The Power of the Firstborn: J.R.R. Tolkien's Reimagining of Elves

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Abstract

With the publication of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien revolutionized the then nascent genre of fantasy literature by his portrayal of elves, a portrayal that was reinforced and expanded upon in his later writings. As part of this reimagining, Tolkien drew upon a range of influences, including Celtic mythology, Roman Catholicism, and early English folklore. These sources allowed him to reform Victorian/Edwardian fairies into robust and noble characters that joined with human beings to shape Middle-Earth. This paper will consider Tolkien's sources and trajectory to argue that his intertextual relationship with the originators and propagators of his sources reveals that he was more interested in redefining literary archetypes than in repeating established tropes and figures. In repositioning Tolkien in this way, the broader claim will be made that his body of work redraws the boundaries of the genre of fantasy fiction.

Keywords: **J.R.R. Tolkien, Elves, Celtic mythology**

1. Introduction

There are few people left who are unfamiliar with J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. After all, those two works fathered the high fantasy subgenre and have gone a long way toward legitimizing fantasy as a whole, and, of course, the films brought Tolkien's world to viewers around the world. While there are many reasons why Tolkien's work has been so enduringly popular, the adventure itself, the memorable characters, the effort dedicated to creating Middle-Earth, one element often overlooked is the nature of the Elves. Tolkien's depiction of Elves as noble, powerful creatures has served as a template that has influenced depictions of Elves in fantasy literature. This is significant because prior to Tolkien, Elves were something quite different. Far from Tolkien's Elves that we know today, the late nineteenth century Elves were the Victorian/Edwardian fairies. In creating Middle-Earth, one of Tolkien's goals was a large-scale reimagining of Elves. In order to do this, he drew upon diverse creative fonts, ranging from Celtic mythology to early English religious and historical sources, as well as his own Roman Catholicism and fertile imagination, to transform them into something new. In what follows, I will examine Tolkien's reimagining of Elves as a process which generated a new archetype, but I will also explore the ramifications that this archetype continues to have for literature going forward.

2. The Imaginative Process

By Tolkien's own admission, his understanding of fairy stories changed over time. As a result, in his earliest writings, his Elves were very similar to fairies: that is, they were small, sprightly, semi-transparent figures with wings. By late

1915, however, Tolkien had begun his reimagining, as evidenced by his poem "Kortirion among the trees," which told of fairies living in England in antiquity. The characteristics of Tolkien's fairies were similar to those of other Edwardian fairies, but there was a new idea as well. In this poem the fairies, over time, leave or fade with the rise of humanity. This idea, the diminishing of the fairy, formed the basis for Tolkien's later development of the decline of the Elves in the second and third ages of Middle-Earth. Notably, the language describing the abandoned fairy habitations in this poem would be echoed by the description of the elvish lands after the end of the Third Age.[1] This idea of a regression from "Elves" to "fairies" appeared again in *The Book of Lost Tales*, begun in 1917. Tolkien wrote: "Men were almost of a stature at first with Elves, the fairies being far greater and Men smaller than now. As the power of Men has grown the fairies have dwindled and Men waxed somewhat."[2] If the fairies were the product of a great diminishment, then it would be necessary that their former state be something quite unlike the final state. At this point in the creation of his legendarium, however, Tolkien had not decided what that former state was.

Although Tolkien harbored something of a dislike toward Celtic mythology and resented the claim that it might have substantially influenced his legendarium, it was undeniable that there was some influence.[3] Of particular interest are the mythical *Tuatha Dé Danann*, who exhibit striking similarities to the Elves of Middle-Earth. Indeed, Tolkien specialist Dimitra Fimi argued in her essay "'Mad' Elves and 'Elusive Beauty'" that both the Elves of Middle-Earth in general as well as the return of the Noldor to Middle-Earth in the first age in particular were based upon tales about the Tuatha.[4] Both the Elves and the Tuatha were semi-divine beings: not gods, but physically and intellectually superior to ordinary men. Both races were immortal and might only die by violence, were capable of magic, and were skilled craftsmen and artists. The Elves learned their arts under the tutelage of the Valar and the Maiar in Valinor, much as the Tuatha learned their magic and other skills in the mysterious islands of the North. The stories of these races' arrivals were alike as well. In one version of the arrival of the Tuatha, they arrived in ships, which they then burned. The smoke rising from the ships clouded the sky, bringing unnatural darkness for three days and nights. It was in this darkness that they defeated the previous inhabitants of the land, the Fir Bolg. Compare this to the return of the Noldor after the Kinslaying. The followers of Fëanor took the ships of the Teleri by force and, upon arriving in Middle-Earth, burned them. They arrived between the destruction of the two trees that lit the world and the creation of the sun and moon, so that the only light was that of the stars, and it was in this twilight that they first fought Morgoth's forces.[4] Ultimately, the Elves left Middle-Earth to the dominion of Man, and returned across the sea, much as the Tuatha gave way to the Sons of Míl, who would became the ethnic Irish, and were forced into exile.

Though this series of comparisons offers the strongest evidence for the connection between the Elves and the Tuatha, it is not the only piece. Scattered across Ireland's landscape are ancient earthen mounds, called *síd*-mounds (Newgrange being perhaps the most famous example). In Celtic mythology, the Tuatha were strongly associated with the *síd*-mounds. In some stories, they were considered to have retreated to or been exiled to them after their defeat by the Sons of Míl, while in others the *síd*-mounds were viewed as the natural domain of the Tuatha. Celticist Mark Williams notes that "it was not uncommon in the Celtic scholarship of Tolkien's day to translate *síd* as 'elfmound' and to refer to the people of the *síd* as 'Elves.'"[5] It is possible that this mistranslation provided the initial impetus for Tolkien's adoption of the characteristics of the Tuatha. On a related note, Fimi observes that the Tuatha were ultimately transformed into the fairies of popular imagination. This is, of course, similar to the idea proposed by Tolkien in his legendarium: that the Elves diminished with the rise of men.

These similarities between the *Tuatha Dé Danann* and Tolkien's Elves suggests much of the path that Tolkien took in his reimagination of the Elves. Yet the process of reimagination was not completed; in fact, the entire process continued through the writing of *The Hobbit* and into the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*. Notably, the Elves of *The Hobbit* were somewhat different from the Elves of the later trilogy. The Elves of Mirkwood appeared more light-hearted and, in a sense, more human than the Elves of Rivendell or Lothlórien. One possible explanation was that Tolkien was, at the time, still struggling to work out the metaphysical nature of the Elves within the framework of his sub-creation. Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic, and though he had no intention of using Middle-Earth as allegory, he was nonetheless very much interested in having certain themes in place. Author Tom Shippey suggested that the Elves are somewhat like angels. Unlike the fallen angels in Christianity, they played no part in the rebellion of the Enemy (Morgoth), but they cannot truly be considered "unfallen" either. After all, the vast majority of the Elves in Middle-Earth at the time of *The Lord of the Rings* had either left Valinor in the wake of the Fëanorian rebellion or had refused the call to return to Valinor at the end of the First Age. Unlike the race of men, their ultimate fate is unclear, and they cannot die in a permanent sense. In creating these complex beings, Shippey argues, Tolkien drew both on his Catholicism and on *The Early South English Legendary*, written around 1250 A.D., to create a sort of hybrid race.[6] In fact, Tolkien considered Elves to be akin to unfallen man, and used this to justify the gifts Elves possessed that men did not.[7]

Another element that Tolkien sought to resolve as he reshaped Elves centered on his vision of Middle-Earth as being a sort of mythology for England. Particularly, Tolkien needed to resolve the fate of the Elves after their time had

passed: since they could not both remain in their original state and inhabit this world, they must either pass from the Earth entirely or become something else. Tolkien opted for a similar conclusion to the one at which he had arrived in *The Book of Lost Tales*. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Galadriel observed that Elves remaining in Middle-Earth will "dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten."[8] Shippey argues:

> "'Dwindle' could have a demographic meaning; there could be fewer of [the Elves]. It could be physical too, looking forward to the 'Elves' of Shakespeare, and even moral, making one think of the detached, cruel, soulless Elves of Scottish and Danish tradition. The best fate for the Elves who stay, perhaps, would be to turn into landscape."[9]

Tolkien may very well have had in mind all three of these meanings: demographic, physical, and moral. His solution—that the Elves would dwindle as the fourth age advanced—served as an economical resolution to the question of the fate of those Elves who refused to head the final call to return. Having resolved this final issue, it appears that, by the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien had managed to fully separate Elves from fairies in his mind and in his mythology.

3. Imaginative Power

Tolkien's Elves represented something completely unprecedented within literature, and their influence is most obvious in the genre of fantasy literature. The prevalence of Tolkien's elvish archetype indicates that there is something about the archetype itself that seizes the imagination, for there is no other satisfactory explanation that accounts for its remarkable longevity. I would suggest that the main reason this reimagining of Elves has such power is that it resonates with something deep in the human identity. Tolkien himself wrote in a letter:

> "If I were pressed to rationalize, I should say [the Elves] represent really Men with greatly enhanced aesthetic and creative faculties, greater beauty and longer life, and nobility – the Elder Children, doomed to fade before the Followers (Men), and to live ultimately only by the thin line of their blood that was mingled with that of Men, among whom it was the only real claim to 'nobility.'"[10]

In another letter, he noted that "Elves are certain aspects of Men and their talents and desires, incarnated in my little world. They have certain freedoms and powers we should like to have, and the beauty and peril and sorrow of the possession of these things is exhibited in them."[11]

Perhaps, then, this resonance comes from a sense (whether accurate or not) of having lost capacity (physical, mental, creative, etc.), and a longing to have it back. Or, perhaps this resonance comes from an innate fascination with that which has been shrouded by the mists of time. Tolkien writes elsewhere that "a part of the 'fascination' [of *The Lord of the Rings*] consists in the vistas of yet more legend and history."[12] We know that the past, especially the mythic past, has a strange power. Perhaps that power is what draws the imagination here. Or, perhaps the power that Tolkien's reimagining of Elves evokes stems from a source far outside our ability to grasp or to describe in anything other than a series of vague impressions and feelings, a source that we can never really know. If this is the case, then perhaps this unknowable source is the same that lent itself to the conception of the Tuatha Dé Danann, or, for that matter, any one of the varied world mythologies. Or perhaps this power is a result of all of these.

It is likely that Tolkien would have pointed to another source. As he had observed to his friend and colleague C.S. Lewis, Tolkien believed that Christianity was the "true myth" underlying all other mythologies. As a "sub-creator" working within God's creation, it would be inevitable that this work would take on theological categories. Tolkien noted this in a letter to Robert Murray, a Jesuit priest, claiming that "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision." As a result, Tolkien believed, this deep longing for Eden that is central to the biblical "myth" and that involves the restoration of that which was lost as a result of the biblical fall might be the underlying source for the continued power that the Elves have over our imaginations.[13]

Regardless its source, the grip of this power over the imagination is undeniable. Because it appears to be so inextricable, it is fair to expect that it will persist in the human imagination for a very long time. And Tolkien's Elves, since they evoke it so well for so many, will likely continue to hold our imaginations, until either something better comes, or until our imaginations are so changed that the power this evocation has is gone. What does this mean for literature? It means that we should expect for the general form of Elves that Tolkien created to persist, to crop up time

and time again, in everything from dime-a-dozen fantasy novels to deliberate attempts at high-epic fantasy to the occasional truly exceptional work.

4. Conclusion

Tolkien's reimagining of Elves was a long process that involved drawing upon various mythological, religious, and historical sources to create something truly remarkable. The resulting creation was in part a return to pre-Shakespearean thought regarding Elves, and in part a new creation. This creation, the fell and fair Elves of Middle-Earth, has for the past sixty-odd years held the popular imagination, to such an extent that it has been largely successful in displacing fairies as the primary characters associated with the term "Elves." The reason that this reimagination has been so successful is that it taps into a powerful source deeply intertwined with human identity. Though the precise identity of this source is up for debate, its strength cannot be denied. As long as this source remains so connected to humanity, as long as its power holds sway, so long should we expect Tolkien's Elves to hold the popular imagination. As a result, the template that Tolkien created for the depiction of Elves in literature will likely retain its popularity, until either supplanted by something better at evoking the same source, or until the source itself ceases to be.

5. Acknowledgements

6. References

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