‘I Am No Man’

*The Strength of Women in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Major Works*

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

Two of Tolkien’s major works – *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* – have been criticized for their lack of major female characters, as well as the stereotypical nature of those females present. This essay discusses how far from reality these assumptions are, and how the female characters present in Tolkien’s works are actually very independent, strong, and important to the central plots of each novel. Tolkien’s characters Lúthien, Galadriel, Arwen, Éowyn, and Shelob are good examples of strong females. It is important to keep in mind the background from which Tolkien drew his characters, such as old Germanic and Norse mythology, and Catholicism. If one takes into account these ancient ideas, as well as Tolkien’s personal background, his women actually demonstrate qualities of spiritual and physical power, self-determination, and wisdom.

Some aspects of the five characters discussed in this essay are the importance of their personal sacrifices to the fate of Middle-earth, the importance of fertility and healing in relation to Tolkien’s women, how masculinity and femininity are traits both men and women share simultaneously, and how flawless beauty does not necessitate a weak individual. In Tolkien’s world it is clear that power goes hand in hand with sacrifice, and those who sacrifice the most tend to be the strongest. Lúthien, Galadriel, Arwen, and Éowyn all make sacrifices for the good of Middle-earth, and therefore, they are all very potent individuals. Their involvement with fertilizing the earth as well as bearing children is essential to life in Middle-earth, and Tolkien emphasizes the importance of healing and fertility throughout his works. It is also clear that femininity is not the only characteristic Tolkien’s women bear, but instead they share a range of masculine traits as well. Feminine traits are also attributed to some of the most heroic men of Middle-earth, and Tolkien makes it clear that only by embracing both ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ qualities can one be a truly strong individual.
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Introduction

If you look closely there are many female characters throughout J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. It is true that there are not as many major female characters in Tolkien’s works as there are men. Nonetheless, aside from the less important female characters, the four major females in *The Lord of the Rings*, and Lúthien in *The Silmarillion*, are important to the stories. Some critics claim (Neville 101, Partridge, Ringel 165) that, not only did Tolkien use women sparingly, but he placed them in traditionally stereotypical female roles. These same critics even go as far as to say that Tolkien was a misogynist. Others argue (Donovan 109) that Tolkien’s female characters embody all that is morally good, heroic, and noble in the world, as well as signifying honorable leadership. Tolkien’s background may have something to do with how critics view his demeanor towards women. Tolkien’s personal history has been thoroughly analyzed by many critics. His work, therefore, has also been analyzed with regard to how these critics believed he thought of women. It was not uncommon for men like Tolkien to see women as society saw them, for Britain had a very specific role for women to play in the early 1900s, like wife, mother, seamstress, etc. (Mazurana, Raven-Roberts, and Parpart 2). Despite societal influences Tolkien saw something more in women than the stereotypical mother and housewife: he saw strength.

The idea of power in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is not only about physical strength, and the ability to rule over others, although there is plenty of that in the story. Power is also portrayed in a much deeper form: the power within, and the ability to sacrifice oneself for the greater good. It is this latter type of power which Tolkien found superior. Beauty and grace can be considered a powerful thing. Some critics feel that focusing on a woman’s beauty and graciousness takes away from other stronger qualities she might possess, sometimes submitting her to religious idolization. Other analysts (Partridge) give great meaning to alleged sexual innuendo concerning females in Tolkien’s works, and use these analyses to condemn Tolkien as a misogynist. With special focus on Lúthien, Galadriel, Arwen, Éowyn and Shelob, five of the most significant female characters in Tolkien’s works, this paper will reveal how Tolkien made his female characters stronger, wiser, more powerful, and more important to the central plot of the story than many believe them to be.
Some critics (Partridge 183, Ringel 165) claim that the pure lack of female characters in Tolkien’s works made him a sexist or a misogynist. In *The Silmarillion*, however, there are seven male Valar and seven female Valar who aid in the creation of Arda (i.e. Middle-earth). There are also several females whose actions help steer the fate of the Silmarils (Lúthien, Elwing, and the spider Ungoliant). Some of the better known of Tolkien’s women come from *The Lord of the Rings*. Galadriel and Arwen are the two main elvish women, and Éowyn is the only human heroine in the story. There are also several other female characters including Shelob, Goldberry, Rosie, Lobelia, and the Entwives (only mentioned). If one’s focus is on *The Lord of the Rings* alone, it is true that there are not as many female characters as men, but the fact that the women are fewer helps draw attention to each woman’s uniqueness and importance (Donovan 107).

Some argue (Partridge) that ‘being a product of one’s time’ is not a legitimate reason to think the way we think. The problem with that argument, however, is that we are all products of our time, and there is not much we can do about that. Others feel that Tolkien was not as harsh on the women of Middle-earth as the British school systems were on women during the 1970s (Ringel 166). This comparison, however, does not help to improve the view future readers may have on Tolkien and his female characters. It is necessary to review his personal background, as well as his academic background in order to understand where his female characters came from. Only then can we make assumptions about their strengths and weaknesses.

During Tolkien’s college years he associated mainly with men, most likely because not many women attended university at that time. There was a strong sense of male camaraderie as a result of the all-male schools (Partridge 179), and further established because of the all-male British Army in which Tolkien served some time during World War One. Another source of Tolkien’s strong sense of male camaraderie came from his participation in the literary discussion group called the Inklings. Some of the members of the Inklings have been criticized for their ‘blatant’ sexual discrimination towards women, including C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien (Partridge 180). Lewis and Tolkien were good friends for some time, but after Lewis developed a close relationship with Charles Williams, another member of the Inklings, Tolkien and Lewis had a falling out. Lewis was particularly criticized for some of his remarks on women (Partridge 180), often resenting them for their general interference in intellectual discussion and friendship between men. It was not
uncommon for men to think of women as intellectually inferior at this time since many women lacked extensive education. Tolkien agreed that it did not seem that women could go as far as men intellectually, but that did not discourage him from treating his female students equally to their male counterparts, and aiding them in their education (Carpenter 169). Edith was not an intellectual, and their marriage was far from perfect, but it is clear they had a deep love and respect for one another. According to Tolkien himself his relationship with his wife Edith was a loving one. He explains in a letter to his son Christopher that Edith knew how much she meant to him (Tolkien, Letters 420). Carpenter also explains that Tolkien was “capable of sympathizing with the plight of a clever woman who had been trapped by marriage into leading an intellectually empty life” (169).

Despite the obvious misrepresentations of women in British society during Tolkien’s life (which unfortunately continue to this day) Tolkien attributed a great amount of strength to the women of Middle-earth. Many of Tolkien’s female characters are derived from the strong women of Old Norse and Germanic literature, which helped shape his own opinion of women. Tolkien also had a great amount of respect for his wife who was a muse for much of his work (West 259). West states that “Tolkien is far from being a feminist author, [but] his women characters are stronger than they are often made out to be” (265). Despite Tolkien’s suspected beliefs about a woman’s intellect, he presented Galadriel and Arwen with an enormous amount of wisdom and intelligence. These are not the only strong qualities that Tolkien attributed to his women. He gave Éowyn a tremendous amount of physical strength for someone so slender and small, as well as extending qualities of courage, sacrifice, and power to his female characters. As Donovan explains; “Tolkien’s Galadriel, Shelob, Éowyn and Arwen are characters whose words and actions in The Lord of the Rings provide a … polyphony of motives that shift the plot’s course of events as well as the reader’s expectations of an appropriate outcome” (110). Bravery and brawn are strong traits, but they are merely strong in the traditional sense. Tolkien tended to have other opinions of what could be considered strength.
Strong Characteristics

Wisdom

There are not many who would disagree that wisdom is a strong quality to have. Tolkien certainly felt that wisdom was something to be proud of. The wizards of Middle-earth tend to be very wise, as well as the Elves, and there is no Elf in *The Lord of the Rings* wiser than Galadriel. It is Galadriel, for instance, who forms the idea of creating a council in which to discuss the fate of the One Ring (Madill 465). She, and not Celeborn, is the one who realizes that Gandalf has fallen when the fellowship arrive in Lórien. Also, when Celeborn speaks to Gimli harshly, Galadriel amends this, showing empathy and forgiveness (Enright 99).

Galadriel is also the one who “mentally tests each member of the Fellowship, offering him a choice between the danger that lies ahead and something else that he greatly desires” (Enright 99). The wisdom of Galadriel is very much equal to that of Gandalf and Elrond (Madill 465), which makes her a very strong character. Galadriel even comes off as being more proactive than Elrond, as she actively defends Lothlórien against orcs, and Sauron himself. The vivid descriptions of Galadriel’s radiant eyes and hair also “serve to emphasize the brilliance inherent to Galadriel’s character as reflective of her enhanced physical and moral state” (Donovan 113). Such physical descriptions are typical for valkyrie figures, and many of Galadriel’s descriptions reflect such an image, which help to elucidate just how wise and powerful she is. Galadriel is not merely wise, but she has prophetic talents. She can look into the minds of those she meets, and can sometimes see into the future via her Mirror.

Another wise figure in the novel is Arwen, although she does not appear as often as one might like. She is very intuitive, and is, for instance, the first to notice that Frodo is in a state of unrest (Enright 98). She freely offers Frodo her jeweled necklace to comfort and heal him and her passage west if he still feels uneasy when it is time to sail (Tolkien, *Return* 304). The wisdom that Galadriel and Arwen display comes from their innate ability for independent thought.

Independence

Tolkien’s women are very independent, and exert their independence in spite of those who would dominate them. Lúthien, for instance, is locked up in the house of Hírilmorn and forbidden by her father to go and help Beren after he is captured. Despite her father’s
command, Lúthien defies him and escapes (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 202). Lúthien lets her hair down from her prison in Hírilorn much as Repunzel did from her tower, but instead of doing so in order for her prince to come to her rescue it is so that Lúthien may rescue Beren (West 263). Later on, it is Beren who does not want Lúthien to go with him on his second attempt to retrieve the Silmaril, but again she ignores the orders of men, and tells him that no matter what path he chooses “…I shall go with you, and our doom shall be alike” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 208). Arwen’s tale is similar to Lúthien’s. Her father, Elrond, wishes her to venture to the West along with her kin, but she will not leave Aragorn (Tolkien, *Return* 419). Her decision to stay is, of course, immensely important to the future of Middle-earth.

Éowyn is quite autonomous, despite the will of others to talk down to her, and tell her what to do (Neville 102). Not only is she a woman, but she is fairly young. Théoden loves her, of course, but his attempts to protect her also hold her down. Théoden does choose Éowyn to lead the people in his stead while the men are at war, but he makes it clear that he feels her place is not in battle. Éowyn disguises herself as Dernhelm, a male warrior, in order to fight, but since “her training verifies that in the culture it is acceptable that women engage in battle” it is most likely that she disguises herself in order to hide her personal identity from Théoden (Donovan 123). Aragorn also tends to speak to Éowyn as if she were a child. After all, he is eighty-seven years old, while she is probably not much older than thirty. Aragorn forbids her from going with him through the Paths of the Dead, and generally speaks condescendingly to her (Tolkien, *Return* 54-5). However, she lets neither Théoden nor Aragorn keep her down. When Aragorn is explaining where he feels her place is, she retorts:

“All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death” (Tolkien, *Return* 55).

These are powerful words, and Tolkien made it clear that women do not have to do as men command them. Eventually, Éowyn rides out to battle anyway, and becomes an honorable hero.

Galadriel is quite independent, although she and Celeborn are partners. No one speaks down to Galadriel, as she is one of the most powerful characters in *The Lord of the Rings* of either gender (Enright 99). Not only is she older and wiser than most who come across her, but she also has great magic. With independence, however, come difficult decisions, and sometimes these strong women are forced to choose between ultimate power and humility.
Power and Sacrifice

Power comes in many different forms, and it is each individual’s definition that molds one’s opinion on what it is to be powerful. Some believe that power derives from physical strength, or the ability to dominate others. Enright explains that “the stereotypical and purely masculine kind of power, as represented by Boromir for instance, is shown to be weaker morally and spiritually than its non-traditional counterparts” (93). Throughout The Silmarillion and The Lord of the Rings it is the strength that comes from within that conquers evil, not brute force. Not to take away from the obvious force of the armies of Gondor, Rohan and the Elves, but spirituality, love, and sacrifice are examples of the inner strength that aid in the liberation of Middle-earth. Lúthien, Galadriel, Arwen, and Éowyn are all examples of how personal sacrifice for the good of others is essential to the salvation of Middle-earth. Tolkien may have drawn inspiration from religious works on the power of sacrifice, as Enright points out: “This paradoxical power through the abdication of power echoes the kenosis\(^1\) of Jesus, as described by St. Paul” (97).

Along with Gandalf, Galadriel is one of the characters in the book to whom Frodo freely offers the Ring. Galadriel exhibits an enormous amount of restraint, and eventually decides to forfeit this potential supremacy, and continue her ‘regular’ life (Enright 100). This is a good example of the power of Galadriel, and her ability to resist the force of the Ring, while men have been the weaker in dealing with the Ring’s power (e.g. Boromir, Denethor, Witch-king of Angmar, etc.). This ‘power through the abdication of power’ is not only something Lúthien, Arwen, Galadriel, and Éowyn accomplish, but also Faramir, Frodo, Sam, and Gandalf give up the power of the Ring for the greater good. Their strength and power is in their humility and sacrifice.

Galadriel’s struggle with power is also echoed in her mental battle with Sauron himself, which she explains to Frodo in The Fellowship of the Ring:

“Do not be afraid. But do not think that only by singing amid the trees, nor even by the slender arrows of elven-bows, is this land of Lothlórien maintained and defended against its Enemy. I say to you, Frodo, that even as I speak to you, I perceive the Dark Lord and know his mind, or all of his mind that concerns the Elves. And he gropes ever to see me and my thought. But still the door is closed!” (479).

\(^1\) From the Greek word for emptiness. “Christ’s voluntary giving up of attributes of divinity in taking human flesh and suffering crucifixion” (New Lexicon Webster’s 537).
This is a potent example of Galadriel’s inner battle with Sauron, and her ability to repel him from penetrating her thoughts. That a mere Elf can have such control over a Maia is impressive, and the fact that it is a woman is just icing on the cake. Galadriel’s ring, Nenya, is suitably made of Adamant, and is symbolic of her strength (Enright 100). Adamant, as defined by the The New Lexicon Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language, is “a substance of uttermost hardness, unyielding” (9). Samwise also describes how he views Galadriel’s power in The Two Towers as such:

“But perhaps you could call her perilous, because she’s so strong in herself. You, you could dash yourself to pieces on her, like a ship on a rock; or drown yourself, like a hobbit in a river. But neither rock nor river would be to blame” (357).

Samwise’s description shows the power of Galadriel while also explaining that her power is not synonymous with evil.

The story of Beren and Lúthien is one known to all Elves and some Men of Middle-earth. Lúthien is given a choice whether to live alone in peace; and without grief, or to go back to Middle-earth with Beren and live as a mortal. Lúthien’s personal sacrifice of her immortality in order to be with Beren is an essential part of the story since it is the reason that many future characters come to exist. Elrond, Aragorn, and Arwen are all descendants of Lúthien. If not for Lúthien’s sacrifice they would not exist, and Middle-earth would not have been salvaged by these fine and brave Elves and Men (Tolkien, Silmarillion 220-1).

Arwen’s sacrifice is of a similar kind, and is done mainly out of love. Her part, however, is extremely important, as she symbolizes the end of the Elves in Middle-earth. Donovan states that what Arwen “gives up of her own volition in order to help initiate the coming of the New Age remains as important in the reader’s mind as what she has gained” (129). Her sacrifice is personal, but also embodies the sacrifice that all Elves and Dwarves made so as to bring order back to Middle-earth (Enright 98). Arwen is the least proactive woman of the five that are examined in this essay. Without her inner strength, however, the fate of Aragorn, and Middle-earth, would have been in jeopardy. Not only does she sacrifice her jewel and her passage to the West for Frodo, but she sacrifices her immortality for the love of Aragorn. Sacrificing one’s own immortality, whether for love or otherwise, cannot be considered weak, but instead, shows just as much strength as someone who sacrifices their life in war for their friends, love, or the freedom of Middle-earth.
Speaking of fighting for love of the people of Middle-earth, Êowyn also sacrifices a piece of herself in order to gain something more profound than power: peace. Peace was something Êowyn was not able to attain until the very end of her story as she sacrificed much of her younger days attending to her afflicted uncle, King Théoden. As Donovan explains: “Êowyn sacrificed her own self-esteem and dreams of a fulfilling future in order to tend the ailing Théoden” (126). However, through her sacrifice she was able to help revive Théoden to his kingly self, further enabling him to defend the people of Rohan. After being relieved of taking care of Théoden, Lady Êowyn proves herself as a brave warrior, and eventually decides to give up her sword for love and tranquility. Enright points out that some readers might view this as a backwards step into a typical female role, but “her experience of power must deepen through renunciation of it” (104-5). In Tolkien’s world, sacrifice is the ultimate demonstration of strength, and no man sacrifices as much as the handsome women of Middle-earth do.

Beauty vs. Beast

Beauty is a common characteristic amongst the women of Middle-earth. Lúthien, Galadriel, Arwen, and Êowyn are all beautiful, with gorgeous hair and clear skin. Their eyes are also often described as being gripping. They hold a certain power over the men who look into these mesmerizing eyes. Tolkien did seem to deal out a lot of beauty and purity to his female characters, which, along with inspiration from old mythology, is very much influenced by Tolkien’s religious background (Tolkien, Letters 172). In Letters, Tolkien states that “The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision” (172). Partridge feels that, with regard to his female characters, Tolkien used certain religious symbolism in a demeaning way (191).

One of the most over-analyzed characters in The Lord of the Rings is Shelob, the giant spider. Partridge, amongst others, has tried to use Shelob as the ‘clear sign’ that Tolkien was a misogynist. Both Shelob and her lair have been criticized for embodying some evil, sexual undertones. One of the main focus points that Partridge discusses is Shelob’s lair and its apparent similarity to the female sexual organs. According to Partridge, Shelob’s cave symbolizes the womb; the cobwebs are the pubic hairs (189). Frodo’s penetration of Shelob’s cave is obviously misconstrued as some sort of intercourse, and Frodo’s sword the symbolism of his inadequate manhood (Partridge 189).
Spiders are quite soft and squishy, perhaps not unlike female genitals, but that does not mean Tolkien meant it that way. These crude analyses undermine Shelob’s strength by sexualizing her. None of the other female characters in Tolkien’s works are sexualized in this way. Yes, they are fair, and perhaps desirable, but no critic has found reason to analyze them in this manner as they have Shelob. It is very likely that Shelob is also in part a product of inspiration from works such as *Beowulf*, and other Old English and Norse literature (Donovan 118-9). Instead of glorifying all women as beautiful and saintly, as Tolkien somewhat did with Lúthien, Galadriel, and Arwen, he made females equal to males by stating that both sexes could have qualities of good and evil.

It is easy to imagine that a giant, ancient, ravenous spider is quite large and bloated, as Tolkien described it. Tolkien, however, did not have an aversion to spiders, and stated that, “I usually rescue those whom I find in the bath!” (Tolkien, Letters 217). Shelob is an evil spider, one of the few evil female characters in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. The amount of evil male characters in both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* is larger as they contain figures such as Melkor, Morgoth, Sauron, Saruman, and Denethor. We have already established that both Morgoth and Sauron can be temporarily disarmed by ‘singing at them’, and Sauron can be defeated by destroying his Ring. But Shelob is not so readily defeated. Her skin is so thick, thicker than a dragon’s, that the only weakness she has is her eyes (Tolkien, Two 421). This contrasts with the eyes of the other females, which tend to be more mesmerizing to those who look into them. These descriptions of Shelob are the only ‘bad’ descriptions of a female in *The Lord of the Rings*, and say more about what Tolkien thought of evil than what he thought of women.

Along with her religious analysis of Shelob’s character, Partridge also uses religious symbolism to refer to Galadriel and Goldberry. Galadriel is at the other end of the spectrum of females in religion, as she is more of a goddess-like figure or some version of the Virgin Mary, in Partridge’s opinion (193-4). Some of the women, such as Galadriel, Arwen, and Goldberry are described as being quite perfect, and even saint-like. However, one might argue that Tolkien’s stories are fantastical, and not only are some of the women goddess-like, but the men are heroes who accomplish feats that are humanly impossible. These figures are not supposed to be reflections of real people as Neville excellently points out: “As we live our modern lives, we may choose to feel patronized by Tolkien’s women, but unless we can claim to be a Beowulf or Aragorn (a route not open to normal men, either), Tolkien’s message may not be so disempowering as has been thought” (110). Along with religious influences, Tolkien also drew some of his inspiration from the strong valkyries of Germanic mythology. They
were often described as being bright and beautiful (Donovan 111). These valkyries were handsome and high ranking, and often an important supporting character to the ‘hero’ of the story.

There are some questions that arise in relation to why wickedness in women must necessarily coincide with ugliness. All the ‘good’ women in The Silmarillion and The Lord of the Rings are beautiful, but Shelob, Ungoliant, and Lobelia Sackville-Baggins are ugly. Of course, most of the evil male characters are ugly as well, even monstrous, but it is not as straight-forward as with the women. Sauron is capable of seeming pleasant in order to ensnare his victims (Tolkien, Silmarillion 324), and Aragorn at first looks foul although he is good-hearted (Tolkien, Fellowship 226). With the women, however, it is mostly either good and beautiful or evil and ugly. One of the reasons this might be is the effects of Tolkien’s religious background. As he states, his work is undoubtedly influenced by his religion, and we are able to see this a little in Shelob. Partridge does make a good point in relation to religious symbolism in Shelob, and how it is possible that Tolkien’s inspiration for Shelob might have come from religious ideas of female sexuality, such as a succubus or an evil temptress (191).

It is true that it does not help that there is no female character that is both foul-looking and good-hearted, such as Aragorn, but as was mentioned above, certain stereotypes are perhaps unavoidable due to personal background. Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, however, is an interesting character as she is at first seen as a rather mean-spirited old woman, who wishes only to obtain some treasure (mainly Bag-End). After Bilbo and Frodo have left the Shire she does obtain Bag-End, although her experiences with Saruman’s men, and the popularity she gains at the end of The Return of the King changes her, and she gives Frodo back Bag-End. She then dies a year later, and leaves all her money to Frodo (Tolkien, Return 365). Lobelia is the only ‘crone’ in either The Silmarillion or The Lord of the Rings who, in the end, changes her ways for the better. In a way she is like Aragorn in the sense that she looks foul but is kind, although she is not kind until the very end of her life.
Women and Men

Femininity and Masculinity

Many people believe that men are the ‘stronger’ sex, and therefore, that masculine traits produce a strong character. In literature, the stereotypical woman is often described as beautiful, gracious, caring, giving, and other ‘typically’ feminine traits. The common characteristic of ‘enchanting beauty’, which causes men to fall head over heels, can be a powerful gift. Lúthien, Galadriel, Arwen, and Éowyn are all described at some point as being fair women, as well as holding some enchanting power over those who are in the presence of their beauty. This powerful trait is not solely attributed to the women in Tolkien’s works. Celeborn is also spoken of as beautiful (Tolkien, Fellowship 465), as well as Finrod (Tolkien, Silmarillion 204). Some critics nevertheless feel that the women of Middle-earth are too feminine (Ringel 165). There are, however, varied descriptions of the main female characters. Some are solely described with feminine traits, while others share a blend of masculine and feminine characteristics. Galadriel, Éowyn, Arwen, and Shelob are all, at some point, presented with traditionally masculine characteristics.

Galadriel and Celeborn are first introduced in The Fellowship of the Ring as equally tall, grave, and beautiful (465). They are equally attributed two traditionally masculine traits (tall and grave), as well as a traditionally feminine trait (beautiful). On the same page, their eyes are also both described as keen and profound, accrediting wisdom to both Celeborn and Galadriel. Madill explains that such descriptions “…suggest that both the male and female character are equal in status and that they both admirably share masculine and feminine qualities” (4). In The Fellowship of the Ring Galadriel is further described as having a voice deeper than most women (466), as well as being wise and fearless (480). When Frodo offers the Ring to Galadriel she momentarily transforms into a “terrible and worshipful” figure, and is “tall beyond measurement” (Tolkien, Fellowship 480). Her power is renowned amongst the Men of Middle-earth, and Aragorn must explain to the fellowship that although she may be powerful, she is not evil (Tolkien, Fellowship 470). Samwise describes Galadriel as “strong in herself,” and explains how anyone who thinks her a threat will find themselves threatened, although he knows she is not dangerous (Tolkien, Two 357). Galadriel may be beautiful, but these descriptions portray a powerful and wise being beyond any mortal man.

Éowyn is likewise given some masculine descriptions. She is often described as fair, and her hair is also complemented for its golden beauty. However, directly after she is spoken
of as fair she is also said to be strong, and “stern as steel” (Tolkien, Two 140). Háma, King Théoden’s right hand man, describes Éowyn as “fearless and high-hearted” when suggesting to the King that she should lead the people while the King is away (Tolkien, Two 151). Throughout The Return of the King there are many descriptions of Éowyn that can be interpreted as generally masculine terms, such as: stern, proud, hard, courageous, valiant, and high (as in regal). These are not the descriptions of a stereotypical woman, but of a woman who has won renown amongst her kin, and respect from the men around her. It is also these qualities that Faramir falls in love with, not merely her beauty (Donovan 126).

Graveness is a quality that Arwen, Galadriel, and Éowyn share. Other than being often quite grave, Arwen does not bear many masculine qualities. Arwen and Lúthien are the ‘beauties’ of Middle-earth. Shelob, however, is far from being beautiful. Shelob is dark and evil, but great (Tolkien, Two 415). She too is fearless as Éowyn, although in a different way, as she is in league with Sauron (Tolkien, Two 416). Shelob’s skin is also thicker and stronger than a dragon’s, leaving her eyes as her only weakness (Tolkien, Two 421).

Femininity and masculinity are not always so cut and dry. Many of the characters from Tolkien’s works have a mixture of traditionally feminine and masculine characteristics. Madill asks if it is even possible for one character to embody only masculine or only feminine qualities, or whether they do not almost always intertwine in some way (6). Tolkien does not only accredit feminine qualities to his women, but also to his men. Celeborn, Faramir, Finrod, etc. all have some qualities which could be interpreted as feminine. That does not mean we should think less of them as strong male figures. In fact, Tolkien believed that if any of his characters resembled him it was Faramir, with the exception of lacking Faramir’s courage (Tolkien, Letters 232). Tolkien, therefore, associated himself with a character bearing qualities that some may think traditionally feminine, such as gracious and gentle (Tolkien, Return 91). But being gentle in some situations does not mean one cannot be strong in others, as Tolkien illustrated through some of his female characters.

Healers and Warriors

Much of Tolkien’s inspiration came from a wide range of old mythology, including the epic poem Beowulf, which means that the frame in which female roles are set can be an ancient one (Donovan 107). Elshtain puts it this way: “We in the West are the heirs of a tradition that assumes an affinity between women and peace, between men and war, a tradition that consists of culturally constructed and transmitted myths and memories” (3). Although it may not be
fair to continue to place women in passive roles in literature, it cannot be denied that history has unfairly placed women into these roles for many years.

Women in western society have only recently begun to serve as soldiers in war. Women in the early 1900s in Britain were homemakers, worked as clothing manufacturers or secretaries, and during World War One they worked mainly as nurses. Women were also able to work a number of other jobs during WWI and WWII such as cooks, clerks, telegraphists, etc. (*Women at War*). British women were not permitted to serve in combat alongside men until 1990, long after Tolkien was deceased.

*The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1954-1955, during a time when women in the British military did not participate in battle, and yet Tolkien has a human woman participating in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. The fact that Éowyn is often described as wearing armor and a carrying a sword in Tolkien’s text shows how important her martial aptitude is to her character (Donovan 121). Éowyn is a woman born of kings, and is niece to King Théoden of Rohan. Her story is sad, as she watches her uncle succumb to the evils of Saruman. She is small and fair, but courageous and strong. She can wield a sword, and is one of the most important figures in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. Éowyn is the only one in the battle capable of killing the Witch-king of Angmar, for she is not a man, but a woman. One might argue that Éowyn’s participation in one of the most glorious battles of Middle-earth is a large step forward in the literary history of women in war. Neville feels that “Tolkien has been radically modern in depicting a woman who dares to do what would have been unthinkable in the culture upon which he based the Rohirrim” (102). Hypothetically, Éowyn is paving the way for other women of Middle-earth to become soldiers and heroic figures themselves, and to show their quality. In this sense, Tolkien is somewhat ahead of his time in western feminist thinking.

Éowyn decides to marry in the end, and abandons soldiering to become a healer and gardener. Those who say that this is out of character are not wrong. These actions are a bit unlike Éowyn, and her ending could have been written more convincingly. There is, however, nothing wrong with such an ending. Those who criticize this ending (Partridge) tend to make it seem like a bad thing that she becomes a healer by calling it a job typical of women. To diminish the role of healer and gardener in this way by referring to it as a typical ‘woman’s job’ is not a strong argument against Tolkien and his lack of respect for women. Those who have studied Tolkien are aware that he placed a high value on both healing and gardening!

Éowyn is not the only warrior/healer. Aragorn is a great warrior, and the future King, but he is also a healer. In *The Return of the King* the legend goes; “The hands of the king are
the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known” (157). The fact that Aragorn is a healer is how the people know that he is the true King of Gondor. Tolkien obviously found this skill an important quality, and he graced many of his characters with such a quality (e.g. Aragorn, Éowyn, Goldberry, Elrond, Galadriel). In fact, one of the greatest healers in *The Lord of the Rings* is Elrond. Elrond is, for instance, the only one capable of healing Frodo’s Morgul blade wound (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 290). Healing and gardening are important themes throughout Tolkien’s novels, and he clearly respects any who are skilled in such arts. Madill states that becoming a healer is only a step backwards for Éowyn “…if we, as readers, do not value healing, loving, and nurturing…” (5). If being a fighter and a killer are traits that the readers of Tolkien’s works deem greater than healing and cultivation, then Éowyn’s renunciation of her sword will be disappointing.

There are no other women in *The Lord of the Rings* who take up a shield and sword and do battle. Lúthien, however, is some breed of warrior/healer as well. She never uses physical strength to fight her adversaries, but instead, she uses magic. Lúthien is not a mere Elf, but the daughter of Melian, a Maia, which makes her a very powerful Elf (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 22, 193). Her skills include casting a magic cloak before the eyes of her enemies to make them fall asleep, and the magic of her voice, which is her most powerful asset. The power of song and music is evident throughout *The Silmarillion*, and can clearly be seen right from the beginning with ‘The Music of the Ainur’ which describes how Arda was created with music alone. It is also acknowledged that Tolkien borrowed the idea of singing as a powerful art from the *Kalevala*\(^2\). In *The Silmarillion* King Finrod Felagund, a Noldorin Elf, sings in contest with Sauron (Tolkien 200). Singing, therefore, is perceived as a great power to the people and creatures of Middle-earth, and is certainly more powerful than a sword. Lúthien also sings in order to devastate the fortress of Sauron, and save Beren.

Lúthien saves Beren from peril a few times. Beren is sent to retrieve a Silmaril from Morgoth’s crown, but is captured. After Sauron imprisons Beren and his companion Finrod, Lúthien and Huan, a hound, come to their rescue. Lúthien casts her cloak over Sauron’s eyes, and Sauron yields to the power of Lúthien. She is then able to retrieve Beren from his prison (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 206). West asserts that Lúthien “does far more to achieve the quest of the Silmaril than does Beren, even urging him on when he is ready to abandon it rather than put her at risk” (265). Despite being a gentleman, and wanting to spare Lúthien from harm, it is Beren who is mortally wounded twice, and both times it is Lúthien that heals him. The first

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\(^2\) *The Kalevala* is a Finnish epic consisting of folk poems that emphasize the power of song (West 263).
time he is pierced with an arrow, and the second his hand is bitten off by the venomous Carcaroth, and Lúthien sucks out the poison (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 209, 214). Beren is a mere human, and although brave, he is mortal and is easily defeated by Sauron and Morgoth. There is no way that Beren could have accomplished any of his quests without Lúthien’s help. This is a very potent example of the strength that Tolkien attributes to his female characters. After saving Beren several times, Lúthien is finally able to be with her love, and through their love they give birth to the future of Middle-earth.

**Fertility**

As many Tolkien-fans might know, there were few things he loved more than nature (Tolkien, *Letters* 213). In one scene in *The Two Towers*, where Faramir is addressing Samwise and Frodo, Tolkien uses Faramir’s voice in order to punctuate his own love and respect for those who enjoy nature; “your land must be a realm of peace and content, and there must gardeners be in high honour” (359). As was mentioned above, Éowyn becomes a gardener after the War of the Ring has ended. Éowyn is not the only one to become a gardener after the war. Samwise also settles down, and does some rather dazzling gardening with the seeds Galadriel gave him. Fertility is something that Tolkien found immensely important, and integrated it into his work. Not only does he portray the importance of fertility to Middle-earth through Galadriel and her preservation of Lothlórien, but also in the relationships formed between his male and female characters.

There are several marriages that take place at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance those of Aragorn and Arwen, Samwise and Rosie, and Éowyn and Faramir. These matches are, of course, important to the continuation of men, hobbits, and a few Half-elvish in Middle-earth. Donovan explains that “in heroic German poetry, some valkyrie women … form compelling relationships with male heroes that alter the course of events in the human world” (111). This punctuates the importance of marriage and the ‘fertility’ that comes with pairing off. In this same respect the seeds that Galadriel gives to Sam are important to the continuation of nature after much of it has been destroyed by the war. Fertility plays a major role in the rebuilding of all that has been lost during the War of the Ring, both people and nature. Women, of course, are essential to continuing life on Earth, and having strong women breed can only help Middle-earth. Lúthien, for instance, bears a child (Dior) who is the beginning of a long line of strong Men and Elves. Arwen and Aragorn’s children will most
likely be both wise and vigorous. Knowing Éowyn’s past, her children will almost certainly be brave and independent.

The Ents are not so fortunate as to be able to continue their race in this way as the Entwives have left them. The Ents, therefore, lament this loss of fertility and companionship (Tolkien, *Two* 88-9). As Neville states, “…it is striking that male characters without female counterparts often fare poorly in Tolkien’s work (Gollum, Saruman, Sauron, Boromir, Denethor, the Ents, arguably Frodo himself), while heterosexual couples embody the positive forces of Middle-earth” (107). Perhaps the Ents will live forever, as trees may do, but there will never be new Ents or Entings until they find the Entwives once more. Both males and females (human or otherwise) are important to fertility and the continuation of life in Middle-earth.

**Conclusion**

When reading literature such as *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* it is important to keep an open mind, and not to get lost in our modern way of thinking. It is easy enough to ask why certain people from the past did not do things differently, or behave more wisely. However, this is a dangerous way of thinking, and can only cause a reader disappointment. We are all children of our time, and our opinions are always molded by the beliefs and culture of those around us. Tolkien spent much time with other men who had unsavory views of women, as was common for that time. However, that did not stop him from creating some genuinely strong female characters in his works. It may be argued that the small number of major female characters in his work actually aided in their uniqueness. If there had been just as many main female characters as there were male characters in Tolkien’s works, the individuality and distinctiveness of those women that were present may not have been as powerful. Yes, there are stereotypes in between, but these stereotypes apply to both the male and female characters.

The women and men of Middle-earth share more than just the world in which they live together. They share a passion for healing and gardening, which Tolkien found a vital quality to have. Both sexes show courage, strength, and wisdom in the face of adversity, as well as sharing a deep love and respect for each other and Arda. They also share feminine and masculine qualities which strengthen them as individuals. Lúthien, Galadriel, Arwen and Éowyn symbolize all that is good in the world, as well as being leaders within their communities, and conserving the traditions and culture of their people. Whether they are the
wise beauty, the brave warrior, or in Shelob’s case, the powerful monster, all of Tolkien’s major female characters display some strong qualities. What Tolkien shows us by way of his work is that only through the joined strength of men and women are we able to overcome the many obstacles we face in life.
Works Cited


