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## **The monstrous feminine:**

### **Ungoliant, Shelob, and women in Tolkien's Middle-Earth<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract.** This article seeks to provide an analysis of Tolkien's portrayal of feminine figures by emphasizing the roles of Ungoliant and Shelob, the monstrous spiders which Tolkien codes female, and finding how these sexual and procreative beings fit into Tolkien's theological and gender essentialist views of women, and then how this reflects on other women within Tolkien's legendarium, arguing that far from any of Tolkien's women being empowered, they are instead always subservient to his essentialist understandings of women, that they are biologically and intellectually usually inferior to men and have specific gendered roles in Tolkien's very Catholic gender binary, and so his literary women are in fact not empowered but fit into his restrictive sense of gender roles between men and women.

**Keywords:** J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Middle-Earth, women, femininity, Ungoliant, Shelob.

#### **1. Introduction**

The works of J.R.R. Tolkien have sparked numerous debates over various questionable aspects of their contents, leading to controversies from racism to sexism, and his depictions of women in particular have gained wide attention from various literary scholars (Reid 2015: 13-40). These issues largely stem from the often quite enigmatic depictions of women within his works, with defenders of Tolkien usually citing figures such as Éowyn and Yavanna, while those levying accusations of sexism have accused Tolkien's characters, even Éowyn, of being one-dimensional characters. As a result, a consensus on whether or not Tolkien could, or should, be considered to have been sexist or racist is nonexistent with academics being by and large divided into three primary camps: those who view Tolkien as a sexist (Hatcher 2007); those who view Tolkien as non-sexist (Flieger 2017: 90-99) or borderline feminist (Maddox 2018); and those who have argued that his portrayals of women border on ambiguous (Łaszkiewicz 2015).

In recent conversations on Tolkien's portrayal of women, however, the roles of Shelob and her mother Ungoliant have been quite often overlooked or relegated to only

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brief discussion, and discussion on the place which they occupy in Tolkien's Middle-Earth in regard to the feminine has been underdeveloped as a result.<sup>3</sup> However, they are still well worth exploring since they are the only examples of feminine evil within Tolkien's Middle-Earth, and so within *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* as a result. The fact that Ungoliant and Shelob are coded female, and their acts create an antithesis to Yavanna, the creator of the two Trees of Valinor. Their sexual reproduction is seen as a monstrous and hideous activity. Ungoliant and Shelob, as a result, are integral to the study of femininity and women's places within the world of Middle-Earth, as they stand in stark contrast to figures often discussed.

## 2. Terminology

In this discussion, I will be discussing the “monstrous feminine” and “women” broadly. The two terms will overlap and so it is prudent to first discuss what is meant by them. The “monstrous feminine” is the form a woman takes in Middle-Earth when they have exited and are not (or cannot be) rehabilitated into patriarchal gender roles of subservience, obedience, and docility. Ungoliant and Shelob, as will be discussed below, are not horrific by quality of them being spiders for Tolkien—he had no such qualms or inherent fears of spiders, contrary to some popular claims (Carpenter 2000: 217). Instead, their monstrosity is because of their sexual freedom, which violates the Tolkien's natural order. Their lack of subservience to men and their lack of strict monogamy makes them monstrous, not their outward appearance. As such, the monstrous feminine is a manifest instance of “woman” in Tolkien's work. It is the form the “evil woman” is embodied in, while the “proper woman” is defined by her acceptance of Catholic binary gender norms: subservience to the husband, monogamy, sexual restraint only for procreative activity, etc.

To be clear, women and the monstrous feminine are not separate beings. The monstrous feminine are women, Ungoliant and Shelob are women. But they are a specific form of women: they have fallen and are thus evil and monstrous in form. Notably, men do not become monstrous when polyamory or unacceptable relationships are taken up, nor are the women whom the men choose. It is only when the woman initiates sexual encounter, and when men fail to have power over her, that she becomes monstrous.

## 3. Sexuality, reproduction, and female spiders

Any discussion of the sexual nature of Shelob and Ungoliant is incomplete without first exploring Tolkien's own conceptions of sexuality and its place within the world. Tolkien was a devout Catholic, and the literature which has been written on how this influenced Middle-Earth is quite endless.<sup>4</sup> As far as sexual intercourse went, Tolkien was quite explicit in his letters and drafts that it was only acceptable within the confines of

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<sup>3</sup> The most intensive discussion of Shelob is Abbott's article “Tolkien's Monsters” (1989), though the ties to women and the feminine in this article only touch on the issue in relation to Grendel's mother. See also briefly Łaszkiewicz's discussion of Shelob (2015: 16-17).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Purtill's *J.R.R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality and Religion* (1984). Various other authors have also contributed on this matter in recent years (Kreeft 2005; Coutras 2016).

explicitly Christian marriage. In addressing C. S. Lewis' *Christian Behaviour* (1943), Tolkien wrote:

There you will observe that you are really committed (with the Christian Church as a whole) to the view that *Christian marriage* – monogamous, permanent, rigidly 'faithful' – is in fact the truth about sexual behaviour for *all humanity*: this is the only road of total health (including sex in its proper place) for all men and women. (Carpenter 2000: 60) [italics original]

Thus, sexual intercourse was only an acceptable practice within the boundaries of a faithful Christian (specifically Catholic for Tolkien) marriage. This is made all the more explicit in a 1941 letter to Michael Tolkien, his son, wherein he further writes:

In this fallen world the 'friendship' that should be possible between all human beings, is virtually impossible between man and woman. The devil is endlessly ingenious, and sex is his favourite subject. [...] This 'friendship' has often been tried: one side or the other nearly always fails. Later in life when sex cools down, it may be possible. It may happen between saints. (Carpenter 2000: 48)

Even having a platonic friendship between men and women, for Tolkien, was near impossible due to the nature of sex and sexual attraction, and the desires for a non-sexual friendship between man and woman was an idealistic concept that "no one can count on" (Carpenter 2000, 48). As "sex is [the devil's/Satan's] favourite subject," it takes on a devilish or satanic undertone which then gives sex this sinister characteristic. Therefore, Tolkien's concept of sex is that it has an appropriate place, but only within a Christian marriage. Sex was permissible in that context, but outside it was something which impeded the ability of men and women to have friendships, and even more so, it was sinister due to the temptations it caused.

When thinking of Tolkien's idea of sex, then, the roles of Shelob and Ungoliant may be argued to represent a "monstrous feminine" in more ways than one. From his own Catholic worldview, they would take on a "monstrous" undertone from their sexual liberty, their freedom, which is in violation of Tolkien's view of how the righteous minded should carry themselves. In a more literal sense, the way that their sexual nature is described by Tolkien in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* is also monstrous. Tolkien writes of Ungoliant:

With their [the Balrogs'] whips of flame they smote asunder the webs of Ungoliant, and she quailed, and turned to flight, belching black vapours to cover her; and fleeing from the north she went down into Beleriand, and dwelt beneath Ered Gorgoroth, in that dark valley that was after called Nan Dungortheb, the Valley of Dreadful Death, because of the horror that she bred there. 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. Of the fate of Ungoliant no tale tells. Yet some have said that she ended long ago, when in her uttermost famine she devoured herself at last. (Tolkien 2001: 81)

Here the act of sexual reproduction itself is seen by Tolkien as this an horrific event in the history of Arda, as Ungoliant's mating with the other spiders then leads to the creation of horrible offspring, of which Shelob is one. Her offspring (the "horror that she bred") are the result of an improper union, one which then leads to evils throughout the world. This theme of improper union is consistent throughout the works of Tolkien, and they always have terrible results for those involved. For example, Finwë's dual marriages to Míriel and Indis lead to the rivalry and evils committed between his sons,

especially by Fëanor, whose displeasure with the marriage between Finwë and Fëanor's stepmother Indis is seen as an inciting event for the evils which Fëanor later commits (Tolkien 2001: 65). More overtly, the marriage between brother and sister Nienor and Túrin Turambar becomes the inciting incident for their final doom in *The Children of Húrin*, the most improper of unions (Tolkien 2007: 240-259). This parallel is more direct since Nienor was also then pregnant with a child of incest. The next example of improper union is that of Maeglin, who desires to have Idril and then betrays the location of Gondolin in the hopes that he could have her (Tolkien 2001: 241-245). The notion of improper sexual unions, be they outside of wedlock or from improper marriages, is a monstrous act. Monogamy, as the proper state of being for Tolkien, must be upheld and violations thereof alienate one from the natural order. In the case of these examples, most figures only have one improper union, while Shelob and Ungoliant have "many," which further alienates them.

In the case of Ungoliant, her offspring plague Middle-Earth from its beginnings until the end of the Third Age, when the Elves finally depart, and *The Lord of the Rings* closes. There are a few other occasions where Ungoliant's children and descendants are mentioned, and in all cases, they are described in various monstrous terms by virtue of being her offspring. They are her "foul offspring" (Tolkien 2001: 121), the "fell creatures of Ungoliant" (Tolkien 2001: 132) and in earlier manuscripts they are, again, her "foul offspring" (Tolkien 2002: 15), "foul broods" (Tolkien 2002: 194) or simply "foul brood" (Tolkien 2015a: 297). In earlier versions, her sexuality is still this act of horrific evil which leaves a terrible mark upon the history of Arda. The unbridled sexual intercourse and improper union of Ungoliant with other spiders is what grants her the qualities of being monstrous, as it alienates her from the proper order. She is not monogamous. It is not the mere fact that she has spider form, for her spider mates are pitied as "unfortunate." It is her sexuality that is the cause of this monstrosity.

When we next hear of Ungoliant's progeny in *The Silmarillion* in any major fashion, it is during Beren's journey to Doriath to reach Lúthien. To reach Doriath he travels through Nan Dungortheb and Ered Gorgoroth, and Ungoliant's brood is once again mentioned:

Terrible was his [Beren's] southward journey. Sheer were the precipices of Ered Gorgoroth, and beneath their feet were shadows that were laid before the rising of the Moon. Beyond lay the wilderness of Dungortheb, where the sorcery of Sauron and the power of Melian came together, and horror and madness walked. There spiders of the fell race of Ungoliant abode, spinning their unseen webs in which all living things were snared; and monsters wandered there that were born in the long dark before the Sun, hunting silently with many eyes. (Tolkien 2001: 164)

What exactly happened within the Dungortheb is unknown in the legends, since Tolkien does not recount it in detail; however, *The Two Towers* at least gives one detail:

There agelong she [Shelob] had dwelt, an evil thing in spider-form, even such as once of old had lived in the Land of the Elves in the West that is now under the Sea, such as Beren fought in the Mountains of Terror I Doriath, and so came to Lúthien upon the green sward amid the hemlocks in the moonlight long ago. (Tolkien 2004: 723).

The result of Ungoliant's sexual intercourse is something which leaves Beren with a post-traumatic stress disorder, wherein he cannot even fathom the thought of reliving his memories of her "brood" which he fought in the Dungortheb (Tolkien 2001: 164). Sexual intercourse of this "foul" kind in Middle-Earth (to use Tolkien's words) is

not withheld only to Ungoliant, but additionally to her daughter Shelob, for the reproduction by these feminine creatures only leads to more horrors in the world, through their polyamorous sexual relationships.

In *The Two Towers*, Shelob is notable for a number of reasons. Firstly, the construction of her name makes it clear what she is: a *she-spider* (English fem. prn. *she* + *lob* or “spider,” from O.E. *loppe*). Shelob, in name and in physical nature, is defined by her femininity and monstrosity,<sup>5</sup> something which has prompted a comparison to Grendel’s mother by some commentators (Abbott 1989: 42). Furthermore, she is defined by the fact that she is sexual and has children which, like Ungoliant’s, haunt the world of Middle-Earth. Tolkien writes in *The Two Towers*:

Far and wide, her lesser broods, bastards of the miserable mates, her own offspring, that she slew, spread from glen to glen, from the Ephel Dúath to the eastern hills, to Dol Guldur and the fastnesses of Mirkwood. But none could rival her, Shelob the Great, last child of Ungoliant to trouble the unhappy world. (Tolkien 2004: 723)

Again, her “broods” are the result of this improper sexual activity, “bastards of miserable mates” as Tolkien writes, and so the sexuality of Shelob, like her mother Ungoliant this act of horror. This echoes Tolkien’s views on sex as improper outside of Roman Catholic monogamous marriage. The mere act of them engaging their natural bodily functions, like reproduction, is itself wrong because of this. It is the case that all those who have offspring in a “proper” fashion are always married in a monogamous relationship, even when there is little character development or romantic chemistry between the characters in question, as in the case of Éowyn and Faramir. The place of the woman is in an acceptable marriage, and then to give birth, but not to give birth outside of marriage.

This is further evidenced by another letter of Tolkien’s where he writes, in talking about how “the sexual impulse makes women” more inclined to pursue men’s interests in any attempt to be servient to men:

No intent necessarily to deceive: sheer instinct: the servient, helpmeet instinct, generously warmed by desire and young blood. Under this impulse they can in fact often achieve very remarkable insight and understanding, even of things otherwise outside their natural range: for it is their gift to be receptive, stimulated, fertilized (in many other matters than the physical) by the male. (Carpenter 2000: 49)

So, the “proper” place of women in Middle-Earth then reflects this conception that their role is to be “fertilized” or “stimulated” in such fashion. As such, we see the courageous warrior Éowyn rather forcefully (by the author) placed into marriage with Faramir; similarly, Arwen is to marry Aragorn; Lúthien is to marry Beren; and Samwise is to marry Rosie Cotton; and these are only a few examples. There are not “friendships” between women and men, for that is unable to occur due to the nature of sexual attraction and its use by the “devil” as his “favourite subject,” and so sexual intercourse in non-Catholic marriages (like Finwë’s second marriage) or outside of wedlock to create “bastards of miserable mates” (like Ungoliant and Shelob) leads to the monstrous feminine in the world of Middle-Earth. Therefore, Shelob and Ungoliant thematically stand as warnings to those who are sexual but not within Christian marriage and of a

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<sup>5</sup> Tolkien seems to have decided on this name as early as 1944 when he consulted his son Christopher on the matter (Carpenter 2000: 81)

Christian morality.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, as feminine figures not receptive or servient to men, but instead dominant, they occupy more than just thematic warnings but positions of horror. They occupy what women should not be in Tolkien's Catholic worldview. That the women (and men for that matter) are sexual beings is something to be quite actively restricted in marriage in Middle-Earth. When, especially, the feminine have sexual intercourse outside of this, they become monstrous and their "broods" are monstrous, so that they plague the lands of Middle-Earth ever after, in ways which other evils do not. Morgoth and Sauron both leave their marks, but Ungoliant's *uncontrolled* feminine and sexual being<sup>7</sup> is so great that it leaves even Morgoth afraid (Tolkien 2001: 76). Their bodies are described in grotesque fashions and the act of their natural bodily functions is an evil.

#### 4. The gender essentialism of the monstrous

Given the above notions of sexuality, womanhood, and the monstrous feminine we have seen in Tolkien's work, it is worth exploring one very notable juxtaposition between "evil" feminine beings in Middle-Earth and the "good" ones, specifically the thematic opposites of Ungoliant and Yavanna, since their roles both mirror each other in rather notable ways: primarily their being females and their primary roles being productive. As noted above, Tolkien was intensely gender essentialist, in that sex and gender are rather identical entities for Tolkien and carry biologically determined characteristics.<sup>8</sup> Frederick and McBride argue that Tolkien was "uncomfortable" in allowing women to occupy the space of evil within Middle-Earth (2001: 109), concluding this from what they deemed a lack of apparently evil women in his world. However, it does not appear that he was uncomfortable with their being in a thematic place of evil. Instead, it is that they occupy a specific place in his essentialist views of sex and gender. That his views on women cross into a biological essentialism is made clear by his own admission of deriving his thoughts from the work of Julian Huxley (in his draft letter responding to Lewis):

From the biological-sociological point of view I gather (from Huxley and others) that monogamy is probably highly beneficial to a community. (Carpenter 2000: 62)

Here, Tolkien considers Huxley's arguments in comparison to other species, such as birds, suggesting that the human species should be adoptive of monogamy as "examples of proper relations" (Bartley 1995: 95). However, it is notable that Tolkien's writings to Lewis and Michael do not indicate his defense of equality among sexes, something which Huxley did emphasise (Bartley 1995: 99). However, Huxley's work and

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<sup>6</sup> As Tolkien writes to Lewis, "Christian marriage is not a prohibition of sexual intercourse, but the correct way of sexual temperance – in fact probably the best way of getting the most satisfying sexual *pleasure*, as alcoholic temperance is the best way of enjoying beer and wine." (Carpenter 2000: 60).

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that they are both beyond the powers Sauron and Morgoth. Of Shelob, Tolkien writes "*his cat* he [Sauron] calls her, but she owns him not" (2004: 724), "own" being used in the archaic sense to mean "acknowledges" here. In *The Silmarillion*, Ungoliant turns on Morgoth and binds him so that only his Balrogs could save him from his utter end (Tolkien 2001: 80-81).

<sup>8</sup> Gender Essentialism essentially holds that differences in social dynamics between people of differing genders is a result of an innate "nature" or biological/psychological "realities" of their being, meaning that these are intrinsic and immutable (Heyman and Giles 2006), aside from potentially evolutionary processes.

Tolkien's Catholic faith form a biological essentialist view of gender. There is a binary, man and woman, with specific roles to which they belong and to which sexual behavior belongs. Man and woman have sexual traits and attitudes which are specific to them, because of the nature of their biology. Thus, for Tolkien, "unspoiled" women are bound to want "to become [a] mother" (Carpenter 2000: 50). We can see how this essentialist view of gender plays out in Middle-Earth and how it relates to the monstrous feminine.

In *The Silmarillion*, Yavanna is portrayed as the creator of the Two Trees of Valinor, two of the greatest and most splendid creations in all of Arda, and they give light to the world. In addition, she gives life to all things which grow, plant-life, trees, and so on. Her role in his mythos is procreative in nature. Likewise, she is also properly wed, for her husband is the smith and maker Aulë, who creates the dwarves. In doing so, her creations likewise become servient to her husband's, as the dwarves will destroy her trees for timber. Yavanna is therefore the proper procreative and subservient wife. As she answers to Manwë and all answer to the male coded Eru, the god of the world and creator of the Valar, she is rightfully confined to her role as well.

Ungoliant stands as a stark contrast to her. She hates and consumes light, spinning forth webs of darkness, which light cannot enter, and she vomits up a black vapor. Again, in juxtaposition to Yavanna, Ungoliant was originally conceived of as the incarnation of a primeval spirit of the night called *Moru* (Tolkien 2015b: 151-152), and so stands as the primeval opposite of the trees and the light of Yavanna. Furthermore, Ungoliant answers to no man, and she is, in all ways, uncontrolled by them. It is notable and perhaps prudent to then draw attention to the fact that the Two Trees of Valinor are killed by Ungoliant's poisons, and their light is forever diminished: the uncontrolled sexual and grotesque feminine monster destroys the works of the "properly" married and therefore "properly" procreative woman. In this, we can parallel Tolkien's Christian conception of women in the fallen nature of the world. Tolkien wrote, once again in his letter to Michael:

The woman is another fallen human-being with a soul in peril. But combined and harmonized with religion [...] it can be very noble. / [...] Before the young woman knows where she is (and while the romantic young man, when he exists, is still sighing) she may actually 'fall in love'. Which for her, an unspoiled natural young woman, means that she wants to become the mother of the young man's children, even if that desire is by no means clear to her or explicit. [...] But they are instinctively, when uncorrupt, monogamous. (Carpenter 2000: 49-51)

Thus, Ungoliant and Shelob are therefore "corrupt" and "spoiled" women. They have not been "combined and harmonized with religion," and they embody the evil woman, who is uncontrolled and "unstimulated" by men. As such, they function as a counter to those women who do get married properly in Middle-Earth, those who do not have "bastard" offspring by "miserable mates." Ungoliant and Shelob have given into fallen natures, and denied what is natural in a righteous way, and become evil by way of their femininity. While Ungoliant stands in direct contrast to Yavanna, an anti-procreation to Yavanna's righteous procreation, Shelob is juxtaposed to figures such as Goldberry and Arwen: she too hates the light, lives in darkness and creates horrid offspring which trouble Mirkwood, all in mimicry of the acts of her mother. Goldberry and Arwen are bright, receptive to men, married, and servient.

On the wider topic of women in Tolkien's legendarium, Weronika Łaszkiwicz argues that Lobelia Sackville-Baggins and Éowyn stand as potential "examples of female

empowerment” (2015: 18), but in the light of Tolkien’s writing on sex and gender, this does not seem to be the case. Lobelia’s depiction in *The Lord of the Rings* is arguably not empowering, given the antagonistic role that she occupies in the narrative (specifically as antagonizing the male heroes Bilbo and Frodo). It is true that Éowyn takes up arms to defend her home and those whom she loves, but it must be recognized that her most empowering moment, the defeat of the Witch-King of Angmar, is only accomplished by Merry’s aid in stabbing the Witch-King prior to her, allowing her to make the final blow. Arguably, this is not an example of female empowerment but a theme of hobbits being overlooked and ignored by evil forces, until they accomplish great feats, similar to Bilbo, Samwise, and Frodo. Likewise, Éowyn’s ultimate fate is to become docile, placed into proper marriage with Faramir and to abandon those elements which violated her gender role as a woman. Łaszkiwicz also argues that the portrayals of Arwen, Galadriel, and Goldberry (as well as a few other figures) as wise and high-status figures are also empowered women (2015: 19). In the case of Galadriel, this seems strained, since she more accurately parallels Eve, as she is seeking redemption for having fallen, being tempted by the words of Fëanor. Notably, it is Galadriel’s desire for power and to rule, specifically to have status, which is the cause of her remained exile (Tolkien 2001: 83-84). As such, Galadriel’s seeking empowerment is a stain on her character, and so the fact that she “can humble herself for her husband” (Łaszkiwicz 2015: 19) is an acknowledgement that in her youth she should not have sought empowerment at all. And with Goldberry, she defers to the male authority of her husband in subservience. Arwen’s fate, likewise, is dictated entirely by that of Aragorn’s as well, and so the argument that she is an empowered figure is debatable. Furthermore, in Tolkien’s work, women’s fates are more often than not tied up with those of men. Melian, for example, goes into the west after Thingol’s death being unable to cope without him, and because of this the enemies of Doriath are able to destroy the kingdom. And departed now, she spends her time in sorrow for Thingol. One can then also point to Arwen and Lúthien, who are prizes to be won by men after a great adventure. Their fates are dependent upon the deeds and fates of their soon-to-be husbands.

It is true that women can take on power and divine status, but it is only within the safe confines of their “proper” and very Catholic relations with men that this happens, otherwise this power or divinity is a fault in their character or unnatural in some fashion. Even when they perform daring actions it is for the sake of men. Éowyn fights the Witch King in order to defend her dying uncle, Théoden, son of Thengel (Tolkien 2004: 841), and it is also notable that part of her desire to fight is connected to her attachment to Aragorn. Here Arwen and Éowyn stand in juxtaposition to each other: Arwen patiently waits for Aragorn as a docile soon-to-be wife, while Éowyn is impatient, therefore defying the proper expectations of her gender. Furthermore, Éowyn, as Frederick and McBride point out, only accomplishes her feats by essentially becoming a man (2001: 113). This is not necessarily a case of gender-queerness,<sup>9</sup> as Éowyn is within Tolkien’s

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<sup>9</sup> Arguably, the only case where this may occur is with Shelob, again, who possesses a stinger of some kind. One could see in this a phallic symbol. The stinger she has can be seen as a feminine phallus, being used to penetrate the male heroes. As such, being coded female with a penile organ, this may be argued to genderqueer in some fashion, but in this light being genderqueer would be something, too, horrific and encompassed by the monstrous feminine. The female has overtaken the role of the male. Whereas Tolkien wrote that the role of women was to be “receptive, stimulated, fertilized [...] by the



very cis-normative legendarium. Instead, Éowyn must deceive men into thinking she is among them and defy her “natural” subservience to men in order to fight. For Tolkien (contra Hatcher 2007: 48-49) there are these specific gendered spaces and roles, and because Éowyn transgresses them, this means she must either reenter her natural roles or risk becoming one of the monstrous feminine or “evil women” like Ungoliant and Shelob.<sup>10</sup> Through the marriage of Faramir, she is able to be rehabilitated as a proper and docile Catholic woman. Her transgression of gender norms may have good outcomes, but it is still something which Tolkien sees the need to “correct” in a sense.

On the fallen but not quite monstrous side, there are other women in Tolkien’s legendarium. The Numenorian queen Tar-Ancalimë does take power, but it is a reign which is entirely immoral in *The Silmarillion*, as she forsakes Gil-Galad and enters into a loveless marriage, purely out of political necessity.<sup>11</sup> It is one which produces an heir within wedlock, and then they separate. She is said to regularly throw off suitors. As such, it is unrighteous but still monogamous and sexually restrained. As such, she does not yet become the “evil woman” embodied in Shelob and Ungoliant, but she has approached it. Of similar note, Berúthiel, queen of Gondor, is portrayed as a sinister figure who watches over the men of Gondor and is so loathed that her husband sends her on a ship to Umbar (Tolkien 2020: 425). But she too is not yet monstrous, because men still have power over her.

This enforces Tolkien’s gender essentialist view of women, which pervades Middle-Earth. Women are lesser than men. They are to be humbled and subservient in comparison. They are not to be sexual outside of a proper marriage, and that marriage must be carefully tempered in a Catholic fashion. The fates of “proper” women are bound up with those of men. But those who are not bound by the confines of male power, fate, and dominance, and are women of sexual freedom become the monstrous feminine. Those who seek empowerment, see Ungoliant and Shelob at the end of their journey.

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male” (Carpenter 2000: 49), here Shelob forces Frodo to become the receptive one. Thus, we can see Sam stabbing Shelob as she thrusts her body down upon him (again potentially sexual) as him asserting masculine dominance over her (Chance 1980: 111-113) and an abjection of queerness. Tolkien further described Shelob in notes to his publisher which were recently published, see Tolkien 2021: 196.

<sup>10</sup> Of note, in the recently published *The Nature of Middle-Earth* edited by Carl F. Hostetter, one of Tolkien’s notes further elaborates that Melkor, like Ungoliant, became incapable of “extricating himself and finding scape in the vastness of Eä (Tolkien 2021: 344), which indicates that Ungoliant’s horrible nature was something unavoidable to an extent as well. However, this note does contradict later published materials in *The Silmarillion* on a number of points and so should not be viewed as definitive of how Ungoliant was conceived in the more or less final versions of the mythology.

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that also while Tar-Ancalimë is the “first” queen of Númenor, there were only ever three ruling queens in Númenor (Tar-Ancalimë, Tar-Telperiën and Tar-Vanimeldë). Almost nothing is said of Tar-Telperiën other than that she refused to get married or produce an heir, and Tolkien says nothing positive of her reign. It is also indicated that she refused to give up the sceptre of the rulers and it was not taken until she died, unlike Ancalimë (2020: 238). Tar-Vanimeldë was the last female ruler, but she, in fact, was ruler in name only as she left her duties to Herucalmo (Tolkien 2020: 240). Thus, Tolkien never presents any of the Queens of Númenor as positive role models. Their empowerment as rulers is presented as either negative or ambivalent. Notably, though, none of these women become monstrous. They are not manifestations of the monstrous feminine, because they are not sexual or still overpowered by men. Tar-Telperiën refuses to produce an heir, implying asexuality. Tar-Vanimeldë deferred to the power of her husband.

They are the result of the end state of a liberated (and therefore “evil”) woman for Tolkien.

## 5. Conclusion

In light of the above, even the so-called “empowered” women of Middle-Earth are still the servants of men. If they seek to have power of their own (Galadriel, Ancalimë, Berúthiel), then it leads to all kinds of strife and hardship, and it is something that they are to repent of (as with Galadriel), and if they go beyond this, becoming sexually active with various mates, they become monsters. Tolkien does not, therefore, empower women, for even those who have an acceptable power are bound by the fate and wills of men, or are eventually put under men’s dominion (such as with Éowyn). The highest of women figures in Middle-Earth is Yavanna, who is properly married, and she is acceptably procreative by nature, but even her creations are subject to the wills of men. Her opposite is Ungoliant, whose sexually charged being and independence makes her arguably the greatest foe in all of Middle-Earth.

Middle-Earth is gender and bio-essentialist in its nature, so that the roles of women are defined specifically by their biology and psychology. For Tolkien, the “unspoiled” woman is subservient to man as a natural reality, and all female figures within Middle-Earth tend to illustrate this patriarchal stance. Their sexual beings are to be restricted, something which is found quite notably in Tolkien’s manuscript *The Laws and Customs of the Eldar*, wherein he explicitly describes the place and role of sex in quite a Catholic fashion, as practised by the Elves (Tolkien 2015a: 209-214). Women who express or insinuate sexual interest in men are repudiated in Middle-Earth,<sup>12</sup> but the men who show interest in women (Beren, Aragorn, Faramir and so on.) are not met with such judgment, unless such unions are found to be evil or unnatural in some fashion (as in the cases of Finwë, Maeglin, and Túrin). But in these male dominated relationships, no one becomes monstrous. Only in those dominated by the feminine.

Furthermore, one can look at the women who are in positions of power and find that their portrayals are either ambivalent or negative. In *The Silmarillion*, Galadriel’s coming into Middle-Earth is a result of her pride and desire to rule there and is a character flaw of hers. The three queens of Númenor are all portrayed either negatively or ambivalently, and it is especially noteworthy that, in the exceptionally small amount that is written about them in *The Unfinished Tales*, their choices not to enter into marriage or have children are at the forefront. The last queen, Tar-Vanimeldë, is lacking in so much presence that she rules in name only, since her husband truly runs the kingdom.

Permissible aspects of sexuality and gender are strictly confined to specific gender roles in Middle-Earth. Some women (such as Éowyn) may stray from their roles and have positive effects on the world but must become confined to the subservient. Women who do not become more and more hideous, especially with their sexuality. In Tolkien’s gender essentialist universe, women are not empowered but are controlled by

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<sup>12</sup> When Túrin saves a woman from being raped, the language she uses and which is later used about her indicates that she is sexually opening herself to Túrin, who casts her aside (Tolkien 2007: 104-106).

the will and fate of men. They find themselves either within a traditional gender role or occupying the space of the monstrous feminine, the evil woman.

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