared to the woods and moors through which the Hobbits have recently passed. And yet, readers also learn that “though their little land was not much farther than a day’s riding east of the Brandywine Bridge, the Hobbits of the Shire now seldom visited it” (I.9.150). Indeed, the traffic between the Shire and Bree has declined precipitously, and the Northern Lands, of course, “had long been desolate” (I.9.150). Travelers to Bree have become so rare, in fact, that the arrival of the Hobbits after dark startles the surly gatekeeper, Harry Goatleaf.⁹ What this suggests is that the people of Bree, despite living near an ancient crossroads, no longer expect to see travelers of any kind, at least after dark. Gone then are the peddlers, merchants, actors, sailors, soldiers, and assorted vagabonds that one would expect to encounter on a medieval highway. The inn is busy, to be sure, but the proprietor informs the

⁹ The fact that the gatekeeper is a villain, in the employ of the Black Riders and on the lookout for Hobbits, is irrelevant here. What matters is that he is so taken aback by the unexpected appearance of visitors after dark that he “jumped up and fetched a lantern and looked over the gate at them in surprise” (I.9.151). He does not grasp the significance of their arrival until a little while later, after he has exchanged words with Frodo.

Hobbit that it is rarely so, claiming that "there is such a crowd already in the house tonight as there hasn't been for long enough" (I.9.153). An aura of decline, if not yet outright decay, hangs over the town, its residents leading lives not of quiet desperation maybe, but of genteel shabbiness.

The almost total absence of women in Bree reinforces this impression. In any other novel, readers might encounter the proprietor's plump widow at the inn or perhaps his buxom daughter, characters so common in British literature as to be almost archetypes. They might expect to find maids at the inn or housewives in the streets, but there are none. Men appear in the text—Harry Goatleaf; Barliman Butterbur; Nob the Hobbit; Bob the groom; Bill Ferny and his ilk; and guests of all sorts, including humans, Hobbits, and Dwarves—but no women. Places in the narrative exist where Tolkien could, if he chose, insert female characters, but despite his keen eye for telling details, he never does. When "most of the inhabitants of Bree and Staddle, and many even from Combe and Archet, were crowded in the road to see the travellers start," the crowd must contain at least a few women, and perhaps a great many, but Tolkien's eye scans the assemblage, decides *not* to focus on any of the women and girls present, and passes on (I.11.180). As a result, all the men readers meet seem to be alone in the world, without daughters, sisters, wives, or mothers. Butterbur, a "short fat man with a bald head and a red face," radiates indulgence, specifically in simple, wholesome pleasures of the domestic variety, yet he, like all the other male characters in Bree, is a bachelor, his only companions being his male servants (I.9.152). Perhaps the loneliest of them all, Aragorn, who also appears at this time, never even mentions his great love, which must seem, at this point in his life, lost and unobtainable.

The pattern displayed here reappears throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, the stories of the Dwarves, whose women we never see, and the Ents, whose women have long ago disappeared, being two of the most prominent examples. The Ents, in particular, have attracted the attention of scholars, many of whom have analyzed them through the lens of ecocriticism (Denekamp; Dickerson and Evans). Tolkien himself encourages such an approach in a letter to W. H. Auden, claiming that "the difference of the 'male' and 'female' attitude to wild things, the difference between unpossessive love and gardening," inspired their creation (*Letters* 212n, #163). And yet, while the loss of the Entwives may very well communicate an environmental message to responsive readers, their story also reinforces the sense of ongoing decline and approaching doom that, outside of the Shire, hangs over Middle-earth. Within Fangorn Forest, the subtle, but persistent, impression of masculine sterility hardens into an indisputable reality. The women are gone, perhaps forever, and according to Treebeard, "there have been no Entings—no children, you would say, not for a terrible long count of years" (*LotR* III.4.475). As a result, the demographic decay that threatens

Middle-earth has, for the Ents, become a collapse. Counting on his fingers, Treebeard believes that “only three remain of the first Ents,” a number bolstered somewhat by “a fair company” of younger Ents (III.4.474-5). What make this sad decline so shocking are the associations that the Ents evoke: we would expect Ents, like trees in a forest, to be bountiful, to be almost beyond counting, not reduced to single digits. Without the Entwives, the last of the Ents will someday cease to exist, a fate made even more poignant by Treebeard’s pathetic inquiries. He accepts that “the withering of all woods may be drawing near,” and yet he insists that the Entwives are not dead, but merely lost, as if, at this late hour, they might still be found wandering nearby (III.4.473). The absence of women here and elsewhere suggests not that Tolkien, the devoted son and happily married father, was a misogynist, but that the peoples of Middle-earth lack a future, that their societies are no longer thriving and, if something fundamental does not change, never will again.

The few female characters that Tolkien does introduce to the reader only reinforce this subtle, but pervasive sense of barrenness, for few have, or seem capable of having, children. Galadriel, beautiful though she may be, is also ancient, and her children grown. In Rivendell, Frodo sees her granddaughter, Arwen, a woman “young [...] and yet not so” (II.1.227). Like Galadriel, Arwen impresses all who meet her with her queenly grace and exquisite beauty, but Tolkien’s description of her makes Arwen seem frigid, more of an image than a living woman—what Rawls calls a “half-glimpsed dream” (99). When Frodo sees her for the first time at Rivendell, he admires her, studies her even, noting that “thought and knowledge were in her glance, as of one who has known many things that the years bring,” but she does not speak to him or interact with him in any way (II.1.227). Arwen’s inapproachability separates her from the male Fellowship and distances her, in the minds of readers, from Aragorn, whose deep love for her surfaces so rarely in the first five books that first-time readers can be forgiven, I think, if they forget its existence. Indeed, Tolkien relegates almost the entirety of her story to Appendix A; in the body of the novel, Arwen exists not as a woman, but as a ghost, a memory that haunts and troubles Aragorn, who, as mentioned above, seems to have lost hope in ever marrying her. These female characters may be goddesses, but they are not fertility goddesses, and their beauty, though stunning, does not suggest youth or maternity.

At first glance, of course, Goldberry would appear to be an exception, for she, very much unlike the Elves, functions not as an aesthetic artifact, perfect and untouchable, but as a wife and a homemaker. Proof of this claim, if any is needed, resides in the very different reaction she inspires in Frodo and his companions:

The hobbits looked at her in wonder; and she looked at each of them and smiled. 'Fair lady Goldberry!' said Frodo at last, feeling his heart moved with a joy that he did not understand. He stood as he had at times stood enchanted by fair elven-voices; but the spell that was now laid upon him was different: less keen and lofty was the delight, but deeper and nearer to mortal heart; marvellous and yet not strange. (I.7.123)

What seems to strike Frodo so forcefully is not her comeliness, which cannot quite compare to the beauty of the Elves and the "keen and lofty" delight it engenders, but the domestic bliss that her feminine appearance and manners seem to promise. An almost allegorical figure of traditional femininity, Goldberry looks after her husband, who worships her in turn, her well-run home and its comforts (symbolized by the ample meal of "yellow cream and honeycomb, and white bread, and butter; milk, cheese, and green herbs and ripe berries" that she prepares) providing him and his guests with a refuge from the outside world (I.7.124). While Arwen sits immobile beneath her canopy, like a piece of statuary on display, Goldberry bustles about the house, attending to the needs of her husband and the Hobbits and providing the novel with a rare example of what Marion Zimmer Bradley calls "maternal love" (77). As a result of her presence, the house of Tom Bombadil stands in stark contrast to the male-dominated households that appear elsewhere in the novel, where domestic needs are provided by male servants, such as Sam, Fatty Bolger, and Nob. Perhaps Frodo reacts so strongly to Goldberry because in Middle-earth one encounters such an arrangement so rarely: the happy domesticity we find in this house appears nowhere else. And yet, while Goldberry differs from Arwen and Galadriel, she, incredibly, has no children. The importance of this can hardly be overstated: Tolkien's living symbol of feminine domesticity is, unless recently married, presumably sterile.

Is it not telling that the most human and the most developed of Tolkien's female characters, Éowyn, the White Lady of Rohan, renounces her femininity and, with it, the very possibility of motherhood by adopting a masculine persona and embracing battle as a lifestyle? In a world of men and, to a much lesser extent, goddesses, Éowyn stands out and, as a result, represents the novel's many missing women. Symbolically, much depends on her, and everyone in her life—from her uncle, King Théoden, to his counselor, Gríma Wormtongue, to Aragorn and Faramir, the man she loves and the man who would love her—pressures her to fill the feminine role that, from the reader's perspective, has been vacant for so long. And yet, she resists. Though young and beautiful and very human, she, too, is sterile—psychologically. Despite being drawn to her, Aragorn intuits this when they meet for the first time:

Very fair was her face, and her long hair was like a river of gold. Slender and tall she was in her white robe girt with silver; but strong she seemed and stern as steel, a daughter of kings. Thus Aragorn for the first time in the full light of day beheld Éowyn, Lady of Rohan, and thought her fair, fair and cold, like a morning of pale spring that is not yet come to womanhood. (*LotR* III.6.515)

In this physical description, we encounter both sides of Éowyn's character, her outer beauty hinting at an inner capacity for love and affection and, by extension, motherhood, which is undermined by a vague, but powerful, impression of frigidity, suggested by the word "cold" as well as by frequent references to metals, shiny but lifeless materials incapable of growth and reproduction. As a result, Aragorn thinks of her not as a summer's day, when the earth is in full bloom, but as a cold spring morning, as "a daughter of kings," yes, but not as a mother of kings. Such descriptions prepare the reader for Éowyn's decision to disobey her uncle's orders and Aragorn's advice. Scorning her role as "dry-nurse" to the people of Rohan, she leaves those in her charge to fend for themselves and rides to war in Gondor (V.2.784).

Many modern critics view her, at least at this moment in the narrative, as a feminist role model, as a strong-willed and independent woman asserting her right to the lifestyle she desires, traditional gender roles be damned, but such readings can overlook just how bloodthirsty Éowyn becomes.¹⁰ When the "Shadow" that lies over her spirit finally departs, she tells Faramir that she will no longer "take joy only in the songs of slaying," a remarkable admission considering the novel's condemnation of senseless violence, usually associated only with Orcs, and its praise of pity and mercy (VI.5.965). When Éowyn disguises herself as Dernhelm and, abandoning her people, follows the king to war, she has not simply rejected a social role that does not appeal to her: she has endangered lives so that she may revel in slaughter. In the words of Melissa Smith, "she desires to find death, not to renew life" (204). Unfair though it is, the burden of reproduction, of nursing the next generation, rests on Éowyn's shoulders in *The Lord of the Rings*. In a novel comprised of men, there is, it seems, no one else. If she had embraced such a role, choosing the life of a "dry-nurse" over that of a shield-maiden, her actions would have suggested that there is hope for Middle-earth, that there is, despite Sauron's wars and machinations,

¹⁰ As the most developed female character in *The Lord of the Rings*, Éowyn has attracted, and continues to attract, considerable attention from literary scholars (Madsen; Linton; Filipczak; Larsen). Historically, critics have struggled with the question raised by her character and her character's sudden transformation: "Is she a role model for feminists, or merely a pitiful, flat character (easily described in one sentence), or is she a woefully misunderstood young woman who merely wishes to die in battle?" (Johnson 117).

the possibility of growth and renewal. It would have, in other words, undermined the bleak message conveyed elsewhere in the text by the absence of women. Much hinges on this one character, this lone representative of the female sex, and nothing reinforces the impression of barrenness that hangs over the novel like her shocking preference for war and death.

VISIONS OF FERTILITY: NIGHTMARE VERSUS NORMALITY

If, as I have suggested, Tolkien's approach to female characterization serves a rhetorical purpose in *The Lord of the Rings*, subtly but effectively suggesting a grim future for the already depopulated lands of Middle-earth, his depiction of Mordor and its evil denizens serves a related purpose: it creates an impression of unwholesome and shocking fertility. Here we find another of Tolkien's female characters, the spider Shelob, the great mother. Building on the work of Catharine Stimpson and Brenda Partridge, T.S. Miller and Elizabeth Miller have argued that Frodo and Sam's battle with Shelob "represents the nearest thing to a sex scene that we can find in Tolkien's corpus," his descriptions of her corporeal loathsomeness suggesting a sense of disgust with the "female body, and specifically women's sexuality, desiring, and aging" (134). Even those, however, who reject a Freudian interpretation of the fight in Shelob's lair cannot deny the sense of revulsion that her reproduction evokes. She has, for starters, birthed thousands and populated whole districts: "Far and wide her lesser broods, bastards of the miserable mates, her own offspring, that she slew, spread from glen to glen, from the Ephel Dúath to the eastern hills, to Dol Guldur and the fastnesses of Mirkwood" (*LotR* IV.9.723). Hiding within these nested phrases is a disturbing admission that Shelob's "miserable mates" are "her own offspring" that she later killed and presumably devoured. Without peer, she has been giving birth to generations of her own lovers, an act of self-replication so unnatural that it bears little resemblance to sexual reproduction as we know it. That this ancient creature has continued to reproduce in this way despite her age only makes her more disturbing. The antithesis of Tolkien's other female characters, who are all but childless, Shelob functions as "a maternal monster, a nightmare of unceasing reproduction" (Miller and Miller 140). Metaphorically, she has applied the logic of industrialization to childbirth, transforming herself into a sort of reproductive machine that generates offspring. Unless something changes, they will be the ones to inherit Middle-earth.

If the most memorably symbolic, Shelob is not the only monster in Tolkien's epic blessed, or cursed, with an unnatural fecundity. While Dwarves and Elves seem to be few in number, so few, in fact, that in the beginning of the novel Sam yearns to see an Elf—much as an American reader might yearn to see a grizzly bear or a humpback whale—Orcs are legion. They appear, almost

always, in enormous numbers, disorganized hordes that threaten to overwhelm any who resist them. A skilled fighter, such as Legolas or Gimli can kill dozens in a single battle, but more always appear, eventually swamping even the doughtiest warrior. When Aragorn, for instance, finds Boromir dying near Parth Galen, he sees that “many Orcs lay slain, piled all about him and at his feet” (*LotR* III.1.414). No Orc, by itself, can defeat Boromir, that symbol of manly strength and physical prowess, but he, in turn, cannot withstand the onslaught of so many. In the end, they do not so much defeat him—he dies clutching his sword—as they wear him down: “Aragorn saw that he was pierced with many black-feathered arrows; his sword was still in his hand, but it was broken near the hilt; his horn cloven in two was at his side” (III.1.413-4). What the Orcs do to Boromir they can also do to all of Middle-earth, which cannot hope, considering how depopulated it has become, to resist the threat their numbers pose.

Tolkien emphasizes this point in his descriptions of the Orcs, often comparing them to swarms of insects. At Amon Hen, for instance, while perched atop the Seat of Seeing, Frodo looks out over Middle-earth and has a vision of legions of Orcs pouring out of the ground: “The Misty Mountains were crawling like anthills: orcs were issuing out of a thousand holes” (II.10.400). At the Black Gate, Frodo encounters a similar sight, this time up close: “beneath the hills on either side the rock was bored into a hundred caves and maggot-holes; there a host of orcs lurked, ready at a signal to issue forth like black ants going to war” (IV.3.636). What have these Orcs, one wonders, been eating in the mountains? How can they live, and thrive, in rocky holes? Truly, they resemble ants more than humans, having no need, it seems, for houses, towns, farms, carts, boats, or roads. Twice, Tolkien calls them the “maggot-folk of Mordor” (IV.7.702, V.10.887), and the Orcs themselves, curiously enough, use a variation of this, often referring to other Orcs as “maggots” (III.3.449, III.3.452, III.3.454, VI.1.905). The word evokes a familiar, but sickening, image: a swarm of maggots crawling and writhing mindlessly over rotting flesh. A more nauseating image can hardly be imagined, its effectiveness stemming, in part, from the disturbing way that maggots seem to appear, quite suddenly and in vast numbers, out of nothing.

In much the same way, the fecundity of the Orcs is disquieting because it violates the natural laws that govern all other complex organisms. Female Orcs do not, as far as the reader knows, even exist, for no mention of them appears anywhere in the text, and yet in some way, which the novel leaves disturbingly vague, the Orcs have reproduced and multiplied.¹¹ More than once,

¹¹ In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien states that Melkor “by slow arts of cruelty” debased captured Elves, thus transforming them into Orcs (47). And yet, this raises as many questions as it

Tolkien hints at their shockingly unnatural, yet incredibly effective, means of reproduction. In the mines of Moria, Gandalf insists that he must rest "even if all the orcs ever spawned" are chasing him, a phrase later echoed by Sam in Cirith Ungol (II.5.327). While searching for Frodo, Sam becomes so desperate that he stops worrying about "Shagrat or Snaga or any other orc that was ever spawned" (VI.1.908). If taken literally, the word "spawned" implies that Orcs reproduce in much the same manner that most fish, amphibians, crustaceans, and mollusks do: that is, by fertilizing enormous quantities of eggs laid underwater. The similarity between these two statements indicates, however, that they are variations of an idiomatic phrase, and if so, Orcs only spawn metaphorically, the word suggesting vast numbers of offspring while simultaneously concealing an act of reproduction too alien and shocking to describe concretely. That these creatures, while outwardly so human that, in the dark, Frodo and Sam can infiltrate their ranks, reproduce in a biologically primitive way adds to the horror they evoke. Truly, they are "maggot-folk," a word that captures their dual nature. They are a folk, a people capable of speech and reason, that breeds much like the simplest animals and the foulest insects do. In this way, they provide the barren, depopulated world of Middle-earth with a way forward. To a land with few men and even fewer women, Sauron offers the Orcs as a solution, as a means of infinite, boundless growth, unmoored from resources and capable of populating even the infertile lands of Mordor. Those who accept it, like the wizened sorcerer Saruman, who lives alone in an isolated tower like a symbol of masculine infertility, can suddenly become the fathers of nations. How fitting it is that the great temptation in the novel, which Tolkien actually created for his earlier work, is a ring. To claim it is to become the bride of Sauron.

Thankfully, an alternative exists in the person of Aragorn, who provides Middle-earth with its Fisher King. Here Tolkien incorporates what Verlyn Flieger calls "sacral kingship," an ancient Celtic principle "whereby the health and fertility of the land are dependent on the coming of the rightful king" (133). Acting as the embodiment of human civilization, Aragorn must first heal himself before his lands can recover from the blight of infertility that lies over them. This process begins, of course, when elven smiths reforge his broken sword—a phallic symbol if ever there was one—at Rivendell, the home, quite fittingly, of the woman he yearns to marry. Once Aragorn assumes the actual kingship, the once-barren society that the reader has come to know immediately blossoms. As Karen Simpson Nikakis, who builds upon Flieger, points out, Aragorn's coronation "is mirrored powerfully in the literal and metaphorical

answers. Most importantly, how has Sauron created so many Orcs in the Third Age, a time when Elves have become rare? Presumably, Melkor's Orcs have reproduced—but how?

flowering of the landscape,” though I would argue that the resulting transformation affects the people of Middle-earth as much as it affects the land (89). All of a sudden, a narrative that, until this point, has focused almost exclusively on men and male companionship, undergoes a dramatic change, giving birth to new themes involving courtship, love, marriage, the possibility of sexual reproduction, and the domestic future that it promises. After so many years, plagued, the reader imagines, by sexual frustration, Aragorn finally weds Arwen, and even Éowyn, who so forcefully rejected the feminine role urged upon her in favor of a masculine death, transforms into someone new, her metamorphosis drawing attention to the return of fertility to Middle-earth. Note the passing of “her winter,” followed by her proclamation that, henceforth, she will “love all things that grow and are not barren” (*LotR* VI.5.965). Quite fittingly, she and Faramir leave Gondor for the despoiled lands of Ithilien, which they restore to its former loveliness. Sam, of course, finds Rosie Cotton, whose very name evokes images of blood-stained underwear and bedsheets and, by extension, menstruation and the tearing of the hymen. In time, the two will have many children, but the novel concludes with their young family sitting at the dinner table together. After housing bachelors for so long, Bag End has become a home for families once again.

CONCLUSION

Such a reading has implications for ecocriticism, scholars of which have found many of their most cherished themes explored in Tolkien’s work (Dickerson and Evans; Jeffers; Attebery; Sena and Vogel). His depiction of a massive continent rich in flora and fauna, but scarcely populated by humans and similar races, suggests a uniquely biocentric worldview, a vision of a more natural world *not* dominated by civilization. As Patrick Curry points out, “what is most striking about Tolkien’s world [. . .] is its profound feeling for the natural world: geography and geology, ecologies, flora and fauna, the seasons, weather, the night-sky, and the Moon in all its phases” (130). In the Anthropocene, Tolkien offers, or appears to offer, a way forward, an ecological morality that values other species for themselves and does not automatically rank humanity’s concerns above theirs. Both his Elves and his Ents could be, and to some extent already are, mascots for deep ecology, and yet Tolkien does not present this depopulated world as an ideal. Indeed, the implied sterility of Middle-earth’s Men, Elves, Dwarves, and Ents is nothing to celebrate, for it places the world at risk and opens the door to something far worse than overpopulation: the blight of Mordor. Middle-earth escapes that fate, but the ending, with its sudden blossoming of human fertility, undermines the environmental vision that surges through much of the narrative and which appeals so strongly to modern audiences. Readers, and viewers as well, thrill at the vast wildernesses

displayed in *The Lord of the Rings*, and for many, the idea that humanity, its growth unleashed by Aragorn's benevolent kingship, will soon dominate this land is not so much a happy ending, as a distressing thought. A sense of stewardship, it seems, lies at the heart of Tolkien's environmental vision, a belief—reflected in both the Elves and the Ents—that nature needs humanity's protection and, potentially, benefits from our presence, and though Tolkien expresses this view eloquently in his epic, readers today, living in a world of eight billion people, can hardly be blamed for being skeptical.

From a feminist perspective, the interpretation that this essay offers also fails to satisfy. That is, it explains, or attempts to explain, the notable absence of female characters in *The Lord of the Rings* as well as the significance of their sudden predominance at the very end, but it also suggests that, for Tolkien, these women are, first and foremost, symbols of fertility. Those that reject that role, as Éowyn does, he depicts as sick, as dysfunctional. They exist, it seems, to provide the male characters with sexual healing and to provide Middle-earth with children. It is not my intention, however, to defend or promote Tolkien's views on gender and sexuality, only to demonstrate how they resurface, again and again, in *The Lord of the Rings*, in the process shaping the reader's understanding of Middle-earth and the threat Sauron poses to it. The novel's female characters may not play the role that many modern readers, and filmmakers, would want them to play, but in an indirect way, they are central to the narrative. *The Lord of the Rings* is very much a book about men without women, but it does not praise or recommend such a life—far from it. One thinks of Frodo, who, more than all the other male characters, needs love, but never finds it. Aragorn and Faramir and Sam marry, and their physical and psychological wounds are healed, but Frodo remains apart, a relic of sterility in a now-bountiful world. Tolkien, it seems, cannot even imagine such a life for his protagonist, for Frodo, if he does not die, nevertheless passes away.

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