

Warm Beds are Good: Sex and Libido in Tolkien's Writing

By Tyellas

Editorial Acknowledgements To: Aayesha, Finch, Philosopher at Large, and Suzana.

Introduction

“The devil is endlessly ingenious, and sex is his favourite subject.” – J.R.R. Tolkien¹

“Sex” and “Tolkien” may seem like a contradiction in terms. It is often believed that Tolkien’s works as a whole are sexless, boyish and innocent, based on the lack of sexual content in his novel *The Lord of the Rings*. This is not true. Sex and libido are present in Tolkien’s vision of Middle-Earth; indeed, it’s inevitable in such a complete portrait of an imaginary world. Sex is marginalized in *Lord of the Rings*, is a destructive undercurrent in *The Silmarillion*, and is given rare, yet frank mentions in Tolkien’s extensive backstory of Middle-Earth. Passionate love, transgressive desire, denied sexual fulfilment, and rape are plot points in several stories. Libido and sexual love are even portrayed positively, when they take place within the proper moral bounds. This essay is an attempt to unearth and review the role of sex in Tolkien’s writing, and to analyse how modern readers react to it.

Tolkien: Old-Fashioned In His Day

“This is a fallen world. The dislocation of sex-instinct is one of the chief symptoms of the Fall... *Allas! Allas! That ever love was sinne!* As Chaucer says.” J.R.R. Tolkien, commenting on sex in Letter 43.²

The events of Tolkien’s life and times illuminate his reticence and rare direct statements about sex. Morally, he was more a more Victorian than Edwardian or truly modern, due directly to his upbringing.

Tolkien’s genteel upper middle-class upbringing was entwined with his strong Catholic faith. He was born in 1892. When he was four, his father died; at the age of 12, in 1904, his Catholic mother died and he became the ward of Father Francis, a conservative Catholic priest. When Tolkien fell in love for the first time at the age of 17 with a young woman named Edith Bratt, Father Francis’ disapproving reaction was to forbid him to see Edith again until he was 21. Many young men might have rebelled against this or moved on from this first young love. Tolkien did neither. He and Bratt were married in 1916, when Tolkien was 24, the wedding taking place partly in response to Tolkien’s military activity in World War I. When separated from Edith, during war or when studying at university, there is no evidence of the least jot of impropriety.³

After WWI, Tolkien became a professor, working at several universities before settling into a chair (professorship) at Oxford. The university milieu he inhabited for 24 years, from 1925 to 1959, had strong bohemian elements. Oxford in the 1930s was one of the few refuges in British culture for gay subcultures. The forbidden, intellectually sophisticated gay lifestyle evoked “...positive interest among rebellious students in the

¹ Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995. Letter 43.

² Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995. Letter 43.

³ Carpenter, Humphrey. *J.R. R. Tolkien: A Biography*. HarperCollins, 1977, p. 21 – 77.

thirties, as in the division in Oxford, for example, between hearties and aesthetes.”⁴ Tolkien could not have been further from the gay cliques on campus. By his dress and his choice of religious and extra-curricular activities, Tolkien aligned himself with the hearties, and against the aesthetes.⁵ His letters in the 1940s firmly express his belief that conservative sexual conduct was right and proper, writing vehemently against divorce and second marriages.⁶

Tolkien's sexual stodginess was not the norm for British society or British literature during his lifetime. What did Tolkien see during the years he was working on his Middle-Earth stories, from 1915 to his death in 1973? There were censorship and academic scandals about sexually controversial books: Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928)⁷ and the novel *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, published in 1928 and the subject of an obscenity trial in 1960.⁸ Outside the spotlight of controversy, popular and acclaimed British novelists, such as H.E. Bates⁹ and Nancy Mitford,¹⁰ incorporated sexuality into their works. Socially, World War II loosened sexual restraints, and bohemianism in the late 1950s and early 1960s reached its apotheosis in the Sexual Revolution.¹¹

If Tolkien was moved by the works of other British authors and the events of his day, it was to be all the more steadfast to his own beliefs. He was open-minded enough to intellectually appreciate works that discussed homosexuality in an appropriate historical context, such as Mary Renault's groundbreaking novels set in ancient Greece, *The King Must Die* and *The Bull from the Sea*.¹² But with regards to his own myths, he became even more conservative as he grew older. During his later life, he often went back and revised or censored earlier versions of his Middle-Earth stories. In the two letters in which he discusses his beliefs about sex and marriage, he comes across as conservative to the point of being a prude. And yet, he shows that he was profoundly conscious of the power of sexuality, viewing it as something overwhelming. Sexual tension was a perpetual

⁴ Haggerty, George E. *Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia*. Garland Publishing Inc., 2000. p. 471

⁵ Carpenter (Bio), p. 167

⁶ Carpenter (Letters), Letters 43 and 49

⁷ Souhami, Diana, *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall*, Virago Press 1999, chapters 21-23. Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* is a sympathetic portrait of a butch lesbian in the years before, during, and after World War I.

⁸ Parker, Derek, *An Anthology of Erotic Prose*, The Bath Press, 1981, p. 180

⁹ Bates, H.E., referring to his shorter works, especially the anthology *Seven by Fire*, a collection of his stories from 1926 to 1961 which include stories about lesbianism, adultery, and seduction. There was also his popular “Larkin Family” series, written from 1958 to 1963, four books laden with juicy ribaldry and affection for rural England. The central family, the Larkins, are strikingly like Tolkien's hobbits in their innocence, adoration of their rural home, and appetite for food

¹⁰ Mitford, Nancy E., referring to almost everything she wrote, alive with a sly awareness of sex, but specifically referring to the novels *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) and *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949).

¹¹ Brecher, Edward, *The Sex Researchers*. Specific Press, 1979, p. 325. This book includes virulent commentary throughout that shows that the cold grip of Victorian repression, and ideas of sexual health formulated at that time, were still having a profound effect sixty-six years later. “I believe that our culture is gradually recovering from a debilitating disease: Victorianism.” “Much of the sexual misery and inadequacy in Western culture today stems directly from the methods of child rearing urged by Dr. Blackwell and other Victorians...”

¹² Letters 294. Mary Renault was one of Tolkien's favoured students at Oxford, and her treatment of historically accurate homosexuality in the novels cited here caused some controversy at the time. The novels were historically and folklorically accurate on many levels, in a firmly pre-Christian setting. Thanks to Philosopher At Large for this reference and related information.

interference barring true friendship between men and women; from one side or the other, the sex-instinct would rear its head.¹³

Central Concepts of Sex in Tolkien's Writing

"Marriage, save for rare ill chances or strange fates, was the natural course of life for all the Eldar." Laws and Customs of the Eldar.¹⁴

Throughout the 17 books of Tolkien's published works, certain concepts of sex emerge:

- **Sex belongs in marriage** - Good sex takes place within marriage; bad sex takes place outside of marriage, or breaks the rules that govern marriage. Honourable characters do not try to engage in sexual activity outside of marriage. It is telling that Sam Gamgee needs to be called to join Frodo at his departure from Bag End not because he has his hand down Rosie's blouse, but because he is saying good-bye to the beer barrel.¹⁵
- **Within marriage the desire for sex is normal and healthy** - The desire to be married and have children is laudable. Sam's attention to Rosie in this regard after their marriage seems to leave no room for criticism. Characters who do not desire marriage and/or sex, even though they might, such as Boromir and Frodo, have something wrong with them.
- **The desire to reproduce reflects racial health and rightness** - It is tempting to include a long apologia, explanation, and criticism of Tolkien's views of race and eugenics, but that is outside the scope of this essay. What matters is that a healthy race, be it an individual species like the Ents or an ethnicity within a species, like the Dúnedain, was one that had children.
- **The trope of the male authority figure** - Drawn directly from Tolkien's life, this occurs again and again; a male authority figure giving or withholding approval for marriage. This appears in all his great romances; Idril and Tuor, Beren and Lúthien, Aragorn and Arwen, Aldarion and Erendis.
- **The cultural separation of women and men** - Most women in Middle-Earth live constrained by, even happy with, the limits of their culture and with traditional gender roles. There are a few exceptional women: Lúthien, Eowyn, Galadriel. Lúthien is semi-divine; Eowyn and Galadriel have aspirations that are traditionally male, Galadriel to rule, Eowyn to be a hero. But most remain in their own niches and thus do not appear in Tolkien's stories of adventure and war.

¹³ Carpenter (Letters), Letters 43. It is greatly tempting to quote this letter in its entirety. One comment leads to another; first men are castigated, then women, "You may meet in life women who are flighty, or even plain wanton..." then men again. "Each of us could healthily beget, in our 30 odd years of full manhood, a few hundred children, and enjoy the process." The letter concludes with a realistic analysis of marriage in general, then his own marriage and the exhortation to love "the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament."

¹⁴ Laws and Customs Essay (LACE), *Morgoth's Ring*, p. 210

¹⁵ Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Fellowship of the Ring* (FOTR), Ballantine Books, 1954, p. 79

Libido as Reward in Lord of the Rings

“When things are in danger, someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. But you are my heir; all that I had and might have had I leave to you. And you have Rosie...” Frodo speaking to Sam at the end of *Return of the King*¹⁶

For most of the novel *Lord of the Rings*, sex a non-issue. It emerges briefly in *The Two Towers*, with Eowyn’s infatuation with Aragorn, and Treebeard’s story of the gender separation and reproductive decline of the tree-people the Ents, but is subsumed and ignored as war takes centre stage in the story. Sex and romance appear at last in *Return of the King* when the story reaches and passes its Biblical climax of the destruction of the Rings and begins its long denouement.

The kisses of Eowyn and Faramir upon the walls of Gondor, part of the climactic events, are a powerful and approving foreshadowing of the sexual unions to come. Their first kiss upon the walls seems chaste – Faramir kisses Eowyn’s forehead. Nonetheless, it is marked by the one sensual device Tolkien allowed himself throughout his writing; beautiful hair. “Their hair, raven and golden, streamed out mingling in the air.” Later in the chapter, Faramir declares his love for Eowyn and their kiss is even more intimate, “and he cared not that they stood upon the walls in the sight of many. And many indeed saw them...”¹⁷ After the passionate peak reached by Eowyn and Faramir, pairings that follow in the denouement seem cool and perfunctory.

Via its one acceptable road, marriage, sexual fulfilment is part of Happily Ever After for Tolkien. Other characters who are good and who succeed – Aragorn and Sam – receive sex and love as a reward within the narrative. In the appendix *The Tale of Years*, other “good” characters, Merry, Pippin, and Eómer, also are paired off with eligible women. His strongest indicator of this rewarding fulfilment may be earthy Sam having thirteen children.¹⁸ Characters who are evil and fail are either depicted as asexual (Denethor, Saruman, Gollum) or de-sexualized. Grima, who had desired Eowyn, is depicted at the end as a whimpering worm of a man.

If sex is a reward, why are other good characters, Gimli, Legolas, Treebeard, Gandalf, and Frodo denied it? They are not married or reunited with lovers. They are all ascribed asexuality. And none of these characters, or their respective races, belong in Middle-Earth any more at the end of the narrative. Their lack of sex is a denial of their continued existence into the Fourth Age, the Age of Men. Legolas, the Elf, is the strongest indicator of this disconnection. Gimli is linked to him both in awareness of his own race’s decline in Middle-Earth and in his connection to the Elves, via friendship and his courtly love of Galadriel. For in *Lord of the Rings*, the time of the Elves is done; they are leaving or fading (literally withdrawing from physical existence). The only elf/elf love story discussed in *Lord of the Rings*, that of Amroth and Nimrodel, ends with the death of Amroth and the disappearance of Nimrodel related to an unsuccessful journey to go over Sea, almost a criticism of their inappropriate earthly passion.¹⁹

The most poignant moment related to this linked sexual denial and “fading” is Treebeard’s farewell to Celeborn and Galadriel in the *Return of the King* chapter “Many

¹⁶ *The Return of the King (ROTK)*, J.R.R. Tolkien, Ballantine Books, 1955, p. 345

¹⁷ ROTK, events in the chapter *The Steward and The King*.

¹⁸ ROTK, events detailed in Appendix B, *The Tale of Years*.

¹⁹ FOTR, page 353.

Partings.” Treebeard’s goodbye words to these two Elves translate as “Fair ones begetters of fair ones.” It is a sad note from one race with its sexuality in the past to another race in a similar situation, even as it acknowledges the good fortune of the elvish couple’s contribution to Aragorn’s line, which will continue into the future.²⁰

Yet in Tolkien’s world sex is not the ultimate reward. The divine is. Frodo, one of the great heroes of the story, has an interval in which he might attempt libidinal fulfilment, his time in the Shire after the Quest’s end, but it is not for him. He soon goes over Sea with the Elves, a direct connection with the divine that has for him a chance for true healing. Sam, after the death of his wife, goes over Sea, to partake briefly of the healing there. Aragorn chooses to die when his span is past, as an act of free will, and in Tolkien’s world the death of mortal men is supposed to bring about a form of union with God.²¹

Where does this leave Arwen, who remained in Middle-Earth for the sake of her love and passion for Aragorn? She seems punished, somehow. Aragorn’s choice of death plunges her into a sad understanding of human denial of death and leaves her without reason to live. Arwen’s decision to stay in Middle-Earth and love Aragorn, motivated by passion, becomes hollow, in the end. “I must indeed abide the Doom of Men, whether I will or I nil; the loss and the silence.”²² This evokes the results of passion-based decisions in *The Silmarillion*.

Sam and Frodo: Gay? Or Victorian?

“I didn’t ought to have left my blanket behind,” muttered Sam; and lying down he tried to comfort Frodo with his arms and body.” Mount Doom, *Return of the King*²³

Any discussion of sexuality in Tolkien is incomplete without a discussion of the loving dynamic between Sam and Frodo. From Sam’s refusal to let Frodo leave the Fellowship without him at the end of *Fellowship of the Ring* to the intense physical closeness they fall into on the hard roads of Mordor in *Return of the King*, even to the final notes of the book in which Sam follows Frodo over Sea, their intimacy is exceptional. Modern readers often interpret their deep affection and love for each other as being on the edge of homosexuality.

It was in no way Tolkien’s intent to present Sam and Frodo as homosexual. To clarify his intent with these characters, we need to examine the Victorian and medieval ideals of friendship. The relationship between Sam and Frodo hearkens back to pre-20th century ideas of male friendship as an ultimate expression of companionship. “In previous centuries “friends” would write to each other in emotional tones that would be read in modern society as indicating sexual interest.”²⁴ These ideals can be traced in literature from the time of the ancient Greeks. One of Tolkien’s most inspirational folkloric texts, the Finnish epic poem *The Kalevala*, has a poignant invocation of such male friendship in

²⁰ Through Celeborn and Galadriel’s granddaughter Arwen, married to Aragorn.

²¹ ROTK, Appendix A, *The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen*.

²² ROTK, Appendix A, *The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen*.

²³ ROTK, *Mount Doom*, p. 241

²⁴ Haggerty, p. 778

its beginning stanzas.²⁵ In the 19th century, same-sex relationships were often termed “romantic friendships” and included various expressions of homoeroticism without becoming actively sexual. This changed at the turn of the century, but in the United Kingdom it was tempered by the literary reaction to the war-related deaths of World War I. “The massive loss of life in World War I produced a literary outpouring of grief that made poems by both homosexual and heterosexual authors seem overwhelmingly homoerotic.”²⁶

Lord of the Rings was written during World War II. It is possible that Tolkien’s depiction of Sam and Frodo’s partnership was in part influenced by the events of the day re-evoking the elegies of World War I. Tolkien noted that the character of Sam was partly based on other soldiers he knew during World War I.²⁷

Tolkien’s male friendships, some intense enough to cause conflict with his wife, were an important part of his life. His friendship with C.S. Lewis has attracted much attention, both because they were both writers and because of Lewis’ own essay on friendship. Tolkien’s biographer Carpenter notes the historical role and that such friendships were “not homosexual...yet it excluded women. It is the great mystery of Tolkien’s life, and we should understand little if we attempt to analyse it...we can find something of it expressed in *The Lord of the Rings*.²⁸

It says a great deal about how much our society has changed in the 50 years since *Lord of the Rings* was written that Tolkien’s ideals and experiences of male friendship are now a historical phenomenon that require clarification. When the *Fellowship of the Ring* film was released, the emotional and physical closeness between Sam and Frodo was even commented on in gay and lesbian media.²⁹ Tolkien would not have been very pleased by the attention he was receiving from the aesthetes.

The Censored Silmarillion

“But as she looked on him, doom fell on her, and she loved him; yet she slipped from his arms and vanished even as day was breaking. Then Beren lay upon the ground in a swoon, as one slain at once by bliss and grief...” Of Beren and Lúthien, *The Silmarillion*³⁰

²⁵ Lönnrot, Elias, translated by Magoun, Francis Peabody, *The Kalevala or Poems of the Kalevala District*, Harvard University Press, 1963. Lines 6 through 12 of Poem 1, noted as an expression of male friendship, are as follows:

“Beloved friend, my boon companion, my fair boyhood comrade,
start now to sing with me, begin to recite together
now that we have come together, have come from two directions.
Seldom do we come together, meet one another
On these wretched marches, these poor northern parts.
Let us clasp hand in hand, fingers in fingers,
So that we may sing fine things, give voice to the best things.”

²⁶ Haggerty, p. 1023

²⁷ Humphrey (Bio) p. 114 “My Sam Gamgee is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognized as so far superior to myself.”

²⁸ Carpenter (Bio), p. 194. Carpenter pulls no punches in his cold analysis of Tolkien’s relationship with his wife, and we may assume that he is making informed and accurate statements here.

²⁹ *The Advocate*, Dec. 25, 2001, “The Gay Guide to Middle Earth.”

³⁰ Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Silmarillion*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Ballantine Books, 1977.

Compared to *Lord of the Rings*, the published book *The Silmarillion* has much more romance and sex. Sexual transgression influences two major stories, that of Turin, who married his sister Nienor, and that of Maeglin, who desired his overly-close cousin, the elf princess Idril. (Both of these transgressions have a tragic ending. Turin's tale has the double suicide of both siblings after the revelation of their incest, and Maeglin betrays an elf stronghold to evil, hoping to gain Idril for himself.) The entire story of the mortal Beren and the semi-divine beauty Lúthien is laden with references to Lúthien's desirability. She even uses her sexual appeal to lull the evil power Morgoth, offering her services as a minstrel, and it is implied that Morgoth plans to rape her. These events, and other glimmers of sexual frankness in *The Silmarillion*, are all couched in the most Biblical terms.

Couched; or, in some cases, rephrased. The original drafts of Tolkien's material for *The Silmarillion* are often far more sexually frank than the version that was published. Tolkien worked on *The Silmarillion* for 56 years, and many sections went through multiple drafts. At times, Tolkien would amend items he had written in his more passionate youth, censoring himself. For example, in the original draft of the *Silmarillion* chapter "Of Maeglin," the Dark Elf Eöl comes upon the straying elf-lady Aredhel in the woods and "takes her to wife by force,"³¹ Tolkien's favourite euphemism for rape and unwilling marriage. In a later draft, he changed this so that Aredhel was drawn to Eöl by Eöl's enchantments and "was not unwilling."³² Another significant change is that of Lúthien's approach to Morgoth. In an earlier draft Lúthien did not sing for Morgoth; she danced for him, and the entire encounter was more sexualised.³³

Yet another story that had extensive sexual elements removed was the tale of Turin. These editorial changes were probably made by Christopher Tolkien, Tolkien's son and literary executor. The *Silmarillion* version retains the incestuous union of Turin and Nienor and an elf's deadly sexual insult to Turin's female kin, "If the Men of Hithlum are so wild and fell, of what sort are the women of that land? Do they run like deer clad only in their hair?"³⁴ The long version of this story, *Narn i Hin Húrin*, published in the book *Unfinished Tales*, includes sexual details that round out the setting of a nearly-medieval world torn by war and its crude realities. There is a sympathetic view of a woman, Aerin, forced into marriage with her conqueror; greater emphasis on the elf-maid Finduilas' attraction to Turin; and an incident where Turin, living in outlawry, rescues a woman from being raped by a member of his gang, and the woman has a shockingly libidinal reaction: "Then the woman rose to her feet and laid her hand on Turin's arm. She looked at the blood and she looked at Turin, and there was delight in her eyes. "Kill him, lord!" she said. "Kill him too! And then come with me. Larnach my father will not be displeased. For two 'wolf-heads' he has rewarded men well." It is implied that she is making herself sexually available to Turin. Turin's response is to say, "I will not cut off the heads of my fellows to buy his favour, or aught else." Later on, another outlaw is perplexed by Turin's restraint, and shows his own corrupt nature in his interpretation of the incident: "The woman liked that well, and offered to go with him...But he did not want her, and sped her off; so what grudge he had against the captain (the rapist) I

³¹ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The War of the Jewels (WOTJ): The Later Silmarillion Part Two, Volume 11 of The History of Middle Earth*, J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Co, 1994. p. 409.

³² WOTJ, p. 322.

³³ Shippey, Tom, *The Road to Middle-Earth*, HarperCollins, 1992, p. 279.

³⁴ The Silmarillion, p. 244

cannot guess.”³⁵ In the published version of *The Silmarillion*, this event is deleted in its entirety, edited down into one sentence, “But Turin abode long among the outlaws, and he became their captain; and he named himself Neithan, the Wronged.”³⁶

Because the more explicit material was released later, in *Unfinished Tales* and the *History of Middle-Earth* series, it does not seem likely that C. Tolkien’s intent was to bowdlerize the original. C. Tolkien was probably excluding this for editorial considerations of length and style. Much of the explicit material is very different in style or format from the Biblical style of the *Silmarillion* corpus. For example, the Turin rape-rescue incident is presented in immediate third-person dialogue, a more intimate pacing with a wider range of characters. And Tolkien’s two most sexually explicit pieces, “Laws and Customs of the Eldar” and “Aldarion and Erendis,” while part of the materials intended for *The Silmarillion*, were both incomplete and tangled in format. Tolkien might not have been pleased at their exclusion on stylistic grounds, but he might have approved on moral ones.

Laws and Customs Among the Eldar: Everything Under Control

“Seldom is any tale told of deeds of lust amongst them.” – Laws and Customs Among the Eldar³⁷

After *LOTR*, in which three kisses between men and women take place within a 1000-page novel, and the pious tone with which *The Silmarillion* sterilizes sexual transgressions, Tolkien’s essay “Laws and Customs Among the Eldar” seems dizzyingly explicit. It discusses elf marriage and the “begetting,” bearing, and raising of children.

This essay is the ultimate expression of Tolkien’s idealizations of love and sex. The title itself indicates the role of sex in Tolkien’s ideal world. It is “Laws and Customs,” not “Lives and Loves” that control the Elves in these matters. The second part of the essay is a long, morally tortured discussion, centred around a judgement and debate, of why second marriages are unnatural.

Sex equals marriage for the Elves. “It was the act of bodily union that achieved marriage,”³⁸ not the ceremony itself. This is taken directly from Roman Catholic doctrine.³⁹ There was social pressure to have the ceremony under normal circumstances; it incorporated extensive parental expressions of approval. Surprisingly, marriage also equals sex. “Marriage is chiefly of the body, for it is achieved by bodily union, and its first operation is the begetting of the bodies of children....And the union of bodies in

³⁵ *Unfinished Tales*, Narn i Hin Hurin, p. 92 – 94.

³⁶ *The Silmarillion*, p. 245.

³⁷ Every time I read this quote, I can’t help but think that this is no longer true with the advent of Tolkien fanfiction on the Internet! Tales of lust indeed. Tolkien, J.R.R., *Morgoth’s Ring: The Later Silmarillion Part One, Volume 10 of The History of Middle Earth*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin Co, 1993. The full essay title is “Of The Laws and Customs Among the Eldar Pertaining To Marriage and Other Matters Related Thereto; Together With the Statute Of Finwe and Miriel And The Debate Of The Valar At Its Making.” It is abbreviated for reference as LACE.

³⁸ LACE p. 212

³⁹ Personal communication, Philosopher at Large. This writer noted that Catholic marriage exists when four conditions are met; the parties are not previously married, wish to marry, understand what marriage entails as a commitment before God – and that they have sex. The private vow and acknowledgement before God are sufficient for the banns, and the rest is social formality.

marriage is unique, and no other union resembles it.”⁴⁰ Once this is taken care of, however, “the desire soon ceases, and the mind turns to other things. The union of love is indeed to them great delight and joy,...but they have many other urges of body and of mind that their nature urges them to fulfil.”⁴¹ Sex is both exalted and contained. It is appropriate in its brief time, place, and role; the early part of marriage.

The spiritual side of marriage, the idea that the two spirits are also joined in eternal union after the physical act, is the focus of the second half of Tolkien’s essay (which is choppy and uneven, still in draft form.) All of this information about elvish sex/marriage has been given to the reader to provide a moral frame for a tragedy. An elvish king, Finwe, was married to the elf-woman Míriel; after she had her first child, she declared herself weary of physical existence, wishing “to escape from the body,” and chose to die. Finwe, specifically saying that he was “young and eager, and desiring to have more children,” was given leave by authority (in this case, the godlike Valar) to marry a second time, the elf-woman Indis. In subsequent years, the strife between his first son Feanor and his later children creates a tragic rift amongst the Elves and makes them vulnerable to evil.⁴² Libido and reproduction are entwined in Tolkien’s euphemisms. Thus it is Finwe’s persistent libido that draws him into a moral sin; he is an example of Tolkien’s personal belief that “Men are not [monogamous]....No good pretending. Men just ain’t.”⁴³

The essay bogs down at this point into interminable moral discussions about the nature of marriage, the core idea being that souls (*fea*) are eternally bound together through marriage, and just because one partner is not in a body (*hroa*) does not mean that the marriage is ended, thus remarrying after being bereaved is a sin. In this realm of ideals, divorce is not even possible, though separation is. The decision to allow Finwe to remarry is seen in the long run as flawed, and remarriages are henceforth discouraged among the Elves. One cannot fault C. Tolkien’s decision to exclude the second part of this essay, distilling it into a few paragraphs and including the mitigating sentence, “But the children of Indis were great and glorious, and their children also: and had they not lived, the history of the Eldar would have been diminished.”⁴⁴

The Great Tolkien Sex Story: Aldarion and Erendis

“How can I dismiss you, when I look on you again, fair as the sun after winter!” – Erendis speaking to Aldarion, *Aldarion and Erendis*

Where “Laws and Customs” describes Tolkien’s ideals about sex and marriage in the abstract, the story “Aldarion and Erendis” explores them via a failed relationship between a distracted mariner-king and his resentful wife. “Aldarion and Erendis” is the quintessential Tolkien sex story; one in which hardly any sex takes place, and yet all the actions are influenced by desire unfulfilled or withheld. Their marriage is unwise, based greatly on Erendis’ animal attraction to Aldarion. But the greater evil comes in their allowing resentment to come between the desire they feel for each other. They set up a cycle of denial and bad examples.

⁴⁰ LACE, p. 226

⁴¹ LACE, p. 213

⁴² LACE, p. 237

⁴³ Carpenter, (Letters), Letter 43 again.

⁴⁴ *Silmarillion*, p. 70

In a way Aldarion is Tolkien's ideal man; a venturer, strong, handsome, politically minded, and allied with the Elves. Also, he is not swept away by desire. Although he admires Erendis, his "sex psychology" is all too firmly under control, and neither libidinal fulfilment or marriage are high priorities for him. The woman who loves him, Erendis, is less rarefied, more understandable in her unrequited love, and also more fallible. She is not an ideal woman, but she may be a quintessential one for Tolkien; more involved with Aldarion than he is with her, home-bound, concerned with small matters, specifically of lesser kin than Aldarion. She cannot compete with the world and voyages that tempt Aldarion to leave her again and again.

Healthy sexuality is repeatedly defined throughout this story. In reversal of the male authority figure trope, Aldarion is under considerable pressure from his father Melendur to marry Erendis. Once they are engaged, Melendur is astonished that Aldarion waits for three years and more, implying criticism of his son's lack of libido. "I marvel that you could endure so long a delay."⁴⁵

It is in their rare expressions of desire that the characters reach romantic greatness and inspiration. Erendis is smitten with Aldarion when she sees him on parade. In a gesture of closeness (and enabling) Erendis brings Aldarion a token of good luck for his journeys, a green branch, that the King forbids him to have. Later, Aldarion is smitten in turn when he comes upon Erendis roaming beneath the trees, wearing the jewel that he gave her. Their marriage at last is a cause for national celebration, and is even blessed by the presence of Elves at their final celebration. The Elves give Aldarion and Erendis a symbolic gift of birds: "They mate for life, and that is long." That very night, Erendis arises from her marital bed, and the two elven-birds are sitting on the windowsill, a sign of approval for their bed and its activity.

After several years, the couple have a falling-out when Aldarion goes venturing again, and Erendis retreats entirely into a world of women, living out of sight of the sea in a household attended by women only. Significantly, she sends the elven-birds away. "Sweet fools, fly away!" she said, "This is no place for joy such as yours." She and Aldarion never have sex again.

When Aldarion finally returns from his venturing, she does not fly to his arms, treating him instead as a guest in a way that makes clear her sexual refusal of him. "A guest-room is made ready for you, when you will. My women will wait on you. If you are cold, call for fire." Aldarion leaves in a fury the next morning, and never returns to her. Erendis later refuses the King's decree to return to Aldarion, using terms that express her abdication from sexuality: "Here then permit me to remain in my solitude..." Aldarion, upon hearing of this, says, "Rather a beautiful Queen to thwart me and flout me, than freedom to rule while the Lady...falls down into her own twilight." He is mourning the renunciation of her sexual power, and her emotional connection to him as well. Even if she was tormenting and bewitching him, it would have shown that she cared.

After this renunciation, the story exists in draft form only. But there is startling fall-out from this dissolution of desire, and the story reaches its peaks of sexual frankness. Their daughter, Ancalime, has learned from her mother to intensely dislike men. Erendis says to her, "All things were made for [men's] service...women for their body's need, or if fair

⁴⁵ All quotes in this section sourced from *Unfinished Tales, Aldarion and Erendis: The Mariner's Wife*, p. 181 through 222.

to adorn their table and hearth.” Ancalime, destined to be Queen since there is no male heir, wreaks political havoc with her refusal to marry. Eventually she marries the noble man Hallacar, and endures just enough sexual attention from him to have a son. In spite afterwards, she withdraws Hallacar’s family lands from him, saying that she will not have her husband as a farm-steward.

The final note of the story is the most explicitly sex-positive incident in all Tolkien’s writing. Ancalime has forbidden her serving-women to marry, although they had lovers. Her husband Hallacar “in secret arranged for them to be wedded.” He held a feast and invited Ancalime, and she attended with all her women.

“She found the house all lit and arrayed as for a great feast, and men of the household attired in garlands as for their weddings, and each with another garland in his hand for a bride. “Come!” said Hallacar. “The weddings are prepared, and the bride-chambers are ready. But since it cannot be thought that we should ask the Lady Ancalime, King’s Heir, to lie with a farm-steward, then alas! She must sleep alone tonight.”and Ancalime would not come to the feast, but lay abed listening to the laughter far off and thinking it aimed at herself.”

This event brings together all of Tolkien’s sexual themes. There is the bucolic group marriage as a wrong amended, and the approval of marital sex in the near-ribald idea of the bride-chambers. At the same time, there is Hallacar’s public defiance and sexual negation of Ancalime, noted as her comeuppance for using her powers of sexual denial not only in her own marriage but to block the marriages of others. Hallacar is the male authority figure enabling the marriages to take place, usurping Ancalime for one night. “But she pursued Hallacar with hatred afterwards.”

Modern Readers’ Reactions: Updating the Myths

“Many young Americans are involved in the stories in a way that I’m not.” – J.R.R. Tolkien, in response to a question about his books’ popularity in the U.S.A.⁴⁶

It seems that the majority of Tolkien fans are content with Tolkien’s own limits on sexuality. Amongst other things, this ensures his works’ continued popularity amongst Christian conservatives. Many fans are purists, and many others seek libidinal thrills in fantasy worlds closely related to Tolkien’s, derivative novels such as the Terry Brooks’ *Shannara* series or role-playing games.

For a substantial minority of Tolkien fans, the asexuality and martially proscribed libidos of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth seem aberrant. It seems wrong, missing, childish, a marked absence. Literary critics have noted this.⁴⁷ At the same time, far removed from Tolkien’s Victorian ideals of male friendship, the emotional closeness between male characters is now often viewed not as boon companionship but as sublimated homosexuality. This latter has been commented on extensively as *Lord of the Rings* hits popular culture anew in the early part of the 21st century, thanks to Peter Jackson’s films. Parodies and fan fiction written by modern Tolkien fans sexualise Tolkien’s world and characters to lesser or

⁴⁶ Carpenter (Letters), Letter 279.

⁴⁷ Shippey, p. 123, quotes a British review that “There is not enough awareness of sexuality.” Turner (London Review of Books, “Reasons for Liking Tolkien,” v. 23, #25) echoes this by noting the pre-pubescent quality of several characters.

greater degrees, with satire, self-insertion, and relationships between the characters, invented desire or emphasized romances. The Peter Jackson film adaptation is the best example of this popular culture sexualisation; the role of Arwen is considerably enhanced, and scenes with her and Aragorn are added to give the tale “more romantic interest.”

Why?

The answer is that Tolkien’s goal of creating a mythology for England⁴⁸ was successful beyond his wildest dreams. For many readers, Tolkien’s worlds have been a substantial part of their inner landscapes and fantasy entertainment since childhood. The excitement of having “entered” the book can be profound; a critical reader notes, “The kicks I used to get from *The Lord of the Rings* were sensual, textural, almost sexual, a feeling of my mind being rubbed by the rough edges of the different layers.”⁴⁹ This has been emphasised even further with the recent *Lord of the Rings* film project, which has catapulted Middle-Earth into fully realized Surroundsound laden with powerful images. Tolkien’s world is now part of the mythology of popular culture and looks to remain so for some time.

Living myths do not remain the same. They are updated. The pagan gods became Christian saints; Christian and Confucian religious beliefs have varied based on translation and the political expediencies of the day. For centuries Christ was depicted based on the attractive ideals of the day, dressed in current clothes. Many Tolkien fans are updating Tolkien’s myths using the vehicles of modern folklore, most widely the Internet and the dissemination of humour, satire, and revisionary works it enables. For better or worse, sexualising Tolkien is how many Tolkien fans update Tolkien’s myths and place them in their own context. Within the subcultures of Tolkien fans, some disapprove of this strongly, especially if homosexuality is brought into the picture. Others approve provided that the reframing and fan works are done in a way that is respectful of, and accurate to, Tolkien’s depictions of his world. Some fans sexualise Tolkien’s characters for parody, humour, or expression of personal fantasies – and the final results are often barely related to Tolkien.

Tolkien imagined worlds and epics with sex confined to a respectable margin. But the modern audience cannot.⁵⁰ The libidinal force that Tolkien acknowledged, and tries to negate, is swept in by the reader in the present.

Conclusion

One reviewer, Turner, has commented that sex was literally an impossibility in Tolkien’s world. She posits that the maturity and satisfaction of true libidinal fulfilment would destroy Tolkien’s misty atmosphere of quests and male camaraderie.⁵¹ This opinion was based on the *Lord of the Rings* alone, not the full corpus of Tolkien’s work. As we have seen, sex was considered, was part of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth. His views on sex and romance were shaped by a combination of history and personal circumstances, as are those of his readers today.

⁴⁸ Shippey, p. 268.

⁴⁹ Turner, 2001.

⁵⁰ Turner, 2001 provides an example of this: “Though one always wonders about Merry and Pippin, and Legolas the wood-elf’s prejudice-busting closeness to Gimli the dwarf.”

⁵¹ Turner, 2001.

A final important aspect of sex and relationships in Middle-Earth is that Tolkien himself did not consider them in a modern context, but as part of his invented history. He deliberately did not place modern sexual dynamics or mores into Middle-Earth. In response to a criticism that Eowyn and Faramir fell in love extraordinarily quickly, Tolkien sums up how he pictured sexuality in his created world. “In my experience feelings and decisions ripen very quickly...in periods of great stress, and especially under the expectation of imminent death...This tale [LOTR] does not deal with a period of ‘Courtly Love’ and its pretences; but with a culture more primitive (sc. less corrupt) and nobler.”⁵² It is a vision of a world less stressed by sexual and romantic complications, where desire is both fulfilled and restrained, powerful yet moral; a hint of what might have been, in Tolkien’s view, if the world was purer than it is today.

About The Author

I am not a student, and I have not been one for some time. Unlike Tolkien, I like French food and cats. Correspondence and feedback are encouraged to Tyellas@hotmail.com, especially if you have new and interesting information. Special thanks are due again to all the people noted in the Editorial Acknowledgements, editors Aayesha and Suzana, and especially to Finch and Philosopher at Large for their contributions to the Mary Renault and Catholicism-related information noted here, with a later note of thanks to Dmitriy V. Ryaboy for a correction regarding *The Kalevala*.

⁵² Carpenter(Letters), Letter 244.