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Guinevere, Grímhild, and the Corrigan: Witches and Bitches in Tolkien's Medieval Narrative Verse

Kristine Larsen

Note: This paper was presented at the University of Vermont Tolkien Conference on April 11, 2015 and does not take into account Verlyn Flieger's commentary (especially concerning Galadriel) in her 2016 edited volume *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun*.

Tolkien warns us in Manuscript B of the essay "On Fairy-stories" that Faërie is "the occult power in nature" and therefore "fairies have thus acquired a diabolical aspect" (Flieger and Anderson 2008, 264). Tom Shippey (2003, 280) argues in *The Road to Middle-earth* that the alliterative rhymed poem "The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun" most clearly demonstrates Tolkien's belief that "getting involved with Faërie was deeply dangerous." In my essay "'Alone Between the Dark and Light': 'The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun' and Lessons from the Later Legendarium" published in *Author of the New Century: T. A. Shippey and the Creation of the Next Canon* I explored this danger, centering around the use of magic (itself a rather nebulous concept in Tolkien's works) especially by female characters, the witches of my title (Larsen 2014). This paper draws heavily upon and extends that work to Tolkien's "The Fall of Arthur" and the works published as *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, and begins to investigate the complex nature of Galadriel – is she a witch, a bitch, a heroine, a demi-goddess, or perhaps all of the above?

"The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun" was composed by at least September 1930, and published in the *Welsh Review* in 1945 (Carpenter 2000, 188; 306). Shippey, Kocher, and Yates have individually explored the various Celtic and Norse literary sources for the lay (Shippey 2003, 280; Kocher 159-168; Yates 63-71). While Tolkien's version has plot points that can be clearly traced back to several predecessor stories, Shippey notes that his main original contribution to the tale is "a heavy weight of faith" (2003, 280). In Tolkien's lay, a childless Lord invokes the occult influence of a witch—a Corrigan—in the form of a magic potion in order to conceive twins with his Lady wife. After the children are born, the Corrigan demands the Lord's affections as her belated payment. Tolkien's Christian Lord remains faithful to his bride and is condemned to death in three days' time by the Corrigan. His wife dies of grief soon after, and the ultimate fate of the ill-begotten offspring is unclear. The Corrigan is not only a witch, but apparently a vindictive bitch as well. Tolkien successfully turns the cautionary tale from one about the dangers of infidelity to one's spouse to one about the dangers of infidelity to one's faith—infidelity in one's relationship with God. As Shippey argues, Aotrou "would have done better to trust in 'hope and prayer',

even if the prayer were unanswered” (2003, 280). It is as Tolkien warns in Manuscript B of “On Fairy-stories,” part of the power of the “inhabitants of Faerie... is power to play on the desires of our bodies and of our hearts” (Flieger and Anderson 2008, 211). This forms a centerpiece of my argument, and we will return to this statement several times.

Shippey explains that while the death of the Lord also appears in the source material, in Tolkien’s version the death is

deserved, or at least prompted by Aotrou’s attempt to sway Providence by supernatural forces. Tolkien’s moral is clear and unequivocal. Aotrou’s sin lay not in submitting to the Corrigan [...] — it lay in having any dealings with her at all. (2002, 294)

Indeed, Tolkien’s lay ends with the invocation

God keep us all in hope and prayer
from evil rede and from despair,
by waters blest of Christendom
to dwell until at last we come
to joy of Heaven where is queen
the maiden Mary pure and clear. (Tolkien 1945, 266)

The final invocation of Mary demonstrates unequivocally that she is the only “supernatural” woman with whom Tolkien believes we should have contact. Similarly, Shippey also notes that the poem is a “complete rejection of supernatural allure” that goes “several stages” beyond his other poems that discuss the intersection between humans and Faërie (2002, 294).

This same lesson is repeated throughout Tolkien’s *legendarium*. One of the most obvious occult practices against which Tolkien warns is the worship of the dark powers, in the form of Melkor and Sauron. We find this, for example, in Tolkien’s account of the original sin of humans, “The Tale of Adanel” (part of the “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth”), as well as the Akallabêth and the other versions of the downfall of Númenor.

The examples given so far are distinctly black and white—sin is clearly defined and unequivocal. But Tolkien himself notes in Manuscript B of “On Fairy-stories” that “Miracle and magic are not so easy to distinguish from one another. They have in fact only become distinguished by Christian theology” (Flieger and Anderson 2008, 252). He continues to explain that “God performs miracles in answer to prayer, or through the mediation of a person (human or angelic) who is in that particular operation the agent of a specifically divine purpose” (Flieger and Anderson 2008, 253). In his discussion of Tolkien and the power of faith, Bradley Birzer gives the example of the blinding of the magician

Elymas by St. Paul as a clear example of “the superiority of the miracle to magic” (2002, 102). As applied to Middle-earth, this would seem to include Ilúvatar and the Valar (including Varda, who fashioned the Valacirca as a heavenly portent of the eventual downfall of Melkor). However, does this satisfactorily explain how Galadriel’s mirror—a scrying mirror that shows visions to its user—is not in the same forbidden class as the black arts practiced by the Kings of Gondor? Galadriel herself notes to Sam that her mirror is “what your folk would call magic, I believe. . . and they seem also to use the same word of the deceits of the Enemy,” i.e. Sauron (*FR* 377). She warns the hobbit that her mirror shows some events that “never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent them. The Mirror is dangerous as a guide of deeds” (*FR* 378). Likewise, is the line between the phial of the Corrigan (containing the fertility potion that Aotrou secretly feeds to his wife) and the phial of Galadriel, whose light has the power to repel Shelob the monstrous spider, black and white, or an uncomfortable shade of gray? Tolkien himself saw a significant difference, and admitted that Galadriel’s characters owes much “to Christian and Catholic teaching and imagination about Mary” (Carpenter 2000, 407). But is the difference always consistent and clear to the reader?

Tolkien understood well that he had encountered considerable difficulties in articulating the sometimes subtle differences between Elvish and “black” magic (Carpenter 146, 199). In fact, numerous pages of Tolkien’s various drafts and revisions of “On Fairy-stories” as well as a number of published letters are devoted to attempts to clarify this division, possibly in his own mind as well as those of his readers. Indeed, the period of his crafting of “On Fairy-stories” from the initial lecture through revisions to the final version for publication (circa 1942-47) falls within the middle of the time during which Tolkien was writing *The Lord of the Rings*. During this period Tolkien was struggling to articulate a clear and self-consistent definition of the types of “magic” in his subcreation, definitions that would be consistent with his own personal beliefs and used consistently within his *legendarium*. In a 1954 letter, Tolkien admits that he has “been far too casual about ‘magic’ and especially the use of the word. . . . It is a v. large question, and difficult” (Carpenter 2000, 199). In another letter he explains that he has not used the term magic “consistently,” and blames this in part on a lack of a clear term for Elvish magic, as opposed to the black magic of the great enemies (Carpenter 2000, 146). Perhaps the clearest distinction possible (despite the lack of a proper terminology) is found in Manuscript B of “On Fairy-stories” in which he explains that “Magic is evil when it is sought as a means of personal power (especially over our fellows)” (Flieger and Anderson 2008, 261). By this definition, the works of Melkor, Sauron, and the Corrigan are clearly evil. Since the childless Lord desired power as well—the power to counteract his wife’s infertility, in effect to create life where naturally there would be none—his deal

with the Corrigan is clearly sinful and his subsequent punishment of death deserved.

But the issue of “magic” in Tolkien’s *legendarium* cannot be wrapped up quite so neatly. Tolkien spent decades trying to find consistent language (and apply that language in some uniform way). Nowhere is this clearer than in the multiple drafts of his famous lecture “On Fairy-stories.” For example, Flieger and Anderson include four different versions of a particular passage concerning definitions of (and relationships between) such terms as “*Art, Enchantment, Wizardry, Magic, Science, delusory belief, elvish craft, [and] Fantasy*” and characterize Tolkien’s ever-changing hypothesis as “confusing and [...] itself confused” (2008, 140). While he does not achieve complete consistency or clarity, there are two important points made in both the drafts and the final essay: Elvish “magic” is more closely aligned with what we would normally call art and enchantment (in terms of fantasy and not harmful delusion), and the “magic” of the Enemy is more closely aligned with control, domination, and mechanism/technology. This final identification is perhaps the most consistent piece of the definition, and is clearly seen in what Tom Shippey calls “Sandyman’s disease.” Shippey describes the advanced form seen in Saruman when he explains it “starts as intellectual curiosity, develops as engineering skill, turns into greed and the desire to dominate, corrupts further into a hatred and contempt of the natural world which goes beyond any rational desire to use it” (2002, 171). Tolkien continues this identification through his later letters, such as the 1951 communication with Milton Waldman. Here he explains that the Fall is caused by a possessive attachment to one’s own sub-creations and a desire for immortality, either one of which will “lead to the desire for Power, for making the will more quickly effective, - and so to the Machine (or Magic)” (Carpenter 2000, 145).

Like Tolkien himself, Tolkien scholars and critics have also struggled with defining just what “magic” means in the *legendarium*. For example, Birzer argues that Tolkien believed in two forms of magic which he described as “*magia* and *goeteia*,” Birzer in turn defines these as “enchantment” and “power derived from a demonic source and intended to dominate others and deprive its victim of their free will” (2002, 102). But in a 1954 letter draft Tolkien points out the problems with this dichotomy: “*magia* could be, was, held good (per se), and *goeteia* bad. Neither is, in this tale, good or bad (per se), but only by motive or purpose or use. Both sides use both, but with different motives” (Carpenter 2000, 200). For example, Tolkien explains in the same draft that Sauron (and presumably Melkor) uses his *magia* “to bulldoze both people and things” while the Elves (and Gandalf) use their *magia* “sparingly” and “for specifically beneficent purposes.” The Enemy uses “*goeteia* to terrify and subjugate” while the Good Powers’ goetic powers are “entirely *artistic* and not intended to deceive,” although they could

deceive mere humans (Carpenter 2000, 200). Tolkien's working definition appears to be the following: magic can be divided into two kinds of dichotomies: by motive into Art and Domination, and by outcome into Effect (what he calls in this draft *magia*) and Delusion/Enchantment (here called *goeteia*). Here we see the closest thing to clearly articulated definitions of the uses of magic in his subcreation. In my paper in the Shippey *festschrift* (Larsen 2014) I used these definitions to construct a 2X2 matrix of forms of magic, and attempted to test the consistency of this classification by assigning specific examples within the *legendarium* into a single, unambiguous box (as seen here):

	<i>Art</i>	<i>Domination</i>
<i>Effect</i>	Good (but used sparingly) e.g. Gandalf's fireworks	Worst e.g. Saruman's explosives
<i>Enchantment</i>	Best e.g. Elvish cloaks	Bad e.g. "The Voice of Saruman"

An example of an Art-Effect would be Gandalf's fireworks, while a Domination-Effect would be Saruman's explosives. The Elvish cloaks given to the members of the Fellowship would be an example of Art-Enchantment, while Domination-Enchantment would include the power of the voice of Saruman. The Corrigan's fertility potion is clearly an example of Domination-Effect as well.

The Corrigan shares characteristics with another female character in Tolkien's epic poetry, Grímhild. According to Tolkien's notes to the poem "The Lay of the Völsungs," Grímhild

Is the chief agent of evil, not because of any far-sighted plans of wickedness: she is rather an example of that wickedness that looks only to each situation as it occurs, and sticks at nothing to gain from it what seems immediately profitable. She is 'grey with wisdom' being a witch in lore and still more skilled in the reading of minds and hearts to use their weaknesses and follies. Her will dominates her daughter Gudrún and her oldest son Gunnar. (Sigurd 52)

Chiefly she manipulates those around her through potions, and like the Corrigan they are a means to a sexual end, namely potions that in some way cloud the mind and bring together a couple who would not, if left to their own will, join together.

The first example is her daughter, Gudrún, whom she tricks the hero Sigurd into wedding. In “The Lay of the Völsungs” we read

There Grímhild dwelt,
Guileful in counsel,
Grimhearted queen
Grey with wisdom,
With lore of leechcraft,
Lore of poison,
With chill enchantment
And with changing spells. (130)

She gives to Sigurd a “Drink of power/ Dreadly blended” (139) that rendered Sigurd “silent gazing;/ his mind was glamoured, mood confounded,” he therefore succumbs to Gudrún’s charms (140). Clearly Tolkien’s choice of words such as *enchantment*, *glamoured*, *spells*, and *power* bolster our classification of Grímhild’s potion as belonging in the Domination-Enchantment category of the grid and align Grímhild with the Corrigan. She, too, is a witch. But she is also a bitch, for not only does she trick Sigurd into marrying her daughter, but in order to trick Brynhild into marrying Gunnar “counsels potent/ had her cunning furnished/ of chill enchantment/ and changing spell./ In Gunnar’s likeness/ on Grani leaped he” and he was able to successfully woo Brynhild, not for himself, but for Gunnar (149). To say that Brynhild was a wee bit perturbed by this trickery would be a vast understatement. She says of her betrothed Gunnar

From witch-woman’s
Womb thou comest.
Woe to Grímhild,
Woe’s contriver! (158)

Witch? Check. Bitch? Check.

But wait – there’s more. After the deaths of Sigurd and Brynhild, Grímhild arranges for Gudrún to marry Atli the Hun, although Gudrún has absolutely no interest in it. In the original saga Grímhild gives Gudrún a potion of forgetfulness in order to make the reluctant bride forget her past sorrows and agree to the marriage. Christopher Tolkien notes how his father purposefully leaves out this second potion of forgetfulness in his version, “The Lay of Gudrún,” and rather, in the words of Christopher, “submitted without sorcery to the strength of purpose of her formidable mother” (316). Perhaps no witchery here, but certainly a healthy serving of bitchery.

It has been shown above that it is possible to unambiguously classify some specific examples of magic in Tolkien's works. However, what of the more interesting examples found in his writings? As one might suspect, as with all classification systems that rely on dichotomies rather than continua there are exceptions that cannot be so clearly pigeonholed. Melian and her daughter Lúthien both use enchantment to thwart the Enemy and his hordes, for example in the case of the Girdle that surrounds Doriath and the disguises that Lúthien devises for herself, Beren, and Huan in order to fool Sauron and Morgoth. Melian seeks to preserve the lives and safety of the residents in her and Thingol's realm. While the couple's isolationist politics are dubious in intent (and ultimately unsuccessful), the initial purpose of Melian's Girdle to protect the residents of Doriath from attacks of orcs and other foul creatures is a justified one. But what of Lúthien? She first sought to rescue Beren from Sauron's dungeon, but the ultimate goal of their quest was to steal a silmaril from Morgoth's iron crown as a dowry prize for her father. As a part of her plan to acquire the cursed jewel from Morgoth Lúthien sang a song "of such surpassing loveliness, and of such blinding power, that he listened perforce; and a blindness came upon him, as his eyes roamed to and fro, seeking her. All his court were cast down in slumber, and all the fires faded and were quenched" (S 180-81). While her actions at first sound like her mother's enchantment, they move into power and effect. Indeed, we should not forget that upon their first meeting in the woods, Beren "fell into an enchantment" and "became dumb, as one that is bound under a spell, and he strayed long in the woods, wild and wary as a beast, seeking for her" (S 165).

Another character whose beauty bewitches (to the ruin of all involved) is Guinevere. Christopher Tolkien notes that his father "left no indication even of the briefest kind... of his thought or intention that lay behind his very original treatment of 'The Legend of Lancelot and Guinevere'" in the posthumously published narrative poem fragment *The Fall of Arthur* (12). After tracing the evolution of the character of Lancelot throughout the Arthurian tradition, Christopher Tolkien points out that one of his father's key changes is that the banishment of Lancelot is not due to the death of Gareth, but rather simply for the adulterous affair with the Queen (110). Of said affair we read

Dear she loved him
 With love unyielding, lady ruthless,
 Fair as fay-woman and fell-minded
 In the world walking for the woe of men.
 Fate sent her forth. Fair she deemed him
 Beyond gold and silver to her grasping.
 Silver and golden, as the sun at morning
 Her smile dazzled, and her sudden weeping

With tears softened, tender poison,
Steel well-tempered. Strong oaths they broke. (37)

An even stronger comparison between their lust and the negative magic of Enchantment/Domination is seen in the so-called LE manuscript, a conversation between Lionel and Ector, Lancelot's kin. Ector explains

....Too fair the queen,
The knight too noble, and the net too strong
That caught him captive... But love conquered.
He strove in vain in her strong fetters,
But release won not; and love unyielding
With tears or laughter the true as steel
Bent slowly down to bitter sweetness. (194)

In the published poem, after the infidelity of Lancelot and the Queen is discovered, it is said

The Queen was taken. With cruel justice
Fair as fay-woman they to fire doomed her,
To death they condemned her.... (38)

As Christopher notes, his father's version of the rescue of the Queen is distinctive in "the reckless violence of Lancelot's irruption on the scene, which was followed by a Túrin-like subsidence after a great rage, and led to a far-reaching penitence of spirit and attempt to undo the havoc that he had caused, an agonizing recognition of guilt" (106). Thus we see that Lancelot is not only "enchanted" by Guinevere, herself compared to a "fay-woman" but that he is temporarily driven insane by the power their passion has over him. Indeed, we return to Tolkien's warning that one of the dangers of the "inhabitants of Faerie... is power to play on the desires of our bodies and of our hearts" (Flieger and Anderson 2008, 211).

But not only does Guinevere have this power over her lover Lancelot, but also over Mordred. We read of Mordred

His heart returned
To its long thralldom lust-tormented,
To Guinever the golden with gleaming limbs,
As fair and fell as fay-woman
In the world walking for the woe of men
No tear shedding. Tower might he conquer,
And thrones o'er throw yet the thought quench not. (27)

An earlier draft of this same section reads

His thought was turned, thirst-tormented,
To Gwenaver the golden, whose gleaming limbs
The minds of men with madness filled,
So fair and fell, frail and stony,
True and faithless. Towers might he conquer
And thrones overthrow and thirst slake not. (214)

After Mordred reveals to Guinevere his intention to take her by force if she does not willingly accept his sexual advances, Guinevere escapes from the castle. Following a failed search Ivor has to explain to Mordred that she has managed to escape his grasp, although he tries to make Mordred see that this is actually a fortunate turn of events:

... Few love her.
Fear her no longer, the fay-woman!
Fell fate take her! May her feet never
Return hither to trouble Mordred!
From thy mind thrust her! (48)

As one might expect, Mordred is not so quickly released from Guinevere's spell:

In his bosom there burned under black shadow
A smouldering fire whose smoke choked him;
His mind wavered in a maze walking
Between fear and fury. At first his thought
Hunger-hunted from his hold wandered
By lust allured to its long torment. (48-9)

In other versions of the Arthurian tale one might put the blame squarely on Mordred, but in Tolkien's version we are faced with a far less innocent and sympathetic Guinevere. For example, when she escapes from Mordred she hides in the countryside, "Her hope in havoc, in her heart thinking/ Men's fate to mould to her mind's purpose" (42). She may not have intentionally caused Lancelot or Mordred to fall in love with her, but she is certainly not above manipulating either one of them, or any other man, to protect her own interests. Tolkien's outlines to the later parts of the poem that were never completed explain that when she and Lancelot are briefly reunited in Wales, her former lover only cares where Arthur might be. In Tolkien's words "His love for Guinevere had no more power" (136).

As she watches him ride into the west, it is said that “though grief was her lot it is not said that she mourned more for others than for herself” (136). Tolkien’s Guinevere is manipulative, selfish, and seen by others as clearly wielding her sexual powers over men as a weapon, in other words, as a witch and a bitch.

Another important example of magic in Tolkien’s *legendarium* is, of course, the Rings of Power. As Tolkien notes in a 1951 letter, the object of Elvish magic is “Art not Power, sub-creation not domination and tyrannous re-forming of Creation” (Carpenter 2000, 146). But Tolkien himself agrees that the Elves “came their nearest to falling to ‘magic’ and machinery” when with “the aid of Sauron’s lore they made *Rings of Power* (‘power’ is an ominous and sinister word in all these tales, except as applied to the gods)” (Carpenter 2000, 152). Tolkien further explains that the “chief power” (note the use of that “ominous” word again) of the rings was

the prevention or slowing of *decay*... the preservation of what is desired or loved, or its semblance—this is more or less an Elvish motive. But also they enhanced the natural powers of a possessor—thus approaching ‘magic’, a motive easily corruptible into evil, a lust for domination. (Carpenter 2000, 152)

One of these three rings was wielded by our final femme fatale, Galadriel, who is perhaps the most complexly written of them all. The daughter of Finarfin, half-brother of Fëanor, she is also proud and strong of mind. After the rape of the silmarils, she willingly joins many of the Noldor in exile. In *The Silmarillion* we read that Galadriel, “the only woman of the Noldor to stand that day tall and valiant among the contending princes, was eager to be gone. No oaths she swore, but the words of Fëanor concerning Middle-earth had kindled in her heart, for she yearned to see the wide unguarded lands and to rule there a realm of her own will” (84). After the defeat of Melkor, most of the remaining Noldor return to the Blessed Lands, having received the pardon of Manwë, but Galadriel “alone remained of those who led the Noldor to exile in Beleriand” (S 254).

As Christopher Tolkien describes in *Unfinished Tales*, “The reasons and motives govern for Galadriel’s remaining in Middle-earth are various” (240) and the interested reader is directed to the section of that volume entitled “The History of Galadriel and Celeborn” for more an in-depth examination of this topic. The bottom-line is that in his later years, Tolkien attempted to rehabilitate Galadriel in the sense of distancing her from the crimes of the Noldor, including a version of her background story in which she comes to Middle-earth independently of the rest of her kin (*UT* 243). If we refer only to the published *Silmarillion* as well as *The Lord of the Rings*, we see that Galadriel does uncomfortably seem to span the intersections between the four blocks of our magical grid. Besides the

aforementioned ring of power and mirror of Galadriel, she has the ability to read the minds of others and speak to them telepathically. As Boromir accuses “Maybe it was only a test, and she thought to read our thoughts for her own good purpose; but almost I should have said that she was tempting us, and offering what she pretended to have the power to give” (*FR* 373). Boromir sees Galadriel as a temptress, certainly not in the sexual sense, but a temptress nonetheless. Indeed, Galadriel is called “the Sorceress of the Golden Wood” by Wormtongue (*TT* 118) and Faramir refers to her as “Perilously fair” (*TT* 288). Éomer says of Galadriel’s reputation, “Few escape her nets, they say... If you have her favour, then you also are net-weavers and sorcerers, maybe” (*TT* 35). Countering this is Sam, who argues that “perhaps you could call her perilous, because she’s so strong in herself. You, you could dash yourself to pieces on her, like a ship on a rock; or drown yourself, like a hobbit in a river. But neither rock nor river would be to blame” (*TT* 288). This lack of blame certainly sets her apart from Tolkien’s depictions of Guinevere.

In addition, Galadriel’s fidelity to Celeborn is unwavering (although it is said in the *Unfinished Tales* manuscript “The Elessar” (263) that Celebrimbor, grandson of Fëanor and creator of the Three Elven Rings of Power, loved her “though you turned to Celeborn of the Trees”). In contrast to Lancelot, Gimli’s chaste love for this queen leads him to do deeds of honor, not disgrace. Aided by her natural abilities for telepathy, the “great lore and wisdom” she learned from Melian in Doriath (*S* 115), and the White Ring Nenya, Galadriel is able to protect Lothlórien from the evils of the world and the powers of decay, as Frodo remarks, “the wearing is slow in Lórien... The power of the Lady is on it” (*FR* 405). Indeed, as a ringbearer himself, Frodo is able to see Nenya upon her finger, and at their parting from Lórien finds her “no longer perilous or terrible, nor filled with hidden power” (*FR* 393). So perhaps the grid is actually better represented by a Venn diagram, with Galadriel occupying the intersection set between the Effect/Enchantment/Art/Domination (or at least the first three of these).

Hence we see that these female characters are a reflection of the greater evolution of Tolkien’s thoughts on magic, an evolution from tackling clear examples of “right and wrong” to a more interesting gray area at the multiple intersections of morality, intention, action, and result. Tolkien’s views on “magic” approached, but apparently never ultimately reached, a self-consistent completion (rather like the *legendarium* itself). Perhaps most notably, it is his admittedly “Marian” character – Galadriel – who straddles the blurred lines between witches, bitches, heroines, and the semi-divine in Middle-earth and beyond.

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