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

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

Abstract

A response to Dylan Henderson's article on "Women and Fertility in *The Lord of the Rings*" (#142), highlighting some of the problematic ecocritical and gender essentialist premises of his argument.

Additional Keywords

women; gender; ecocriticism; racism

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NOTES

A BLEAK, BARREN TAKE: A RESPONSE TO “WOMEN AND FERTILITY IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*”

CLARE MOORE AND LEAH HAGAN

OLIVIAN L. HENDERSON'S RECENT *MYTHLORE* ARTICLE, “‘A Bleak, Barren Land’: Women and Fertility in *The Lord of the Rings*” recapitulates the old—and, nearly 70 years after the initial critique was made on the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, tired—argument that there are no women in *The Lord of the Rings*. Henderson argues that this is because Tolkien intends the lack of women to signify the infertility of Middle-earth, both the land and the peoples. The few “sterile” women who do appear only strengthen the depiction of Middle-earth as infertile. Henderson is entitled to his bleak and barren interpretation, but we wish to call attention to several problematic aspects of his essay that have troubling repercussions for Tolkien studies: its misogyny, anti-environmentalism, racism, and queerphobia.

It has long been a problem within Tolkien studies that newer scholarship is ignored while continued attention is paid to critiques, arguments, and ideas that are not only outdated but have been developed, countered, or even laid to rest by other scholars. Michael Drouot and Hilary Wynne complained in 2000 that Tolkien critics repeated the same arguments and never read each other's work. Thomas Honegger mourned this same issue in 2016 in his “Review's Complaint,” calling such scholarship careless and sloppy. Henderson's essay is, sadly, yet another example of such careless scholarship. In building up the hype that “there are no women in *The Lord of the Rings*!,” Henderson cites Alfred Leo Duggan (1954), Marion Zimmer Bradley (1961 and problematic for other reasons; see Alison Flood's article in *The Guardian* for details—content warning for child abuse), Doris T. Myers (1971), Kenneth McLeish (1983), Brenda Partridge (1983), and Melanie Rawls (1984)—all critiques that are 40 years old. The two critiques Henderson does offer from the 21st century are Frederick and McBride (2001) and Hatcher (2007), which are still over a decade old. While the depth of Henderson's timeline may seem admirable, it is dramatically incomplete and highly problematic because the largest gap is work from recent years, especially considering how scholarship

on female characters in the legendarium has flourished following the publication of *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth* and following the expansion of Tolkien studies as a field, which has seen more women participating in Tolkien studies and more work published which utilizes feminist and gender theories (by scholars of all genders).

Henderson does cite many of the essays published or re-published in the 2015 volume *Perilous and Fair*, but how the citations are handled exemplifies another way in which his scholarship is careless. Other than mentioning these essays as if they are a checklist to get through before he can ignore them and proceed to his own argument, he fails to deeply engage with their arguments and at times seems to completely misunderstand or ignore their main points. On a most basic level, Henderson seems to define “feminist” as “women,” meaning pertaining to female characters or scholarship written by women, rather than its own multi-faceted theoretical framework. This assumption, which is never defended or supported, is evident in Henderson’s interpretation of Éowyn, whom Henderson holds up as an example of feminist theory and scholarship since scholars interpret Éowyn as a “strong-willed and independent woman asserting her right to the lifestyle she desires, traditional gender roles be damned” (98). Henderson describes Éowyn as bloodthirsty because she at one point in her life enjoys “songs of slaying” and abandons her people, and then he proceeds to blame the decline of Rohan solely on Éowyn because she rejects the “female” role of a nurse and caregiver, even though it is “unfair” that such blame must fall to her (98-99). What Henderson’s interpretation ignores, however, is that male warriors of the Rohirrim also delight in songs of slaying (“And then all the host of Rohan burst into song, and they sang as they slew,” *LotR* V.5.838), and that Théoden and Éomer “abandon” their people in the same way Éowyn does (as do Húrin, Finrod, and a number of other male leaders from the First, Second, and Third Ages). For Henderson, though, infertility and decline are Éowyn’s fault because, well, she is the woman who rejected, rather than embraced, her assigned gender role (98-99).

Henderson’s argument also lacks deeper engagement with feminist Tolkien scholarship. He fails to address the counterarguments that exist or to acknowledge that his argument relies on a very specific definition of gender that is far from universally accepted: patriarchal biological essentialism. Rather than supporting his own arguments by actually summarizing the arguments in feminist scholarship (as opposed to cherry-picking quotes or listing the publication in a note), addressing potential counterpoints, and acknowledging the limitations of his own argument, Henderson seems to simply conclude that *The Lord of the Rings* is not for women (103)—sorry, ladies!—and that Tolkien himself is the source of these views on gender and sexuality while Henderson is

merely the demonstrator who describes but does not defend or promote these views (103).

Henderson offers his ecocritical reading in much the same way as his gendered reading. He cites several ecological interpretations of Tolkien, such as Dickerson and Evans's book (2006) and Sofia Parrila's essay (2021), just two examples, but his own interpretation of the ecological dimension to his fertility reading is shallow, contradictory, and troublingly anthropomorphic. He claims Middle-earth is an empty landscape when he really means that the map is empty of human settlements (90), though he later acknowledges that Middle-earth is full of flora and fauna (102). Henderson seems troubled by the lack of peopled population, suggesting that in his view nature is valued not for itself and its own diversity but only as far as it is conquered and utilized by people, which is a far cry from contemporary ecocritical scholarship in and outside of Tolkien studies, and, indeed, from Tolkien's own opinions, as examined through this scholarship. Curry, Dickerson and Evans, Jeffers, and Parrila, for example, all build their varying arguments around understanding the relationships and power dynamics between Middle-earth's human and non-human peoples, and seriously explore Tolkien's deep, almost spiritual value of non-human nature. Humans are irrevocably part of and not separate from nature in Tolkien's life and fiction. It makes one wonder if Henderson fully read Parrila's essay or Jeffers's book. Henderson confusingly claims that modern readers (and perhaps ecocritical scholars?) do not fully grasp the proper understanding of Tolkien's environmental vision of stewardship. Dickerson and Evans, among others, notably offer an interpretation centered around Tolkien's vision of stewardship and mutually beneficial relationships, in contrast to Henderson's assertions. Henderson also confusingly characterizes readers of Tolkien as falling prey to the trap of Nature equals Good and People equals Bad and People do not equal Nature, which Jeffers herself points out is deeply reductive and overly simplistic, and to which she believes Tolkien actually offers an antidote with his depiction of Middle-earth (Jeffers 11). Henderson claims that Tolkien's vision of environmental stewardship only *seems* to be "an ecological morality that values other species for themselves and does not automatically rank humanity's concerns above theirs," a vision which indeed may be necessary for living in the Anthropocene but is in fact a vision of how a world without humans is sterile, nightmarish, and not an ideal to celebrate (102). This conclusion ultimately lacks support from, or indeed engagement with, existing scholarship. In fact, several recent works by Kristine Larsen (2023) and Erik Jampa Andersson (2023) engage with Tolkien's work through the dynamics of the Anthropocene and how Tolkien may offer a more eco-centric morality, suggesting that ecocritical perspectives from other scholars may be more grounded than Henderson wants to admit.

Recapitulating old arguments, cherry-picking from secondary sources, and deliberately mischaracterizing or ignoring existing scholarship is bad enough, but Henderson's arguments are problematic beyond their repetition and poor scholarship because they are harmful. First, Henderson's interpretation is harmful to women. He reduces the value of Tolkien's female characters entirely to reproduction with the implication that the only value of women in the primary world is also reproduction. He also uses alarming language to describe female characters: "insipid" (89), "frigid" (96, 98—twice!), "aesthetic artifact" (96), "statuary on display" (97), "psychologically sterile" (97), "sick" (103), and "dysfunctional" (103). He bemoans the lack of stereotypical female roles such as "plump widow" and "buxom daughter" (95). These terms are Henderson's interpretation of Tolkien's world and characters; Tolkien never uses these terms to describe his female characters. Henderson states that he does not intend to "defend or promote Tolkien's views on gender and sexuality" (103), but his interpretation of Tolkien proves far more misogynistic than Tolkien's narrative, a misogyny carried out by the language Henderson chooses to use.

The misogynistic language Henderson chooses for conveying his interpretation of the women in *The Lord of the Rings* highlights another alarming aspect of Henderson's article. While it is *his personal* interpretation that Tolkien's female characters are insipid, frigid, and only valuable for their fertility, Henderson offers this interpretation as *the only* interpretation, even though he cites numerous other interpretations in his literature review. Henderson equates his reading of women in *The Lord of the Rings* to the experience of every reader, whom Henderson assumes to be male: "the reader and *his* conception of Middle-earth" (89, our emphasis). Henderson's dictation of every reader's experience is evident in his phrasing throughout his article: "readers" encounter female characters not as individuals but as appendages to male characters (87), Rohan and Gondor loom large in the "reader's" mind (93), "readers" experience the hobbits' arrival in Bree the same way (94), the lack of women reinforces the "reader's" understanding of Middle-earth (103). This reader is also Tolkien himself: barren women are *Tolkien's* approach to characterization (99), women are first and foremost symbols of fertility *to Tolkien* (103). Not only does Henderson speak for every reader but for Tolkien as well.

We can hardly speak to the problematic and harmful nature of this approach to interpretation as eloquently as Tom Emanuel's excellent article that appears in the same issue of *Mythlore* as Henderson's, "'It is 'About' Nothing But Itself': Tolkienian Theology Beyond the Domination of the Author," so we direct everyone to Emanuel's essay, but we shall share a few of Emanuel's points: "It is the move from *a* valid interpretation to *the* valid interpretation with which I take issue" (40, original emphasis), Tolkien himself valued the freedom

of the reader to interpret according to her own experience and desires (44, 45), Tolkien “is not a univocal Author(ity) but instead a human being whose voice informs the dialogue of meaning without dominating the conversation” (47), and—perhaps most germane to this discussion—“the question for us, as Tolkien fans and scholars, is not whether Tolkien believed these things, but whether or not *we* do” (47, original emphasis). So, do we, readers, believe that women are valuable only if they successfully reproduce? Does Henderson believe that? Regardless of his own beliefs, however, Henderson should not position himself as Tolkien’s spokesperson and instead pay attention to the ramifications of his own interpretations.

Another alarming aspect of Henderson’s interpretation is the racist implication of his reading of the “fecundity” of the Orcs. Henderson argues that while the free peoples of Middle-earth—Elves, humans, Dwarves, even hobbits—are infertile, the Orcs are extremely fertile but contradicts his argument to this point because fertility is bad when it comes to the Orcs. Orc fertility is, in Henderson’s words, unnatural (99, 101). Many scholars and readers have noted the racist construction of the Orcs (see Charles W. Mills and Helen Young for examples), and a higher rate of fertility has long been erroneously associated with Black and brown women. This racist ideology still persists in some dimensions of society today (for example, the stereotypes of the “welfare queen” or “anchor babies”) and, at its worst, forms part of the central tenet of the false White supremacist belief known as the Great Replacement, a conspiracy theory that believes that the immigration of people of color into a country will “replace” White people and their position of power (National Immigration Forum). Great Replacement ideology has influenced violent actions, from the events in Charlottesville in 2017 to Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019 (see National Immigration Forum), hence the danger of it going unacknowledged in a peer-reviewed essay.

Henderson’s assumption that the fertility of Elves, humans, and hobbits (Ents, too, and maybe Dwarves?) is desirable, while the fertility of the Orcs is a sign of unnatural evil, just as the fertility of the white race (or white races) is desired while the fertility of a Black race (or any race of color) is feared and forms a potent, existential threat. Even if this is not the focus of Henderson’s argument, such a connection must at least be acknowledged if such an interpretation is to be taken seriously. A Ph.D. student at a university in the United States, publishing in a peer-reviewed journal, should have enough knowledge of his own country’s history to at least acknowledge the implications of his interpretation. (See also Moore’s response to a different article in *Mallorn* 64, “Concerning ‘Concerning Racism and Tolkien,’” for more about the importance of being educated about issues of race and racism as it pertains to

Tolkien scholarship, fandom, and community. It is long past time for Tolkien studies to be better about this.)

Henderson's argument also has queerphobic implications. He proposes that it is only when Sam, Rosie, and a child occupy Bag End that the house can be "a home for families once again" (102). This suggests that Bilbo and Frodo were not a family because they were not a heterosexual couple *with* children. In Henderson's reading, a childless heterosexual couple is as useless as a nontraditional family. Henderson's interpretation of "family" is one that excludes any and all kinds of queerness. He goes so far as to say that Frodo, "who, more than all the other male characters, needs love," never finds love (103)—which might be news to Sam Gamgee and a lot of readers. But, of course, Henderson specifically means romantic, heterosexual love that produces children, implying that anything short of that is not love. Or family. This response is hardly the place to offer a full counter-argument to this issue, so we defer to Mercury Natis' 2023 Oxonmoot presentation, "'And its Folks are Queerer': Queer Marginality and the Chosen Family Dynamics of the Bagginses of Bag-End."

Everyone—even Henderson—is entitled to her own interpretation of Tolkien's work, but these interpretations should never be framed as the only correct reading of Tolkien's texts or the one Tolkien intended to the exclusion of other interpretations. The entitlement of everyone to her own interpretation is also not a "get out of jail free" card for the harms inherent in certain readings or the harms caused by the way in which these readings are offered. Deliberately mischaracterizing and dismissing existing scholarship on Tolkien's value of nature and the role of women in his work while offering an interpretation that supports the exploitation and subjection of both to (white) men reinforces the harm long perpetuated under capitalist patriarchy. The reduction of women's value to successful reproduction is an ideology that has long diminished and subjugated real women, and it still reappears in modern societies in attempts to keep women subordinate to men. The reduction of non-human nature to worthlessness until utilized as extracted resources for humankind is an ideology that arguably is the source of the current climate crisis of the Anthropocene. To perpetuate these views even in the interpretation of a fictional text without care and sensitivity is hurtful and dangerous. To ignore the racist implications of "unnatural fertility" in Black-coded characters is also hurtful and dangerous. To suggest that only heterosexual couples with children can be a family is hurtful and dangerous. We doubt Henderson intended to be misogynistic, ecophobic, racist, or queerphobic, but ultimately such a generous view of his aims only points to a lack of awareness on his part, a lack of awareness no one can afford to have in 2024. We, as readers of Tolkien, as scholars and fans, as members of a community of diverse people and perspectives, must be better. We must be

sensitive to when our interpretations draw on racist ideology, denigrate queerness, and/or insult women. And our scholarship must be better. It is a shame that in 2024, Tolkien studies is still making the same mistakes Honegger complained about in 2016.

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TOLKIEN'S LÚTHIEN: FROM LIFE TO ART TO LIFE AS ART

VERLYN FLIEGER

LIKE OTHERS OF HIS GREAT TALES, the stories of Húrin and Túrin, Tolkien's story of Lúthien grew over time in both verse and prose, moving through various versions from a comic fairy tale with a child narrator reminiscent of Marie de France to a romance in rhyming couplets imitative of Chretien de Troyes. Christopher Tolkien gives an account of his father's development of the story of Lúthien in *Beren and Lúthien*, the third and final volume in his Great Tales series.

My intent here is less sweeping but more focused. I want to dig more narrowly but also more deeply into one aspect of the story: the singular manner in which Tolkien used, fused, and con-fused his real-life wife Edith with his invented character of Lúthien. "I never called Edith *Lúthien*," he wrote in a letter to his son Christopher, "but she was the source of the story that became [...] the chief part of the *Silmarillion*" (*Letters* 590, #340). More explicitly he stated unequivocally that "she was (and knew she was) my Lúthien" (*ibid.*). To his son Michael he described Edith as "the Lúthien [...] of my own personal romance" (*Letters* 585, #332). But while this carefully distinguishes the personal from the fictional, I hope to show that for Tolkien the two areas overlapped and influenced one another.

A caveat here about these very personal quotes: while Edith-as-Lúthien is by now a canonical part of the Tolkien mythos, it is well to remember that at the time Tolkien was writing to his sons (1971-72) this was not a widespread view. The names of Beren and Lúthien, still less the story, were only tangentially familiar to readers through references in *The Lord of the Rings* and its