

2020

Ladies of the Forest: Melian and Mielikki

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Recommended Citation

Larsen, Kristine (2020) "Ladies of the Forest: Melian and Mielikki," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol9/iss1/6>

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It is well-known in Tolkien scholarship that the tale of Kullervo in the Finnish mythology collected in *Kalevala* played a central role in his first attempts to compose original mythology. For example, in a letter to Milton Waldman circa 1951, Tolkien notes that Finnish mythology “greatly affected me” (2000, p. 144), while in a 1955 letter to W.H. Auden he explains “the beginning of the legendarium... was an attempt to reorganize some of the *Kalevala*, especially the tale of Kullervo the hapless, into a form of my own” (2000, p. 214). With the 2015 publication of Tolkien’s original interpretation of the Kullervo tale, *The Story of Kullervo*, composed circa 1914-6 (2015, p. xiii), and Verlyn Flieger’s commentary on the work, important connections are now coming to light between *Kalevala* and other personas and plotlines within Tolkien’s legendarium.

I wish to focus on a particular incident in this tale. In Runo XXIV of *Kalevala*, after causing the death of the wife of Ilmarinen the smith, Kullervo wanders aimlessly in the forest, bemoaning his fate and condition as an orphan. He decides to avenge his parents’ death, but “Then an old dame came to meet him,/ Blue-robed Lady of the Forest” (Kirby, 1985, p. 457). When he explains his plan to the mysterious woman, she reveals that his parents are still alive and gives Kullervo detailed directions to their location “Far away on Lapland’s borders” (Ibid.). She then disappears from the tale, and Kullervo travels straight to his parents’ home.

Who is this seemingly minor character? In her commentary to *The Story of Kullervo*, Flieger (2015, p. 61) identifies the Blue-robed Lady of the Forest with Mielikki, “the consort or wife of Tapio, a major woodland deity.” Stocker (2016, p. 1) agrees with this identification, and explains Tolkien’s reference to “the Pohie-Lady of the Forest” in the draft plot synopses to his adaptation of the story (2015, p. 46) as another name for Mielikki. The etymological basis is a reference to the North Land, related to the title of the illustration “The Land of Pohja” that was featured on the dust jacket of Flieger’s volume (Stocker, 2016, p. 6). The identification of the Lady of the Forest with Mielikki aligns with an earlier reference in *Kalevala*, specifically Runo XXXII. Here the wife of Ilmarinen utters a lengthy prayer invoking the spirits’ help in protecting her animals. Lines 241-10 specifically refer to “Mielikki, the forest’s mistress/ Of the herds the bounteous mother”; she in particular is invoked to protect the cattle (Kirby, 1985, p. 436). This part of the prayer is omitted in Tolkien’s abbreviated version of the supplication (prefacing it with “her prayer was in the fashion of a song and very long, whereof some was thus” [2015, p. 22]).

But while she is omitted from Tolkien’s abbreviated prayer, her overall role is much enhanced in his adaptation. After the death of the smith’s wife, lamenting his fate, and bent upon avenging his parents’ deaths, Kullervo comes upon “an old dame, even the Blue-robed Lady of the Forest” (2015, p. 34). But in contrast to the original, Kullervo is not told that his parents are still live but is instead given directions to the dwelling of his enemy, Untamo. But with this knowledge comes a stern admonition: “when turning to the Northwest thou wilt find a wooded mountain. Fare not towards it lest ill find thee” (2015, p. 35).

As in the original, after revealing the path, she slips away and out of the story. But as this is a Tolkien tale, the hero doesn’t listen to her sage advice, instead trekking up the mountain to escape the gloom of the forest. He meets his sister, and, falling victim to the curse of the smith’s wife, lays with her and commits incest, leading to her suicide and his, eventually, as well. Flieger (2015, pp. 61-2) summarizes the mysterious woman’s importance to the tale: “The world of *Kalevala* is full of nature spirits, woodland demi-gods who appear when needed. This one has a particularly portentous role, since it is when Kullervo disobeys her instructions to avoid the

mountain that he has the fated meeting with his sister.” If this plotline seems familiar, well, it is. Replace the curse of the smith’s wife with that of a dragon and you essentially have the central themes of “Turambar and the Foalókë” (written circa 1917).

Tolkien did make a number of significant changes to the story of Kullervo, as described by Flieger (2015, p. 147). Among these is the introduction of Musti, a supernatural hound and aide to Kullervo based on a simple black dog in the original Finnish tale, who Flieger notes was the “clear forerunner” of Huan in the saga of Beren and Lúthien (2015, p. 160). Flieger concludes that “Tolkien found Musti simply too good to waste, and recycled him from the unfinished early story to the later and more fully realized fairytale context of the romance of Beren and Lúthien” (2015, p. 162). It is my contention that Tolkien recycled another character from *The Story of Kullervo*, one who plays important roles in both “Turambar and the Foalókë” and “The Tale of Tinúviel” (although she has limited screen time in both), namely Melian, the mother of Lúthien. I therefore allege that Tolkien was not being entirely truthful when he wrote to Christopher Bretherton in 1964 that the theme of Kullervo’s tragedy “remains a major matter in the legends of the First Age... though as ‘The Children of Húrin’ it is entirely changed except for the tragic ending” (2000, p. 345).

Let’s examine the evidence. First, a characteristic of the Finnish pantheon is that the gods are married, and often have children. For example, the “god of the forests is Tapio, and his wife is Mielikki (the gracious) when she is propitious to hunters, or Kuurikki (the deaf) when she is not so” (Bonser 1928, p. 344). He is described as “very tall and slender” while she is “dressed in sky-blue” (Ibid.). Their son, Nyrikki, “builds bridges that the cattle may be able to pass to their summer-pastures over the morasses” while their daughter, Tuulikki (also called Tellervo), drives game “with a rod of birch-wood” or holds game for the hunter, thus aiding in the hunt (Ibid.). Tolkien himself describes this family unit in his essay “On ‘The Kalevala’ or Land of Heroes,” delivered in 1914 and 1915 (2015, p. 63), explaining

There is a dim and awesome figure (the nearest approach to regal dignity) Tapio God of the Forest and his spouse Mielikki, with their fairylike son and daughter ‘Tellervo little maiden of the Forest clad in soft and beauteous garments’ and her brother Nyrikki with his red cap and blue coat. (2015, 81)

We clearly see more than a mere echo of this family in the original first family of Doriath (originally called Artanor): King Tinwelint or Tinwë Linto (later Thingol) and his Queen, Wendelin or Gwendeling, “a sprite that escaped from Lórien’s garden” (*Tales Two*, 1984, p. 8), with their daughter Tinúviel in her “silver-pearly dress” (*Tales Two*, 1984, p. 11) and son Dairon, “a boy strong and merry” (*Tales Two*, 1984, p. 10). While Dairon becomes Daeron the jealous minstrel in later versions of the tale (2001, p. 166), and other significant pieces of the tale were transformed (for example, Beren’s species shifting from Elvenkind to human), much of the tale remained unchanged throughout the decades of Tolkien’s tinkering. It is also interesting to note that, besides being the Lord of the Forest, Thingol shares another trait with Tapio: in *The Silmarillion* Thingol is described as “tallest of all the Children of Ilúvatar” (2001, p. 58).

In “The Tale of Tinúviel” we read that Artanor was kept safe “by the magics of Gwendeling the fay, and she wove spells about the paths thereto that none but the Eldar might tread them easily,” a reference to the later Girdle of Melian (*Tales Two*, 1984, p. 9). It is also said of Melian that “in many things she was wise and forewise” (*Tales Two*, 1984 p. 45). Both of the seemingly magical powers of Melian (her ability to spin a web of enchantment and her gift of

foresight) naturally follow from her role in *The Story of Kullervo*, and reflect what Flieger terms Tolkien's "long preoccupation with the nature of magic and the supernatural" (2015, pp. xx-xxi). Indeed, as Flieger notes, the blue robe of the Lady of the Forest, as well as the Blue Forest itself where Kullervo met her, are highly symbolic, as "Tolkien associates the colour and the phenomenon [of blue-misted forests] with mystery and magic" (2015, p. 57).

It is now instructional to carefully parse Flieger's (2015, pp. 61-2) earlier observation. First, recall that "The world of Kalevala is full of nature spirits, woodland demi-gods who appear when needed." In *The Silmarillion* we read that Melian was originally a Maia who served the Valar "Vána and Estë; she dwelt long in Lórien," whose gardens are said to be "filled with many spirits" (2001, p. 30; p. 28). Flieger then adds of the Blue-robed Lady of the Forest, "This one has a particularly portentous role, since it is when Kullervo disobeys her instructions to avoid the mountain that he has the fated meeting with his sister." As Tolkien expanded and revised the tale of Beren and Lúthien over the years, he emphasized this role of Melian – as a sage who pronounces dooms and whose advice is ignored only at significant risk. For example, in *The Silmarillion*, she not only warns Thingol that the "Peace of Arda would not last forever," motivating him to build Menegroth (2001, p. 92), and cautions him to "Beware the sons of Fëanor" (2001, p. 128), but admonishes Thingol that his rash decision to send Beren off to bring back a silmaril in order to earn Lúthien's hand has doomed either himself or their daughter, a premonition that comes true in spades, when Lúthien binds her fate to Beren's and hence dooms herself to a mortal death, and Thingol's greed for the silmaril leads to the destruction of Doriath and his own death.

But a more severe penalty for ignoring the words of Melian can be found in "Turambar and the Foalókë," which dates to the same time period as "The Tale of Tinúviel" (*Tales Two*, 1984, p. 3). Here we also have reference to what will become known as the Girdle of Melian (*Tales Two*, 1984, p. 76) as well as the tragic consequences of not heeding Melian's advice. In this case, Melian (here called Gwedheling) urges her husband to not allow Nienóri, Túrin's sister, to travel with their mother in search of Túrin, "for she was a fay and perchance foresaw dimly what might be" (*Tales Two*, 1984, p. 96). Again, as Tolkien expanded and revised these central tales within the legendarium, certain important themes also evolved and were enlarged, including the importance of Melian's foresight. In *The Children of Húrin* not only does Melian, being "wise and foresighted" try in vain to "avert the evil that was prepared in the thought of Morgoth" (2007, p. 77) by attempting to convince Morwen, Túrin's mother, to accept refuge in Doriath, but she also advises Túrin to "Beware of yourself, lest it be ill.... If in days to come you remember the words of Melian, it will be for your good: fear both the heat and cold of your heart, and strive for patience, if you can" (2007, p. 85). In a third instance, she warns Beleg against taking up Anglachel, the blade forged by Eöl, predicting that "It will not love the hand that it serves; neither will it abide with you long" (2007, p. 97). Finally, as in the original version "Turambar and the Foalókë," Melian advises against Morwen leaving the safety of Doriath to go after her son. None heed her advice, and we know well the consequences: Beleg is killed by Túrin, Niënor kills herself after realizing she has committed incest (as does the sister in *The Story of Kullervo*), and Túrin takes his own life, after realizing what a complete mess he has made out of everything (as does Tolkien's Kullervo).

The moral of the story, one that clearly resonates down through the legendarium in an unbroken line from *The Story of Kullervo* through "Turambar and the Foalókë" and *The Children of Húrin*, potent enough to find its way into the "The Tale of Tinúviel" and all its antecedents, is

that when the Lady of the Forest tells you to stick to the path, whether it be physical or metaphorical, you best listen. Nothing less than your very fate hangs in the balance.

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