



A New Consideration of Gender in the Works of Tolkien with Consideration of Literary and Mythological Analogs

Kevin Hensler

Now I want to explain in advanced that I don't stick with any particular discipline's nomenclature with respect to a sex/gender distinction in this paper. I do this both because, though the increased precision is welcomed by me, I'm not sure I like the artificial redefining of existing English vocabulary which has been carried out and then dogmatically enforced by those scholars of the discipline of gender studies and their supporters. I also think the sex/gender distinction itself was something fuzzier for Tolkien than it is for modern scholars of gender, if he recognized its existence at all. Now I do strive towards precision, but consistent adherence to that new terminology when considering Tolkien's own phrasing would be both synthetic and confusing.

Okay, on with the paper. So, when I submitted the proposal for this paper, I really had no idea where I was going to go with it. I have been researching an ancient Syrian goddess, Anat, who seems to reject traditional gender roles for a while now, so I thought I might be able to take a similar tack in this paper. A central point of my research and analysis has been the idea that



gender for deities, as entities which transcend the material realm, must be fundamentally different than it is for us. I take this sensibility to my consideration of Tolkien's work and therefore have extensively considered the Valar and Maiar and what gender is for them. And indeed, the Valar and Maiar, not being embodied except by choice, and then in a manner of their own choosing, do experience gender differently than the Children of Ilúvatar, according to certain of Tolkien's works. As this paper developed, the relationship between gender and embodiment among the various races of Tolkien's legendarium became the central theme.

Gender embodiment is interesting when considering the Valar and Maiar precisely because all of their physical gendered characteristics are entirely voluntary. Nevertheless, the choices they make with respect to their physical gender seem to reflect an innate disposition. In the *Ainulindalë*, Tolkien writes:

“ . . . the Valar take upon them forms some as of male and some as of female; for that difference of temper they had even from their beginning, and it is but bodied forth in the choice of each, not made by the choice, even as with us male and female may be shown by the raiment but is not made thereby . . . (Silmarillion, *Ainulindalë*: Paragraph 23)”

Unlike the Valar and Maiar, the manifest gender of the Children of Ilúvatar is not based on volition in response to an innate disposition, but is rather a product of the physical body into which an elf or human is born. Is it the case that humans and elves have the same innate disposition that the Valar and Maiar have, and, though without volition, those bodies match that disposition? Do the Children of Ilúvatar have a fundamental unity between body and mind with respect to gender, albeit the eventual separation of body and soul at death for humans and some elves? There are not really any certain answers in the works of Tolkien, but there are hints which I mean for us to consider.

By way of this meandering introduction, I have broached those topics I wish primarily to consider. For the remainder of the paper, I will proceed by considering in more depth the gender first of the Valar and Maiar, and then of the Children of Ilúvatar.

Ainur, Valar, and Maiar

I consider the engenderment of the spiritual beings first because I prefer that the nonphysical, though apparently innate, gender of the Ainur to be the baseline of our discussion. In the handout I have given you, you can see the evolution of Tolkien's thought on this issue across revisions of the *Ainulindalë*.

In these passages we see the development the idea of engenderment of the *Ainur* within Tolkien's world. *Ainulindalë* A testifies that the Ainur took physical form upon entering into the circles of the world, but there is no sense either that there was or wasn't volition involved in their taking a form. *Ainulindalë* B suggests that the Ainur adopted the form and temper of males or females. The suggestion that they did not adopt the form based on their individual temper, but adopted both, is strange. I don't quite know what to make of it. At this point did Tolkien think of the gendered temperament of the descended Ainur as just as superficial as their appearance? Or is neither superficial, but in some way, neither is manifest before the entrance of the Valar and Maiar into the circles of the world? Tolkien addresses this to some extent in *Ainulindalë* C*. Here the descended Ainur still "arrayed themselves in <male or female> form and temper", but the narrator states that "doubtless" their choice of gender "proceeds" based on a "temper that each had from their uttermost beginning; for male and female are not matters only of the body any more than of the raiment." This is clarified in *Ainulindalë* C and the published *Silmarillion*

version. In these later versions, it is made clear to us that the gender of each of the descended Ainur is fundamental, and the way each of them is manifest reflects that fundamental reality, apparently in the same way that human dress reflects human gender, but humans cannot change their gender by cross-dressing.

So according to Tolkien, the manifest gender of fundamentally spiritual beings without inherent physical gender is completely voluntary, but in all cases apparently reflects an underlying gendered temperament. But theoretically they could manifest themselves as the other gender, they just would not. Way more can be said about this, especially if we consider modern human analogues of atypical gender identity, but alas, my time is brief and I have lots more to cover.

Now let's move on to consider the degree to which the gender of Valar and Maiar is physically embodied. In Tolkien's original conception of his legendarium, the Maiar were not yet conceived of, but some of the Valar had children who played similar roles.¹ This fact would seem to attest the physical capacity of the Valar to conceive and give birth to children in a way probably at least analogous to the manner of the Children of Ilúvatar, i.e. through the mating of opposite sex Valar. Some time before the publication of the *Silmarillion*, Tolkien abandoned this idea and the Valar and Maiar lost the physical capacity to reproduce, except for two very notable exceptions. The first is Melian, who becomes the mother of Luthien, Elu Thingol being her father. The second is Ungoliant, who becomes the mother of horrible spider creatures, most

¹ These ideas are preserved for us the Book of Lost Tales, and were lost some time between the composition of manuscripts B and C* of the *Ainulindalë*.

famously Shelob of Cirith Ungol fame. In my handout, I have provided the Silmarillion passages relating to the reproduction of these Maiar.

Why is it that these Maiar retained the ability to reproduce while the other descended Ainur apparently lost this ability? I have not found an explanation within Tolkien's published writings, but I think there are three possibilities we might consider. The first is that, more so than, or in a different manner from the other descended Ainur, Melian and Ungoliant became physically embodied. Melian, despite being a Maia, took on a beautiful female body evidently capable of producing fertile offspring when mated with a male elf.² Ungoliant, like Melian, demonstrates the ability to reproduce sexually with creatures of similar form to the one she took on.

The other possibilities besides a different degree or manner of physical embodiment from the other descended Ainur involves the fact that they are both Ainur mating with apparently sexually fertile beings. By the period of the composition of the Silmarillion, according to the development of Tolkien's ideas, it seems the descended Ainur had lost the ability to father children upon other descended Ainur, but perhaps it is possible that we should imagine that what is lacking between two descended Ainur is natural reproductive ability, and that in the presence of one naturally sexually fertile partner, descended Ainur could all have reproduced. Very few did because very few descended Ainur ever took mates who were not also descended Ainur. The final possibility is that the crucial element in Melian and Ungoliant's ability to reproduce is their femininity; that, in fact, no descended Ainur would have had the ability at all to father any

² I said above that no other descended Ainur were the parents of Children, but in fact the status of certain embodied creatures who seem to reproduce remains unclear. Creatures like the first dragons, or here, the "foul creatures of spider form" which Ungoliant "mated with" could, possibly, also have been embodied Maiar, which would undermine the uniqueness of Melian and Ungoliant as descended Ainur with children.

children at all, but that they did have the ability to conceive and bear children via a sexual relationship with male creatures who by their nature reproduced in the manner of the Children of Ilúvatar. This idea turns on how Tolkien imagined sexual reproduction working in the world he had composed. In the modern world, we are aware that in sexual reproduction, men and women both contribute a roughly equal amount of genetic material when having children.³ But while Tolkien was certainly aware of genetics, the focus of his career was the pre-modern world. In fact, he introduced certain factually incorrect pre-modern ideas into his legendarium, the most prominent examples of which are his originally flat world and his etiologies of the sun and moon. At least one pre-modern idea relating to sexual reproduction would seem possibly to clarify Melian and Ungoliant's ability to conceive and bear Children, namely preformationism.

Allow me to quote an article from about.com, slightly modified:

"A typical preformationist . . . thought that the father was like a plough and the mother a field, with the father transmitting the genetic material into something like an incubator. . . . Preformationists argue the seed so planted has all the data required to produce a complete person. <Similarity in appearance and inclinations to one's mother, according to this theory, would result from the fact that> the mother provides the milieu and nourishment in which the embryo grows <which> affects the appearance, <etc.>."⁴

If this theory has any bearing at all on how Tolkien thought of sexual reproduction in his legendarium, which I believe to be likely, though not necessarily deliberate, it could explain the ability of Melian and Ungoliant to reproduce. The descended Ainur would have lacked the ability to generate the seed which could grow into living creature via sexual reproduction.

³ Women actually contribute a little more because all mitochondrial DNA comes from one's mother, and if the child is a boy, the Y chromosome he inherits from his father actually carried less genetic material than the X chromosome he inherits from his mother.

⁴ <http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/philosophy/a/031511-Ancient-Greek-Genetic-Theory.htm>

Nevertheless they could incubate within their bodies the seed of male sexually-reproductive creatures.

Whatever the reason they were able to do this, Melian and Ungoliant both did have conceive and bear children after the manner of the Children of Ilúvatar, which means that they were not just manifestly female, but that they actually took upon themselves female bodies. This prompts me to wonder whether all of the Valar and Maiar had the ability to take on comparably gendered bodied and not just gendered manifestations, and whether or not they did. There is no clear answer to this. The various descended Ainur mostly seem to retain the ability to "walk unclad". Upon her union with Thingol, however, until his death, Melian seems to have remained embodied and not just manifest. Some other descended Ainur relinquished the ability to walk unclad. Ungoliant seems pretty tied to her terrible spider form, and Morgoth is said to have lost his ability to walk unclad entirely.⁵ The Israri of the third age are certainly incarnate, to the degree that both Gandalf and Saruman are able to and do die in the manner of the Children of Ilúvatar. I am prompted ultimately to wonder whether difference between the Valar and Maiar manifest and the Valar and Maiar embodied, and the degree to which this would affect the reality of their genderedness.

As is as is the case for the manifest descended Ainur in the works of Tolkien, when physical gender is a voluntary characteristic which maps on an underlying temperament, one must wonder what the nature of that pre-gender gendered temperament is. Stated in another way, before they take bodies, what is it that, for instance Varda, Melian, Nienna, and Ungoliant have in common that, for instance, Ulmo, Sauron, Gothmog, and Gandalf do not, and vice versa,

5

which results in their apparently inevitable temper-driven choice of manifest or embodied physical gender? I believe this is maybe the fundamental questions for consideration of gender distinction in Tolkien, which is why I raise it to close my section considering the gender of the Ainur. I have no ready suggestion. Indeed, I can indicate similarities or draw parallels between individual descended Ainur of the same manifest gender, for instance, Varda seems to be the Vala most explicitly associated with light per se, while Ungoliant is exactly the opposite, associated with a darkness so profound it is light's antithesis—but Melian and Nienna have no special relation to light over and against the male descended Ainur I have considered. Melian and Ungoliant become mothers, but outside of this fact, their femininity is no more evident than that of Varda and Nienna, who do not become mothers.

So what is it that gives inherent gender to those entities that have no biological sex for Tolkien? I do not know the answers, but I would welcome suggestions and discussion.

Elves

With respect to embodiment, elves are a middle ground between descended Ainur and humans. Like humans and unlike the descended Ainur, elves exist naturally as a unity between body (*hrondor/hroa*) and spirit (*fea*).⁶ Unlike humans, however, if the spirits of elves do become separated from their bodies, they persist within the circles of the world as long as the world itself exists. The lack of a body is an unnatural state for elves though, and those elves having been separated from their bodies may eventually return,⁷ but the manner by which this is achieved is

⁶ Tolkien explains most extensively in "Laws and Customs among the Eldar" in *Morgoth's Ring*, but some of the ideas present clear seem possibly to have been abandoned by the period of the published *Silmarillion*.

⁷ *Silmarillion*, Quenta Chapter 1, In the Beginning of Days, Paragraph 24

ambiguous in the published *Silmarillion*. In earlier versions, Tolkien allows for Elves eventually to be reborn, ideally as the children of close kindred, with exceptions to enable the returned dead as easily as possible to reunite with their spouses.⁸ Reborn elves, according to this model, would at first resemble their new parents, but as they grew and their spirit was more and more manifest in their bodies, they would come more and more to resemble their original appearance until their identity could not be doubted to any who had previously known them.⁹

To return to the topic of gender, Tolkien makes one explicit statement about gender which relates directly to the embodiment of elves. “. . . *fear* of the Elves are of their nature male and female, and not their *hronдор* only.”¹⁰ Apparently the spirits and bodies of elves are both gendered and in the same way.

My questions at this point relate to exactly how slain elves reacquire a body. In early versions, was it automatic that when an elvish spirit was ready to reincarnate, their reincarnation would replace what would otherwise be the genesis of a new elvish soul as a consequence of normal reproduction? If so, presumably the gender of the body of the reincarnated elf would inevitably be the same as that of the elf's soul. More complicated processes, however, cannot be precluded, and might yield the possibility of an asymmetrically gendered reincarnation. Once Tolkien abandoned the notion of slain elves being reborn among near kindred or in close proximity to one's spouse, if indeed he did,¹¹ the possibilities of the manner in which elves “return” become much more extensive. One can imagine that they are re-embodied the way that

⁸ See, e.g. “Laws and Customs among the Eldar”

⁹ “Laws and Customs among the Eldar”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ It seems to me quite possible that Tolkien intentionally only introduced ambiguity because he second guessed but did not necessarily abandon the idea of reincarnation for slain elves.

Valar or Maiar are embodied (though in a more permanent manner). If so, one wonders whether they too would have had the ability to take a body gendered asymmetrically with their spirit. No doubt for Tolkien they would not, but could they have? A parallel to this might be the Istari. Like the other descended Ainur, the Istari had the ability to take on a gendered appearance. Before being sent to Middle-Earth in the third age, however, they were all embodied as what appeared to be old human males who aged further only very slowly. Is however the Istari were embodied similar to the manner in which slain elves would also have been? Unfortunately, this potential parallel cannot be verified, and even if it could, the implications of this for the necessity of symmetrically gendered re-embodiment would remain unclear.

With respect to elves, we do not have the issue of considering inherence of gender in the absence of biological sex. Elves separated from their bodies are in some manner fundamentally incomplete, in a way that descended Ainur, with the possible exception of the Istari after having been embodied, are not. Elves are meant to be embodied and are only stripped of their bodies as a result of the fallen state of Arda marred and those atrocities committed by Morgoth and his servants. If they are not meant to be separated from their bodies, then surely elements of those bodies, such as biological sex, are more fundamental to them than they are to the Ainur. We are told also that, unlike the descended Ainur, whose gender is a choice reflecting an innate temper, both the bodies and souls of elves have gender, and not just an inclination towards a gender-particular manifestation.

Humans

With that we move only consideration of the gender of humans within the works of Tolkien. Of humans, elves, and gods, humans are the most attached to their bodies within the circles of the world, for it is only while they are embodied that they dwell in the world. When without their body, humans quickly flee to Mandos and then out of the world. Humans are also less attached to their bodies than elves are. Once human bodies are destroyed it is not natural for them to be re-embodied while the world endures. Despite the less profound attachment to their bodies, is human engenderment still to be thought of as similar to that of elves, namely symmetrically gendered bodies and souls, while the body endures, and then after death, the fleeing of gendered human souls from the world whither the elves know not?

In order to consider engenderment from the human perspective, the obvious choice is the character who most obviously seems to defy gender norms within Tolkien's secondary world, Eowyn.

Eowyn brings direct attention to her dislike at least of those things she is prevented from doing as a woman when she says to Aragorn after he has made what seem to be good arguments about how she must remain with and protect her people.

"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 what is it that Eowyn wants? Consider Gandalf's words to Eomer concerning her predicament as a Rohirric woman.

"My friend," said Gandalf, "you had horses, and deeds of arms, and the free fields; but she, born in the body of a maid, had a spirit and courage at least the match of yours.

Here is a clear comparison between Eowyn's situation and Eomer's. Gandalf expressly conveys that Eomer might feel similar despair to Eowyn if he was in her position not having access to "horses", "deeds of arms", and "the free fields". But the phrase "born in the body of a maid" genders the situation beyond the social implications of femininity in Rohirric culture. It's not just the lack of those things which Eomer had access to as a prince of Rohan, but the being born in the body of a woman itself which Gandalf raises as troubling, implying that if Eomer had been "born in the body of a maid" he would have had a very similar experience. But he is male and she is female, and presumably a male soul embodied in a female body would have a worse experience than a female soul with ample spirit and courage; unless of course this "Spirit and Courage" is what Tolkien means by the masculine "Temper" that the male Valar had from the beginning, leading them to choose to manifest masculinely. However, if the gender of the body and spirit are symmetrical, as a rule, then this whole idea is nonsensical, as Eomer could not have been anything but male, and Eowyn could not have been anything but female. What if, however, unlike as seems to be the case with the elves, human souls are genderless and are simply born into a gendered body? There might actually be reason to support this model. In a letter to his son, Michael, Tolkien writes concerning the possibility of platonic friendship between men and women:

"... two minds that have really a primarily mental and spiritual affinity may by accident reside in a male and a female body . . ."

Admittedly, I have taken this out of context, but it seems that with respect to mind, or soul, that he suggests that the maleness or femaleness of one's body is a mere accident. If this is the case, in fact we could say that Eowyn's femininity, or indeed Eomer's masculinity or any human's gender, is a mere accident. If this is the case, no doubt the body does affect one's desires, but at some deeper level than base desires, humans divorced from their bodies would be genderless, which would be a unique case, as the Valar have some innate temper which prompts them to manifest one particular gender, and the elves have gender in both their bodies and souls.¹²

To return to Eowyn, did she wish she was a man? If so, was it because women were not permitted to fight, and the glory and honor of fighting were more important to her than anything that came with being a woman? Therefore, if women were permitted and enabled to fight and win glory, there would be no desire at all not to have been "born in the body of a maid." This seems to me most likely, i.e. that battle-glory was way more important to Eowyn than being a woman, though I doubt Tolkien would have said she wished she had been male per se, but perhaps cared more about the privileges which would have accompanied being male. It is interesting then that her female gender is central, apparently, to the great glory she won by slaying the Witch-king and his fell-beast mount, as it was prophesied that no *man* could would kill the Witch-King.¹³ It is certainly her being a woman that allows her to fit the parameters for a possible slayer of the Witch-King according to this prophesy.

Eowyn is not a clear case because we really don't know what she wanted. We have evidence to suggest, though, that she was most satisfied when she recognized that she had

¹² Per texts we considered above.

¹³ Now prophecy itself is complicated because it may have been foretold that no man could because, no man would, and except for the fact that they would not, they could have.

already won great glory, and then married Faramir, and chose to become a healer. There is no reason to believe that, beyond desire for glory, which she had fulfilled, she would have desired at all to have had the body of man rather than the one she had. Yet, we cannot say that she would have been satisfied with Faramir's love and the career of a healer if she had not already won very great renown. Nevertheless, it does not seem that it was ever masculinity per se that she desired, just the glory men might be able to win which was generally unavailable to women.

Dwarves

Dwarves are the strangest beings in Tolkien's works with respect to gender. According to passages I have provided for you in the handout, Dwarf women are rare compared to dwarf men, well below half of the dwarf population. Those who do exist have bodies presumably exactly like dwarf males, with beards, comparable voices, comparable body shapes, etc. This is explained based on the idea that Aulë had only created dwarf males prior to their adoption by Ilúvatar, and not being willing to "amend the work" of Aulë, it seems he took the dwarf male body as a template and swapped out the male reproductive system and added a female one so that dwarves could reproduce, but did so without changing the rest of the body at all.

This is certainly strange, and Tolkien seems to have abandoned some of the strangeness of this conception later. Nevertheless, even here, we see evidence that Dwarf men and women, despite having essentially identical bodies besides reproductive system (ostensibly dwarf women are no physically weaker, for instance), have one principal difference in behavior. Dwarf women do not go to war. Is this a Dwarvish instantiation of that essential "difference in temper" between

males and females, the same which prompted voluntary gender manifestation differentiation of the descended Ainur?

Synthesis and Conclusion

In consideration of the various races and their gender embodiment, a number of trends can be observed, but it is also clear that many of Tolkien's ideas relating to this issue evolved over the course and development of his thought concerning his legendarium. Some sense in difference of temper as the basis of non-physical gender differentiation, only explicitly noted in those whose physical form is only voluntary, namely the descended Ainur, can be observed in all the races, at least in the fact that women are much less prone to go to war across the board. Additionally, all evidence seems to point to a consistent spirit-body gender symmetry in all races with a possible exception and humans, but most likely this is the result of Tolkien's evolving ideas about these concepts. The idea of non-gendered souls embedded in gendered bodies does seem to be present in Tolkien's thought about humans during some periods of his thought.

There are so many more topics relating to this field which could be addressed, but seeing as I feel as though I barely did justice to those paltry ideas I have considered, further consideration will have wait for another study. I hope this paper can, at the very least, be a springboard for further discussion about this very interesting topic.



TABLES

| <i>Ainulindalë</i> A (HME 5) | <i>Ainulindalë</i> B (HME 5) | <i>Ainulindalë</i> C* (HME 10) | <i>Ainulindalë</i> C (HME 10) | <i>Ainulindalë</i> D (Published Silmarillion) |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| 'Now the Ainur that came into the world took shape and form, such even as the Children of Iluvatar who were born in the world; but greater and more beautiful, and some were in form and mind as women and some as men.' | Now the Ainur that came into the world took shape and form, such even as have the Children of Iluvatar who were born of the world ... And some of them, therefore, took form and temper as of female, and some as of male. | ... the Valar arrayed themselves in the form and temper some as of male and some as of female; and the choice that they made herein proceeded, doubtless, from that temper that each had from their uttermost beginning; for male and female are not matters only of the body any more than of the raiment. | ... the Valar arrayed them in the form some as of male and some as of female; for that difference of temper they had even from their beginning, and it is but bodied forth in the choice of each, not made by the choice; even as with us male and female may be shown by the raiment, but is not made thereby. | ... the Valar take upon them forms some as of male and some as of female; for that difference of temper they had even from their beginning, and it is but bodied forth in the choice of each, not made by the choice, even as with us male and female may be shown by the raiment but is not made thereby . . . |



| Melian as Mother | Ungoliant as Mother |
|---|--|
| <p>And of the love of Thingol and Melian there came into the world the fairest of all the Children of Ilúvatar that was or shall ever be. (Of Thingol and Melian)</p> <p>And at the end of the first age of the Chaining of Melkor, when all the Earth had peace and the glory of Valinor was at its noon, there came into the world Lúthien, the only child of Thingol and Melian. (Silmarillion: Of the Sindar)</p> | <p>For other foul creatures of spider form had dwelt there since the days of the delving of Angband, and she mated with them, and devoured them; and even after Ungoliant herself departed, and went whither she would into the forgotten south of the world, her offspring abode there and wove their hideous webs. (Silmarillion: Of the Flight of the Noldor)</p> |

Dwarves:

"... the Naugrim have beards from the beginning of their lives, male and female alike; nor indeed can their womenkind be discerned by those of other race, be it in feature or in gait or in voice, nor in any wise save this: that they go not to war, and seldom save at direst need issue from their deep bowers and halls. It is said, also, that their womenkind are few, and that save their kings and chieftains few Dwarves ever wed..." (HME 11)

This is because, per another such passage:

"< Ilúvatar > would not amend the work of Aule, and Aule had yet made only things of male form, therefore the women of the Dwarves resemble their men more than all other... races." (HME 11)

Elves:

'Nonetheless marriage concerns also the fear. For the fear of the Elves are of their nature male and female, and not their hrondor (44) only. (Morgoth's Ring: Laws and Customs among the Eldar)