

There Are Two People In This Marriage

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The meditation in this paper originally arose out of a reading of Christine Barkley's 'Point of View in Tolkien' in the *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference*, which reached the UK in the spring of 1996. It was an accidental result, for it does not take issue with any of the valuable points raised in Christine's paper. Much of the *Part of the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen* can only have been told originally by Aragorn. Both the *Tale* and the *Lay of Lúthien and Beren* sung in *The Lord of the Rings* are tributes to Aragorn and Arwen's love. But the paper threw a switch. I suddenly had that feeling that I had forgotten something. Groping for a clue, I found that the light was there, all right, but I had taken it so much for granted that I had never even dusted it.

In examining the impulses behind Aragorn's telling of the *Lay of Lúthien and Beren* and the *Part of the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen*, Christine writes:

... we cannot assume Frodo or any hobbit translated, transcribed, or wrote from memory this tale ... I prefer to think that it was written, dictated, or related by Aragorn himself – certainly dialogue is included between Aragorn and his mother Gilraen, between Aragorn and Elrond, and even between Aragorn and Arwen which only he would know. And also the story continues beyond the death of Aragorn to that of Arwen as well, so the court scribe as narrator seems more likely, but I will refer to Aragorn as the narrator in the same way I called Gandalf the narrator of "The Quest of Erebor" since (other than a little harmless flattery of Aragorn) the scribe does not seem to interject his own world view or observations.

With many significant dialogues between the hero and his family, by far the greater part of the *Tale* tells of Aragorn's early life, Aragorn's coming of age, Aragorn's feelings and motivations, his love for Arwen, his relationship with his mother and with Elrond his foster-father; his heritage, his career, his victory, his long and happy reign, and his departure. We see the meeting of Arwen and Aragorn through his eyes: it is her grace, and the turnings of her head, and her laughter that are described, but only his feelings are stated. The feelings of Arwen, Gilraen and Elrond are recounted at other points, but they are, through most of the *Tale*, nested within the story of Aragorn's life.

The Prologue to *The Lord of the Rings* gives Faramir's grandson Barahir as "writer" of the *Tale*, "some time after the passing of the King", and "Findegil, King's Writer, IV 172" as the scribe who made in Minas Tirith the copy referred to, but Aragorn must, within the story, be the ultimate source of much of the material, as it includes very private conversations between himself and Elrond or Gilraen. Aragorn is called "the King" at the start, which is not how he is normally introduced in *The Lord of the Rings*. (Having done so, it settles down again to calling him Aragorn.) The whole *Tale* is related in quote marks, a sign that the story is being quoted, probably by a scribe, and probably verbatim, from another source. (The quote marks are in some ways the most curious thing about it, as they continue right to the end, where the final valediction must have been written in the north, and not in Minas Tirith.) If you were to come first to the *Tale* in Appendix A, rather than straight from the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* as I did, it would be clearer that the material is probably being quoted, in its Red Book context, by an ongoing chronicler, presumably from an earlier source. Throughout Appendix A, some material is quoted, like the story of Helm Hammerhand; and some is not, like the interpolated commentary. It is not stated when the Great Smials copy was sent back to the Shire, but the copy (IV 172) was made 50 years after Aragorn died. It would be, by the time it appears, by far the latest piece of writing in the Red Books, apart possibly from some Hobbit gossip which does not in any case appear in the Appendices.

The *Tale* has many of the characteristics of a chronicle or history, and chronicles are often compiled from diverse sources and written down by learned people who were not part of the action. Another well-known assumption about chronicles is that some of the material will be speculative at best, or even the product of the chronicler's vivid imagination. And indeed, the *Tale* must have been at least partly compiled, for it relates private conversations, and events after the death of Aragorn, who had been witness (in some cases the only witness) to most of the contents.

As for speculation, *The Lord of the Rings* is a work in which the reader can accept reported events as "true" within the story. Therefore I accepted that the events reported at the end of the *Tale* are intended

to be “true”, and not, for example, the dramatisation of an annalist, even though the end explicitly allows for no witnesses.

And all these factors conspired to disarm me for 20 years of the questions: “Who saw these things? Who knew them, and who told them?”

So, we assume that the material of the story came from a reliable source. And, being as how most of it reads like his biography, and he having outlived most of the other possible sources, it is inevitable that the primary interviewee must be Aragorn, although he was not the writer. But my inner elbow was telling me that I was missing something (I wish it would do that more often), and I started scribbling in the margin, as I often do. It was my scribbling that spotted it.

“It is not a story told by Aragorn - altho’ most of the personal material must have come from him OR ARWEN” said my pencil, desperately trying to get my attention, and then it arm-wrestled me viciously and underlined it, just in case I missed it again. (I wish it would do that more often.)

“Or Arwen”, it said.

Or Arwen. Well, of course, *some* of the material must have come from Arwen, as she was the only one there and alive at the time. Presumably the chronicler (being conscientious) had interviewed everyone involved. But what’s the point of assuming that Arwen was the teller of the *Tale*? And does it matter?

I had always made the assumption, despite the statements (which are not part of the *Tale* itself) about scribes, and the quote marks, that the primary voice of the *Part of the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen* was that of our author, J.R.R. Tolkien. My main reasons for this were two: the marked difference in style between the body of *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Tale*, and the sharp register-shifts of viewpoint at the end, which I will come back to.

In short, I took it that at this point he put down the Red Book and began by degrees to tell a tale he knew himself, in his own voice. The Appendices themselves are presented as a mixture of extracts from Annals, Tolkien’s own editorial, and (in the case of the “unquoted” sections) what I take to be Red Book editorial (say, chiefly by Bilbo or Frodo). At the end of the *Tale*, the voice of the internal chronicler and the voice that must be at last the voice of Tolkien the storyteller, slide one into the other, the shift obscured only by the quote marks, which enclose the entirety. He does not devise an excuse or

explanation for describing what he says no-one saw. He allows the story to take over.

The omniscient view is the one that he must adopt, at that point, if he is to report faithfully that Arwen came to Lórien at the end of her life, and lived alone there, and accepted her death upon Cerin Amroth.

So what with Tolkien telling it and Barahir grandson of Faramir doing the interviews and the writing-up, I did not stop and meditate that someone within the story might personally have related most of this tale at one go. I am not exactly making that claim now, but I am holding up for consideration, because the voices I hear in it have altered, diverged and unified, and begun to make a new kind of sense.

It is not as if this change is a giant step. Whoever the storyteller is, the last part of the story moves the focus gradually but relentlessly away from Aragorn and onto Arwen. The parting of Arwen and Elrond is recalled in the very moment of victory, and Arwen’s death is foreshadowed even before her reign is described. Clearly Arwen is the only witness to her last conversation with Aragorn - his ability to relate events ceases here, as he drops dead. And yet, until now, although she was the last and, at the last, the only witness, it did not occur to me to think of her as a narrator. With that shift came the ability to see her as, substantially, the narrator of the whole of the *Tale*, from its beginning to its end: “... all the days of her life ...” All the days, that is, that the busy Men of Minas Tirith and Oxford Town had time to write down in their chronicles.

With that shift a new light appears over a number of things. Seen through Arwen’s eyes, the descriptions of Aragorn’s appearance are no longer the respectful dramatisations of a chronicler, but the response of the only person left alive who had seen him in his youth, and knew those who also knew and loved him. And the (much fewer) references to her own appearance become words that Aragorn himself spoke to her, and in all likelihood to their children and other close friends, during his life with her. And who could report that “her face was more grave, and her laughter now seldom was heard”, while Aragorn was absent in the wild, except Arwen herself? Perhaps even Aragorn did not know that this was how it was with her, before they were betrothed.

Then there is that statement she makes when she first meets him. She says, in effect, that she must not be mistaken for Lúthien Tinúviel, “Though maybe my doom will be not unlike hers.” What an odd thing

for an elf-lady to say to a young Man at first acquaintance! To anyone who knows the *Lay*, it is likely to convey a selection from “I might just run away with a mortal, argue with Mandos and die” But Arwen is not any old Elf-lady; she is one of the Halfelven, the family of Elrond, who have been given special dispensation to choose between the life of the Elves or the Doom of Men. It is quite likely, I conclude, that this is (on the face of it) simply a conversational way of jogging the memory of a new acquaintance about Lúthien’s descendants. Were her interlocutor any kind of Elf west of the White Mountains, he would certainly have responded “Ah! You must be Elrond’s daughter!”

And yet it seems rather too allusive a remark to spring on some young Man she has never met before. Do Elves normally greet Men they don’t know with crossword clues?¹ It is just possible that, in the moments of meeting, she does not realise that he is not an Elf. And it is quite clear, further down the conversation, that he has not quite internalised the fact that she *is* one – even though she looks like Lúthien and has already told him that she is Elrond’s daughter. Aragorn is, within the constraints of his dignity and intelligence, in goldfish mode.

As for Arwen, the famous fate of Lúthien, as we have seen, was that she eloped with a human and died as a result. But I do not think that was what Arwen intended to convey to Aragorn. That would be a little previous for a lady in her position. Aragorn certainly doesn’t draw that inference (or he would not have been so depressed on the next page). But that, intended or no, is the meaning of her words. Not only will her doom be not unlike Lúthien’s, but it will be for the same reason, and a lot sooner than she had imagined.

And herself? Did it touch her mind at that moment? Unlike Aragorn, she is not conspicuously afflicted, but there must be some reason for calling Elves “wise”, and a much lesser wisdom than Arwen’s would have seen clearly, somewhere between the moment that she made that remark and the moment that she realises that Aragorn is deeply confused about what he is experiencing, the arrival of the goldfish. She would have watched it orbiting gently round, mouth opening and shutting with

nothing sensible coming out, before she stepped in to bring him down gently: she is 81.25% Elf, and carries her years well, but she is old enough (by roughly 1084 times) to be his mother². And yet, in those few moments, Arwen and Aragorn, despite the differences of age and species, meet each other as girl and boy, reacting to the moment for just long enough to give both of them something to think about.

For she looked into his eyes, where he saw her nature. Perhaps she did not pay enough attention to the songs about her ancestors. Perhaps she did. She was wise, but you are never wise enough to know what will happen to you. But apart from that moment, there is nothing in this first meeting to suggest that Arwen made any connection with Aragorn other than an amiable conversation with a distant cousin.

It is Aragorn who calls after her, hurls the gravest and most sincere of compliments at her feet, fails to understand what he is hearing and turns pink. Shortly afterwards, his mother extracts his secret and warns him that he is barking up the wrong birch of many summers. Aragorn, chin firm, replies “Then bitter will my days be, and I will walk in the wild alone.” Adrian Mole would have been proud of him, and yet such is the nature of the *Tale* that this is literally true, and Aragorn simply serves to remind us that, young, we are all Adrian Mole at heart, unless there is something very wrong with us.

Shortly after that (and unsurprisingly), Arwen’s father tells him gently that his dilemma is obvious, and that it is time he threw himself into his work, instead of thinking about girls. Elrond betrays no hint that Aragorn’s feelings might be in the smallest way reciprocated; he implies the opposite, yet he is clearly an anxious man. Be that as it may, during the next 29 years, although Aragorn must have visited Rivendell from time to time if only to see his mother, he and Arwen do not meet again. Even her gravity in Lórien could as well be a sign of the times as an uneasy heart. But when she sees him again, she falls in love and engages herself to him, and the thread is picked up as if it were never in doubt.

Yet there is no sign that Arwen felt a mission to follow the fate of Lúthien, or that she had spent 2710 years of single life waiting for her Beren to come. On the contrary, her immediate family tended to take

¹ I am very much afraid that the answer to this may be “no and yes”.

² This is, of course, a data-based interpretation. What she actually says is “Do not wonder! For the children of Elrond have the life of the Eldar.” As if Aragorn didn’t know that. But he clearly needed reminding. The other equation that he has temporarily overlooked is: Elrond = (around for a long time/has two sons) x (wife conspicuous by absence for several centuries/still alive = no other wife culturally permissible) = any daughter will be several centuries old. At least.

their time about marrying (even Elwing and Eärendil waited until their parents left home), and for a Lady of Rivendell she seems to have spent a great deal of time in Lórien, where the opportunity for meeting mortals was statistically insignificant. She bore the *epessë* Evenstar, and was no doubt aware that her own people's time in Middle-earth was past its zenith. This is pure conjecture, but it may be that she had no desire to start a family unless something in her people's situation changed decisively in the direction of flourishing and growth. Despite her own relative security, there was no sign that this would happen in Middle-earth. It was unlikely that she connected any such change with Men, as they had a fairly consistent history of destruction rather than renewal, particularly in Arnor. She has seen Men come and go, and she has a cool attitude towards the old Númenóreans for carelessly throwing away their island paradise and much else. This coolness probably did not extend conspicuously to the descendants of Elendil, who had not taken part in the fatal rebellion (but who had nonetheless messed up in a number of ways. Isildur, for example), and who were in any case relations. But it is clear that once she starts considering the practicalities, she finds separating herself from her people the Elves, and from her family, very hard indeed.

"Maybe my doom will be not unlike hers", she said, and yet her doom was unlike Lúthien's in so many ways. No rebellion. No family rows. No personal confrontations with major demonic forces or private recitals with the Keeper of the Dead. Instead, long waiting, little news, an uncomfortably clear knowledge of what the outcomes could be for her and her family, and a great deal of needlework. Then, a settled and happy marriage, family, comfort, admiration, authority, and no holy flesh-eating jewel to wear her away out of the living world.

And yet these words might be spoken by a lady who knew, at last, that she resembled Lúthien Tinúviel only too well, lack of jewel-thieving and tower-demolition notwithstanding – a lady, maybe,

recently widowed, who was relating the story of her life with her husband to a family friend as one of the last actions of that life.

Perhaps this is what happened. I hope so, because the story of Lúthien tells three important things, which the Elves clearly held to be truth: that she fell in love with a mortal Man, that she objected, as strenuously as she could, to being parted from him, and that the Powers that Be listened, and did not part them. This is the comfort that Aragorn does not seek to comfort Arwen with in his last moment, but which we know he knew how to sing, and must have sung to her often:

The Sundering Seas between them lay,
And yet at last they met once more,
And long ago they passed away
In the forest singing sorrowless.

And Aragorn – at the last, he seems to believe that Arwen still has the ability to leave the mortal world and rejoin her own people, if she chooses to do so. But she says emphatically that it is too late. This has excited a great deal of comment over the years – which one of them is right? Yet the Tale emphasises this fact no fewer than three times: looking forward, at their betrothal: "her choice was made, and her doom appointed"; at the time of Elrond's departure: "But Arwen became a mortal woman ..." and, looking back, at his deathbed: "Nay, dear lord ... that choice is long over ..." ³

So there is no contradiction in the text. Arwen gave up her immortality purely through her choice, but the change in her nature took place when Elrond left Middle-earth⁴, not when Aragorn gave up his life. There was no more choice. And she knew this. But it seems that he didn't.

I like that. It shows that she didn't nag.

The last part of the *Tale* dismisses all eyewitnesses and tells what no-one saw: Arwen's last days in Lothlórien. Barahir might have reported that she went away, but the narrative is specific that she lived alone in Lórien, and then laid herself to rest on Cerin

³ The existence of tripled events, symbols and characters in ancient European literature is well established, as is Tolkien's occasional use of the same. The three Elven-rings and the three Elven-houses are the most obvious examples. I think it unlikely that the triple emphasis here is accidental. It's as plain as Skuld, Urd and Verdandi (though not in that order).

⁴ Speculatively, you could build a case, based on the sacred Elven (and presumably Númenórean) marriage tradition, unbreakable outside death, for thinking that the consummation of the marriage itself compelled her nature to take on his. This would, of course, apply only to the Halfelven family of Elrond, who had been given a free choice.

If this was the case, then Elrond, in marrying Celebrían of Lórien, would have confirmed his nature as Elven. Yet there is a sign, late in time, that Tolkien missed Elrond, too, and tentatively tried to renew his human option. (Sorry, I have completely lost the reference. It's in one of the later Histories.) However sound his instincts in wanting Elrond back with us, and whatever the biology of it, he apparently hadn't got round to looking at it from Celebrían's point of view.

Amroth (babe-in-the-wood-like) as the leaves were falling. We could slide round our author and postulate shadowy servants, trusted and faithful, invisible to the story as servants so often are; an escort across the leagues between Gondor and Lothlórien, someone to watch over her from a respectful distance and then return. Or maybe there were still a few locals in Lórien to pass on the word. Or maybe she left her parting thoughts on a folded mallorn leaf in a forked stick, and they were found by passing hikers and carried faithfully south in a backpack until they reached Minas Tirith. Maybe Barahir mounted a research expedition to Lórien many years later and found her memorial inscribed in the bark of a mallorn tree. But I think this is beside the point. We are told that she was alone in Lórien, waiting for winter. "*and the land was silent*". Who says? For a paragraph or two, we see as it were through our own eyes the silent woods and the distant forgetful future. This is the end of the story. (It really is. When Tolkien tried to pick up the threads of Middle-earth history a few years later, he found that he could not do it.)

But he made a fitting conclusion. The final line says: "this tale, as it has come to us from the South." The voice of the storyteller has twanged back into the Tale and landed again, not in Minas Tirith where the tale was written, but back in the North, where the Red Book began, with Tolkien (and ourselves) and the Hobbits.

Arwen is two people. One of her is very old; a little under 3,000 years, thoughtful, knowledgeable, queenly, knowing many things that the years bring. But she is not a queen. Dividing her time between her father's house in Rivendell and her granny's tree in Laurelindórenan, Lady of Imladris and of Lórien, but not in a complete sense Lady of either, she seems in her moments of crisis to be completely vulnerable. What she saw in Aragorn at that first meeting, who knows? All we know is that, after she met him, Elrond her father feels compelled to talk seriously to Aragorn and cannot rule out the possibility that his daughter might fall in love with his foster-son. So it falls out. We have no indication that Arwen considers her relationship with Aragorn as a divine calling. This is the comfort that Elrond offers to himself. As for Arwen, she sees Aragorn again after a long absence, fed and clothed by her grandmother Galadriel, and she chooses him, not without fear. At this second meeting, it is he that is seen through her eyes, and it is her inner thoughts, not his, that are told.

Her life makes a turn then, and afterwards, as she waits for him, her greatest fear seems to be that the victory may not be achieved, not of the vast renunciation she must make to be part of it. She was in love, and Aragorn's welfare, not her own, was her main preoccupation. The hope she experienced was also bound up with the war against Sauron and the welfare of her world. But she cannot have forgotten that if her hopes came to pass, she would not only lose her long life, but her father and brothers, and would never see her mother again. Did Elf-ladies in Middle-earth keep diaries for family overseas? "Dear Mother, If I should not make it Home to Aman –" In the way that young men do in war, or young mothers for their tiny children when they find themselves facing illness and premature death.

Before *The Silmarillion* was published, I assumed that Lúthien was the elder of the two, old and powerful and long-lasting, and that Arwen was the younger one, drawn on by her love, but desperately unsure of what was ahead of her. Then we find what we find so often, that the truth is the opposite of the obvious: Arwen was old and wise, and Lúthien was the green girl. The hair-cutting, the fleeing, the father-defying, the breaking-and-entering – none of that is in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is not so much that it is hard to imagine Arwen cutting off her hair and shinning down Hírilorn, but that it is hard to imagine anyone wanting to send her up there in the first place. She is, almost, Juliet: entirely sincere, but not, despite her resolution, prepared for what comes after. This is why she is still young. It is almost impossible for her to go into this, the other side of her family destiny, with her eyes open.

After 25 years and XXII volumes of the Histories, I am now less sure than ever what it was our author saw in Elrond's daughter, who appeared at a late stage in his creation and was called Finduilas till an even later one. Frodo sees her, and his reaction is to go pink, look somewhere else and start concentrating on his food. (Fortunately, he did not resolve to marry her.) She dresses in grey, speaks softly but frankly, laughs and sings, and makes her quiet plans for Frodo's welfare. We know that she is beautiful, and that she and her father (unlike Lúthien and Thingol) are able to talk together about serious things without falling out.

But her last recorded words are an argument. Aragorn appears decisive, as indeed he must be if he is to go first and steadily, carrying the vast responsibility that he has taken upon himself in

marrying her. He says: it is time for me to go. There is nothing to be done about it. Now you must choose. One day, things will be better. She answers that she has no choice, any more than any human has, and she must abide the Doom of Men whether she wishes to or not. "If this is indeed the gift ..." she says. "Hope ..." she cries, and hope dies.

Who carries the argument? Not Aragorn, steadfast as he is. Not Arwen. The answer is not in their hands, or even in Tolkien's.

Aragorn speaks for hope, for what, as a Man, he believes of what he has been told about the Creator's intentions for the World. It is Arwen who appears to despair. Odd, that, is it not? Her people have been fostered by the servants of Eru since the World was young. They live long lives not subject to death and decay. But they too accept that this will change one day, and that the ending of their World is part of Eru's plan. Even the Exiles remain essentially Unfallen, in that, although they are not without sin or error, they continue to believe unequivocally in their Creator and put their trust in him. Unlike Men, they have never turned away from that Creator willingly to follow Melkor or his agents. And as a Halfelven, Arwen herself is descended from at least two people who chose human nature freely (not to mention one who chose Elvishness reluctantly). So she seems well fitted to come to terms with a human destiny. But it turns out that she was no better fitted for it than the rest of us. Elves and Men have one important thing in common (apart from their general outward appearance, of course): they don't like being dead.

Tolkien was a Catholic, and my modest understanding of Catholic death is that the spirit moves immediately to some form of judgement; to heaven, hell or purgatory. Many believe that there will be a place in the new kingdom when it arises for those who lived honourable lives before the time of Christ; who must, however, wait for the Day of Judgement to learn their fate. If the story of Arda reflects on one level Tolkien's personal beliefs – and I think he has made it clear that it does – then we must take it that he had this in mind for his pre-Christian people. I am not going to discuss details of doctrines or belief – apart from anything else, the fine detail is not relevant here, for reasons I will come to – but I must try to sketch out the personal context in which Aragorn and Arwen confront each other at Aragorn's deathbed.⁵

In the story of Arda, Mandos is the keeper of the halls of the dead; we are told that Men do not stay with him, but that they have in Mandos a "time of waiting"; else Lúthien would not have caught up with Beren there. Death here is not like going under an anaesthetic and waking up a few multimillenia later saying "what time is it?" If there is loss and silence, then there is an experience of loss and silence. And yet those words would stand very well for the annihilation that people often fear. "The spirit of Lúthien fell down into darkness" said Tolkien, of her experience of dying.

It has been said that Aragorn and Arwen's exchange is on one side an intimation of Christianity to come, knowing its saviour, and on the other side an honourable paganism, holding its head up in the face of darkness. This may be as good a way of describing it as any that can be found, although it describes the exchange, not the speakers, who share the same cultural background. Aragorn in some way "knows" enough to trust that all will be well. Arwen, despite ancestors and traditions shared with him, and much closer to boot, is at that time unable to cleave to that assurance. But why is this? Arwen is the great-great-granddaughter of the woman who negotiated directly with Mandos and got her husband resurrected; the brother's daughter of Elros Halfelven, who opted to be a Man when he could have been an Elf; the granddaughter of Eärendil who, when offered immortal Elvenhood in Aman (that desirable residence for the sake of which an entire continent was toppled into the Sea when the locals tried to relocate) said, OK, he would do it if his wife wanted, but he would much rather be a Man. None of these people seemed to lack assurance of the ultimate Gifthood of the Doom of Men. But Arwen does. Because she too is now Man, on the verge of mortality. Not any old mortal Man, either. She is our author, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, and all the rest of us. This is not (as I think we all come to know) an argument between two beliefs or even two experiences, but the inner voice of a Man, meditating on the hardest thing that Man has to consider.

The quiet, carefully certain voice of Aragorn says: "I speak no comfort to you, for there is no comfort for such pain within the circles of the world ... In sorrow we must go, but not in despair" He tells her the truth as he knows it. We know he is speaking the truth, because he is an honourable man, and if his

⁵ I recently read a theatre review in which the hero "confronts his mother on her deathbed". Three days later, a note corrected this to "comforts his mother on her deathbed".

belief was of a more pessimistic nature, he would not have drawn her into his fate. But his words are the considered words of resolve, for him and for her. He can hope or despair, so he has made an informed choice and opted for hope. But the voice of Arwen is still on the razor edge between resignation and the despair of a cornered living thing, and she speaks directly from that experience: "I must indeed abide the Doom of Men, whether I will or I nill – but not till now have I understood the tale of your people and their fall. As wicked fools I scorned them, but I pity them at last. For if this is indeed, as the Eldar say, the gift of the One to Men, it is bitter to receive."

For Arwen is an angry woman; she is angry for Aragorn's sake and her own. And maybe she is angry with him too. Many people experience unwilling anger towards a dying or departed parent or partner, however much loved and blameless, even knowing that their anger is only their own helplessness in a situation that it cannot comprehend.

Arwen was not born to die. Even though she "became as a mortal woman", there is no sign that she aged much in her lifetime. Aragorn himself, ageing as he was, was still hale. Let's get technical: if at their wedding she had a biological age of about 20, then she was biologically about 60 years younger than him, and genetically part-Elf to boot, whatever her official fate. Tolkien is quite specific that she was not yet weary of her days, as Men may eventually become. But, young or old, most people die when they would rather live, and it was only because she did what many a woman does, and chose her man and threw her lot in with his trials and travels and all that followed. Did he think, when he was writing Arwen's *Tale*, of his mother's trials, maybe of his wife's family church, maybe even of her piano? Who knows? He lived with Aragorn for quite a long time, and then he came near the conclusion of the story and found Arwen. This very old, very young woman, whom he doesn't know terribly well, is speaking for him.

Unable to repent of her choice of mortality, Arwen in her humanity makes a confession and repentance of another kind. "... not till now have I understood the tale of your people and their fall. As wicked fools I scorned them, but I pity them at last ..." One need not deny the badness and arrogance of Ar-Pharazôn's invasion of Aman to realise that he

was a desperate man, or blame his fears entirely upon the evil influence of Sauron. I doubt that Arwen had encountered the whisperings of Sauron ever in her life⁶, but, blameless as she is, she is still afraid.

It has been said that Arwen is cold in this scene. I can only think: be there, come back and say that you were not cold. This scene has been very carefully set up. There is none of the allusiveness of Aragorn and Arwen's first meeting. There is a granite edge to it; they are not histrionic people, but in the formality of the exchange there is more than the measured tone of controlled emotion. They are at a point where explosive sorrow has no further purpose or meaning. (If it did, it took place, just off-stage, somewhere on the lower half of the previous page.) They must say to each other exactly what they have to say, for they do not have much time. We are excluded from both of them during this conversation, shown nothing of their inner thoughts, and seeing neither of them through the other's eyes. But there is a moment, just before it begins, when she is pleading for her life.

It seems almost to be Aragorn's voluntary death that upsets Arwen most. 'Voluntary' is also a gift, but not necessarily easier on the day. It was Lúthien, with the passion of youth and danger, who went after Beren into Mandos. She did not have to see Beren volunteer, or have her course defined for her in advance. Being grown-up is so much more organised. It brings the blessings of time and thought, but, in the end, we must fall off our perch, fortunate if there is someone to hold our hand. It may be a bit futile to draw parallels with Edith, because this was written nearly 20 years before her death, but I wonder if Tolkien thought of this, when he went back with her to live in Bournemouth. Arwen had to return to Bournemouth-on-the-Nimrodel by herself.

This is why I said previously that this is not the place to carve up the details of doctrines and beliefs. This is the time – the time that even the most assuredly faithful, I am told, come to at some point in their lives – when doctrines and beliefs fade out like the certainty of consciousness in the face of the complete unknown, and the only knowledge left is: *Help*.⁷

Many of you will remember "Tolkien in Oxford", shown on BBC2 first in 1968 and again in 1972, and again in the event of Tolkien's own death in September 1973. I saw it in 1972, not long after I had

⁶ There are however possibilities in the direction of her mother's capture and poisoning by Orcs, and subsequent acute depression, incurable even by Elrond.

⁷ Those who know it will recall that this is pretty much the point where Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *Inferno* gets going.

become a Tolkien reader. Part of the relevant clip is also in the video *JRRT: A Film Portrait of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Visual Corporation, 1992).

Tolkien says:

‘If you really come down to any large story that interests people – holds the attention for a considerable time – stories practically always, human stories are practically always about one thing, aren’t they? Death. The inevitability of death.

I don’t know if you’d agree with that, but anyway that is what I – there was a quotation from Simone Beauvoir (sic) in the paper the other day which seems to me to put it in a nutshell. May I – I think I’ll read it to you. It is apropos of the untimely death of a music composer of whom I have myself always been extremely fond, Carl Maria Weber, who died in ’39 of tuberculosis⁸, and the man who [had] written his biography actually quotes these words of Simone:

“There is no such thing as a natural death. Nothing that happens to man is ever

natural, since his presence calls the whole world into question. All men must die, but for every man his death is an accident, and even if he knows it and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation.”⁹

Well, you may agree with the words or not, but those are the keyspring of *The Lord of the Rings*.’

I have a hunch that this was not what Tolkien or the Unwins had in mind when they encouraged him to write another book about Hobbits.

Nor is it intuitively obvious that Tolkien, who was said to write “boys’ stories”, and dislike all things French, would call upon a French feminist to describe the prime force of his great work.

And at last I am reconciled to that shifting voice at the conclusion of the *Part of the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen*. Arwen has spoken for him. It is only right that he should speak for her.

And it gives me pleasure to know that (thanks to our author) the days of her life are not forgotten yet, and that (always thinking of Lúthien, no doubt) elanor and niphredil still bloom in the spring.

References

Berkley, Christine. 1992. “Point of View in Tolkien” in eds GoodKnight and Reynolds *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Tolkien* pp.256-262

⁸ The name is more usually Carl Maria von Weber. Weber died in 1826, at the age of 39.

⁹ From *A Very Easy Death* by Simone de Beauvoir. English translation published by Andre Deutch, London, 1965.