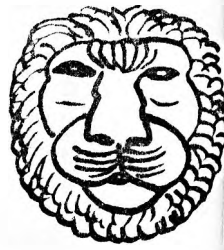




MALE CHAUVINIST LIONS



SEX DISCRIMINATION IN TOLKIEN & C.S. LEWIS part 1

by

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So what if there is, one might reply ? The answer's simple: as a school librarian I am often urged to stock certain books, and to reject others, on the grounds that their content might indoctrinate young unformed minds. For example, our attention is drawn to material on South Africa showing negroes happy in their subservience, and we are told to avoid pornography for its false attitude to sex and degradation of women. So far, so good. Lately we have been persuaded to eliminate books showing sex discrimination, and boys and girls in stereotyped rôles: e.g. Johnny helping Daddy wash the car, Susan helping Mummy do the washing-up. This movement started with children's picture books and easy readers, and has now moved onto full length books, including 'Watership Down', which, you will be surprised to learn, has attracted much criticism for its sexist treatment of the does - just breeding stock.

It's important, therefore, to re-examine Tolkien and Lewis in this light, for this reason - should our beloved fantasies get the 'sexist' label, they will not be bought and read. Libraries might be warned off them just as they now refuse to stock Biggles and Enid Blyton. We should be able to defend our authors against these attacks !

First, a summary of what 'sexism' implies in children's books. Secondly, an examination of the two writers. Note that C. S. Lewis is in far worse danger than Tolkien, as he has already come under heavy attack for (admitted) religious propoganda and (suspected) sadism.

Sexism is that attitude which labels a particular man or woman, boy or girl, as a particluar type of person possessing characteristic thought typical of that sex. Your sex determines your personality. Thus any woman is automatically assumed to be a bad driver, because women as a class are supposed to be such. Any man who goes in for ice-skating or ballet-dancing runsthe gauntlet of ridicule. More seriously, male attitudes have for generations prevented women's education, where for example in the field of

medicine their contribution has been inestimable. In children's books 'sexism' would lie in continually portraying boy-heroes looking down on weak, snivelling girls, who always spy on the boys and spoil their fun. The current controversy stems from the knowledge that early childhood impressions are far-reaching. Girls may be influenced away from a fulfilling career (and marriage to someone like-minded) to bury themselves in early marriage to someone unsuitable. Battered wives, it is said, are the result of sex-stereotyping in childhood.

And so children's books are being checked for evidence of this. In the days of such neo-McCarthyism, each book must find a defender, so here I stand, to save Tolkien and Lewis from the bonfire.

To examine Tolkien in detail first, he escapes the first line of attack by children's book critics, as there are no children in Tolkien to be portrayed, in stereotyped rôles or otherwise. No tough boys, no snivelling girls (we shall look to C. S. Lewis for interesting child characters). One could, however, say that children identify with Hobbits, and although there is no discrimination in Hobbit society, I can't prevent troublemakers complaining that one of the four questing Hobbits, at least, might have been a girl. I just plead the writer's privilege, to choose his own heroes.

It is quite plain that in general women are 'equal but different' and usually the home-makers in Middle-Earth. Moreover, the laws of 'Historical Accuracy' confirm that this has to be, in a mediaeval world. I shall show that Tolkien is as fair to the women as this law allows, but I must treat the people of Middle-Earth race by race.

First come the Hobbits. I see not distinction between men and women - both are cosy home-makers - the true contrast lies between the Shire-folk and the four questers. A married woman like Mrs. Maggot has the traditional responsibilities of a wife, but is no inferior, while Lobelia is definitely the dominant partner. Of Sam's children, the most important was Elanor, who carried her golden hair into the line of the Fairbairns of Westmarch, and became

one of the maids of Arwen.

I move from the Hobbits a moment to deal with the Ents; the sad story of their wives and the subsequent loss of them is sufficient proof of Tolkien's belief that the two sexes need one another. You will remember that they grew so far apart that when the Entwives left their lands the Ents never heard of it, and so their race was doomed to extinction.

The Dwarves are another special case, as by nature far fewer women are born than men. Thus they are jealously guarded and seldom walk abroad. We have no evidence to make any further observations.

This leaves Elves, Men, Nature Spirits and Monsters. In the world of Men, which is a feudal world, women share responsibilities in peace-time, but in the time of war the rôle of women is to preserve the next generation - and so women do not fight, according to the 'Law of Historical Truth'. Gondor sends its women, children and old men to Lebennin, and Rohan houses them in the Hold. However, those who do desire to help and whose skills are needed, do find a way. So we have Bergil, who won't go away with the women; Ioreth the healer, one of "the few women that had been permitted to remain" (III 131), and of course Eowyn, who must have special attention from me later on. Why are the women sent away? Not because the men think them inferior, and wish to get rid of them (a modern misconception), but because they deeply cherish them and wish to protect them. What are they fighting for, indeed, but to protect their families!

With Elves in general, as with Dwarves, there is little mention of womenfolk. The cloaks of Lórien are woven by Galadriel and her maidens, and her maidens sit around her at the last feast of Lórien on the Hythe. Otherwise, Elves are en masse, and are not differentiated by sex. This can be explained by their psychology; due to their immortality, matings are rare and so even more are offspring; and so Elves are not very highly sexed. Matters are different with the leading female Elves, who have leading parts in the story, and it is crucial to understand that their rôles derive from fantasy archetypes. Arwen is a

Princess and Galadriel an Enchantress. Thus the law of 'Historical Accuracy', which grants women less important rôles in a war epic, can be adapted in a Fantasy epic to redress the balance. Arwen may seem a very passive character, a stay-at-home, who works on a standard, and arrives when all the fighting is over, but this is a superficial view of her importance. Re-read the conversation of Aragorn and Gandalf on page 249/250 of 'The Return of the King': Aragorn is concerned for the future of Gondor, knowing that he must eventually die, and Gandalf says of the young tree, " ... if a fruit ever ripens, it should be planted, lest the line die out of the world." And when the tree blossoms, Aragorn's bride arrives as a fantasy Princess should when the hero has performed the heroic deed. Her function is not just to act, in the common parlance, as a 'sex-object' and 'house-bound mother', but to fulfill the greatest gift a woman can offer a man, and give both of them immortality through children. She brings not only herself, but the blood and inheritance of her great ancestry, to provide the finest birthright for the next generation of Kings. However, both heredity and monarchy are out of fashion in our modern world, so critics of this point will just have to be satisfied that Tolkien conforms to Historical and Fantasy criteria.

Galadriel is an enchantress, a good one of course, but in the same style as Morgan le Fay, she uses her beauty to influence the minds of others, as well as her magic. When she dreams of power through the Great Ring she dreams of adoration too, "All shall love me and despair !" She is far more important than her consort, for she is of higher descent, an exile of the House of Finrod, and when she passes over the sea, he stays in Middle-Earth. As mother of Celebrían and grandmother of Arwen, she is rightfully respected by Aragorn for the rôle in the existence of his love. One should also mention here the oft-invoked goddess of the Elves - Elbereth, spouse of Manwe (perhaps too sacred himself to be invoked ?).

I am now able to return to 'earth' as it were, and may couple with Galadriel, on a small scale, Goldberry, the daughter of the river, who is wedded to the Robin Goodfellow of Tom Bombadil. Both Galadriel and Goldberry create the environment in which they live, by their own magic. Goldberry surrounds her husband with a magical world of nature expressed in her own beauty; while Galadriel uses the Elven Ring to keep inviolate the world of Lórien and 'stay'

the season's passage. "Home-making" is a term of disgust in our modern world, where there is little for the wife to do and such a small architect-designed box to transform to an individual environment - what a travesty of the creative rôle available to the women of the past ! When Tom says Goldberry is doing her washing and autumn-cleaning, he means that she is calling up rain, in her rôle as river-daughter, to wash the thirsty land. So Goldberry is an enchantress too - and you wouldn't catch Bombadil trying to dominate her.

Before I tackle the Eowyn problem, which is perhaps the crux of the matter, I must first deal with the female monster. One has two contradictory points of view to consider: either that powerful females are evidence for a writer's anti-sexism, whether they are good or evil, or that if they are evil, they demonstrate the writer's hatred of the female sex. Two points of view. You, the reader, must decide.

I think I've said enough to pinpoint Tolkien's respect for women, and so Shelob is just one evil female to set against the other good ones. Of course a fanatic would leap upon Shelob (metaphorically speaking !) - but I think more antipathy is shown in C.S. Lewis's witches, lovely though they are.

Now to Eowyn who would seem to be the most obvious candidate for sex-discrimination. She is forbidden to go to war ! And after proving herself as a fighter, Tolkien allows her to give it all up and get married ! It would be easy to make out the case for the prosecution, and I will now try to refute it. Note first of all that Eowyn has been allowed to learn riding and other fighting skills. As leader in Theóden's absence she may have to fight the enemy too. Why does Aragorn refuse Eowyn permission to ride ? First, as he tells her, she cannot leave her duty without permission from her kinsman. The second reason he keeps secret; she wants to ride for love of him, so he is responsible for her: he can not take her into danger, as he does not return her love.

She herself speaks against the view that she is inferior because she is a woman.

"All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield

blade, and I do not fear either pain or death."

"What do you fear, lady?" he asked.

"A cage," she said. "To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire."

(III 58)

Note that she argues for herself as an individual, not as a woman (untrained women have no place in battle) but her birth entitles her to consideration. However, she is still a slave to women's lot - she is a slave to love. Not only does she love Aragorn, she remembers the horrible fate threatened by Saruman - to marry Wormtongue! I think we can say that her heart's conversion to loving Faramir is delicately and romantically done. You may think that her joyful speech is too much to bear.

But remember, Eowyn has achieved a great war deed. She defied Aragorn and went to war and fulfilled the prophecy that no man should slay the chief Nazgûl. Now she chooses once more to do what she wants. She is not forced to marry. Romantic by nature, she must love and be loved. And as I said earlier about Arwen, a Princess gives her husband immortality through children, and unites royal houses to bring peace and the best possible heredity, in fantasy worlds at least. Eowyn is also a Princess as well as that other great fantasy archetype, the Amazon.

To sum up my arguments on Tolkien's behalf: women are not inferior, though they perform their historical rôle, and some women are important examples of fantasy archetypes. However, it is obvious that Tolkien prefers to write about men and that he considers the creative rôle of women to be their greatest function in life. I would prefer to see it as a fault in our modern age that many do not agree, than that it is a fault in Tolkien. However, the feminists ought to find something sympathetic in 'The Lord of the Rings', for what is it but a parable on the triumph of the physically weak over the strong.

No doubt fanatics will not have been convinced by anything that I have said, if they are determined to hunt out 'sexism'. They have already started to carve up C. S. Lewis. So on to the second part of my article. Narnia and the North!