

# Tolkien's Marian vision of Middle-earth

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*"And now thy very face and form, dear Mother, speak to us of the Eternal...O harbinger of day! O hope of the pilgrim! Lead us still as thou hast led; in the dark night, across the bleak wilderness, guide us on to our Lord Jesus, guide us home."<sup>1</sup>*

John Henry Newman

When the results of the 1997 Waterstone's poll determined J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to be the "greatest book of the century,"<sup>2</sup> it came as no surprise to its millions of devoted readers. Although the books do have some shortcomings, shortcomings that even C. S. Lewis (one of the *Rings* greatest advocates) acknowledged<sup>3</sup>, they are highly readable and redemptive texts that bear repeated readings. They are, according to one commentator, "richer and deeper than many books more carefully crafted by shallow men."<sup>4</sup>

One shortcoming, either real or perceived, that might be observed by those who are more sensitive to feminist issues is that Tolkien's epic is dominated by masculine figures. Feminine figures rarely appear or play a critical role in the fortunes of Middle-earth. In contrast to this, my reflections upon Tolkien's life work<sup>5</sup> elicit an entirely different response. Instead of being dominantly masculine, I understand the text to have an almost permeable feminine vision which, when interpreted theologically, I deem to be a Marian vision. Like Sir Gawain who "on the inner side of his shield her image depainted, / that when he cast his eyes thither his courage never failed"<sup>6</sup>, Tolkien was guided by Feminine/Marian inspiration. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has a creative and redemptive feminine perspective that must not be minimised or lost.

The feminine vision overlooking the entire corpus of the *Rings* trilogy becomes apparent when we appreciate the role that Beren and Luthien<sup>7</sup> played in the life of Tolkien himself, in *The Lord of the Rings* generally, and regarding certain characters within the text specifically. This position, although my emphasis differs from that of Caldecott<sup>8</sup>, is reinforced by Tolkien when he writes " [Beren and Luthien are] at the very core of...*The Lord of the Rings*."<sup>9</sup> Luthien, like the Blessed Mother/Blessed Virgin for each one of us, represents the feminine – and, in fact, redemptive<sup>10</sup> – love and light inspiring Beren on his quest. The figures of Aragorn and Arwen, key figures in *The Lord of the Rings*, are similarly patterned.<sup>11</sup> Frodo, a crucial character in the *Rings*, finds similar, although non-romantic (in the current sense of the word "romantic" ), inspiration in Galadriel (more later).

This concept of the feminine love and light is not exclusive to Tolkien's work. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the parallels between the figure of Beatrice and the Blessed Virgin must not be underestimated, bear a like (albeit less subtle) vision. And, as shall be seen, Tolkien's subtler vision does not in any way diminish, but enhances, the hope and scope of his message. Does the lesser role of Our Lady in the plan of salvation in any

way diminish her influence over the entire corpus of Roman Catholic theology?

Four events or orientations influenced the writing of the *Rings*. These are: the death of Tolkien's mother when he was very young; his devotion to Mother Church; his dedication to the Blessed Mother/Blessed Virgin and Tolkien's domestication by Edith, his wife and his Luthien.<sup>12</sup> Together, these constitute the sociopsycopneumatic underpinnings of the feminine vision inspiring and guiding Tolkien's texts.

Tolkien's mother died when he was very young.<sup>13</sup> Tolkien considered her death to be martyrdom for her Catholic faith, and a chief reason why he entered Mother Church.<sup>14</sup> Joseph Pearce, author of *Tolkien: Man and Myth* (among many other noteworthy texts about leading literary figures) writes "Tolkien's relationship with his mother was very important, potent if not omnipotent...she accompanied him from the cradle to the grave..."<sup>15</sup> It is in no way flippant to suggest that this death, and the sense of loss resulting from it, constitute the intrapersonal grist inspiring both the writing and subtle feminine flavor of Tolkien's texts.

The transfer of affection from his lost mother to the living arms of Mother Church is not easily missed. Pearce, quoting Tolkien's biographer Humphrey Carpenter, draws attention to this distinct possibility.<sup>16</sup> Having worked in the field of psychology and counselling for almost twenty years, I do not find such a suggestion to be either exaggerated or sacrilegious. Fathers and mothers do influence our impressions, for good and ill, of God and the Blessed Mother. Tolkien's dedication to the Roman Catholic Church cannot be underestimated.

Tolkien's dedication to Our Lady is also amply demonstrated. After the death of his beloved mother, Tolkien was raised by a priest who knew Cardinal John Henry Newman (quoted at the beginning of this article). Undoubtedly this priest, like Newman, shared a similar devotion to the Blessed Mother and communicated this devotion to his charge. Tolkien, in his *Letters*<sup>17</sup>, suggested that all of his perceptions of beauty and majesty were rooted in Our Lady. George Sayer, in his chapter from Pearce's *Celebration*, writes that Tolkien "attributed anything that was good or beautiful in his writing to the influence of Our Lady."<sup>18</sup> The bridge between the affection that Tolkien had for his mother, Mother Church, and the Blessed Mother is critical to who Tolkien was, and what Tolkien wrote.

Tolkien was a very domesticated man. C.S. Lewis referred to Tolkien as the most married man that he knew.<sup>19</sup> Home was his haven and the source of his inspiration.<sup>20</sup> The place where Tolkien was "tamed" , where he truly "lived" , were the sociopsycopneumatically linked "homes" of mother-love, Mother Church, the Blessed Mother and Edith – his Luthien and the mother of their children. These constitute the feminine "compass" guiding the *Rings* in its writing as well as (through certain feminine characters within his texts) the entire landscape of Middle-earth. While, possibly, the characters

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may indeed be dominantly masculine, the context – its writer, writing and ethos – is feminine in focus. One could say that Tolkien, using the literary genre of Epic Romance that is structurally masculine, nevertheless communicates a substantially feminine vision.

However, notwithstanding this feminine emphasis, an emphasis that is profound in its subtlety, it can be appreciated how some readers might perceive Tolkien's Middle-earth as being dominantly masculine. It could be capably argued that feminine figures rarely appear in Tolkien's epic, and that the roles played by feminine figures are idealised and ethereal. While to some extent this may be an accurate evaluation, I would ask the reader to consider whether the ethereal and ideal do not constitute the essential and fundamental substance of our world. Does not "heaven" constitute the ideal structure of what "earth" should be? Is not the spiritual and social structure of humanity to reflect the nature of the Trinity? Are we not to aspire to the hailed grace of the Blessed Mother? Charles Williams, an acquaintance of Tolkien and friend of C.S. Lewis, suggested that flesh speaks as Spirit speaks, but Spirit knows of what it speaks<sup>21</sup>. The ideal and the ethereal are the substantial structures upon which our world, and Middle-earth, are constructed.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches, as well as advocates, the status of Our Lady as co-redeemer. It was She who gave us Our Lord – the Bread of Life and the Light of the World. She who was "full of grace" (in all that these words theologically and practically imply), the "Second Eve", said the sub-ultimate "yes" to God<sup>22</sup> and by doing so gave us "Emmanuel" who is "God with us."<sup>23</sup> Can any other part, except that which was fulfilled by Our Lord, be conceived? Not likely! With this "yes" heaven and earth, temporal and eternal, God and humanity, ethereal and practical are forever joined. Apart from the King, only the Queen plays such a noble role.

This emphasis permeates Tolkien's world. Tolkien's feminine vision of Middle-earth mirrors the noble emphasis given Our Lady in Catholic theology. Consider the crucial

feminine figures of Middle-earth. Galadriel first appears in *The Fellowship of the Ring* when she assists the company on their perilous journey. It is stated that "[t]here is in her...no evil."<sup>24</sup> Moreover she provides the fellowship with both light to combat the darkness<sup>25</sup> and a portion of her garden without stain<sup>26</sup> in order to renew the earth after the defeat of the great evil. This is beautifully described in Tolkien's final volume, *The Return of the King*.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, apart from this, another woman (Eowyn) plays a critical role in the war of the ring when she slays "the great beast."<sup>28</sup>

Reviewing these details, we can readily appreciate the biblical/theological pattern of redemption. The connections between the feminine figures and Our Lady – of light with Christ, of the first earth (Eden/Lorien) with the renewed earth after the last great battle and the death of "the great beast" with the final victory over the Evil One as promised to Eve and (through her posterity) fulfilled through Our Lady<sup>29</sup> – easily fit the themes of creation, fall, redemption and consummation<sup>30</sup> as found in the bible. Our Lady gave us Our Lord, the Light of the world. She is the vision that has guided a multitude of weary souls through the purgatory of this earth. Unstained, through her Son, she defeats "the great beast" and returns us to the garden that was lost. The feminine in Middle-earth, from the creation of the company of the ring to the consummation of their dreams in *The Return of the King*, parallels the redemptive roles that Our Lady fulfilled in salvation history.

What are the practical implications of Tolkien's texts? Most immediately, at least from my perspective, they are not sexist texts. In fact, as has been hopefully demonstrated, they display a permeable feminine presence that demonstrates a very high, in fact salvific, estimation of women. But, more appropriate to the practical applications of Tolkien's world view, what can be suggested? Women have had, and currently do have, a critical role in salvation history. It is to such a high calling that women and men must equally aspire. Together, and only together in both the Church and the world, can we achieve the intention of God and return to the Garden of which Lorien is only a pale but beautiful shadow.

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## References

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3. Pearce, Joseph (ed.). *Tolkien: A Celebration*. London, 1999, p. 7
4. *Celebration*. p. 18
5. *Man and Myth*. p. 5
6. Tolkien, J.R.R. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. New York. p. 39
7. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion* Boston, 1977, Chapter 19
8. *Celebration* pp. 22-26
9. *Celebration* p. 22
10. *Celebration* pp. 23-24
11. *Celebration*. p. 25
12. *Celebration*. pp. 10 and 25
13. *Man and Myth* pp. 19-20
14. *Man and Myth* p. 21
15. *Man and Myth* pp. 24-25
16. *Man and Myth* p. 21
17. Carpenter, Humphrey (ed.) *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. London, 1981, p. 172
18. *Celebration* p. 11
19. *Celebration* p. 14
20. *Celebration* p. 11
21. Unfortunately I have forgotten the source for this concept except to say that it was by Williams
22. Cf. St. Luke 1: 38 and 22: 39-44
23. St. Matthew 1: 23-24
24. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York, 1954, p. 349
25. *Fellowship* p. 367
26. *Fellowship* p. 341
27. Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King*. New York, 1955, pp. 999-1001
28. *Return* pp. 823-824
29. Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd Edition). Washington D.C., 1997, p. 123
30. Although it is a common paradigm, I am personally indebted to Dr. John R. W. Stott (I believe in his book, *Between Two Worlds*) for this insight.