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## The Girl in the Woods: On Fairy Stories and the Virgin Horror

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## THE GIRL IN THE WOODS: ON FAIRY STORIES AND THE VIRGIN HORROR

### INTRODUCTION

The story is an old one: the maiden, venturing out her door, ignores her guardian's prohibitions and leaves the chosen path. Fancy draws her on. She picks the flowers. She revels in her freedom, in the joy of being young. Then peril appears—a wolf, a monster, something with teeth for gobbling little girls—and she learns, too late, there is more to life than flowers. The girl is destroyed, but then—if she is lucky—she returns a woman.

According to Maria Tatar (while quoting Catherine Orenstein): “the girl in the woods embodies ‘complex and fundamental human concerns’” (146), a statement at least partly supported by its appearance in the works of both Joss Whedon and J.R.R. Tolkien. It may, however, come as a surprise that, for both writers, this motif represents a departure from their usual mode. Rather than inspiring humor or hope, Tolkien and Whedon use the structure and symbolism of fairy tale to deny their audience the consolation of a happy ending and, instead, engender horror.

This essay will examine how Tolkien and Whedon employ the elements Tolkien considered essential to fairy-stories to reflect the horror of a society that allows (and even condones) violence against women. Beginning with episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* “Helpless” and “Fear, Itself,” we will study how Tolkien's elements of Fantasy and Escape are literally constructed within the text to bind the heroes within a socially defined and hostile environment. We will then turn to Whedon's 2012 film, *The Cabin in the Woods*, to examine how he more fully developed these themes in the context of Tolkien's Recovery. Lastly, we shall return to Tolkien and examine a story which, in many respects, stands alone in his legendarium: that of Aredhel and Eöl from *The Silmarillion*. While this tale follows many of Tolkien's elements, it does not have the Consolation of the Happy Ending Tolkien considered especially important to a fairy-story, indicating this tale could be read—not as a fairy tale—but as horror.

### THE VIRGIN HORROR

Before we can properly examine the symbolism of “the girl in the woods” motif, we must first consider the potential layers of meaning latent within the red cape. This is no easy task, as Maria Tatar observes:

the tale itself, by depicting a conflict between a weak, vulnerable protagonist and a large, powerful antagonist, lends itself to a certain interpretive elasticity. But the multiplicity of interpretations does not inspire confidence, with some critics reading the story as an allegory of rape, others as a parable about man-hating, still others as a blueprint for the initiation of girls into sexuality and adulthood. (147-148)

This essay will primarily discuss the rape allegory, but we would be remiss not to explore the more empowering symbolism.

According to the psychoanalytic reading, Red Riding Hood's journey through the woods and the stomach of the wolf represents a hero's journey through the dark of the unconsciousness and a traumatic rebirth. In the book *From Girl to Goddess*, Valerie Estelle Frankel says: "adolescents enter the forest because a part of themselves is missing" (18). The heroine risks "herself completely on her quest, dying in order to be reborn more powerfully. This ultimate form of initiation answers the most primitive longings inside a woman as she travels from innocence to knowledge" (164). It is important to bear this reading in mind as it appears in *Buffy* and is implied in Tolkien, but is undermined by the broader context of each story.

As for the fairy tale's representation of rape, it requires little interpretation to recognize that—in the versions where she is rescued from the wolf—Red Riding Hood does not reach her happy ending by her own agency, but by her ability to survive. The message is not a hopeful sign of rebirth from trauma, but—at best—an encouragement to "lie back and enjoy it." At worst, it is a direct threat of violence against an over-curious maiden who strays from the proper path.

This reading is particularly troubling given Red's construct as innocent virgin and desired sex object. In one body, she is—in effect—the virgin-whore dichotomy: too wayward to follow the path, yet too innocent to recognize the wolf before her. It is this condition of powerlessness—being the unwilling possessor of an attribute society is determined to take at all costs—that we shall call the "virgin horror." Throughout the paper, we shall examine how Tolkien and Whedon employ this concept to represent the very real terror experienced by women in a world of wolves.

### ESCAPE IN "HELPLESS"

In the essay “On Fairy-stories” (originally presented in 1939, then published in 1945 and again in 1964 with revisions), Tolkien asserts there are four elements common to all fairy-stories: Fantasy, Escape, Recovery and Consolation.

Escape, according to Tolkien’s definition, is the “Escape of the Prisoner” (376) to a place outside mundane existence. There are several aspects a story may include in order to make that escape more appealing, such as presenting “the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (383) or constructing a world in which a being’s internal nature is mirrored by its exterior.

In Faërie one can indeed conceive of an ogre who possesses a castle hideous as a nightmare (for the evil of the ogre wills it so), but one cannot conceive of a house built with a good purpose—an inn, a hostel for travelers, the hall of a virtuous and noble king—that is yet sickeningly ugly. (381)

Ordinarily, *Buffy* storylines use the elements of Escape in order to ground viewers in the fight between good and evil. Although the show most frequently inverts the Escape from Death by focusing on the cursed existence of the undead and Buffy’s apathy in Season Six, her resurrection at the end of Season One proves rebirth also has a positive connotation fitting Frankel’s model mentioned above. More importantly for Tolkien’s definition, Buffy’s enemies cannot hide what they are. Even the show’s chief antagonists—the seemingly human vampires—transform when they attack, developing fangs, bumpy foreheads, and yellow eyes. Buffy’s battles with the visibly evil forces of darkness provide catharsis, not only for the audience (by juxtaposing concrete, conquerable villains with Buffy’s struggles to balance school, love, and work), but for Buffy herself as she strives to take control of her life. This is most succinctly expressed by Buffy herself in Season Three’s “The Prom,” when she says: “Great thing about being a Slayer: kicking ass is comfort food.”

Then comes the episode “Helpless” which, while expanding upon the concepts of Escape, sets out to undermine them. This subversion of Buffy’s central conceits first won Whedon’s approval, as writer David Fury observes in the episode’s commentary: “Joss just loved the idea of a terrified Buffy: that Buffy had become the heroine of a slasher or a horror movie who runs screaming from the monster.” This represents a departure from the original concept for *Buffy* expressed by Whedon in the commentary for “Welcome to the Hellmouth”: “I saw so many horror movies where there was that blonde girl who would always get herself killed. I started feeling bad for her. I thought, it’s time she had a chance to

take back the night.” Whedon’s approval of an episode in which Buffy loses her powers represents a complete reimagining of the heroine. No longer a superhero, Buffy now bears more resemblance to the “Final Girl” described by film critic Carol Clover in “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film.” The Final Girl is the one “who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again... She is abject terror personified” (201). Notably, there are two versions of the Final Girl, which Clover differentiates based on their ending: “either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B)” (201). The former version Clover says “for all her survivor pluck, is, like Red Riding Hood, saved through male agency” (203).

In “Helpless,” the Red Riding Hood similarities are more than coincidence, as writer David Fury readily admits, saying: “I wanted to give the impression of a Little Red Riding Hood thing.” Specifically, that “thing” refers to Buffy’s increased vulnerability through the loss of her Slayer-imbued male privilege, as described by Debra Jackson in her essay “Throwing Like a Slayer: A Phenomenology of Gender Hybridity and Female Resilience in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*”:

Remarkably, Buffy’s role as the Slayer allows her to sidestep one of the most profound effects of feminine disciplinary practices on female identity and subjectivity, namely the experience of oneself as delicate and helpless, especially with respect to the threat of sexual violence (paragraph 19).

The loss of her powers leaves Buffy vulnerable, not only to vampires, but to society at large, as she learns while walking home from Angel’s mansion wrapped in a red coat. A group of men cat-call her and she briefly tenses for a fight before remembering her weakened state and hurrying away. In her confusion, she walks directly into the arms of the psychotic vampire, Zachary Kralik, who allows her to escape for the joy of watching her run and hearing her scream.

Again, Jackson notes the similarities to Red Riding Hood:

While interpretations of Little Red Riding Hood vary, in this instance, the “moral” subtext connects well with the episode. Standard readings reference the dangers of gender-based violence, especially that perpetrated by strangers, which is echoed both by Kralik’s reputation for killing women and the street harassment Buffy encounters. (paragraph 27)

Frankel's rebirth model is relevant to this episode, as—in entering the Terrible House where Kralik has imprisoned her mother—Buffy transforms from Clover's first, helpless model of the Final Girl to the one who has the wit and resourcefulness to trick her enemy into drinking Holy Water. However, this personal journey is undercut by the story's framing device.

After rescuing her from Kralik, Giles, her Watcher and mentor, informs Buffy that he is the reason she has no powers. Over the past few days, Giles has injected her with a serum that temporarily saps her strength and regenerative abilities in preparation for a coming of age ritual. However, Kralik—the vampire she was supposed to fight under “controlled conditions”—has escaped and decided to play the game according to his own rules. Immediately, Buffy's world is shaken by the realization that she can be betrayed by someone she trusts implicitly. The entire Escape dichotomy disintegrates and the lines between good and evil are irretrievably blurred. As Holly G. Barbaccia observes in “Buffy in the ‘Terrible House’”: “Whedon transforms the episode into an unnerving allegory of a newly adult woman who discovers that a patriarchy exists, that it authorizes her own power, and that female normalcy within that system equals helplessness” (paragraph 4).

According to Tolkien, “there are other things more grim and terrible to fly from than the noise, stench, ruthlessness, and extravagance of the internal combustion engine. There are hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death” (“On Fairy-stories” 381). Escape from these grievances (amongst which rape and the threat of sexual violence must surely be counted) is created either by presenting the satisfaction of a desire (i.e., a world in which a woman may walk the streets by night in safety) or a Consolation (such as a sexual predator dissolving to dust). However, the Consolation in “Helpless” is undermined, not only by the continued existence of the institution that forced Buffy to fight Kralik, but by the final demonstration of their power when they fire Giles for coming to her aid: an ultimate act of injustice. The Council demonstrates no remorse for the trauma they forced on Buffy, nor shows any inclination to change. Indeed, given Buffy's realization in the Season Seven episode “Get It Done” that the Council's predecessors created the First Slayer by tying her to the floor and forcing the powers of a demon into her against her will, it may be said that the Watchers' power is built on the exploitation of women. In time, Buffy comes to realize this herself, but—even though she twice rejects the Council—she is unable to change their practices or escape their authority completely, until they are destroyed by the First Evil.

#### **FANTASY IN “FEAR, ITSELF”**

In essence, “Fantasy,” according to Tolkien’s definition refers to the creation of a Secondary World in which the unreal is made real. For the reader, this entails more than a “willing suspension of disbelief”—as that implies a conscious effort to preserve credulity—but rather an unconscious yielding to the artist’s power. In Tolkien’s words: “He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside” (351). Ultimately, the success of this creation depends on the artist’s manipulation of reality “for creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun” (370).

There is a higher form of Fantasy beyond the reach of mortals which Tolkien calls “Faërian Drama,” in which the audience becomes physically and mentally subject to the Secondary World wrought by a creator’s enchantment. “To the elvish craft, Enchantment, Fantasy aspires, and when it is successful of all forms of human art most nearly approaches” (368). However, as Janet Brennan Croft observes in ““What if I’m still there? What if I never left the clinic?”: Faërian Drama in *Buffy*’s ‘Normal Again,’” “Tolkien never cites any actual examples of Faërian Drama, apart from a mention of “abundant records” (32). Fortunately, she has created a list of elements essential to Faërian Drama, which are:

The Goal: “to awaken in the participant an openness to Fantasy, Escape, Recovery, Consolation, and the possibility of Eucatastrophe. The one essential goal within the experience is Recovery, the ‘regaining of a clear view’ (OFS 67), which makes the participant receptive to the rest.” (32)

The Participant: “The participant must be in a liminal and receptive state: he or she must be troubled by something, or in need of intervention.” (32)

The Techniques: “The goal is achieved through a variety of artistic effects, the most basic of which is that the participant must believe fully in the reality of the experience while within it. The dreamer is always an acting character in the drama.” (33)

The Consequences: “The experience of faërian drama cannot be dismissed as a mere dream; upon awakening, the participant must retain a sense that the events were real and ‘other,’ with lasting consequences and moral effects, and not solely creations of his or her dreaming mind.” (33)

In the episode “Fear, Itself,” Buffy and her friends become part of a Faërian Drama when they enter a fraternity’s Halloween party. Unbeknownst to them, a demon known as Gachnar has corrupted the house and begun shifting everything within to manifest their fears. As the drama’s auteur, Gachnar has a very clear goal in mind: to manipulate the players into releasing him. To accomplish this goal, he feeds on the fear of the party’s attendees and promises he will release them if they, in turn, free him. In other words, he offers them the hope of recovery, of returning to the real world from which he has separated them, thus fulfilling Croft’s first criterion. He is even successful in this goal, although it does not play out the way he had hoped.

As for the participants, they are all within a state of transition following their first few weeks of college and on the verge of many new, far-reaching changes. Buffy, for instance, is struggling with a fear of abandonment after being rejected by the first boy she was intimate with since Angel. The full extent of her “post-Parker depression” (as Oz calls it) is best expressed in the scene where Buffy visits home to collect her costume for the party: a Red Riding Hood cape. While her mother finishes sewing, they begin reminiscing about the last time she wore the costume trick-or-treating with her father. In response to Buffy’s assertion that her father did not love spending time with her enough, Joyce reminds her daughter that the divorce was not her fault, to which Buffy replies: “I don’t know. Starting to feel like there’s a pattern here. Open your heart to someone and he bails on you. Maybe it’s easier to just not let anyone in.”

The house manipulates this vulnerability in order to keep Buffy under its spell, even literally echoing her words back at her from the mouth of a dead fraternity brother: “All alone. They all ran away from you. They always will. Open your heart to someone and—hm. But don’t fret, little girl, you’re not alone.” In effect, the house is forcing Buffy to become the “little girl,” molding her into both the mythical Little Red and her own younger self. Although Buffy’s decision to keep weapons in her basket instead of goodies for Granny appears to have been a conscious attempt to empower a symbol of feminine passivity, Gachnar works to corrupt her attempts at self-assertion. The success of these manipulations can be seen when, after being stabbed by a skeleton, Buffy attempts to reassert leadership of the group. Willow refuses to heed Buffy’s directions, even going so far as to shout back: “Being the Slayer doesn’t automatically make you boss. You’re as lost as the rest of us.” Lost emotionally and directionally, like a girl in the woods. In further confirmation of the Red Riding Hood persona the house is pushing her towards, it is Oz, the werewolf, who takes Buffy’s cape after she is stabbed.

Before the final confrontation, Gachnar's spell is so complete the Scoobies are in mortal fear of their lives, as Xander expresses best: "if we close our eyes and pretend it's a dream... it will stab us to death." However, this belief is shattered when the group beholds the diminutive demon whose magic held them enchanted and begin to mock him. As Tolkien says: "the moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed" ("On Fairy-stories" 351), a statement Buffy definitively demonstrates by putting her foot down on the tiny fear demon. Although the experience will have little effect on the following episodes, it does establish important themes for the season, such as illustrating the anxieties Spike will later exploit in order to separate them. In effect, this means it is not their fears the Scoobies overcome in "Fear, Itself", but the Secondary World.

Although the episode has a happy ending, the concepts introduced here—namely, the manipulations used to ensnare Buffy and her friends—are further developed in another Joss Whedon production: *The Cabin in the Woods*.

#### RECOVERY IN *CABIN IN THE WOODS*

According to Tolkien's definition, Recovery is "seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them" (373). It is the process by which all preconceived notions are "freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness" (373). Although Tolkien admits this effect is not unique to fairy-story ("humility is enough" [373]), he does claim Faërie has the unique power to "open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away... and you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was *dangerous and potent*" (374, emphasis added).

In *Buffy*, Recovery takes several forms, both through comedy and parody, but also horror. Indeed, Whedon's initial intent in creating *Buffy* is an attempt at Recovery: "a beautiful blonde girl walks into an alley, a monster attacks her, and she's not only ready for him, she trounces him" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth" commentary). The image he describes of a vulnerable maiden beset by a monster is so ubiquitous, we scarcely even question the nature of it, in part because it is one of the first stories we learn through fairy-tales. Our own latent preconceptions are revealed when Buffy's ability to fight back comes as a greater surprise than the idea that someone would hurt her simply for being alone and female.

In many respects, Whedon's 2012 film *The Cabin in the Woods* is a continuation of the work he began in *Buffy*. Not only does it combine elements from the episodes already discussed (containing a ritual orchestrated by a bureaucratic patriarchy and a group of teens subject to Faërian Drama), but Whedon himself

articulated a link: “I think of it being connected to *Buffy* because they’re both examinations of the same question: why do these bad things keep happening to blonde girls?” (DVD featurette, “We Are Not”). This is an interesting statement for many reasons, not the least being that neither of the film’s main women is naturally blonde.

Dana (Kristen Connolly) and Jules (Anna Hutchison) are college students and friends. At the start of the movie, Dana is recovering from the end of a turbulent and sexual relationship with a professor, while Jules has just dyed her hair. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to either of them, the hair-dye has been tampered with to make Jules dumber and more promiscuous, while Dana is also being groomed to assume an opposite, more innocent role. They, much like Buffy and the Scoobies in “Fear, Itself,” are subject to Faërian Drama, although the auteurs in this case are not demons, but a crew of white-collar men (and a few women) trying to prevent the end of the world by appeasing some non-specific Old Gods with a human sacrifice. As with any ritual, there are rules that must be followed and roles the participants must enact, even if they are unaware of it. One of these is that the teens must enter the cabin’s basement freely and select an object without coercion that will summon a monster to destroy them, while another is that the “whore” must die first and the “virgin” is an optional last. This rule reveals the most important part of the ritual: that each teen is made to assume a particular role in the Drama. In this case, Jules is the “whore,” while Dana is the “virgin.”

The movie provides at least two reasons explaining why “bad things” (specifically, stabbing and decapitation) happen to Jules. The final reveal that Jules’ bloody murder is intended to prevent some mysterious Apocalypse provides a utilitarian justification for her sacrifice. However, the word most frequently used by the men orchestrating the ritual is “punishment,” since this signifies both a justification for their actions and an obfuscation of responsibility: *they* are not the ones committing murder; the teens brought it on themselves by straying from the path into the realm of monsters. It is especially notable therefore that—unlike the house of Little Red’s grandmother—the Cabin very much lies within the bounds of society. After all, the only real difference between Dana and Jules is socialization. They are conditioned to fulfill certain roles that distort and distill their personalities into clichéd archetypes. This means Jules’ death is not a punishment for a decision she made, but rather a scripted part of the ritual that could just as easily have been written for Dana. This distinction calls us to question not only the dichotomy between virgin and whore, but the very society that insists on differentiating them.

For a better understanding of how the movie frames this question and its relationship to Tolkien's Recovery, we turn to Gerry Canavan, who—in “‘Something Nightmares Are Made From:’ Metacommentary in Joss Whedon's *The Cabin in the Woods*”—identifies four levels of perspective in the movie and examines how they operate during one of the pivotal scenes: the one where Jules, while having sex with her boyfriend in the woods, exposes her breasts. These audiences are (1) Curt (Chris Hemsworth), the boyfriend to whom she freely shows herself; (2) the controllers downstairs ensuring the cameras capture Jules' nudity; (3) the Old Gods the controllers are trying to appease; and (4) ourselves, the audience at home or in the theater (paragraph 21).

From the perspective of Jules and Curt, they are having fun. Their desired escape from college courses and responsibility seems so complete, they surrender to passion without fear of being seen or interrupted. Not only are they unaware of the hidden cameras and approaching zombies, they do not realize the beer and hair-dye are causing them to act unlike themselves. Meanwhile, the viewers may recognize themselves both in the teens seeking abandon and the men in the control room staring at Jules' nakedness on a giant screen. The men are even framed in the shot like a literal mirror of the audience in the theater before Hadley (Bradley Whitford) disperses them with the line: “your basic human needs disgust me. Get out of here!” The viewers are deliberately made self-aware of their voyeurism just before a knife plunges into Jules' hand and the first (but by no means last) of the movie's blood is spilled. The audience's “basic human desires” are implicated not only in sexual yearning, but also deliberately seeking out and observing the suffering of others on film: an unpleasant mirror that renders even so mundane an act as watching a movie “dangerous and potent,” to quote Tolkien.

On subsequent viewings, the audience becomes aware of the third level identified by Canavan: that of the Old Gods. The experienced viewer now knows Jules' sacrifice is intended to save the world from destruction: a sacrifice that is rendered futile when her friends refuse to participate. The conflicting messages and symbols in this scene contribute to the “placelessness” described by Katherine A. Wagner in the essay “Haven't We Been Here Before?: *The Cabin in the Woods*, the Horror Genre, and Placelessness.” Jules is at once a transgressor punished by universal laws, the victim of a manipulative society of which she is unaware, and an undermined martyr. Despite the specific, pejorative language used to label her—“whore”—she actually does not exist in any known space, identity, or dichotomy. In the words of Wagner, “the overtly constructed places within *The Cabin in the Woods* help produce a sense of placelessness as the realities and per-

haps authenticities of all the places within the film are forcefully disrupted” (paragraph 5).

By the end of the movie, the sense of placelessness is so pervasive the surviving characters are no longer even certain what is good and what is evil. Having climbed their way up the levels of awareness from unknowing participant to free agent and architect on equal level with the Director herself, they are left without any certain knowledge of the world in which they live. Dana is prepared to kill her friend to save the world, while Marty (Fran Kranz) argues no world built on such suffering should endure. In the end, it is Marty’s perspective that wins—not due to a definite decision—but because a werewolf prevents Dana from killing Marty and the ensuing fight leaves them both too weak to act.

It is therefore Joss Whedon’s vision that ends the movie, as articulated in the *Visual Companion* to *Cabin*: “I mean, you want a little bit to tear down these assumptions and start again” (42). While not exactly the “regaining of a clear view” described by Tolkien (“On Fairy-stories” 373), this disruption of preconceptions and assumptions definitely fits his description, even if the new world order presented in *Cabin*—namely, the end of the world—is not the happy ending he would have envisioned.

### **THE LACK OF CONSOLATION: AREDHEL’S HORROR**

Thus far, we have examined how samples of Whedon’s filmography reflect the virgin horror. It would be misleading, however, to consider these narratives “the same story.” As Tolkien himself cautions in “On Fairy-stories”: “it is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count” (332). As evidence, he cites Red Riding Hood, noting the fact that she is devoured in Perault’s version and rescued in the Grimms’ is more significant than other similarities. “The really important thing,” Tolkien argues, “is that the later version has a happy ending... and that Perault’s version had not.” (332). This is especially interesting given Tolkien’s assertion later in the essay that, of all the elements essential to fairy-story, “far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending.” (384). Essential to this is “the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous turn” which Tolkien dubs *eucaastrophe* (384).

This raises the question: if eucaastrophe is essential to fairy stories and the Perault version of Red Riding Hood lacks a happy ending, how are we to classify a tale that ends in the wolf’s belly and the little girl consumed according to Tolkien’s theory? While the *Buffy* episodes we discussed have mostly happy end-

ings, *The Cabin in the Woods* does not. It does, however, have the other essential elements described by Tolkien, so perhaps it could be said that a tale possessing all of Tolkien's elements except Consolation could be considered in the genre *Cabin* proudly claims to be: horror.

To test this argument, we shall turn to a story Tolkien himself wrote: the tale of Aredhel and Eöl from *The Silmarillion*. In many respects, it is a fairy-story. It contains Tolkien's characteristic attention to historic and linguistic detail that help establish belief in his subcreation, while providing several twists on "the girl in the woods" motif, including the heroine's increased age and agency. In fact, Aredhel is quite exceptional among Tolkien's women, as noted by Edith L. Crowe in "Power in Arda: Sources, Uses and Misuses," saying: "physical or political power seems to be associated rarely with women. It does, however, exist, especially among the Eldar" (227). For evidence, she indicates the passage in *The Silmarillion* listing the descendants of Finwë, where it says of Aredhel that "when she was grown to full stature and beauty she was tall and strong, and loved much to ride and hunt in the forests" (51). It is perhaps inevitable therefore that she tires of life under the rule of her brother, King Turgon, and seeks his permission to leave Gondolin, saying: "I am your sister and not your servant, and beyond your bounds I will go as seems good to me" (125). If Aredhel remains true to her word, then it could be—on arriving at Eöl's house and deeming it good—that she decides to stay of her own accord. This would seem an odd decision in a woodland where "the trees are the tallest and the darkest in Beleriand" (126), but then, according to Frankel, the "forest, dark and mysterious, is a font of feminine power, the deep unconscious made manifest" (59). It is possible that here, with Eöl, Aredhel finds peace of mind, comes into her power, and chooses to bear his son of her own will. Unfortunately, this hopeful reading is refuted by a single line: "it is not said that Aredhel was wholly unwilling, nor that her life in Nan Elmoth was hateful to her for many years" (127). Two inevitable conclusions must be drawn from this sentence: Aredhel was *not* wholly willing and her life was *eventually* hateful to her.

Where fairy-stories normally provide the possibility of "sorrow and failure" to accentuate the "joy of deliverance" ("On Fairy-Stories" 384), this tale offers only tantalizing glimpses of a grace that never arrives. Snow-white escapes the woods by stumbling upon a friendly house, but Aredhel rejects the sanctuary of Celegorm's home and continues to wander the woods before being caught by Eöl. In "Corrupting Beauty: Rape Narrative in *The Silmarillion*", Lynn Whitaker considers Aredhel's desire for the company of Fëanor's sons as "an awakening sexual curiosity" (52); however, because she is innocent of her own desire, she

continues to aimlessly wander the woods in search of something she cannot name. Eöl manipulates Aredhel's innocence by setting "enchantments about her so that she could not find the ways out" (127). Significantly, he does not lure Aredhel to him with enticements (which would suggest clear intention on her part), but by blocking all avenues of escape, much like Gachnar traps Buffy and the Scoobies in "Fear, Itself." Thus he steers her to his house, where we are told: "when Aredhel, weary from wandering, came at last to his doors, he welcomed her, and led her into his house. And there she remained; for Eöl took her to wife" (127). Whitaker notes that, although Aredhel begins as the subject in both these sentences, "she loses her subjectivity when she arrives at 'Eöl's doors'" and again when Eöl literally objectifies her through the verb "took" (55). After this, Aredhel acts only according to the roles Eöl forces upon her of wife and mother. For several years, she obeys Eöl's command to go only where he allows until Maeglin encourages her to leave. Unfortunately, Aredhel's decision to favor the role of mother over wife does not lead to safety, for she dies trying to save Maeglin from Eöl. Much like Jules' death in *Cabin*, Aredhel's sacrifice has dire consequences for the world since Maeglin later betrays Gondolin to its doom.

In terms of Escape, Tolkien creates a familiar fairy-tale juxtaposition between Aredhel the White and the Dark Elf Eöl, but then, in denying the Consolation, adds a horrific dimension to Aredhel's white ensemble. Although white is typically reserved for heroes like Gandalf or Galadriel, on Aredhel the color becomes a trap that twice leads to her capture. Her dress first attracts Eöl's attention as "a gleam of white in the dim land" (127) and then again just before Aredhel and Maeglin can escape into Gondolin for "Eöl saw from afar the white raiment of Aredhel, and marked which way she went, seeking the secret path into the mountains" (131). Most significantly, Aredhel is not dressing provocatively or acting wantonly, but in the manner befitting "Aredhel Ar-Feiniel, the White Lady of the Noldor" (125). By this name, we may argue Tolkien is creating a deliberate connection between Aredhel and another character primarily known for the color of her raiment: Red Riding Hood. However, where the blood red cape represents sexual maturation and the transformation from girl to woman, white—in Tolkien's works—is significant precisely because of its changelessness. This is best expressed by Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* when—in answer to Saruman's claim that white is only a starting point waiting to be dyed or broken—he says: "in which case it is no longer white" (259). Unlike Gandalf, Aredhel is not transformed by trauma, but steadfastly remains Aredhel the White to the bitter end. The dominion of men is as constant to her life as the dress that repeatedly betrays

her and leads, ultimately, to her death at the hands of her husband in her brother's court.

The story contains so many inversions of standard Tolkienian motifs, it could be considered an attempt to examine the “dangerous and potent” implications of his own work. Consider, for example, the similarities between Eöl and Beren: two men who, beholding lone women in the forest, single-mindedly pursue them. In the case of Beren, it is fortunate that Lúthien finds his use of the wrong name charming and stops running away long enough to fall in love with him. This pattern is true for many of the other major romances in Tolkien's work: the men are swift to fall in “love” at first sight (Túrin, Aragorn, Faramir), while the women take a little longer to be persuaded (Níniel, Arwen, Éowyn). In keeping with our theme of the virgin horror, each woman possesses a trait (typically represented by her overpowering beauty) that the men decide they must possess. The tale of Aredhel and Eöl stands as the singular example of how badly affairs can transpire when the woman does not consent and the man does not relent.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to delineate the thin line separating horror from fairy-story by comparing the ways J.R.R. Tolkien and Joss Whedon manipulate fairy tale symbolism to create a lasting sense of fear and dread. The “girl in the woods” motif is especially appropriate to this task precisely because of the “interpretive elasticity” (to borrow Tatar's phrase) that allows the tale to be read as a representation of societal punishment and self-actualization. Ultimately, the effect depends upon the framing device, for which Tolkien and Whedon have both opted to focus not on the threat of venturing outside society's bounds but on the oppression women are subject to as members of a society that claims to protect them. In effect, they have equated society with Clover's Terrible Place: “the same walls that promise to keep the killer out quickly become, once the killer penetrates them, the walls that hold the victim in” (198).

As a final demonstration of how Tolkien accomplishes this, we turn to the scene in which Curufin (a son of Fëanor) helps Eöl find his wife and son. Curufin provides very specific directions (“it is not two days since they passed over the Arossiach, and thence rode swiftly westward” [*The Silmarillion* 130]), despite the fact that he has never liked Eöl and knows of his crime (“those who steal the daughters of the Noldor and wed them without gift or leave do not gain kinship with their kin” [130]). It seems, even in elven society, abuse by the powerful is often perpetuated by people who choose not to intervene and instead abide by the

customs that treat women as objects to be traded with “gifts.” Unfortunately, these stories have become only too common in the age of #MeToo as powerful men like Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein belatedly face justice after years of hiding behind the shield of wealth and privilege. These are the wolves, according to Whedon and Tolkien, that we should fear most: not the ones in the woods, but those already settled in bed and grinning behind big teeth.

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