

INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE

EXTENDED ESSAY
GROUP 1

Session: November 2007

The Empowerment of the Feminine in JRR
Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings

JRR Tolkien has been criticised for the seemingly exclusive masculinity of his The Lord of the Rings trilogy. To what extent is The Lord of the Rings an empowering work for the female?

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ABSTRACT

JRR Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings has been criticised by feminist scholars such as Germaine Greer, Catherine Stimpson and Kenneth McLeish as a chauvinistic work, focused predominantly on male issues, friendships and power. While there is no doubt that The Lord of the Rings has a strong masculine influence, to say that it is chauvinistic, even misogynistic, as some feminists have asserted, is to miss the subtleties within the text. In this essay I argue that the feminine is a powerful force in Tolkien's work, and that The Lord of the Rings is empowering for the female. I examine the characterisations of Galadriel, Éowyn and Shelob and demonstrate how each are empowered female characters, despite criticism to the contrary. I then explain how the Elves are, in principle, a feminine race, and how their elevation by Tolkien indicates the power of the feminine as a force in the novel. Similarly, I demonstrate that the Ring, the symbol of ultimate power and the catalyst for the events of the novel, is a feminine object, and that its being feminine attests to the fact that the feminine is a force of considerable power within The Lord of the Rings. From amongst Tolkien's works this essay focuses solely on the feminine in The Lord of the Rings, however I have consulted The Silmarillion and The Hobbit as references and these are included in the bibliography.

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Since its publication in 1954, a plethora of feminist critique has settled upon the shoulders of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and upon its creator JRR Tolkien. Tolkien scholar Edith Crowe admitted her dissatisfaction with “the disappointingly low percentage of females that appear in *The Lord of the Rings*.”¹ Kenneth McLeish was more acerbic in his comment that Tolkien’s women “are nothing but cardboard figures from Welsh legend”²; while in 2002 Germaine Greer – never one to be excluded where feminism is concerned – lamented Tolkien’s considerable literary influence as “a nightmare”³.

It is true that *The Lord of the Rings* presents no shining beacon of hope for modern feminism. The trilogy caters strongly to male readers, featuring an almost all-male cast and an array of swords, arrows and bloodshed. Moreover, there is no sex and little romance, with emphasis placed on male friendship. As female scholars were a rarity in post-war Britain, these ‘flaws’ were more likely a reflection of the patriarchal Oxford society to which Tolkien belonged than the product of latent misogyny suggested by hardcore feminists. Tolkien and his band of academics were all male and for the most part devout Catholics⁴; consequently, Tolkien’s characters are chiefly male, and the females who do appear in the novel are somewhat black-and-white paragons of good or evil.

However, stereotypical though they may be, Tolkien’s women are formidable characters. For an author whose outlook on women was seemingly limited, the pulse of the empowered female throbs beneath the great web of Tolkienian myth, strengthened by the spindles of Galadriel, Éowyn and Shelob. More subtly, analysis of language and characterisation suggests the essential femininity of the Elvish race, whose elevation by Tolkien serves to emphasise the power and wisdom of the female. Finally, and most importantly, the power of the feminine manifests in the One Ring ‘to rule them all’, the symbol of ultimate power and the catalyst of the events of the novel.

¹ Quoted in Donovan, Leslie. 2002, ‘The Valkyrie Reflex in JRR Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*’ in *Tolkien the Medievalist* ed. Chance, Jane. Routledge, New York. p81.

² McLeish, Kenneth. 1983, ‘The Rippingest Yarn of All’ in *JRR Tolkien: This Far Land* ed. Giddings, Robert. Vision Press Ltd., USA. p36.

³ Quoted in Mooney, Chris, 2001. ‘Kicking the Hobbit,’ *The American Prospect*, 4 June 2001, Vol. 12 No. 10, quoted in *The American Prospect Online*, [On-line], Available: <http://www.prospect.org/print/V12/10/mooney-c.html> [17 February, 2007]

⁴ Blake, Andrew. 2002, *JRR Tolkien: A Beginner’s Guide*. Hodder & Stoughton, London. p11.

By the standards of any Rings scholar, Galadriel ranks amongst the most powerful of Tolkien's creations. The elf-queen's might is uncontested by the others of her race; at the time of the War of the Ring, Galadriel is the eldest and most powerful of the Elves left in Middle-Earth. In appearance, Galadriel is a goddess: 'clad wholly in white,' with hair 'of deep gold' and a visage unsullied by the passing of time (The Lord of the Rings, p345). Her beauty, however, is by no means the defining aspect of her character. Tolkien highlights the depth of Galadriel's wisdom by recognising her as the keeper of the Mirror of Galadriel and of *Nenya*, one of the three rings of power. As with other characters, Tolkien uses the eyes to expose innate aspects of the soul – Galadriel's being 'keen as lances' (p345), to imply a profound intelligence. She exudes an aura of mystery; her dialogue long, slow and largely devoid of exclamatory remarks. The effect of this is a rather masculine self-assurance, which some of the Fellowship find disturbing: 'None save Legolas and Aragorn could long endure her glance' (p348). Moreover, Frodo notes that her voice is 'clear and musical, but deeper than a woman's wont' (p346), and she is remarkably similar in appearance to her husband Celeborn. This masculinity in her character negates the passive female stereotype to which her traditional, idyllic feminine beauty confines her, evoking instead the image of an independent and empowered woman.

Tolkien renders the empowerment of Galadriel all the more conspicuous by contrasting her character with that of her husband Celeborn. Officially, Galadriel's position as a woman places her beneath her spouse: in discussion his name is always before hers, and she publicly acknowledges him as her 'lord'. This could be construed as a repression of Galadriel's power, but one must remember that her status is characteristic of the subservient female roles traditional to legends such as the Nibelunglied⁵, from which Tolkien drew inspiration. Galadriel's public domination of Celeborn would be an anachronism and a detraction from the Norse-saga genre. Nevertheless, Tolkien demonstrates that it is Galadriel who wields the power in the relationship by subtly reversing their gender roles. Celeborn fulfils the traditionally feminine role of welcoming the Fellowship to Lothlorien, while his wife silently measures their valour; his words are innocuous compared to her wise counsel. Celeborn's advice is even dismissed by Galadriel: "He would be rash indeed that said that thing" (p347). It is Galadriel, not Celeborn, who calls the White Council; and Galadriel who throws down the walls of Dol Guldur, 'cleansing' the earth at Sauron's defeat. Moreover, it is on Galadriel's hand, and not her husband's, that sits *Nenya*, one of the three rings coveted by

⁵ Day, David. 1994, Tolkien's Ring. HarperCollins Publishers, London.

Sauron. Galadriel declares, “The Lord of the Galadhrim is accounted the wisest of the Elves” (p347), yet Celeborn’s one-dimensional, ineffectual character drenches her praise in irony. Celeborn’s function is to highlight the contrast between Galadriel’s role as a woman, and the role her power merits. For a male author writing in the embryonic stages of the feminist movement, Tolkien is essentially questioning the validity of traditional gender roles.

To Tolkien’s credit, Galadriel’s character is defined by the immense force of her will, a characteristic often neglected in the women of legend in favour of humility and innocence. Whilst man wages war on the armies of Sauron, Galadriel is engaged in a constant spiritual power struggle with him, “I perceive the Dark Lord and know his mind...and he gropes ever to see me and my thought. But still the door is closed!” (p355). The threat of Sauron is felt intensely by male characters such as Frodo and Gandalf, yet Sauron, the epitome of aggressive masculinity, is dominated by the mental power of a woman. Galadriel’s willpower brings success where the majority fail – in the rejection of Sauron’s Ring. The reactions of male characters to the Ring are either to succumb to it, as in the case of Isildur; or, like Gandalf, to violently refuse to contemplate its possession. Galadriel is the only character to profoundly contemplate seizing the Ring, and to reject it nonetheless. Moreover, the ambition that surfaces in the rejection scene refutes the claim that she is a subservient female stereotype. Galadriel undergoes a transformation as she contemplates taking it from Frodo by force; no longer peaceful, a likeness of the Virgin Mary, she becomes aggressive and terrifying, ‘tall beyond measurement,’ her power manifesting as a ‘great light that illuminated her and left all else dark’ (p356). With the One Ring on her finger Galadriel would depose Sauron and assume control of Middle-Earth; yet, unlike Boromir, Saruman or Eve from the Old Testament, Galadriel overcomes temptation and does what is morally correct, despite its resulting in the diminishment of her power and that of her people.

Galadriel’s empowerment is mirrored by the power of her antithesis, the giant spider Shelob. Of all the evil creatures within the *Lord of the Rings*, Shelob is by far the most horrifying, a manifestation of the fear of the unknown. Diction such as ‘groping,’ ‘blind’ and ‘lurch’ (p703) convey the powerlessness of Sam and Frodo as they stumble through Shelob’s lair, the desperate tone emphasising the powerful effect darkness has on the psyche, ‘How much more of this could they endure? One hour, two hours, three hours...hours – days, weeks rather’ (p702). Even before she is introduced into the text, the extent of Shelob’s

psychological power over the heroes is evident and she is established as a force of terrifying might.

Tolkien devotes a large part of the chapter 'Shelob's Lair' to explaining in detail her ancient origins. Shelob was not born of Middle-Earth and her ancientness is highlighted by the archaic tone and syntax, 'There agelong she had dwelt, even such as once of old had lived in the Land of the Elves that is now under the Sea' (p707). Shelob is no mere monster, but rather 'an evil thing in spider-form' (p707), and her elevation as a goddess-figure is engendered not only by Gollum's 'worship' of her, but also by the narrator's use of the capitalised personal pronoun 'She.' Moreover, Shelob is the only of Tolkien's monsters to have a developed character: the Nazgul are apparent as a threat, but they remain detached from the narrative; trolls and orcs are depicted mainly as the half-witted minions of Sauron. Shelob has an active consciousness, apparent through its projection onto the narrative voice, 'No Elf or Man came near, only the unhappy Orcs. Poor meat and wary' (p708). Again Tolkien reveals character through the eyes, 'many-windowed' (p704), symbolising insight and cunning, that 'gleamed with a fell light' (p709), conveying evil.

The characterisation of Shelob as a conscious and powerful female, the goddess among Tolkien's monsters, refutes the claim that the female is a weak force in The Lord of the Rings. However, critics have argued that Tolkien elevates the great female spider in order to emphasise Sam's defeat of her, symbolic of Man's superiority over Woman⁶; Shelob, representing female sexuality, is 'pricked' by Sam's sword, a phallic symbol of male aggression, and humiliated, "cowed at last, shrunken in defeat, jerking and quivering as she hastened from him" (p713).

It is true that the sexual allusions in these chapters are particularly strong; the notion that Shelob represents female sexuality is fuelled by the fact that Shelob is the mother of innumerable bastards, and her belly is described as 'a vast swollen bag, swaying and sagging between her legs' (p709), a metaphor suggesting, perhaps, sinful pregnancy. Aggressive sexuality is symbolised in her 'lust' for meat and in the sadistic pleasure she derives from playing with her food. However, upon further scrutiny, one notes that Shelob is not just a large sexual machine – equally powerful is the image of gluttony, 'bloated with endless

⁶ Partridge, Brenda. 1983, 'No Sex Please – We're Hobbits: The Construction of Female Sexuality in The Lord of the Rings' in JRR Tolkien: This Far Land ed. Giddings, Robert. Vision Press Ltd., USA.

brooding on her feasts' (p707); sloth, 'swollen till the mountains could no longer hold her up' (p707); selfishness, 'she served none but herself' (p708); and spite, 'this time to slay and then to rend' (p712). These attributes, inherent to her character, attest to the idea that Shelob is representative of feminine *evil*, rather than sexuality, a concept reinforced by the consonance of her name: 'She' suggests the female, and 'Lob' is harsh and plosive, a contrast to the delicate 'Galadriel'. Gender stereotypes of good and evil are similarly present within other characters; Galadriel, for example, possesses the beauty, wisdom and empathy aligned with feminine good, whereas Sauron in his association with war, machines and cruelty, embodies masculine evil. The cohabitation of Sauron and Shelob, each independent of the other, refutes any claim that feminine evil is inferior to masculine. Indeed, while Sauron poses the greater threat to Frodo and Sam, Shelob comes far closer to destroying them and ending their quest. As the triumph of good is intrinsic to the 'quest' genre, Shelob's defeat does not symbolise male's triumph over sexually-wayward female. The battle does not see Sam and Frodo emerge triumphantly victorious - they barely survive. Besides, Sam's sword merely slows Shelob's attack; it is the phial of Galadriel that blinds her and causes her retreat. This in itself indicates that the scene at Cirith Ungol does not symbolise the battle of male and female: rather, it is the battle between Galadriel's female virtue and Shelob's female sin.

Even as the feminine is elevated by Shelob and Galadriel, the most compelling evidence of the empowered female within *The Lord of the Rings* resides in the earthly character of Éowyn. Hers is the clearest feminist portrait painted by Tolkien in the text: 'Éowyn stood before the doors of the house at the stair's head; the sword was set upright before her, and her hands were laid upon the hilt' (p512). As is often the case with feminist imagery, the vision is essentially masculine: Éowyn assumes the male role of guarding the hall of her king, her stance aggressive, her position at the 'stair's head' representing leadership. By presenting her armoured, Tolkien insists on her martial ability as a major facet of her character. Like the valkyries of Norse mythology, Éowyn defies her traditional gender role and rides to war; at the Battle of Pellenor Fields Éowyn confronts and slays the Witchking, the greatest of Sauron's servants, whom no man can face: 'Men, cast from the saddle, lay grovelling on the ground' (p822).

Yet to general feminist dismay, Éowyn renounces her shieldmaiden identity in favour of marriage. Echoing Katharine in *The Taming of the Shrew*⁷, Éowyn declares, 'I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders... I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren' (p943). This decision to end a lifelong struggle for recognition, and the implication that unfeminine interests are 'barren', appears to reject the feminist ideal for an inherently chauvinistic one.

Such an approach, however, grossly misjudges Éowyn's state of mind. Born female into a house of warlords, Éowyn is denied the adventure and glory of battle on account of her sex, so she chooses to reject her femininity for acceptance. Aragorn notes: 'strong she seemed and stern as steel' (p504), the word 'seemed' betraying the anguish underlying her facade of independence. Her hands are constantly 'clenched,' denoting angst and frustration. Tolkien's sympathy for the plight of his unhappy valkyrie is evident in the compassionate tone, 'Far over the plain Éowyn saw the glitter of spears, as she stood still, alone before the doors of the silent house' (p513). The notion of distance conveys her isolation, reinforced by 'alone' and 'silent house', the 'glitter of spears' a poignant reminder of the glory in which Éowyn cannot participate. Once again Tolkien uses the eyes of his character to convey her state of mind, 'Her eyes, grey as the sea, were hard and fell' (p823). Their greyness reflects Éowyn's depression, the simile likening them to the sea her emotional turmoil; 'hard and fell' suggesting anger, and the denial of her female identity.

This denial is seen in countless examples of women's history, from bra-burning to power-dressing. Through Éowyn, Tolkien suggests that the emulation of men does not equate to female empowerment. True that Éowyn as shieldmaiden presents a powerful figure, though one associated with unhappiness. Even after having fulfilled her desires on the battlefield, winning renown for Rohan, she is still 'restless' (p937). Faramir teaches her that love is not a weakness, 'Do not scorn pity that is the gift of a gentle heart' (p943); he loves her for who she is, as an equal. Love disperses the darkness in her soul, conveyed by metaphor, 'And suddenly her winter passed, and the sun shone on her' (p943). Éowyn embraces her power as a woman, rather than rejecting it for unattainable masculinity. Feminist critics at this point are so consumed by indignation that they fail to notice Éowyn retains her aggressive character: 'I will take joy not only in the songs of slaying' (p943), the 'only' insisting that she has not rejected but transcended the limitations of her shieldmaiden role. In place of

⁷ Shakespeare, William. ed. Gill, Roma. 1992, *The Taming of the Shrew*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. V ii.

becoming second-in-command to her brother Éomer, Éowyn rules Ithilien as her husband's equal; her marriage thus serving not to disempower her, but to reflect her empowerment.

The empowerment of the female, explored through characterisation, is more subtly but no less importantly conveyed through Tolkien's Elves. That is not to say they are female or of ambiguous sexuality; rather, they possess more feminine principles than masculine, and are thus a characteristically feminine race. They are united by their serene beauty and are associated with music, laughter, spirituality and wisdom. Elvish femininity is most conspicuous in their soft, musical language, with its high frequency of liquid sounds. Note the assonance in '*Elen síla lúmenn omentielvo*' (p79). The 'en' sound is soft and languid, the high proportion of vowels welding the sounds together so that the words run off the tongue. Similarly, the Elves are associated with onomatopoeic words such as 'sighing' and 'whispering.' Dwarves, Men and Orcs are, in contrast, masculine races; this too is conveyed through language, theirs being harsh and guttural, '*Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd aimenu!*' (p1106). Like a beautiful woman, spoken Elvish bewitches the listener, 'He stood still enchanted, while the sweet syllables of the Elvish song fell like clear jewels of blended word and melody' (p232). The diction employed here, 'sweet syllables,' 'clear jewels' and 'melody,' is soft, suggesting femininity – a contrast to the rough, masculine 'slaying songs' of Rohan (p943).

Again, the Elves' innate femininity is highlighted by their affinity with nature. Tolkien's letters reveal his love of the natural environment and aversion to industrialisation⁸, a sentiment reflected in Saruman's 'treason' – felling the trees of Isengard to fuel the fires of his smithies. Feminine races such as Hobbits and Elves live in natural settings, whereas masculine races such as Orcs, Men and Dwarves live in cities or underground. Whilst these places are centres for mining and construction, Elvish havens such as Rivendell and Lothlorien are devoted to song and art, and are relief to weary travellers. Frodo's memories of Rivendell highlight this, 'Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear and sadness' (p219). His anecdotes suggest Rivendell to be like a womb – a temporary, almost maternally-comforting refuge from the hardship of life.

⁸ Tolkien, JRR. ed. Carpenter. 1981, *The Letters of JRR Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. p67-73.

The fact that these sublime creatures, and their homes, are essentially feminine is a firm indication of female empowerment in *The Lord of the Rings*. At the time of the War of the Ring the Elves are the most spiritually powerful creatures of Middle-Earth. Tolkien conveys this power by deifying them in his imagery, appearing to the reader ethereal and awe-inspiring: 'They bore no lights, yet as they walked a shimmer, like the light of the moon above the rim of the hills before it rises, seemed to fall about their feet' (p78). Their racial characteristics represent certain aspects of femininity – their immortality, for example, suggests feminine wisdom; their keen eyesight, clarity of mind. Their importance in the affairs of Middle-Earth mirrors the importance of the feminine in the cycle of life: without it there is no yin, nothing to balance the masculine force, and the world falls to chaos. As *The Lord of the Rings* concludes so to does the power of the Elves, who 'diminish and pass into the West' (p357) to make way for the age of Men and machines. Tolkien, who fought in the Second World War⁹, is essentially lamenting the rise of the masculine principle in modern civilisation, that is industrialisation, nuclear warfare and machinery, and the decline of nature, wisdom and empathy – the feminine principle. Though the novel ends triumphantly, its conclusion is tainted by the Elves' departure, the implication being that the imbalance of masculine and feminine in modern Western society has faded the world's 'light.'

The Lord of the Rings is the tale of Frodo's quest to destroy the One Ring, an object that, like the Elves, is in principle feminine. Isildur, Gollum, Bilbo and Frodo each use the endearing term 'precious' when referring to it, as if it were a spouse; femininity is additionally manifest in imagery, 'The gold looked very fair and pure, and Frodo thought how rich and beautiful was its colour, how perfect its roundness' (p59). In this passage, as in others, the Ring's beauty and innocence are emphasised, 'fair and pure' – traits highly prized in a woman. Moreover, the Ring's 'perfect roundness' suggests the curve of a woman's body.

Similarly, the Ring's femininity is implied by its overwhelming seductive power. Frodo's urges to 'slip the Ring on' at various points in the novel carry subtle sexual undertones, 'He hardly dared to breathe, and yet the desire to get it out of his pocket became so strong that he began to slowly move his hand' (p73). Sauron's Ring is the novel's *femme fatale* – she lures

⁹ Carpenter, Humphrey. 1987, *JRR Tolkien: A Biography*. Unwin Paperbacks, London. p85.

men to her only to betray them when they have served her purpose. The Ring attracts Isildur to save itself from destruction, but slips from his finger when he plans to use it. Always seeking to rejoin Sauron, it bewitches Gollum in the hope he will bring it to the attention of its master, but inevitably abandons him. The Ring's power over its bearers is evident in the 'relationships' it forms with them, the Ring playing the empowered lover, the bearer the slave of passion who must suffer to worship or despair: 'Gollum was always going back to look at it. And sometimes he put it on, when he could not bear to be parted with it.' (*The Hobbit*, p77). This emotional dependence 'emasculates' the bearer – the Ring so ensnares Gollum it becomes the very essence of his being; Frodo leaves Middle-Earth as he is unable to exist without it. Obsession causes the bearer to waste away, feeling, as Bilbo tells Gandalf, "like butter scraped over too much bread," (*The Lord of the Rings*, p32). Like a lover, the Ring nourishes the bearer with long-life, but the emotional dependence this entails ultimately destroys him.

Analysis of the Ring's birth reveals that its femininity originates from its creator Sauron. According to *The Silmarillion*, Sauron was a master of persuasion, a great spirit of Elvish appearance. His 'fair and wise hue' (*The Silmarillion*, p287) won the trust of the Elves, and using their ancient knowledge he forged the Ring, pouring into it all his powers of seduction. However, Sauron's physical form was destroyed when the Valar flooded Numenor, and 'he was unable to ever again assume a form that seemed fair to men, but became black and hideous, and his power thereafter was through terror alone' (*The Lord of the Rings*, p1013). Sauron's being was split into two – his masculine and feminine principles, his yin and his yang. The Ring is Sauron's feminine: his soul, his seductiveness and his beauty; leaving him only with his masculine, the black and terrible body. Thus Sauron too is bound to his Ring, for without it he is unable to attain balance between his two principles, effectively obstructing the consolidation of his power.

The Ring's role as 'antihero' is the greatest indication of its empowered status. It is the catalyst of the events of the novel, and its psychological manipulation of Frodo poses a greater threat than Sauron's war machine, illustrating again how subtle female power can be more potent and enduring than brute masculine force. The destruction of the Ring, however, could be construed as the most blatant indication of misogyny in the text; for if the Ring is feminine, its being evil and ultimate destruction could be seen to suggest a hatred of female power. The reality is much less abstract: Frodo is destroying the feminine principle of a masculine tyrant, disrupting his spiritual balance. Essentially, this empowers the feminine,

as Sauron – the most powerful and most threatening force within the novel – is utterly dependent on the survival of his 'yin.'

While JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* caters to its legions of male readers, the devourers of the blood, arrows and glory that form an integral part of the text, to suggest that *The Lord of the Rings* is exclusively masculine, even sexist, however, is too broad a reading. Rather, the novel is to a great extent empowering for the female in its exploration of character and use of symbolism, and conveys the feminine as a force of equal importance and power as the masculine. Through the formidable representations of Galadriel, Éowyn and Shelob, Tolkien explores the nature of empowerment, and effectively highlights the feminine as a force. Similarly, female power emanates from Tolkien's ethereal Elves, beings of intense moral and spiritual superiority, whose femininity implies the importance of wisdom and insight in the modern world. Finally, the potential of the feminine to destroy is conveyed by the One Ring, the symbol of ultimate power that is both feared and coveted by the men of the novel. The women of the Feminist Movement, intent on asserting their power, can be forgiven for attacking Tolkien's work. We, as women of the 21st century, are confident enough in our place within society to notice that though subtle, the power of the feminine throbs defiantly throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Essentially, its small feminine influence rivals – if not surpasses – the masculinity that supposedly undermines it.

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