

The Existence of Religious Figures in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion, The Lord of The Rings and The Hobbit*

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Received: July 16, 2018

Accepted: August 27, 2018

ABSTRACT

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien stands as the best selling fantasy novelists in twentieth-century literature. His major works are The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings and The Silmarillion. This paper primarily focuses on religious figures in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Silmarillion, The Lord of The Rings and The Hobbit. The religious figures at first glance, to play only a background role in the text's narrative structure. However, their significance extends far beyond merely affecting the plot. There is a clear alignment between Tolkien's real-life views and the qualities represented by his women characters. They draw attention to by depicting as powerful and wise. Tolkien was greatly influenced by the arts and crafts movement of the late 19th-century, which sought to provide a greater cultural emphasis on all forms of artistry and nature and a reduced emphasis on mechanized industry. Although this movement ended at the beginning of the 20th-century, branches of it continued, arguing that the correct sense of artistry and spirituality could be found by looking back to medieval England and that these qualities could be used to help heal the modern ravaged and industrialized country.

Keywords: Religious, Women, Spirituality, Artistry, and Industrialized.

Tolkien drew attention to his female characters to link them with his use of this movement; in order to exemplify the idealized qualities that he feels can repair a nation. There are three powerful, ageless women in *Rings*: Arwen the Elf princess, Goldberry the river-sprite, and Galadriel the Lady of the Golden Wood. Each of them represents a different facet that Tolkien idealized as a part of his use of the medieval movements, and each of them inspires and positively influences the main male characters in a way that helps them rid Middle-earth of evil. Arwen, who stays at home while her husband claims his right as king spends her time weaving a tapestry, evoking frequent comparisons to her ancestor Luthien, an Elf who expressed her unusual power through song and dance. Through these two, Tolkien exemplifies the healing power in arts and crafts, as well as the significance in looking back and taking lessons and cues from history.

Tolkien chooses to focus on the spiritual aspect of medieval ideas drawing distinct comparisons to medieval anchorite hermits and their emphasis on confronting temptation. There are still two significant females left in *Rings*, though neither fit exactly with the others: Shelob the spider and Eowyn the human shield maiden. Tolkien uses these two to exemplify the same principles as Arwen, Goldberry, and Galadriel, but in different ways. In Shelob, a gluttonous and evil monster, he displays how one can lose their humanity if the arts, nature, and religion are ignored; in Eowyn, he showcases how a 'modern day' woman can apply his medieval qualities to a nation at war. Viewed as a collective, the females of *Rings* are meant to represent how Tolkien's interpretations of medieval principles can be used to heal England in the wake of the World Wars.

Galadriel's placement in *Rings* as a symbol of idealized religion is perhaps the most obvious allegory in the text: Tolkien himself admits, in response to a reader comparing Galadriel to the Virgin Mary, that "I know exactly what you mean by the order of Grace; and of course by your references to Our Lady, upon which all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded." (Tolkien, *Letters*, p 172) He does, however, hedge upon an exact comparison, citing Galadriel's status as a repented, a fact that will be examined later. Indeed, though Galadriel is not a match for Mary in every way, there are clear similarities between them.

Father Michael W. Maher, S.J. lists several in his article "'A Land Without Stain,'" including Mary's home in the "House of Gold" in the Loreto Litany and Lothlorien's colloquial name "the Golden Wood." (Michael, p 227) Additionally, Mary is described in Revelation as "a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars." (Michael, p 2168) As the Fellowship

first enters Galadriel's kingdom of Lothlorien, Legolas breaks into song: "An Elven-maid there was of old, /A shining star by day: / Her mantle white was hemmed with gold,/Her shoes of silver-grey./A star was bound upon her brows,/A light was on her hair/As sun upon the golden boughs/In Lórien the fair." (Tolkien, *Rings*, p 339) Similar to the ambivalence of Mary as an unnamed woman, Galadriel is the Lady of Lorien but is never directly mentioned by name in Legolas' verse. Though Tolkien takes some liberties, such as representing the moon under feet as shoes of silver-grey, all of the descriptors are matched in some form. Also of importance is the fact that Legolas' song never breaks its rhythm or rhyme scheme, something that Tolkien had done previously in *Rings*. It is important for him, in this case, to represent purity in every aspect.

Marian mirrors are significant that Christ's birth is pure and virgin, just as Galadriel is described as "clad wholly in white, white serving as a medieval symbol of purity; it should also be noted that using Mary as a descriptor of purity is, in general, reflective of medieval culture" (Ibid p 354) Additionally, the first mention of Galadriel in *Rings* comes as the Fellowship flees the horrors of Moria. We know, having just witnessed Gandalf's death at the hands of the Balrog and the might of the goblins, that there is an army's worth of cruel and wicked creatures living less than a day's march away from Lothlorien. Though Legolas' is only an indirect mention, we come to learn in the coming pages that the power is Galadriel herself, similar to how Mary protects the world through the magical power of the virgin birth. Galadriel, it is revealed, secludes herself away from the rest of Middle-earth in order to act as a gatekeeper against evil. With the previous religious comparisons in mind, this bears a distinct resemblance to the practices of medieval anchorite nuns, or anchoresses, illuminating Tolkien's intent to make Galadriel more than a mirror of the Virgin Mary or even an endorsement of standard Catholic doctrine. Though they often had contact with outsiders in order to provide religious guidance or obtain necessities such as food, in theory they lived a life of total solitude, residing in a four-walled room called a cell built off of a main church, with one small window allowed in order to hear mass and interact with society as needed.

The seclusion and devotion are to an anchoress, one of their guiding principles, and the one which Tolkien chooses to emphasize in *Rings* is the importance of temptation: "Let no one of a high life think that she will not be tempted. The good who have climbed high are tempted more than the weak; and that is only right, for the higher the hill the more wind is on it... If there is any anchoress who feels no temptations, she should be very much afraid." (Hugh, *Ancrene* p 243) The key event, then, to understanding Galadriel's position as an anchoress-representative, is that of her ultimate temptation at the Mirror of Galadriel.

Religious scholar Fleming Rutledge aptly compares the Mirror scene to the temptation of Adam and Eve in *The Battle for Middle-Earth*. However, the Biblical take on temptation is resoundingly negative: it leads to sin and worldwide, long-lasting catastrophe. Tolkien aims to move beyond such a black-and-white portrayal in his work, instead emphasizing the power and success in recognizing, confronting, and overcoming such impulses. In the Mirror scene, Tolkien places his full emphasis on Galadriel's imperfect humanity and her subsequent choice to remain pure. Both Frodo and Sam, when they look into the Mirror, see prophetic and apocalyptic futures. As the Eye of Sauron finds Frodo, Galadriel reveals that she, too, has seen the same visions, comforting Frodo with the knowledge that she protects Lothlorien with the power of Narya, the Elven Ring of Adamant. She shows Frodo her ring, and "Earendil, the Evening Star, most beloved of the Elves, shone clear above. So bright was it that the figure of Elven-lady cast a dim shadow on the ground."

(Tolkien, *Rings* p 365)

That this moment precedes Galadriel's temptation is no accident. Tolkien portrays her as a woman in possession of material goods, power, knowledge, and blessings. Light, as related by medievalist Reno E. Lauro, was considered in the Middle Ages to be "a quasi-spiritual substance. Light is *prima forma corporalis* the first corporeal form... *Lumen* is used for light reflected and is called by Grosseteste 'a spiritual body'" (Lauro, *Spiders* p 60) Following Tolkien's use of the medieval anchoress-model and highlighting elements of medieval significance, light holds the same emphasized meaning here. Light is depicted throughout the Bible as a symbol of being with God and of God's blessing; Galadriel, in every way then, is represented as a blessed figure, and should want for nothing.

Frodo, recognizing that she has far more strength than he, offers her the Ring, a suggestion met by Galadriel with a sudden clear laugh. She lifted up her hand and from the ring that she wears their issued a great light that illuminated her alone and left all else dark. She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful. Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, "she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad. I pass the test, I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel." (Tolkien, *Rings* p 365)

This is Galadriel's ultimate moment of hubris. She begins by positioning herself as a Queen, not a Dark Lady, which would seem to be the equivalent to Sauron's Dark Lord, because she is already the Lady of Lothlorien and such a title would not mark a new level of power. She also justifies this choice by making it clear that it is not her decision: "you will set up a Queen." Continuing, Galadriel places herself on the same level as nature itself and then elevates herself higher by giving the Morning and Night, the Sea and the Sun, etc. proper names. It is Galadriel's intent to raise her to elemental proportions.

The Galadriel's temptation is directly tailored to her past transgressions, as it implies that Tolkien has a meaning and higher purpose. Galadriel's primary sin has always been hubris: she remains banished to Middle-earth because she will not repent for her past actions, which include fighting against the angelic Valar and refusing to give Feanor, another Elf of importance, hairs from her radiant head. (Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* p 241)

Tolkien ensures, then, that her modern-day temptations are also fuelled by excessive self-confidence in her own power and ability; that despite one's best attempts at pushing them aside, sinful nature is always there, even if it is dormant. These events are, of course, complete fantasy, and it is likely that no reader of *Rings* will find themselves in similar situations. However, Galadriel is a fantastical being in a fantastical realm, and if these actions are diluted into more generally-applicable terms, such as rebelling against authority figures or thinking oneself better than others, they are indeed relatable depictions of everyday temptations. This point is made clear previously, upon the Fellowship's initial meeting with Galadriel and Celeborn; afterward Tolkien notes that "all of them, it seemed, had fared alike: each had felt that he was offered a choice between a shadow full of fear that lay ahead, and something that he greatly desired." (Tolkien, *Rings* p 358) If this did not reference enough to Tolkien's argument, Boromir draws it closer still, placing an exact name upon his experience: "Almost I should have said that she was tempting us." (Ibid p 414)

The reason why Tolkien chose to highlight temptation in Galadriel is exactly how it plays out with the Fellowship. He means to display that anyone can feel the pressure of sin, no matter how powerful; that temptation can affect everyone differently but will always be present; and that acknowledging and confessing to one's sins is crucial to overcoming them, that greater power is actually obtained through resistance. To prove the last point, one need look no further than Boromir, who, despite his claim that "it need not be said that I refused to listen. The Men of Minas Tirith are true to their word," ultimately succumbs to his temptation. When he dies shortly thereafter, pierced by Orc arrows, his karmic punishment is made apparent: "I tried to take the Ring from Frodo... I have paid." (Ibid p 417)

Indeed, as Galadriel finishes her speech and begins to overcome the situation, the light as purity imagery returns, highlighted by a quick succession of back-and-forth hyperbole. All of the qualities that Frodo describes beautiful, tall, and worshipful are positive, yet they are tempered by that same sense of elevation, of needing to be more. Even worshipful is countered with terrible. She teeters between the two in a moment of decision, only signifying her choice with a second laugh. Just as laughter began her temptation, so too does it end it, returning her to everyday joys and amusements. Galadriel reveals at the end that she will remain Galadriel, simultaneously referencing her attempts to elevate herself and her ultimate humanization, throughout the story, Frodo, as the narrator figure, has referred to her as the Lady or the Lady Galadriel. For the first time, she is without a title, stripped to her barest persona. She has passed temptation, and though she is reduced in figure her spirituality is unsurpassed.

The change in Galadriel post-Mirror scene is notable. Most readily apparent is her willingness to give Gimli, a dwarf and apparent enemy of the Elves, three strands of her hair when he asks for them, a direct contrast to her proud refusal of Feanor in her earlier days. However, Tolkien also accentuates Galadriel's 'new persona' in the song she sings as the Fellowship departs Lothlorien. Though Galadriel still possesses and acknowledges her power over Lorien, she also has limitations set upon her. In a reference to the proper names of nature in her Mirror speech, the Sun and Moon are now beyond the Lady, and the leaves that she sings into existence are golden, no longer representing the power of the Golden Wood but foretelling the winter and the end of the Elves in Middle-earth. And like Legolas' first song upon entering her realm, Galadriel does not break rhythm or rhyme scheme, accentuating once again her purity and the restrictions that are now forced upon her, here in the form of meter. Still, lest the song seem too melancholic as if Galadriel has been stripped of joy as well, Tolkien makes clear that it is sung as a blessing, ferrying the Fellowship into the dangerous unknown with as much goodwill as possible.

This use of song not only represents Galadriel's newfound position as one who comforts, it also links her back to Mary, since "Mary is a song from the moment of the Visitation." (Miri Rubin, *Emotion* p 21) Though Tolkien was uncomfortable making too much of a connection between the two, it is, perhaps, allowable making the comparison with post-temptation Galadriel, where the presence of her prideful past is

not alluded to and she takes on a different characterization. Indeed, "some [medieval] Protestant female poets turned Mary into a potential sinner, like themselves. Brought down to earth she offered a model to women because like them she had striven to avoid the many sins which loomed and tempted." (Ibid p 27) That is, acknowledge sin, but never succumb to it. Now that Galadriel has done so, she serves as a sort of combined anchoress Virgin Mary figure, acting as a source of inspiration to those still traversing the world's temptations.

Tolkien utilizes Galadriel's main functions, then, to demonstrate how she inspires and provides hope to those who must leave her and continue on a darker and more dangerous path, namely Gimli and Sam. It is entirely likely, given the Fellowship's expected brush with war once they leave the Golden Wood, that this is an intended reference to the soldiers of the World Wars, and that Tolkien, by linking them to Galadriel through courtly love as will be seen in the following paragraphs intends to solidify the link between medieval concepts and modern-day applications as well as heighten the importance and lasting inspiration of acknowledging and resisting temptation. To establish this link, Galadriel gives the entire Fellowship gifts upon their departure from Lothlorien. Instead, she asks what he desires, to which he requests three hairs from her head, as a remembrance of her shining beauty. Galadriel grants his wish, and so Gimli becomes a case example of courtly love.

Courtly love is defined by its non-romantic qualities, almost never taking place between a husband and wife but rather a knight and his chosen lady, and, according to medievalist Sarah Downey, "one of courtly love's essential characteristics is its capacity to make the lover a better down to earth she offered a model to women because like them she had striven to avoid the many sins which loomed and tempted." Having now passed temptation, Galadriel has followed another of the Anchoress' doctrines: "follow Our Lady [St. Mary] and not the cackling Eve." (Hugh White *Ancrene Wisse* p 35) That is, acknowledge sin, but never succumb to it. Now that Galadriel has done so, she serves as a sort of combined anchoress-Virgin Mary figure, acting as a source of inspiration to those still traversing the world's temptations person and, ultimately, to bring him closer to the divine." (Sarah Downey, *Mythlore* p 105)

Gimli takes part in this by defending Galadriel's beauty to all he meets. He informs Eomer that "if ever you chance to see the Lady Galadriel with your eyes, then you shall acknowledge her the fairest of ladies or our friendship will end." (Tolkien, *Rings* p 524) As Janet Brennan Croft asserts, "the rituals of courtly love offer Gimli a behavior pattern into which he can properly channel and enact his feelings for Galadriel... Superstition, amulets, and rituals were a part of many soldiers' ways of dealing with the war through magical thinking." (Janet Croft, *War* p 47) Gimli takes the role of the soldier, but uses religion as his reminder of purity rather than superstition, as Tolkien saw most appropriate. To accentuate this point, Tolkien places the Mirror of Galadriel scene on the calendar date of February 14, St. Valentine's Day; St. Valentine was most commonly associated in the Middle Ages with courtly love. (Tolkien, *Rings*, p 1092) Additionally cementing the link, the Virgin Mary was also seen as a subject of courtly love, inspiring her subjects to rise above temptation throughout their journeys.

Though he is less of a warrior than Gimli, Sam also carries Galadriel's memory with him through his travels. Where Gimli is more aggressive in his chivalric love, Sam uses it defensively. He idealizes Galadriel whenever the journey becomes rough; when he and Frodo use his Elvish rope to navigate the rock maze of Emyr Muil, Sam muses that "it goes hard parting with anything I brought out of the Elf-country. Made by Galadriel herself, too, maybe" (Tolkien, *Rings* p 611) Similarly, when the two travel through Mordor on the last leg of their journey, Sam invokes her: "If only the Lady could see us or hear us, I'd say to her: 'Your Ladyship, all we want is light and water: just clean water and plain daylight, better than any jewels, begging your pardon.'" (Ibid p 918) Later, when they come upon a small stream and a patch of weak daylight, he cries, "If I ever see the Lady again, I will tell her! ... Light and now water!" (Ibid p 918) Sam's religious prayer and devotion to Galadriel is rewarded with blessings even in the land of the enemy, just as God rewards His followers in the psalm.

Shelob, it should not be surprising to note, is not representative of God or love but sin and hatred. Indeed, many Tolkien scholars have tackled the dichotomy between her and Galadriel, namely Reno E. Lauro, who sees Galadriel, especially through her phial, as representative of light, while Shelob embodies all things of darkness. Since the light was a medieval representation of holiness and Sam uses the phial to defeat Shelob, "the hobbits' misadventure in her lair is used as an allegory for how all things religious vanquish sin." (Lauro, *Of Spiders* p 79) Lauro's point is indeed valid and accurately represents what both the Galadriel and Shelob characters represent in *Rings*. However, by painting the conflict as a simple "light conquers darkness" story, she misses many of the specific points Tolkien attempts to make to exemplify exactly how Shelob embodies evil. It is not enough to show Shelob as sinful; Tolkien means to specify how

she is sinful to properly use her as an example of how, like Galadriel, to avoid and overcome that temptation. It is also crucial, at this point, to remember Shelob's earlier associations with disloyalty and industry, in light of the following arguments that she is inherently sinful.

Shelob is meant to exist in as direct an opposition to Galadriel's ideal example, as an anchoritic figure, as possible. Just as Galadriel uses her seclusion in Lothlórien to protect the rest of Middle-earth from Sauron's powers and recognize her place and imperfections within the diminishing world, Shelob, also alone in a confined space, uses her seclusion to reflect only inwards, leading to a variety of sins: she "served none but herself, drinking the blood of Elves and Men, bloated and grown fat with endless brooding on her feasts... for all living things were her food, and her vomit darkness." (Tolkien, *Rings* p 723) Even this is not enough, for her only desire is to grow "swollen till the mountains could no longer hold her up and the darkness could not contain her." (Ibid. p 723) Rather than remain content in her present situation, thinking of others in the world, Shelob cares only for herself. Tolkien's imagery of bloating, vomit, and swelling only serves to emphasize the sickness that she embodies, and the unhealthiness that such a lifestyle results in, a possible fate for Galadriel had she given in to her own temptation.

One cannot mention Shelob and temptation without discussing her relation to female sexuality: Tolkien scholar Brenda Partridge, in "No Sex, Please We're Hobbits," argues that Shelob represents "male fear of the power of women's sexual attraction." (Partridge, No Sex p 188) There is, fitting with Tolkien's depiction of Shelob as evil, significant sexual imagery associated with her, and it is easy to see, from lines such as "Shelob, with the driving force of her own cruel will, with strength greater than any warrior's hand, thrust herself upon a bitter spike where such association comes from" (Tolkien, *Rings* p 729) Like Galadriel's connections with the Virgin Mary, Shelob also has a Biblical mirror in the Great Whore of Babylon, "her world with various lesser monsters and abominations," which certainly fits with Tolkien's descriptions of Shelob's spawn, and also positions her as the antithesis of Galadriel's courtly love.

However, it would be incorrect to place any more emphasis on Shelob's sexual connotations than her gluttony, or her animal anger. Tolkien warns his reader against all of the aforementioned sins equally, with no regard paid to gender roles. If one chooses to focus on sexuality and Shelob's thrust on Sam's sword, for example, they would have to recognize that the act also has repercussions for the male, as Sam pulls back from his blow and sees his death in her eyes. Shelob is female and she sins; she does not sin because she is female. Nowhere does Tolkien place any reference, no matter how insignificant, indicating that it is some feminine quality of Shelob's that has driven her to her current state of being. It is of crucial importance that the "sexualized" stab does not defeat Shelob but rather infuriates her so that she no longer toys with her prey but decides to kill him at last. It is only the phial of Galadriel, used by Sam in a last-ditch attempt to save Frodo utilizing a container of holy light to selflessly help another that can dispel sin and darkness, not an anti-feminist reading of Sam's sword-as-phallus.

Though Galadriel represents Tolkien's idealized vision of religion, he makes it apparent that ideal does not mean perfect. Galadriel is pure and good, sharing qualities with the Virgin Mary, yet she also distinguishes herself from the unattainable Marian ideal, choosing also to align with the anchoritic ideal of complete solitude and devotion in the face of temptation. In many respects, Galadriel is no different from regular mortals: she is faced with her sins and is tempted by them, yet ultimately recognizes the value of maintaining purity and humility over reward; and Tolkien takes great care, through Shelob, to demonstrate just as effectively what Galadriel's endgame might have been had she given in. This overcoming brings its own reward: final acceptance into Valinor, the Undying Lands in Tolkien's mythology where the immortal Valar and those blessed by them go instead of dying. It is Middle-earth's version of heaven, and Galadriel has earned her place there. Still, though she is now preparing for the diminishment of her abilities, her virtuosity remains inspirational and blesses those that encounter her, as exemplified by Gimli and Sam. Tolkien's religious ideal confronting one's sinful nature and using that success to better one and motivate others portrayed with more clarity.

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