

Tolkien's Transformative Women

Art in Triptych

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Series in Literary Studies



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Introduction

The world of J.R.R. Tolkien came to me as a young girl, riding in my parents' 1979 conversion van, listening to the BBC broadcast of *The Lord of the Rings* on PBS. Little did I know those Sunday afternoon drives in Milwaukee would be the beginning of my scholarly career. As my imagination was carried away by the rich voices and enveloping adventures of Tolkien's characters, in me was set a foundation for my future love and study of folklore, medieval and Norse manuscripts, and the realm of the otherworldly. The stories of Tolkien's characters, by way of that Sunday drive, introduced me—not haphazardly—to the world of Medieval, Norse, and Celtic legend.

My intrigue in Tolkien's Middle-earth led me to the medieval world of rich literary history and stuck with me throughout my academic ventures in personal and professional study. It was this same interest that piqued my interest in high school in the *Beowulf* poem, which ironically, in turn, led me back to study Tolkien, focusing acutely on the prominent female figures that resonated with me from a young age and throughout my exploration of powerful female characters in literary history. Consequently, in my attempts to investigate a new era of debate concerning Tolkien studies, I hope to engage the influences from my own interest, those of Professor Tolkien, and those of the numerous influential scholars who have combined their academic efforts to illustrate the rich foundations of Tolkien's early and academic work; such scholars as Tom Shippey, Michael DROUT, Leslie Donovan, John Rateliff, Dimitra Fimi, John Garth, Verliyn Fliieger, Jane Chance, and countless others that have contributed to the Tolkien debate. Furthermore, I hope to expand upon the investigative work of these foundational scholars to explore the female community¹ that emerges within Tolkien's universe, a textual universe that

¹ I use the term community of women to help create the foundation for my method of investigation of the fluid engagement of women throughout Tolkien's literary portfolio to help organize my use of the triptych model for debate—a method I will describe in detail later in this introduction. As thus, while these characters do not find themselves side by side within individual works of his writing per se, they do share similar backgrounds and create a unified group when seen together and as a comprehensive unit, which is the task that I am hoping to accomplish in my investigation. Therefore, consider community as “an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location” (“community”). In this case the common location is within Tolkien's academic and literary writing and each character has joint ownership of each other as well as common characteristics and likenesses in their sense of characterization and actions within his texts.

stems from a deeply insightful and historical literary foundation of powerful female figures.

It is no small task to try to position myself and my research within the Tolkien debate that is comprised of Tolkien scholars and fans of pop culture alike. The vast array of knowledge and critique entrenched in the study of Tolkien and his works is expansive and often downright antagonistic. Fans and critics of any pop culture—and in my opinion, especially in association with Tolkien's writing—hold definitive views on how materials should be viewed, interpreted, created, and even studied or cited, which lends itself—and anyone daring to enter the conversation—to be a prime target for censure. Most recently, we see this phenomenon with the commentary and debate surrounding the current Amazon series *The Rings of Power*, in which social media and media alike have been enflamed by individual commentary either praising or condemning the show's interpretation of the realm of Middle-earth. My point in mentioning this conversation and critique centering on Tolkien's works—or pieces related to Tolkien's works—is to point out the difficulty in entering the conversation, but also in addressing the vast multitude of sources, references, and ideas that surround the Tolkien debate. The racist and ego-centrist vitriol that is spewed by certain fandom is toxic and derailing to the real progress of study, but a current byproduct of the greater Tolkien debate. It is an unfortunate reality that when discussing Tolkien's legendarium, especially in introducing new avenues of insight or evidence that challenge previous assumptions of Tolkien's works, there are many that are violently vocal against new and enriching ways to experience his creations.

New findings and areas of research encourage and push further scholarship in the Tolkien universe, which is necessary and needed, especially in dealing with modern themes and contexts in association with his writings. Furthermore, there is a need to connect Tolkien's universe in scholarship, especially between his fantasy works and his academic projects, which have received little attention due to their relative newness to the public—most of these materials, including *Sellic Spell*, have only been published within the last eight years. Tolkien's writing portfolio is comprised of the works of Middle-earth, but also includes his translations and academic poetry exploring Medieval poetry, Middle-English verse, and prose, as well as Finnish folklore. In addition to his published works, his manuscripts and notes are housed at Oxford University, Leeds College, Marquette University, and Wheaton College, which do not include the private papers and materials owned by the family estate. The sheer volume of writing that encompasses Tolkien's career is expansive yet provides a unique opportunity for exploration and critique since much of his lifelong writing is available to study, allowing readers and

critics alike to challenge these concepts and creations in new ways. Thus, my aim for my research is to illuminate the comprehensive and female-forward renderings of women in Tolkien's writing, as well as highlight those women from literary history that provide a foundation for his works. While I cannot possibly touch on every scholar, every material, discussion, and avenue that exists in connection with his characters—since the scope is so large—nonetheless, I hope to provide a well-researched and thorough academic investigation of the community of women that emerges from Tolkien's academic and fantasy writing career.

J.R.R. Tolkien's academic re-workings of medieval prose and poetry provide a unique and expansive perspective on the female characters in his *Legendarium*. My focus concerns the prevalence of female characters within Tolkien's cumulative works, which I define as his comprehensive fantasy writings and, by extension, his academic translations and poetic experiments that build upon the fragments of extant medieval works of literature. My discussion—as adapted from my dissertation work—aims to evidence the strength and power of female figures in Tolkien's works of *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* and *Smith of Wootton Major*; and his equally important academic translations of *Beowulf*, *Finn and Hengest*, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, and *Pearl*; and the academic and poetic experiments that are an extension of (or derived from) his academic and fantasy works including *Sellic Spell*, *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun*, *Kullervo*, *The Book of Lost Tales*, and *Beren and Lúthien*. In order to show the progression of Tolkien's evolutionary women, I look at the range and composition of his works and parse the renderings of medieval literary women to illustrate how his writings—at each unique stage—exhibit evidence of proto-female construction, as well as to elucidate the original muses that Tolkien utilizes as inspiration for the evolution of his female characters.

While considerable scholarly work has emerged in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries on individual female characters, my discussion goes a step further to highlight Tolkien's vast community of powerful female figures within his fantasy writing, not only singular female figures of power, that stem from the distinct and dominant female forces he creates within his academic translations and poetry. Again, community, in this case, refers to the fluidity in organizing and tracing the lineage of the female characters across multiple texts and variations; as well as how they come together in common ideas, characterization, and in their strength in power. Therefore, my aim in this discussion is to highlight the powerful and female-forward translations of Tolkien's original medieval, Norse, and Celtic figures and unveil how these characters lend shape to the powerful and dynamic female characters that appear within his original poetry and transform into the central figures that shape Middle-earth.

Thus, to map the evolution of Tolkien's female characters, the first aspect of my discussion focuses on the techniques of textual analysis and research framework that I employ in order to parse the expanse of Tolkien's work—including notes, manuscripts, typescripts, and academic renderings. By highlighting Tolkien's manuscript evidence, I create a careful mapping of his character evolution, which I borrow heavily from medieval manuscript evidence and technique, focusing on the transcendent nature and fluidity of his character development, as well as the performative voice that emerges from his vast array of textual witnesses. The next step in illuminating the power of Tolkien's female characters focuses on the women from medieval and Norse literary examples that serve as muses for his academic and fantasy works, whose characters and pieces serve as a critical authority and powerful figures in their own right. Furthermore, Tolkien's decision to create translations based upon the earlier female figures from oral tradition—and not from later translations—suggests a stand against the bias that appeared in the later translations, and as in dynamic female characters that challenge the post-Christian influence that rewrote many key literary figures as marginalized or sidelined compared to their origins. Accordingly, I trace the influence of these original strong and powerful women and their prominence in Tolkien's own literary women as figures of physical power, strength, autonomy, healing, and definitive rule within their respective stories.

My discussion establishes the prevalence of women in original medieval and Norse manuscripts and oral traditions that Tolkien argues have been misrepresented by bias in translation: the figures of Wealtheow, Hildeburh, Grendel's Mother, Hygd, and Modthryth from *Beowulf* and Judith from *Judith* both bound in *the Cotton Vitellus A. XV*; Guðrún, and Grímhild from the *Codex Regius* and *Völsung sagas*; and Pearl from *The Cotton Nero AX*.² This bias, in part, prompted his own work with the original Old English and Norse history to create what he deemed more accurate—and consequently female-forward—translations of the *Beowulf* stories and saga traditions. By establishing the foundation for Tolkien's creative inspiration, we can evaluate the oral tradition and performance of the historical and literary figures in his own writing. We can also establish the wide range of female figures of autonomy and power within Tolkien's own translations of these same characters, as well as those women from his own creative penning in the characters of The Ogress,

² I introduce the manuscripts here to draw attention to the fact that they are significant in this discussion to the original bound writings and placements in areas of the British Library, respective housing and texts; but also to highlight the importance of their earliest renderings as a point of contrast to the multitude of translations that contain significant variations and in some cases errors that change the characterization of the characters mentioned above.

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