

Fairy marriages in Tolkien's works

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Both in its Celtic and non-Celtic declinations, the motif of the fairy mistress has an ancient tradition stretching throughout different areas, ages, genres, media and cultures. Tolkien was always fascinated by the motif, and used it throughout his works, conceiving the romances of Beren and Lúthien, and Aragorn and Arwen. In this article I wish to point out some minor expressions of the same motif in Tolkien's major works, as well as to reflect on some overlooked aspects in the stories of those couples, in the light of the often neglected influence of Celtic and romance cultures on Tolkien. The reader should also be aware that I am going to reference much outdated scholarship, that being my precise intent, though, at least since this sort of background may conveniently help us in better understanding Tolkien's reading of both his theoretical and actual sources.

In *The Hobbit*, we read about Bilbo's Took ancestors:

It was often said (in other families) that long ago one of the Took ancestors must have taken a fairy wife. That was, of course, absurd, but certainly there was still something not entirely hobbitlike about them, and once in a while members of the Took-clan would go and have adventures.¹

It is something which Tolkien had had in mind since the very beginning of his writing the book, because in one of the very first drafts (the one John Rateliff calls the Bladorthin typescript) we read:

It had always been said that long ago some or other of the Took had married into a fairy family (goblin family said severer critics); certainly there was something not entirely hobbitlike about them, and once in a while members of the Took hobbits would go and have adventures.²

Marriages between men and fairies were not at all uncommon in Celtic folklore, as for instance the Welsh tale known as *Llyn-y-Fan Fach* bears witness, the oldest written version of which is preserved in the British Museum.³ In this Lady of the Lake tale, a girl who rises out of the lake agrees to marry a local young man on condition that he will not hit her three times. Of course, he does, and she disappears back into the lake. Another example is the *leannan sidhe* in Ireland, literally 'the sweetheart fairy', who offers artistic inspiration in return for love.⁴

The whole corpus of tales involving the fairy-marriage motif is classified as Thompson F302, and there is no doubt that Tolkien knew the tale in some or another version, be it an original Celtic story (Tolkien owned a private Celtic library) or some later retelling, such as the Middle English *Sir Launfal*, itself inspired by the Old French *Lanval*, one of the *Lais* of Marie de France, in which Sir Launfal meets

the daughter of the King of Faerie, who bestows on him a magical source of wealth, and will visit him whenever he wants, so long as he never tells anybody about her.⁵ Going further back, the nymph Calypso, who keeps Odysseus on her island Ogygia on an attempt to make him her immortal husband,⁶ can be taken as a further (and older) version of the same motif.

But more pertinent is the idea of someone's ancestor being considered as having married a fairy. Here we can turn to the legend of Sir Gawain, as Jessie Weston and John R. Hulbert interpret Gawain's story in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a late, Christianised version of what once was a fairy-mistress tale in which the hero had to prove his worth through the undertaking of the Beheading Test in order to be rewarded by the hand of the *fée* in marriage.⁷

As John R. Hulbert reports, Arthur Charles Lewis Brown summarises a fairy-mistress tale thus:

The *fée* was probably always represented as supreme. She falls in love with a mortal and sends one of her maidens to invite him to her land. Several adventurers thereupon set out, but the *fée* appoints one of her creatures to guard the passage. Naturally, no one overcomes this opposing warrior but the destined hero, who is rewarded by the possession of the *fée*.⁸

The reasons for the *fée* to fall in love with a mortal usually consist in the chosen one being the bravest warrior, the most skilled poet, or, more simply, the most handsome man of all. In order to explain how this kind of tale could have turned into *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Hulbert writes, quoting Brown once more:

In a later part of his work Professor Brown argues that the form in which fairy-mistress stories are preserved to us has been much changed by rationalizers "who have modified the original relations of the supernatural actors to make them conform to ordinary human relations. All the Celtic fairy stories, with the exception of the *Echtra Condla*,⁹ show traces of having been influenced by a general tendency to represent the fairy folk as merely human beings living in a marvellous or distant land. Fairy relationships are interpreted after a strictly human pattern."¹⁰

This sort of rationalisation might also account for elements like Sir Bertilak's castle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, possibly derived from an otherworldly palace, similarly to the Fisher King's castle, which holds the Grail in the Percival romances. It could also account for the transformation of the imperious host motif¹¹, who beheads those who fail his tests, into an 'innocent' and somewhat circumstantial pact between Sir Bertilak and Gawain (Sir Bertilak goes hunting every day, and when he returns he exchanges his

winnings for anything Gawain has won by staying behind at the castle). Weston summarises in similar terms (although interpreting the lord of the castle as a magician instead of an imperious host):

Firstly, I think we must admit that Gawain's connection with a lady of supernatural origin is a remarkably well-attested feature of his story. *Secondly*, that between this lady, as represented in the most consecutive accounts of Gawain's adventures, and the queen of the other-world, as represented in Irish tradition, there exists so close a correspondance as to leave little doubt that they were originally one and the same character. *Thirdly*, that in these earlier stories we find, side by side with the lady, a magician, whose connection with her is obscure, but who is certainly looked upon as lord and master of the castle to which she conducts the hero, and which the latter wins. In such stories as *The Carle of Carlisle* and the *Green Knight* the character of the magician has been preserved, while the lady has lost her supernatural quality.¹²

I think that knowing, as we do, that Tolkien had most likely read Weston and Hulbert's theories while working on his and Eric Valentine Gordon's edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it appears he was thinking about these interpretations when writing the *Hobbit* passage, and by bestowing the Gawain role upon some Took ancestor, he is suggesting that Bilbo is sort of Gawain's descendant, or even that he is virtually comparable to Gawain himself, since Gawain's original story, when compared to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, might be figuratively represented by the same Took ancestor through the latter's relation to Bilbo.

In fact, Gawain's original story is reconstructed through Philology by scholars such as Weston and Hulbert, similarly to the process through which the fairy marriage of Bilbo's Took ancestor is constructed as a hypothesis based on the perceived otherness of the members of the Took family, as well as their adventurous spirit, as observed by other Hobbits.

As far as I know, I am the first researcher to underline this point, which is not as trivial as it may possibly seem, since it represents a confirmation of the idea that Bilbo and Frodo on one hand, Gawain on the other are all expressions of a singular type of hero. Bilbo and Gawain are both outstanding representatives of Englishness (in Bilbo's case, according to Tom Shippey's interpretation of Hobbits in *The Road to Middle-earth*)¹³ in their relative times, the Middle Ages for Gawain, and the Victorian age, when Tolkien was educated, for Bilbo.

Gawain was the most beloved character of the Arthurian legend in medieval England since most of the English Arthurian romances had him as their protagonist, no doubt also reflecting popular feelings of the audience besides the intention of any singular poet. William Raymond Johnson Barron wrote that the English preferred Gawain to Lancelot and the *Perceval* continuations to Chrétien de Troyes' works, because they "could not comprehend Courtly Love and preferred action to emotional analysis".¹⁴ Velma Bourgeois

Richmond instead notes the "English regard for moral value"¹⁵, while Phillip C. Boardman argues that the Arthurian romance itself, alongside its Quest structure, pleased a peculiarly English taste.¹⁶

Bilbo's home on the other end is "in fact, in everything except being underground (and in there being no servants), the home of a member of the Victorian upper-middle class of Tolkien's nineteenth-century youth"¹⁷ and Bilbo himself "is furthermore fairly easy to place both socially and chronologically"¹⁸: a "bourgeois burglar" from later than the discovery of America, since he smokes a pipe, and more precisely from after 1837, since he receives letters in the morning as an Englishman could only after that date, when the postal service was introduced.

The idea of a marriage between a fairy and a hobbit is something which was going to influence *The Lord of the Rings* as well. In the first version of the first chapter, A Long-Expected Party, Tolkien wrote in Bilbo's speech at the party:

"Lastly to make an *Announcement*." He said this very loud and everybody sat up who could. "Goodbye! I am going away after dinner. Also I am going to get married."

He sat down. The silence was flabbergastation. It was broken only by Mr. Proudfoot, who kicked over the table; Mrs. Proudfoot choked in the middle of a drink.

That's that. It merely serves to explain that Bilbo Baggins got married and had many children, because I am going to tell you a story about one of his descendants, and if you had only read his memoirs up to the date of Balin's visit – ten years at least before this birthday party – you might have been puzzled.

As a matter of fact Bilbo disappeared silently and unnoticed – the ring was in his hand even while he made his speech – in the middle of the confused outburst of talk that followed the flabbergasted silence. He was never seen in Hobbiton again.¹⁹

In the same version of the same chapter, Tolkien further comments:

The Tookishness (not of course that all Tookes ever had much of this wayward quality) had quite suddenly and uncomfortably come to life again. Also another secret – after he had blown away his last fifty ducats on the party he had not got *any money or jewelry left*, except the ring, and the gold buttons on his waistcoat. ... Then how could he get married? He was not going to just then – he merely said "I am going to get married". I cannot quite say why. It came suddenly into his head. Also he thought it was an event that might occur in the future – if he travelled again amongst other folk, or found a more rare and more beautiful race of hobbits somewhere. Also it was a kind of explanation. Hobbits had a curious habit in their weddings. They kept it (always officially and very often actually) a deadly secret for years who they were going to marry, even when they knew. Then they suddenly went and got married and went off without an address for a week or two (or even longer). When Bilbo disappeared this was at first what neighbours thought.²⁰

Bilbo's 'fortuitous' mention of his marriage prospect seems similar to a rationalisation of the call of the fairy mistress to his lover, in a fashion which cannot but remind one of the theories by Weston and Hulbert. After all, Bilbo is both the bravest warrior and the most skilled poet among hobbits. The very fact that this background served to explain the origins of the protagonist of the actual tale Tolkien was going to write suggests that Tolkien had some sort of fairy mistress-like story in store for Bilbo, even if it would have not actually involved a *fée* but only 'a strictly human [or hobbit?] pattern'.

The fact that the ring (here not the Ring yet) is mentioned in both the passages suggests not only a connection with *The Hobbit*, but the idea that the ring could be associated with marriage, as in a wedding ring, or could be passed on to further generations as inheritance.

This observation would lead us to consider Frodo's role too, as I earlier anticipated. He is not one of Bilbo's direct descendants, as he was in earlier versions (assuming I can call these other versions 'Frodo' also; in some of them he was named 'Bingo'), but his nephew. Nevertheless, he is very close to Bilbo, and they actually live together. He is in the same order of relation to Bilbo as Gawain to King Arthur, thus suggesting that he is himself a Gawain-type hero too. He has a Took side as well, he inherits the Ring and travels to Mount Doom and back again, although not very precisely back again.

Similarities between Frodo and Gawain have been much discussed. The first to present the idea was John M. Fyler in 1986.²¹ Since then, Miriam Youngerman Miller, Ricky Thompson and Roger Schlobin²² have each presented further arguments that reinforced the hypothesis. Personally I am going to follow the same path, in order to evaluate the possibility that hints of the fairy marriage motif underlie Frodo's characterization too. To be clear, I am not going to suggest (and neither did I for Bilbo) that Frodo actually marries a *fée*, but only that some idea of a fairy marriage is subtly implied through the building of his character in *The Lord of the Rings*.

In order to understand precisely how could this be, I am going to further examine the connection between King Arthur and Gawain on one hand and Frodo and Bilbo on the other. More specifically, I am going to focus on the aspects of those characters which relate to time, since the realm of Faërie is consistently portrayed in English folktales as a place endowed with a different timeline from our own, one such that travellers returning home from Faërie often find that centuries have passed while they were "away with the fairies" and everyone they knew and loved is gone.

Conceived in the *Echtra Condla* as the place where there is no death, no strife, no sin and no table-service, Faërie erases the whole of what time negatively entails, including the possibility of disagreement as well as social inequality. Thus it follows that the tales wherein the human lover joins the fairy in the Otherworld are tales of time joining timelessness for a while or, in other words, tales of time being paused, or even, as in the *Echtra Condla* stopped once and for all.

On the other hand, in the fairy-marriage tales, such as *The Lady of Gollerus*²³, wherein the fairy joins her husband in *this* world, it is possible to think of the fairy-marriage as vinculated to conditions, which may even be a clear prohibition of some sort²⁴, whose setting constitutes the beginning of the time-window wherein the marriage itself may last, before the count-down reaches zero when inevitably the prohibition is ignored and the conditions are therefore violated. These are then tales of timelessness joining time for a while or, in other words, tales of timelessness set in motion, usually only for a while.

Apparently the fairy-marriage of the Took ancestor would have been a tale of the second type, a tale of time paused, or stopped, while Bilbo's "draft marriage" would have been a tale of the first type, a tale of timelessness in motion. Yet this is only a temporary conclusion and we should not be hasty in categorizing these tales, because there is much more at work. Therefore, as I was saying, we should consider the way in which time relates to the above-mentioned characters, and more specifically which is their age connotation.

In her article, Miller also talks about the 'emphasis on youth' shared by *The Lord of the Rings* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The description of Arthur as 'childgered',²⁵ glossed by Tolkien and Gordon as 'boyish, merry', finds its pair in the jollity of the Hobbits. She writes:

Contrary to the frequent depiction in medieval romance of King Arthur as an aged king, a sort of impotent Hrothgar-figure existing primarily to be cuckolded by Lancelot and to be betrayed by Mordred, the Gawain-poet makes a point of describing Arthur as "sumquat childgered" (line 86), which Tolkien and Gordon gloss as "boyish," "merry," deriving the term from child + gere, "mood." "3onge blod and his brayn wyldre" (line 89) lead him to require "some strange story or stirring adventure . . . some moving marvel that he might believe in" (p. 27) prior to engaging in holiday feasting, an expectation of adventure that the Green Knight so thoroughly fulfills at this particular Christmas banquet. The Green Knight himself generalizes from the youthful Arthur to the members of his court who are characterized by the Knight as "berdlez chylder" (line 280). This emphasis, unusual in Arthurian romance, on youth, its exuberance, its immaturity, its naiveté, and its egocentrism, turns the Green Knight's challenge into a dare (not unlike the famous swimming match between Beowulf and Breca) and Sir Gawain's acceptance of it into a rash act impulsively entered into without a mature understanding of its consequences.²⁶

Obviously a reader might also get the impression that King Arthur's boyish mood acts like a sort of pre-figuration, setting the stage for the impressive appearance of the Green Knight, who is described as being 'of hyghe elde',²⁷ glossed by Tolkien and Gordon as 'in the prime of life'. That we are not concerned with such a case, though, was already clearly pointed out by the Gawain-poet, who described King Arthur's court as "þis fayre folk in her first age".²⁸

Miller further continues by observing how similar traits are shared by the Hobbits, who are described as being

between two and four feet tall, propense to laugh “and eat, and drink, often and heartily, being fond of simple jests at all times, and of six meals a day (when they could get them)”²⁹ and are often mistaken for children, as Aragorn implies when he tells Eomer of Rohan that they are “small, only children to your eyes.”³⁰ Furthermore, the Hobbits are completely unaware of the menace threatening their borders, having appointed other Hobbits as Bounders to keep them safe from dangers lurking beyond the Shire, whereas it is really Aragorn and the other Rangers who keep evil at bay. Similarly, Camelot as depicted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a place for music, dances, storytelling and the pleasures of the table, unprepared to confront Morgan le Fay’s plots because nobody there knows how to tell serious matters from a playful entertainment.

But how could King Arthur be an inspiration for a character trait of the Hobbits? I think that the answer lies in one of Tolkien’s own statements, in Letter 181, that *The Lord of the Rings* ‘is planned to be “hobbitic-centric”, that is, primarily a study of the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble’. In this light, we could argue that Tolkien had seen jollity as a quality worth of ennoblement or sanctification, since it had belonged to King Arthur himself. And there are also other parallels between Hobbits and King Arthur: as Verlyn Flieger carefully noted, Frodo parallels a king-like figure when he pulls the Elven shortsword Sting out of the wooden beam at Rivendell, echoing the pulling out of the Sword in the Stone.³¹

Furthermore:

The maimed Frodo’s departure oversea from Middle-earth to be healed in Valinor explicitly echoes the wounded Arthur’s departure by barge to be healed in Avalon.³²

The fact that Frodo exemplifies both Gawain and King Arthur can be read as proof of Tolkien’s dislike of allegory: in an allegory, each character represents one thing, and one thing only. Tolkien’s writing instead is worked out of a whole ensemble of elements, all of which, taken individually, may be read as the only true ones, but the simultaneous consideration of which, discarding allegory, provides the work with a complexity only a true genius could achieve.

If there is a character who most exemplifies King Arthur in *The Lord of the Rings*, that would no doubt be Aragorn. The orphan child raised in foster-care who growing up finds out he is the legitimate heir to a great kingdom is a clear Arthurian reminiscence, as is the theme of the sword associated with kingship, with the Sword in the Stone, Excalibur, paralleling Aragorn’s sword, Narsil-Andúril. The riddle concerning the return of the king of Gondor ends with: “Renewed shall be blade that was broken, / The crownless again shall be king”³³, reflecting the Arthurian association of sword and kingship. Furthermore, in Malory’s *Morte Excalibur* “was so bright in his enemies’ eyes that it gave light like thirty torches”³⁴ when King Arthur unsheathed it during his first war,³⁵ similarly to Andúril “gleaming with white fire” at Helm’s Deep³⁶ and on the Path of the Dead.³⁷

But we would look to Aragorn in vain if we expected to find any reference to him being *childgered*. Even in his very young age, when he was named Estel, in fact:

When Estel was only twenty years of age, it chanced that he returned to Rivendell after great deeds in the company of the sons of Elrond; and Elrond looked at him and was pleased, for he saw that he was fair and noble and was early come to manhood, though he would yet become greater in body and mind. That day therefore Elrond called him by his true name, and told him who he was and whose son, and he delivered to him the heirlooms of his house.³⁸

The fact that he was early come to manhood, and described as fair and noble, would seem to exclude any possibility of him being ‘boyish’. That, though, is only one side of the coin, and that should be immediately transparent as soon as we compare the afore-cited passage to its probable model from the *Gospel of Luke*:

And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him. 41 Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast. 43 And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not of it. 44 But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day’s journey; and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance. 45 And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him. 46 And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions. 47 And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers. (...) 51 And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man.³⁹

The very fact that Aragorn early comes to manhood reveals not so much his coming to manhood, as the stress is instead on ‘early’, obviously highlighting the exceptional character of the King, but also his relation to time. Frodo, Aragorn and King Arthur have in fact all been read as figures of Jesus Christ, especially (except in Frodo’s case) as Christ the King⁴⁰, and that also means they are all concerned with the relationship between eternity and time.

The very same final voyage of Arthur to Avalon is studied by Lucy Paton in her 1903 *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance*.

Celtic literature supplies a tradition which is peculiarly instructive when compared with Lazamon’s narrative, and which proves to be highly important in explaining the account of Arthur’s stay with Morgain in Avalon, as well as Morgain’s relation to both Arthur and Guinevere. This is the story of the summons of Cuchulinn to the other world by Fand, told in the *Serglige*

Conchulaind (Cuchulinn's Sick Bed), which is preserved in the *Lebor na h-Uidre*, and therefore represents material very much older than the earliest extant versions of the story of Arthur in Avalon. (...)

The essential elements of this long story, it will be noticed, represent also those of both the Arthur-Avalon episode and the story of Arthur and the enchantress. In the former, just as two women summon Cuchulinn to the other world, whither, induced by Fand's promise of healing, he sails in a boat guided by a fairy messenger, so two fays come for Arthur, and in a magic boat convey him to the other world for the healing of his wound; there he, like Cuchulinn, dwells with a beautiful fairy queen.⁴¹

Here again we find the fairy mistress motif, this time attributed to Arthur. However, I do not believe that it was *this* story Tolkien was thinking of when writing of the Took ancestor's fairy wife, especially since there actually is a king who takes a fairy, or elven, maiden as his bride in *The Lord of the Rings*: Aragorn, and his wife, Arwen.

Their story, though, totally subverts the fairy-mistress tale in terms of their relation to Avalon (Aman in Tolkien's legendarium), because it portrays the very opposite of the voyage of the hero to find the fairy, when the fairy instead is the one giving up her chances to go there to embrace the mortal fate of her lover.⁴² It would therefore be classified as a fairy-marriage tale of the second type.

Furthermore, Tolkien seems to be playing with the view that Arthur would be Morgan's lover. According to Marjorie Burns and Susan Carter,⁴³ in fact, Morgan le Fay was one of the most important sources after which the character of Galadriel, the Lady of the Golden Wood, was modeled; nonetheless it is not Galadriel who marries Aragorn, but her grand-daughter Arwen.

Also in *The Silmarillion's* first version, *The Book of Lost Tales*, the earliest of Tolkien's major Middle-earth works, a love-story between a man and an elf-maiden took place (although in the original concept they were both elves, only belonging to different elven peoples). Beren and Lúthien's tale is precisely the one which different scholars, from Dimitra Fimi to Alex Lewis and Elizabeth Currie,⁴⁴ have pointed out as the receptacle of diverse Celtic and romance strands. Even there I would say that the initial wandering of Beren, lost through the woods of Doriath, only 'by chance' to meet Lúthien dancing in a clearing, seems to be a reworking of the fairy-mistress motif, only substituting the virtual omniscience and omnipotence of the *fée* with the Boethian concepts of Providence and Fate, as first pointed out by Dubs,⁴⁵ consistent with the Roman Catholic faith Tolkien maintained throughout his life.



The story of *Ogier the Dane*, originally a medieval romance, was retold in a poem by William Morris in his work titled *The Earthly Paradise*, first published in 1868. The poem follows the adventures of the aforementioned Danish hero until he arrives at an island where he meets Morgan le Fay, learns he has been lured there by means of her magic because she is love with him and, reciprocating her feelings, he decides to stay on the island and live there with her happily ever after.

The description of Morgan that Morris writes is a fine piece of literary art, and quite similar to the description of Lúthien in *The Lay of Leithian*. In the two descriptions there are many overlapping phrases. Compare 'the fairest of all creatures'⁴⁶ with 'fairer than are born to men'⁴⁷; Morgan's 'dainty feet' with Lúthien's 'her feet were light'; 'as the ... grey-blue haze ... her raiment veiled her' with 'her robe was blue as summer skies'; 'within her glorious eyes such wisdom dwelt' with 'grey as evening were her eyes'; and 'a fresh rose-wreath embraced her head' with 'in her hair / the wild roses glimmering there.'⁴⁸

John Garth reported that Tolkien owned Volume IV of *The Earthly Paradise*,⁴⁹ which leads easily to the supposition that the writer also read the first three volumes, making it even more probable that he was influenced by Morris in his descriptions of elven characters of uncomparable beauty, like Lúthien and Arwen. I would add that, if Lúthien, as well as Galadriel, was inspired by Morgan le Fay, that would mean that Beren's wife shared with Morgan only the positive features of the Celtic

fée, being totally lacking in a dark side, both textually and subtextually, very different from the Lady of the Golden Wood.⁵⁰ Maybe the most important couple in Tolkien's works, being also inspired by the Professor and his wife Edith, could even have managed to resist to the temptation of the Ring for their mutual love, long enough to toss it in Sannath Naur and destroy it.

Even if Morris was not the source of the description of Lúthien, Tolkien was certainly inspired by the same literary and folkloric traditions, Germanic, Celtic and Romance in a general sense, those of the fairy-mistress more specifically, as Morris was.

To sum up, we have seen how Frodo might be interpreted as a potential King Arthur who can never become a proper one, since he completely lacks the *physique du rôle*, and also because Aragorn already plays that role. Bilbo in the same way is readable as a debased, half serious, half comic version of Sir Gawain. And all these characters, King Arthur, Aragorn, Bilbo and Gawain, are either married to a fairy or related to a character who married a fairy. Frodo is also

related to characters who married fairies, but Frodo himself can be read as taking part in a fairy marriage.

If we compare the passage where Lady Bertilak offers Gawain her ring in Tolkien's translation, which by the way I think all readers of medieval romances should thank his son Christopher for having it published in 1975, to the moment when Frodo sees Galadriel's ring of waters, Nenya, we cannot but notice the similarity of the descriptions, both regarding brilliant stones, set in precious gold rings, the light of which is related to stars⁵¹: Lady Bertilak's ring is "of red gold fashioned / with a stone like a star standing up clear / that bore brilliant beams as bright as the sun",⁵² while Nenya reflects the rays of the star Eärendil (Venus) when "its rays glanced upon a ring about her finger. It glittered like polished gold overlaid with silver light, and a white stone in it twinkled as if the Elven-star had come down to rest upon her hand."⁵³

Incidentally, the Middle English word that Tolkien translates as meaning 'like a star', is the participle *starande*, which literally means 'staring, blazing', as Tolkien and Gordon report in the Glossary to their edition. This means that Tolkien's translation in this case is poetical, following a personal inspiration which also underlies *The Lord of the Rings*.

It may be objected that the exact inverse of what I am stating could be true, too: the passage in Tolkien's romance may have influenced his translation. In fact, although Christopher stated in the *Preface* of the 1975 publication that the first mention of some form of the translation was made by his father some time after 1950⁵⁴, this can provide us with nothing but a possible *terminus ad quem* for it, without any certain *post quem* later than Tolkien's schooldays at King Edward's School in the first decade of the 20th century, when he first discovered *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I would rather say, though, that Tolkien came to conceive his Galadriel based on his reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* than the other way around, because of the above-mentioned elements pointing towards that direction.

And, if both rings are interpreted as playing more or less the same role, that would suggest that there are also hints towards a *liaison* between Frodo and Galadriel, which can be confirmed by Christopher Tolkien's pointing out that "there is no part of the history of Middle-earth more full of problems than the story of Galadriel and Celeborn",⁵⁵ the Elven lord who is also her husband, entailing that Galadriel's marriage represented a thematic and narrative *crux desperationis* to his father. That would be understandable if Tolkien really was thinking of Galadriel as a sort of *mediatrix* of femininity, reconciling the opposite sides of womanhood: the Virgin Mary's virginity and benevolence, on one hand (an inspiration which can be deduced by Letters 142 and 320), and Morgan's evil plots and Lady Bertilak's aggressive display of sexuality, on the other, both inspirations being previously discussed.

Furthermore, Tolkien himself admitted in a late interview⁵⁶ that there was some sexual tension in the meeting of the Fellowship of the Ring with Galadriel. The sexual hints of the scene were studied by Daniel Timmons⁵⁷, and before

that they already had been noticed by director John Boorman, who was going to have a lovemaking scene between the two characters in his never-to-be-realized *The Lord of the Rings* film in the 1970s.⁵⁸

After all, in the same way as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is arguably all constructed on the basis of the different hues and meanings of the Middle English word "grene", which include innocence and immaturity as much as the wantonness of unrestrained lusts⁵⁹, only to be denied by chastity or sanctified through marriage, *The Lord of the Rings* similarly plays with sexual allusions in the Galadriel sequence only to subsequently destine Frodo to celibacy and Samwise to a normal Hobbit marriage with Rosie Cotton. If medieval romance could hardly and rarely stand actual fairy marriages with humans, even less so could Tolkien with Hobbits, who after all are already Halflings.

Tolkien arguably realized in his fiction some sort of a subversion of values, with Halflings, who, as I earlier proved, are childlike and therefore less than men in age, stature, strength and valour, performing deeds like slaying the Witch-King and carrying the Ring to Mordor, thus enabling its destruction to take place, whereas such deeds would have been impossible to be performed even by the best among men.

But, if fairy mistresses choose only the best among men to be their lovers, and some hobbits are at the same time better than the best men, as individuals, and less than the average, as members of their race, then logic would require the fairy mistresses to both choose them as their lovers and not choosing them as such. This observation could be the best explanation we have of the complex picture formed by the relations and meetings between hobbits and Elven ladies, comparable as a whole to the enacting of a fake marriage, a green marriage between a child and an adult woman who are playing house with each other, both for educational purposes and for sheer fun (once again likewise to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where Gawain's pedagogical growth takes place throughout different shades of green corresponding to different instances of courtly merrymaking).

Therefore we have a Hobbit who is like a man-child hero, who will never actually become a man, supposedly married to an Elven lady who is like a wise wife-maiden, who will never age. If we compare these two descriptions, we obtain a noteworthy parallelism. This is what ultimately sets us on the right track. In fact, if the point is greenness as related to age and time, evoking the huge disproportion between time and eternity, and yet their mirroring each other in a fairy-marriage between our own world and Faërie, that surely means that both couples, the one composed of two worlds and the one composed of a Hobbit and an Elf, must be in some sense alike. About the two worlds there is no problem understanding how, their common point being they are both worlds. For the "married" couple the point instead would be that both Hobbits and Elves are, in a sense, fairies. That Hobbits descend from some forgotten creatures of English folklore has been pointed out by Shippey.⁶⁰

Hobbits and Elves are then both the same kind. The Shire is no less a part of Faërie than Lothlórien is, both of them

being idyllic representations of an Earthly Paradise of sorts. Still, through its connection with real-world rural England of Tolkien's youth,⁶¹ the Shire is also a part of our world, further explaining why, besides the differences in stature and maturity, the marriage cannot actually take place but only be hinted at. Their marriage cannot take place because their theoretical tale is neither a first nor a second type, not being clear who is leaving which world to live into which other.

Besides, King Arthur himself was interpreted by Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz as a Fairy King, as he stated: "We ought, probably, to consider Arthur, like Cuchulainn, as a god incarnate in a human body for the purpose of educating the race of men; and thus, while living as a man, related definitely and, apparently, consciously to the invisible gods or fairy-folk", from whom he descends, and who constitute his court, Gawain included, "a court quite comparable to that of the Irish *Sidhe*-folk or Tuatha De Danann."⁶²

To conclude, besides noticing a possible connection between William Morris' Morgan and Tolkien's Lúthien, the main point of my survey is that fairy marriages in Tolkien do not only appear in clear, self-evident forms concerning humans, as is the case with Beren's and Aragorn's, but are also hinted at in semi-visible, subtle allusions concerning Hobbits which are only understandable through an appreciation of Tolkien's study of some scholarly publications from the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, pointing towards a wider awareness of folkloric traditions and a stronger appreciation of Folklore Studies by Tolkien than was previously suspected. Tolkien's mastery is such that he knows how to create the feeling that something is there even when there expressedly is nothing, and this subtle playing with the hints and allusions to a theoretically non-existing romance finds its pair in both the fairy quality of the mistresses and the Hobbits' childlike nature, exalting at the same time the magic and innocence and the vitality and playfulness of that greenness which, alongside many other senses and connections it finds in the *Legendarium*, also complies with both types of characters and may be the actual *trait d'union* between them. Furthermore, the Hobbit stress on youth and the deathlessness of the Elves point towards a difficult marriage of time and eternity the own theoretical being of which acts like a sort of constantly repeated pre-figuration which cannot find its actual realization in time's course, but has to wait for the moment when the lovers will get "East of the sun, west of the moon."⁶³

Notes

- 1 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (London: Harper Collins, 2012), 13.
- 2 John D. Rateliff, *The History of The Hobbit. One-Volume Edition* (London: Harper Collins, 2011), 29.
- 3 Manuscript *BL Add.* 14912.
- 4 For a detailed treatment of the Irish goddesses and female fairies, see Rosalind Clark, 'Goddess, fairy mistress, and sovereignty: women of the Irish supernatural' (1985). <https://search.proquest.com/docview/303408080> accessed 25/08/2017.
- 5 For the fairy mistress theme in Old French literature, see Collen P. Donagher, 'Socializing the sorceress: The fairy mistress in Lanval, Le Bel

Inconnu and Partonopeu de Blois', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 4 (1987), 69-90.

- 6 For the fairy mistress theme in Old French literature, see Collen P. Donagher, 'Socializing the sorceress: The fairy mistress in Lanval, Le Bel Inconnu and Partonopeu de Blois', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 4 (1987), 69-90.
- 7 Jessie Lindlay Weston, *The Legend of Sir Gawain: Studies upon its Original Scope and Significance* (London: David Nutt, 1897) and John R. Hulbert, 'Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyzt', *Modern Philology*, 14 (1916), 433-62, 689-730. The tale tells of a Green Knight who appears in King Arthur's court and invites the knights to undertake the Beheading Test: whoever accepts the challenge will strike the Green Knight once with his axe, on condition that the latter may return the blow in a year and a day. Sir Gawain volunteers and beheads the Green Knight with a single blow – the latter picks up his head and leaves. Sir Gawain later sets off to find the Green Chapel, and finds instead a castle belonging to Bertilak de Hautdesert, who tells him Green Chapel is less than two miles away. Before going hunting the next day Bertilak proposes a bargain: he will give Gawain whatever he catches on the condition that Gawain give him whatever he might gain while remaining in the castle. Bertilak's wife gives Gawain a kiss, then two kisses, which Gawain dutifully gives to Bertilak in return, then a girdle which protects its wearer from harm, which Gawain does not give to Bertilak. It transpires that Bertilak is the Green Knight, and Morgan le Fay was in control of everything. Gawain escapes unharmed, but keeps the girdle to remind himself of his dishonesty.
- 8 Arthur Charles Lewis Brown, cited in Hulbert, 'Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyzt', 438.
- 9 Hans Pieter Atze Oskamp, 'Echtra Condla', *Études Celtiques* 14 (1974), 207-228. The *Echtra Condla*, a fairy woman invites a mortal, Conle to join her in the Otherworld and gives him an apple. Conle eats nothing but this apple for a month. When the fairy woman returns, Conle jumps on to her ship made of crystal and sails away with her.
- 10 Arthur Charles Lewis Brown, cited in Hulbert, 'Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyzt', 438.
- 11 George Lyman Kittredge, *A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1916), 82-3.
- 12 Jessie Lindlay Weston, *The Legend of Sir Gawain: Studies upon its Original Scope and Significance* (London: David Nutt, 1897), 51-2. In *The Carle of Carlisle* Gawain obeys Carle's every demand, including throwing a spear at Carle's face, going to bed with his wife and his daughter, and chopping his head off, thus breaking a terrible curse that made Carle behead any guest that entered the castle and did not completely obey him.
- 13 Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology*. (London: Harper Collins, rev. ed. 2005), 92.
- 14 William Raymond Johnson Barron, 'Arthurian Romance: Traces of an English Tradition', *English Studies* 6 (1980), 5.
- 15 Velma Bourgeois Richmond, *The Popularity of Middle English Romance* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975), 121.
- 16 Phillip C. Boardman, 'Middle English Arthurian Romance: The Repetition and Reputation of Gawain' in Keith Busby and Raymond H. Thompson, *Gawain: A Casebook* (New York – London: Routledge, 2006), 258.
- 17 Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien Author of the Century* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 5.
- 18 Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien Author of the Century* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 5.
- 19 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the Shadow* (London: Harper Collins, 1988), 14-15.
- 20 Tolkien, *Return*, 16-17.
- 21 John M. Fyler, 'Freshman Composition: Epic and Romance', in Jane Chance and Miriam Youngerman Miller, *Approaches to teaching Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1986), 120-22.
- 22 Miriam Youngerman Miller, "'Of sum mayn meruayle, pat he my3t trawe": The Lord of the Rings and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *Studies in Medievalism* III, iii (1991), 345-65; Ricky L. Thompson, 'Tolkien's Word-hord Onleac', *Mythlore*, 75, 20.1 (Winter 1994), 22-34, 36-40; and Roger C. Schlobin, 'The Monsters are Talismans and Transgressions: Tolkien and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', in George Clark and Daniel Timmons, *J.R.R. Tolkien and his literary resonances: views of Middle-earth* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 71-82.
- 23 Thomas Crofton Croker, *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* (Glastonbury, UK: The Lost Library, 2016; 1st edition 1825), 3-20.

- In *The Lady of Gollerus*, a tale from Smerwick which has parallels in the Faroe Islands and in the Shetland Islands, a beautiful merrow, combing her green hair on the rocks in the sunlight, is seen by a man, who falls in love with her and, in order to win her, steals her *cohuleen driuth*, 'enchanted cap', thus forcing her to marry him. They live together for a few years and have children, before eventually one day, while her husband is in Tralee, she finds the cap while cleaning the house, says goodbye to her children and returns to her underwater realm.
- 24 For example, this is the case in the above-cited *Llyn-y-Fan Fach*, where it is forbidden to the husband to hit her fairy-wife.
- 25 (SGGK 86)
- 26 Miller 'The Lord of the Rings and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', 351-2.
- 27 SGGK 844
- 28 SGGK 54
- 29 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), I, Prologue.
- 30 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), III, i.
- 31 Verlyn Flieger, *Green Suns and Faerie: Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2012), 132.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), I, x.
- 34 Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, ed. Edward Strachey (London: MacMillan and Co., 1919), I, vii.
- 35 Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, ed. Edward Strachey (London: MacMillan and Co., 1919), I, vii.
- 36 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), III, vii.
- 37 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), V, ii.
- 38 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), Appendix A, I, v.
- 39 *Luke 2*, 40-47; 51-52.
- 40 Frodo as Christ: see Joseph Pearce, 'Christ' in Michael D.C. Drout, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 98.
Aragorn as Christ the King: see Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien invented a mythology* (London: Harper Collins, 2005).
King Arthur as Christ the King: "Tennyson re-created Arthur as a Christ-figure", Edward Donald Kennelly, *Introduction*, xxxiv in Edward Donald Kennelly, ed., *King Arthur: A Casebook* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996).
- 41 Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1903), 29-30.
- 42 The subversion is not at all new, though. The very same tale *Llyn-y-Fan Fach* I cited earlier had the *fée* come out of the lake where she lived in some underwater realm in order to get together with the male protagonist of the tale. But of course there the idea of sharing her lover's mortal fate is totally lacking.
- 43 Marjorie Burns, *Perilous realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkiens Middle-earth* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2008); Susan Carter, 'Galadriel and Morgan Le Fey: Tolkien's Redemptio of the Lady of the Lacuna', *Mythlore* 97-98, 34 (Spring-Summer 2007), 71-89.
- 44 Dimitra Fimi, 'Tolkiens "Celtic type of legends": Merging Traditions', *Tolkien Studies* 4, no. 1 (2007), 51-71; and Alex Lewis and Elizabeth Currie, *The epic realm of Tolkien* (Moreton-in-Marsh: ADC Publications, 2009).
- 45 Kathleen E. Dubs, 'Fate, and Chance: Boethian Philosophy in The Lord of the Rings', *Twentieth Century Literature* 27, 1 (Spring 1981), 34-42.
- 46 William Morris, *The Earthly Paradise Part II* (London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green and Co., 1896), 280.
- 47 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lays of Beleriand* (London: Harper Collins, 2016), *The Lay of Leithian* I, 21-40, in *Lays* 155).
- 48 Tolkien, *The Lay of Leithian* III, 625-26, in *Lays* 177.
- 49 John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War* (London: Harper Collins, 2003), 185.
- 50 Galadriel was sorely tempted by the prospect of getting the Ring from Frodo and furthermore she was the subject of rumours spread among the Rohirrim concerning her being a net-weaver and a sorcerer, see J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), II, vii and III, ii.
- 51 Tolkien's ideas about what stone precisely could have been lodged in Lady Bertilak's ring could be perhaps deduced from the fact that *Nenya* is the Adamant Ring, implying that the stone was a diamond. Nonetheless, sapphire presents with a variety called star-stone, *zaphhirum stellatum*, which is interestingly also associated to the planet Venus, for example in Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "Dolce colore d'oriental zaffiro", tr.: "Tender tint of orient sapphire" (*Purgatory* I, 14). Aphrodite/Venus was the Greek/Latin goddess of love who had strong connections with the sea, being also called Aphrogeneia, 'Seafoam-born', while Morgan le Fay, Lady Bertilak's instigator, had her name interpreted by John Rhys as Mori-gena, 'Sea-born'. On Aphrodite see Monica S. Cyrino, *Aphrodite* (New York: Routledge, 2010), while a summary of interpretations of Morgan's name is offered in Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1903), 9.
- 52 J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, with Pearl and Sir Orfeo* (London: Harper Collins, 2006), 71.
- 53 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), II, vii.
- 54 J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, with Pearl and Sir Orfeo* (London: Harper Collins, 2006), v.
- 55 J.R.R. Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* (London: Harper Collins, 2006), 220.
- 56 J.R.R. Tolkien, *Denys Gueroult interviews J. R. R. Tolkien* (1964), BBC Author Archive Collection, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p021jx7j>, accessed 12/08/2017.
- 57 Daniel Timmons, "Hobbit Sex and Sexuality in The Lord of the Rings", *Mythlore* 23 (2001), 70-79.
- 58 See Janet Brennan Croft, "Three Rings for Hollywood: Scripts for The Lord of the Rings by Zimmerman, Boorman and Beagle", in Leslie Stratyner and James R. Keller, *Fantasy Fiction into Films: Essays* (Jefferson: MacFarland, 2007), 7-20.
- 59 See John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* IV, 1491: "upon hir lustes greene"
- 60 Tom Shippey, 'The ancestors of the Hobbits: strange creatures in English folklore', *Lembas-extra* 2011, ed. Cecile van Zon (Tolkien Genootschap Unquendor), 97-106.
- 61 Which has even been supposed to include the 'hobbit' as a Welsh agricultural measure, see Michael Flowers, 'Hobbits?...And what may they be?', *Journal of Tolkien Research* 4, no. 1 (2017). Available at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol4/iss1/2>
- 62 Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (Oxford: Henry Frowde, 1911), 309, 316.
- 62 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins, 2006), VI, x.

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