

## **“Young she was and yet not so”: The Revival of the Victorian Fairy Story Heroine in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings***

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### **Abstract**

Historically, criticism by feminist writers has discounted the merit of Tolkien’s most prominent romance in *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly discrediting the lack of development in Arwen Evenstar, the half-elven Lady of Rivendell. A popular misinterpretation of this character’s passive tendencies as well as her decision to forfeit immortality for a finite romance with Tolkien’s king of men has – for many – rendered Arwen’s character ill-equipped to satisfy the presentation of strong women in modern fantasy. However, these critics measure Tolkien’s heroine up to a standard and against an archetype altogether inconsistent with the author’s intentions. Arwen is not a failed attempt at an agentive woman in modern fantasy, but rather the embodiment of a far more traditional archetype, and thus, must be judged according to a separate standard of power entirely. In contrast to critics’ interpretations, this paper argues that an analysis of Arwen’s physical characteristics and inherent virtues as well as the narrative structure of the Arwen-Aragorn subplot confirms that Tolkien’s heroine relates less to the genre of literature that grew out of Middle-Earth and more to the genres that inspired it, namely the Victorian fairy story. This essay synthesizes the recurring characteristics of the most prominent fairy stories of the nineteenth century – particularly emphasizing the Andrew Lang series – with observations from the primary text of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* as well as the extended subplot in the Appendices. It argues that, amongst other similarities, Arwen’s marriage to the ideal fairy story hero in combination with her exceptional beauty, passivity, and her rejection of fate portray her as a direct derivation of Victorian fairy story women. This work also attempts to account for Arwen’s non-archetypal nobility by incorporating Tolkien’s fascination with medieval lore and the culture of noble Norse women in Tennyson and Morris’s nineteenth century work. In establishing the intertextual relationship between Tolkien’s romance and Lang’s collection of fairy tales as well as the influence of the author’s fascination with Anglo-Saxon literature, the essay suggests that Arwen’s character proves more complex, ambivalent and, possibly, more deeply embedded in literary history than previously noted. Although this interpretation may not entirely justify the suggested misogyny that tends to characterize Tolkien’s work, perceiving Arwen’s character as a revival of fairy literature presents the heroine’s submissive qualities not as a product of the author’s own gender bias but rather as an acknowledgment of the literary precedents and conventions of that age. The apparent connection between Tolkien’s heroine and the archetypal female character present in nineteenth century fairy stories suggests that evaluating Arwen Evenstar within the framework of Victorian fairy literature with particular attention to popular Norse influences during this time may foster a better understanding of her character and a greater appreciation for her essential role in the work.

**Keywords:** Tolkien, Arwen Evenstar, Fairy Story

## 1. Introduction

In a collection of works that has sparked tremendous praise as well as extensive criticism, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* presents the fantastical realm of Middle-Earth, a land derived from the author's fascination with medieval lore as well as his own experiences as a child and later as an academic in late nineteenth and early twentieth century England. While Tolkien's largest work follows the quest of an unlikely hero, an analysis of the story's minor characters reveals the author's attachment to more traditional plot structures and archetypes. As Humphrey Carpenter attests in his biography of Tolkien, "The Arthurian legends...excited him. But most of all he found delight in the Fairy Books of Andrew Lang...for tucked away in [their] closing pages was the best story he had ever read...a strange and powerful tale set in the nameless North."<sup>2</sup> While Tolkien concentrated on the publication of his own fairy stories near the start of his writing career, perhaps his most important nod to Victorian fairy literature lies in a subplot of his chief work – *The Lord of the Rings*. In Arwen Evenstar, one of the work's few prominent female characters, Tolkien crafts a heroine representative of the physical and moral traits, romantic interests and narrative structure effectively sealed into literary tradition by Andrew Lang and others in the Victorian period. However, the uncharacteristic strength and nobility that surface in Arwen's character prove not entirely consistent with this model. Indeed, Tolkien's heroine, though primarily a revival of the familiar heroine of fairy literature, also demonstrates notable influence from the author's fascination with medieval lore and the presentation of noble Norse women. It is in this ambiguity of characteristics, in the suggested intertextuality of Arwen's origins, that Tolkien's half-elven heroine proves more complex, more worthwhile to critics, and, perhaps, more essential to the greater narrative than previously noted.

## 2. Fairy Story Influences

The connection between Arwen and her fairy story predecessors is originally prominent in her physical appearance. Following the fellowship's arrival in Rivendell, Tolkien presents an initial description of Arwen through the humble observations of Frodo Baggins. "[T]here sat a lady fair to look upon...Young she was and yet not so. The braids of her dark hair were touched by no frost; her white arms and clear face were flawless and smooth, and the light of the stars was in her bright eyes, grey as a cloudless night."<sup>17</sup> Although grace and beauty are certainly not uncommon in Tolkien's Elven race, the author, through the marveling eyes of his hobbit hero, appears here to aggrandize Arwen's physical appearance significantly. Indeed, her beauty seems to become her greatest identifying characteristic in the novel, a notion that coincides well with Lutz Rohrich's observation of the archetypal fairy story princess, "[her] first job... is to be beautiful."<sup>12</sup> Certainly, her own name, a derivation of the Welsh name Arwyn literally meaning 'fair, beautiful,'<sup>13</sup> also attests to the prominence of her physical appeal. As the fairest of her race, for which she is allotted the name Evenstar, Arwen follows the precedent of this genre in which the central heroine is traditionally the "fairest in the land," and – in line with Lang's "Princess Rosette" and "Princess Mayblossom" – it is this enchanting beauty which also sparks the major conflict in her own narrative.<sup>12</sup> In the fuller version of their romance in the Appendices, Aragorn literally "halt[s] amazed" at the initial appearance of Arwen Evenstar, pledging his love for her only moments later.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Aragorn's sudden devotion fulfills the fairy story motif in which "the *beauty* of the woman...causes the hero to fall in love with her."<sup>12</sup> Although Arwen only briefly appears in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien's emphasis on her immaculate beauty draws a physical parallel between the archetypal fairy story princess and Luthien's descendant.

In addition to Arwen's physical likeness to the fairy story heroine, she also shares a similar reluctance to accept the "doom" laid upon her from birth. In a general survey of fairy story plot lines, Rohrich states, "The dramatic essence of these tales consists of the attempt by human beings to avoid their predicted fate."<sup>12</sup> This phenomenon is apparent in Lang's "Princess Rosette," the tale of a maiden who is predicted to cause the downfall of her brothers before being rescued and wed by the King of Peacocks as well as in "Princess Mayblossom," the story of the child who is cursed to be extraordinarily unlucky until the arrival of a brave and wealthy prince.<sup>7</sup> As a member of Tolkien's Elven race, Arwen's doom, and the doom of Elrond, is to travel into the mysterious West, enduring an immortal life. However, she – like many fairy story heroines before her – challenges her future in her initial meeting with Aragorn, "maybe my doom will be not unlike hers" – referencing the choice of Luthien to die a mortal death.<sup>17</sup> While Arwen does ultimately succeed in evading the fate of the Elves, it is also worth noting that she acquires this salvation in a manner common to this genre. Following the archetype of fairy story females, Arwen commands the role of the passive heroine who must wait for deliverance by her lover. Tolkien writes, "Arwen remained in Rivendell, and when Aragorn was abroad, from afar she watched over him in thought."<sup>17</sup> While Tolkien reveals little

of the doings of Arwen in *The Lord of the Rings*, her distinct lack of action reaffirms her connection to an archetype defined by “unwavering loyalty, unflinching selflessness...and her long-suffering determination.”<sup>12</sup> In her union with the central male character, Arwen embraces a new destiny for her character as well as the conventional resolution of most Victorian fairy stories.

While Arwen’s beauty and passivity mark similarities between her character and that of the fairy story heroine, Tolkien again indicates her place within this genre by borrowing key elements of Lang’s plot structure. Arwen is born with the fate of her race laid upon her, and Aragorn becomes the isolated heroic figure, destined to avenge his father. However, prior to their original meeting, Tolkien fulfills yet another traditional characteristic of this genre. In his analysis of fairy tale themes, Rohrich states, “the heroines are young girls in puberty, who go through a process of maturity to become marriageable women,” noting also that the heroines remain isolated from the greater narrative during this crucial formative period in her life.<sup>12</sup> While Arwen is not confined to a solitary tower in the woods as Princess Mayblossom, Rapunzel, and Rosette, she is conveniently absent from Rivendell during Aragorn’s childhood and returns in the bloom of her youth when he too is of appropriate age. Again noting the parallel plot structure, Aragorn wanders through Middle-Earth in search of redemption as the typical fairy story prince while Arwen exercises patience and loyalty. Ultimately, the reunion of the redeemed prince and the delivered heroine signals the closing of the tale, fostering a “there-and-back-again” mentality used often by Tolkien in his works. Frodo’s response to the reconciliation of Arwen and Aragorn displays the protagonist’s own familiarity with the traditional fairy story structure: “And Frodo when he saw [Arwen] come glimmering in the evening, with stars on her brow and a sweet fragrance about her, was moved with great wonder, and he said to Gandalf: ‘At last I understand why we have waited! This is the ending.’”<sup>17</sup> In addition to confirming Rohrich’s observation that “the joyful wedding of the hero and heroine constitutes the ending of nearly all magic tales,”<sup>12</sup> the wedding of Arwen and Aragorn also supplies Tolkien’s fairy story with its own essential eucatastrophe, a term Tolkien himself coined to describe “the sudden joyous turn” which “denies universal final defeat... and giv[es] a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.”<sup>18</sup> With Arwen’s salvation and with the future prosperity of the kingdom confirmed, Tolkien completes the fairy tale cycle.

### 3. Nineteenth Century Norse Influences

However, while Tolkien’s heroine can in many ways be identified as a descendant of fairy literature, his highest Elven creation does not remain entirely uninfluenced by his own fascination with medieval lore. As Christopher Snyder notes, “*The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* owe much to the high medieval phenomenon of chivalric romance,”<sup>13</sup> and as Melissa Hatcher notes, Arwen bears some resemblance to the “exalted chivalric ideal of a woman.”<sup>15</sup> Arwen appears to command an uncharacteristic sense of dignity that humbles even Aragorn’s youthful pride in their initial meeting.<sup>17</sup> Here, Arwen’s air of nobility is not unlike that of the popular nineteenth century illustrations of Norse women. Both Lang and Wagner’s Brunnhilde, a valkyrie who “went armed into the battle like a man,”<sup>7</sup> face a similar choice and fate as Arwen. While the shieldmaiden proves a far more active heroine, she too relinquishes her own immortality by disobeying her father. Like Wagner, Tolkien crafts a female character who exhibits the true extent of her honor primarily in her tremendous sacrifice for others. Similarly, Tolkien’s heroine seems to possess unnatural strength and authority in her brief presence in *The Lord of the Rings*. When Arwen “turn[s] towards [Frodo]... the light of her eyes fell on him from afar and pierced his heart.”<sup>17</sup> Here, Arwen’s unabashed pride is reminiscent of Morris’s “Defence of Guinevere”: “with her head/ Still lifted up; and on her cheek of flame/ The tears dried quick.”<sup>9</sup> Arwen’s assertive presence draws a distinct divide between her own authority and the thoughtless and submissive Victorian archetype portrayed in tales like “The Three Dwarves” and Lang’s “Bushy Bride.” Perhaps a better representation of the cohesion of Arwen’s fairy story archetype and Norse influence rests in Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott.” While this heroine has a doom laid upon her, Lancelot fails to fulfill the role of the rescuer. Thus, she must abandon her passive and submissive nature in order to command a brave new agency, the price of which – like Arwen’s – is death.<sup>14</sup> Though Tolkien does not admit to receiving inspiration from the heroines of Morris and Tennyson and flatly denies the influence of Wagner, their works rejected the century’s preoccupation with stagnant, helpless fairy tale women, instead fostering a culture for strong, and noble heroines to which Tolkien later contributed in his characterization of Arwen.

In consideration of Arwen’s more noble characteristics, the matter of her agency is also difficult to parse. Arwen’s decision to reject the fate of the Elves for a brief romance with a mortal man coincides well with the character of passive, emotional women in nineteenth century fairy stories. The youngest of Lang’s twelve dancing princesses makes a similar motion, forfeiting eternal pleasure, independence and female dominance with her siblings for the

sake of the palace's lowly gardener.<sup>7</sup> Here, it is also worth noting that Arwen regards her decision as a way to *cleave* to Aragorn,<sup>17</sup> a notion that complements Rohrich's definition of the ideal fairy story heroine, "obedient, modest, loyal...above all she sees her worth only at the side of her husband."<sup>12</sup> However, many critics now argue against such interpretations, claiming that Arwen's *choice* confirms her own agency and nobility. Sue Bridgwater suggests that because the prosperity of the kingdom traditionally reflects the strength of the royal marriage, Arwen's decision to remain in Middle-Earth indicates her own political power and influence.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Hatcher suggests that by championing the author's preoccupation with peace and preservation, Arwen's choice allows her to achieve the most noble and agentic status available to women in Tolkien's realm.<sup>5</sup> Here too, Arwen proves ambivalent, her power a combination of her own Arthurian nobility and Victorian passivity.

#### 4. Conclusion

Admittedly, Arwen's narrative is brief and merely "touched in" to the greater text of *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>16</sup> However, Tolkien's clear revival of the Victorian fairy story – with particular influence from his area of medieval study – undoubtedly plays a crucial role in his attempt to establish a comprehensive mythology for England. In a letter to prospective publisher Milton Waldman, Tolkien discusses his intentions to create a romance that both enhances and "draw[s] splendor from the vast backcloths" of his greater work.<sup>16</sup> In recent years, Arwen's character has invited significant criticism, owing in large part to her discordance with the modern ideal of strong, agentic women. However, acknowledging Arwen's connection to her own "vast backcloths" – the traditions of Victorian fairy tales as well as the proud and noble women of Arthurian lore – suggests that her character may be more complex, ambivalent and, possibly, more deeply embedded in literary history than previously noted. In his use of the Victorian fairy heroine, Tolkien crafts not only a memorable romance and the eucatastrophe of his work, but also a sense of closure brought on by selecting a familiar queen, one whose capacity to reign over the kingdoms of men and to lead the inhabitants of Middle-Earth to their own "happily ever after" is confirmed by countless fairy stories. Ultimately, viewing Arwen as a revival of a separate age and genre entirely may supersede critics' discontent and foster a better understanding and appreciation for her essential role in Tolkien's Middle-Earth.

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