

MIMETIC PATTERNS OF MASCULINITY OR JUST ANOTHER FANTASY BOOK

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When *The Lord of the Rings* was published in the fifties, it was seen as merely “another” fantasy book. Against all expectations, it was chosen the book of the century after a poll carried out by the book chain Waterstones and Channel 4 in 1997. Since then, despite the fact that fantasy or science fiction books have always been considered to belong to a secondary genre, Tolkien’s masterpiece has been analysed in detail from all points of view: mythology, linguistics, ecocriticism... and also recently, gender.

Whereas within gender studies, scholars and critics have mainly focused on the female characters, I focus on male characters in this essay, in order to analyse the different representations of masculinity in Tolkien’s work, dividing my focus on three main sections: the subject of masculinity and gender, Tolkien’s biography and his participation in the First World War, and the characteristics of the different races of Middle-earth.

The first section of this essay deals with the search for theoretical basics to work on the subject of gender, and more concretely, masculinity. Looking at Tolkien through the theoretical framework of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, we note that Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* claims that the concept of sexuality has fluctuated through history. Therefore, sexuality is a social construct, different depending on the historical and cultural period. Also a constructivist Judith Butler states that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 179). We are biologically marked by our genitalia at birth; however, our behaviour is influenced by the socio-cultural and historical moment we live in, it is what you *do* that matters and not *who you are*. We live in a society, though, that erroneously marks our behaviour and therefore our gender identity depending on whether we are born with male or female genitalia, i.e. our behaviour and gender performance are clearly influenced by our context, our relationships

and interactions... According to Butler's and Foucault's theories, each person performs a different type of femininity or masculinity as each person's circumstances are unique (Harris 10), therefore it is more appropriate to talk about "masculinities" in general.

The construction of the divisions between men and women can be regarded nowadays as "primitive"; unfortunately, it is clear they are still existent in Western patriarchal society where "males are seen as logical, rational, aggressive, exploitative, strategic, independent and competitive. Females are thought to be intuitive, emotional, submissive, empathic, spontaneous, nurturing and co-operative" (Goddard 32). We are not a hundred per cent masculine or feminine, though, so in our society these characteristics fluctuate in each of us and either males or females can behave in ways that are patriarchally seen as exclusively meant for women or men.

If we agree that gender is not fixed and is a social construct, it is vital to assess how important it was for Tolkien to have been born in a patriarchal society at the end of the nineteenth century. His life was marked, above all, by three great events: his childhood in a rural area in Northern England, his experience in World War I and his interaction with several literary groups exclusively made up of men from his adolescence to the Inklings of his maturity. Men therefore had a very important role in his life, characterised by his interaction with homosocial groups.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in 1892 in Bloemfontain, South Africa, where his father had moved two years before to work for the Bank of Africa. His mother, Mabel Tolkien, gave birth to another child in 1894 and the three of them moved back to England when John Ronald was only 4 years old as the children's health in such an arid place was not very good. We must bear in mind from the very beginning the sociocultural context in which Tolkien was born—a Great Britain that had lost its status of Empire which had spread in the country a feeling of "masculinism" or male domination (Brittan 53). Boys' representative figures were eminently male: male soldiers, male conquerors, male Prime Ministers. Gender differences in Tolkien's time made it impossible for men and women alike to trespass society's boundaries such as jobs and family roles, for instance. The social construction of men and women marked their characteristics: women were thought to be "gentle and virginal" (Bourke 12) whereas men were left with what Benyon has seen as the four basic pillars in the formation of young men: "athleticism, stoicism, sexual purity and moral courage" (27).

Although born in South Africa, Tolkien could not have been more

English. His father's death was determinant in his life as his mother stayed with her offspring in England where she was economically helped by her family until her conversion to Catholicism. This important fact would also be essential in Tolkien's life as the family became good friends with the Catholic priest Father Francis Morgan, who became a father figure for him even before and, above all, after Mabel's death in 1904. According to Carpenter's biography, Tolkien thought of his mother as a kind of martyr "who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith" (50). Tolkien not only inherited his mother's love for nature and languages but also her devout Catholicism.

When Tolkien was sixteen years old, Father Francis Morgan found a pension for the Tolkien brothers to stay, where John Ronald met Edith Bratt, his future wife. He fell in love with her but his tutor saw her as a "temptation" so did not approve of this relationship. They were consequently separated and Tolkien concentrated on his studies, although he married her later on when he came of age. It was at this time of separation from Edith that he met his best friends Christopher Wiseman, R.Q. Wilson and G.B. Smith, with whom he would create the Tea Club and Barrovian Society. They spent long hours discussing various topics, playing rugby together and soon joined by a male bonding "far from what they perceived to be the damaging influences of 'the feminine'" (Benyon 31). The T.C.B.S. was another homosocial group formed of young men with shared interests who were raised in a patriarchal society. They became what Deslandes calls "elite British manhood" (49), i.e. male undergraduates who had to undergo certain "informal initiations and rites of passage that signified a distinctive stage of life and delineated those masculine traits that distinguished younger from older men" (49.). The T.C.B.S. attended the two most traditional universities in England, Oxford and Cambridge, where the cap and gown were exclusively for men. In short, the public school system marked the identities of several generations in England, transmitting them Victorian values and ideas based on manliness and loyalty.

These same ideas led a great number of youngsters to enlist and fight for their country in the First World War, which meant the sudden growth to maturity for those who survived it. Millions of lives were lost in the attempt "to carry the fate of nations" (Garth 264), and many of them were patriotic young students from Oxford and Cambridge (Deslandes 24). Tolkien wanted to enlist from the very beginning but was advised to stay and finish his studies so he went to war after his marriage in 1916. His T.C.B.S. comrades went to battle as well, with the result that Wilson and Smith died in 1916, leaving the group totally

broken. Their homosocial bond was so strong that Tolkien would always refer to these deaths as a “lifelong sadness.”

This homosociality, characteristic of this historical period in the public schools and the war, was seen by some as a “temporary homosexuality” or “homoerotic” relationship (Fussell 272). Although there were some rumours about homosexual relationships at that time, the truth is that most of the friendships born then had nothing to do with sexual tendencies but with an asexual love and closeness among comrades.

Although Tolkien defended the theory that it is not compulsory to know a writer’s life to understand his work, in this case Tolkien’s biography is illuminating when looking at *The Lord of the Rings* from the point of view of gender. We cannot forget the important fact that he was born at the end of the nineteenth century and was educated in some Victorian values which might seem obsolete nowadays but were fundamental at that time. The end of the Great War was the end of the T.C.B.S. but Tolkien kept on joining homosocial male groups such as the Oxonian literary group the Inklings, whose members were mainly C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Owen Barfield. Their meetings were full of discussions not only about literature but also religion and their own writings. Lewis and Tolkien deeply admired each other and shared a friendship beyond limits, although Tolkien always felt jealous of Lewis’ friendship with Williams. Living in Oxford, giving lectures in Oxford and meeting in Oxford, it is obvious that they were an important factor in the city of spires in the 30s. They were the product of the public school system during their childhood, their adolescence and, later, their maturity. The university and college atmosphere was deeply influenced by the patriarchal tradition and society which kept women out, relegated to a mere secondary role of nurturers and wives.

Tolkien’s personal and professional life full of homosocial relationships, his interests in ancient literature and all his personal experiences are a key point to understand why he created Rohan, Gondor, the Elves, the hobbits, etc., as he did. All the groups of men in Middle-earth represent different patterns of masculine behaviour that Tolkien develops in a sort of mimetic work as each race is a reflection of a particular society, such as Tolkien’s own Oxford or the context of *Beowulf*.

A reflection of the Old English heroic codes found in *Beowulf*, the Men of Rohan are said to have “their real-life counterparts” in the “Anglo-Saxons of early medieval England” (Stanton 54). The Rohirrim share a primitive heroic code based on the cornerstone of the Old

English one of the *comitatus* that joins them together to protect their King Théoden even with their lives, something they share with *The Battle of Maldon's* warriors. Physically strong and mentally fearless, these warriors are always ready for battle, where they seek to perform their loyal and courageous attitudes. Their masculinity is thus based on making heroic deeds, no matter how dangerous they are.

The image we have about the Anglo-Saxon period is certainly influenced by the literary accounts of this historical time. Although *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer* and *The Battle of Maldon* are three of the most important texts that have survived the passage of time, they have not survived the damage of generations of translators that have left us the arduous task of discerning what should be regarded as historical truth and what a deliberate change of meaning. Although there are various hypotheses about the “beginning” of patriarchy, society in the 5th and 6th centuries was eminently patriarchal and this is therefore what we find in Rohan. However, there is a very interesting case in this heroic society that makes it differ from the essentially masculine patriarchal society portrayed in *Beowulf*; it is the character of Éowyn, who resembles more a kind of Scandinavian shieldmaiden or valkyrie rather than a mere hostess. During the War of the Ring in the third volume she becomes “the lord to the Eorlingas” (151) and is given “a sword and a fair corslet” – she becomes the perfect example of a woman confined in a heroic society who becomes a warrior herself, proving she has the same qualities for battle of the Rohirrim. Dwarves can be included to a certain extent here with the Men of Rohan as they are stout-hearted and strong warriors so they share with them similar characteristics in the pattern of masculinity they have been built on.

Gondor, the White Tower place, bastion of the King of Gondor's stewards until the return of the King, is a society whose codes of behaviour are more sophisticated than Rohan's. Gondor's warriors seem to belong to a feudal society of the later Middle Ages, whose main goal is not recognition and praise in war but the defence of a clear ideal. As in the chivalric romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, heroes embark on a quest at the end of which they will prove themselves worthy of something, such as Aragorn, who proves to deserve Arwen's love. The pattern of masculinity portrayed by the Rohirrim is therefore different from the people from Gondor. The most important example is the differences between Boromir and Faramir, two brothers who grow up together in Gondor but who represent different patterns of masculinity. Whereas Boromir can be seen as a hypermasculine hero who seems to be nearer the Rohirrim in his ideas of war as a means to achieve glory, Faramir is a truer representative of the late medieval society of Gondor. For Faramir, war is the

last option to defend something, not something compulsory:

‘For myself,’ said Faramir, ‘I would see the White Tree in flower again in the courts of the kings, and the Silver Crown return, and Minas Tirith in peace: Minas Anor again as of old, full of light, high and fair, beautiful as a queen among other queens: not a mistress of many slaves, nay, not even a kind mistress of willing slaves. War must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all; but I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend: the city of the Men of Númenor; and I would have her loved for her memory, her ancients, her beauty, and her present wisdom. Not feared, save as men may fear the dignity of a man, old and wise.’ (Tolkien 346).

Therefore, when compared to his brother, Faramir can be thought to be like a thoughtful and “feminized” hero in contrast to his brother’s “hypermasculinity.” Aragorn, the future king of Gondor, shares with Faramir this thoughtfulness and spiritual concept of war as the only means to save his people, so different from the epic hero. More than anything, they are human heroes—Aragorn shows his most human side in *The Fellowship of the Ring*: “Aragorn sat with his head bowed to his knees; only Elrond knew fully what this hour meant to him. The others could be seen as grey shapes in the darkness” (Tolkien 367). When Gandalf dies, he suffers: “‘Alas! I fear we cannot stay here longer,’ said Aragorn. He looked towards the mountains and held up his sword. ‘Farewell, Gandalf!’ he cried. ‘Did I not say to you: *if you pass the doors of Moria, beware?* Alas that I spoke true! What hope have we without you?’” (Tolkien 436).

In contrast to Victorian stories, in which they are presented as tiny, pointy-eared creatures, the Elves of Tolkien are a fair people composed of a mixture of characteristics, combining Celtic influences with Tolkien’s own religious views regarding death and immortality. As in the case of *Beowulf*, pure Celtic texts are rare and most of them have been “touched” by the human hand so the information we get from them is not a hundred per cent accurate. Nevertheless, Tolkien’s Elves have inherited the importance of the female figure in the Celtic society. They share their warrior side with the Tuatha Dé Danann:

They [Elves] are a powerful, full-blooded people who closely resemble the pre-human Irish race of immortals called the Tuatha Dé Danann. Like the Tuatha Dé Danann, Tolkien’s Elves are taller and stronger than mortals, are incapable of suffering sickness, are possessed of more than human beauty, and are filled with greater wisdom in all things. They possess talismans, jewels and weapons that humans might consider magical in their powers. They ride supernatural horses and understand the languages of animals. They love song, poetry and music—all of which they compose and perform perfectly. (Day 80)

Tolkien introduces Elves as ageless and spiritual creatures, similar to angels, with hardly any reference to their sex; they share similar attitudes regardless their biological sex and are all presented as androgynous beings without what Western society has categorized as feminine nurturing characteristics for females and masculine strong attitudes for males. Thus, their roles in their society are not fixed: female Elves can fight (Galadriel) and male Elves can heal (Glorfindel). In this mixture of spirituality and warrior features, we could include Gandalf, the hobbit-lover wizard who is always there when needed, the old-looking man who turns out to be more powerful than Saruman.

Finally, *The Lord of the Rings* is actually told from a hobbito-centric point of view, The hobbits are clearly a reflection of Tolkien's own time and friends and the Shire is a true image of Sarehole, the place where Tolkien spent some of his happiest times in his childhood. Tolkien always thought of himself as a hobbit, he liked smoking tobacco, nature and the countryside, and disliked technology. He was a peace-lover who enjoyed the company of his friends, of his own fellowship, either in the T.C.B.S. or the Inklings.

Hobbits are based on Tolkien's own friends and their experience in the War of the Ring is the T.C.B.S.'s experience in the Great War. They are ordinary plain people, "the essence of human strength and human frailty" (O'Neill 53), and in Tolkien's own words, "my 'Sam Gamgee' is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognised as so far superior to myself" (Carpenter 114). As we have seen so far, it is safe to refer to "masculinities" in general when talking about the characters of *The Lord of the Rings*, and even within the same race, as we have seen in the case of Boromir and Faramir, there are differences. Although they share some characteristics such as their innocence and altruistic friendship, each hobbit is different and, at the end of their quest, their differences are more obvious than at the beginning of their journey—they end up acquiring some of the characteristics of the societies they spend some time with. Like the young soldiers in the Great War, the hobbits face perils they could not have dreamt of in their beloved Shire—their bonds are similar to the comradeship that arose in the trenches during WWI, and it is especially in the case of Frodo and Sam where we can see this intimacy and close friendship which entirely transcends the sexual.

Frodo's face was peaceful, the marks of fear and care had left it; but it looked old, old and beautiful, as if the chiselling of the shaping years was now revealed in many fine lines that had before been hidden, though the identity of the face was not changed. Not that Sam Gamgee put it that way to himself. He shook his head, as if finding words

useless, and murmured: "I love him. He's like that, and sometimes it shines through, somehow. But I love him, whether or no." (Tolkien 321)

They could not have achieved what they did if they did not have trusted each other and felt they were a true fellowship. Like a Christ figure, Frodo sacrifices himself for the general welfare of the community—he will never be the same again after being the Ring-bearer so he goes back home with a "posttraumatic stress disorder" (Brennan 135) and lives what Shippey has called "disillusionment of the returned veteran" (156). The quest that the hobbits had to leave did not just take them to Mount Doom, their journey in Middle-earth is Tolkien's journey in 1916: a journey to maturity.

Due to Tolkien's admiration for ancient literary works as important as *Beowulf*, for example, it was inevitable not to think that Tolkien might have included some of these characteristics in his own writings. Thus, to analyse the main races in Middle-earth: men, elves and hobbits, I have in mind the idea that in the creation of each of them, Tolkien tried to imitate historical moments as varied as the Middle Ages or the first half of the twentieth century. Despite the fact that these races are part of a certain society which exists in the history of the human beings, not all the characters in the trilogy are representatives of *their* society. Tolkien's task to create a mythology is also meant to set up a believable and human history, more than just a mere representation of reality.

Generations of critics have seen in Tolkien's masterpiece a type of mass literature that does not deserve to be considered one of the great books of the world. Time and research are proving this judgment to be less than fair, and with the release of Jackson's films, *The Lord of the Rings* seems to be "fashionable" again. Éowyn, Arwen and Galadriel have been analysed in detail since the fifties—it is time now to turn our eyes to the different patterns of masculinity in general and try to discern if twenty-first century writers such as Christopher Paolini and his *Eragon* series or Anselm Audley's trilogy *Acquasilva* are true heirs of the father of epic fantasy and how the various patterns of masculinity created by Tolkien have influenced male and female fantasy writers alike.

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