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## "Saint Galadriel?: J.R.R. Tolkien as the Hagiographer of Middle-earth"

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**Abstract:** Galadriel is perceived in different, sometimes contradictory ways both within the world of Middle-earth and the world of Tolkien scholarship. In some ways, she is a liminal figure, on the threshold between Middle-earth and Valinor, and between secular and sacred influences from the primary world Tolkien actually lived in. One neglected context that may help readers to understand Tolkien's characterization of Galadriel is the medieval cult of the saints.

The cult of the saints provides specific practices and beliefs that shaped how Tolkien consciously characterized Galadriel as saint-like, especially in terms of her beauty, holiness, and power. Her saintliness has Marian qualities, in that female saints were expected to be like the Virgin Mary, but Galadriel is distinctly different from the Virgin Mary in key ways. So she may not necessarily be a figure of "our Lady" in Middle-earth – at least, not in terms of Tolkien's conscious, authorial intention.

However, in his letters, Tolkien acknowledges the possibility of the formation of an *unconscious* connection between Galadriel and Mary. The late shift in Tolkien's thinking between characterizing Galadriel as a saint, who "fell" at the kinslaying of the Teleri at Alqualondë because of her "pride" but was redeemed through her penitence and resistance to the temptation of the Ring, to one who is "unstained" and "committed no evil deeds" (Letter 353 To Lord Halsbury) may have been motivated by the perceptions of influential readers of *The Lord of the Rings*, like Tolkien's proofreader, Father Robert Murray, S.J.. As this study suggests, Tolkien is not only the sub-creator of Middle-earth, but also the hagiographer of Middle-earth: the man who finally idealizes the Marian qualities of Galadriel in order to inspire us all.

### **Saint Galadriel?: J.R.R. Tolkien as Hagiographer of Middle-earth**

In the eighth chapter in the first book of *The Lord of the Rings*, "Farewell to Lórien," the Lady Galadriel gives gifts to the nine members of the Company who are about to re-embark upon their perilous journey to attempt to destroy the Ring. The gifts Galadriel gives are practical (cloaks, belts, rope), precious and symbolic (bejeweled cloak clasps and the elf-stone for Aragorn, a gold belt for Boromir, and silver belts for Merry and Pippin), and useful for battle (a sword sheath for Aragorn and a bow, quiver, and arrows for Legolas). Special gifts are given to Frodo, the Ringbearer (a crystal phial of light), and Sam (a mallorn seed and earth from Lorien), which will prove highly important to the story later on.<sup>1</sup> At first, it

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<sup>1</sup> T.A. Shippey, in *The Road to Middle-earth*, observes that "the gifts of Galadriel correspond to stories preserved in English and Scandinavian family traditions such as that of "The

appears that Galadriel has no gift to give to the dwarf, Gimli. But she asks him what he desires that she could give, and he says it is enough to have seen the Lady. When she presses him a second time, Gimli replies:

‘... unless it be permitted to ask, to name a single strand of your hair, which surpasses the gold of the earth as the stars surpass the gems of the mine. I do not ask for such a gift. But you asked me to name my desire.’

The Elves stirred and murmured with astonishment, and Celeborn gazed at the Dwarf in wonder, but the Lady smiled. ‘It is said that the skill of the Dwarves is in their hands rather than their tongues,’ she said, ‘yet that is not true of Gimli. For none have ever made to me a request so bold and yet so courteous. And how shall I refuse, since I commanded him to speak? But tell me, what would you do with such a gift?’

‘Treasure it, Lady,’ he answered, ‘in memory of your words to me at our first meeting. And if ever I return to the smithies of my home, it shall be set in imperishable crystal to be an heirloom of my house, and a pledge of goodwill between the Mountain and the Wood until the end of days.’

Then the Lady unbraided one of her long tresses, and cut off three golden hairs, and laid them in Gimli’s hand.<sup>2</sup>

This moment is highly significant within the mythology of Middle-earth. Although Gimli does not know it, another person asked Galadriel for a strand of her hair, not once, but three times: her uncle, Fëanor, the maker of the Silmarils.

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Luck of Edehall” or the one recorded in Sigrid Undset’s novel, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, part 2, ch. 6” (106). On the importance of gift-giving in medieval, secular stories that Tolkien knew, consider literary criticism on *Beowulf*, and in medieval, sacred stories, consider Davide Marco Zori, “Gift Exchange with Saints in Medieval Icelandic Miracle Stories, *Viator* 47:1 (2016): 85-105. Zori observes, “Norms of reciprocal gift giving offered a framework for seeking saintly assistance that involved predictable stages, including vows, counter-pledges, and pledge-confirmations, followed by gifts and counter-gifts” (abstract). It is possible to see Frodo’s decision to offer the ring to Galadriel in light of this tradition. Yet equity and reciprocity in gift-giving is not as pervasive in medieval hagiography as Zori implies. Saint Nicolas is the medieval saint perhaps most famous for his generous gift-giving to those in need without expectation of repayment or return. It seems that Tolkien stages the gift-giving of Galadriel as blessings for the Company in light of this later kind of saintly generosity.

<sup>2</sup> Tolkien, *LOTR*, 375-76.

But she refused him each time.<sup>3</sup> Tolkien's use of Fëanor's request and Galadriel's refusal can partly be understood in terms of medieval courtly love romances, in which a lock of a lady's hair may be given to a knight, lover, or suitor as a sign of the lady's favor.<sup>4</sup> Fëanor's request has incestuous undertones (as Galadriel is his niece), and Galadriel's refusal indicates her perception of Fëanor's illicit desire and her rejection of it.<sup>5</sup> The astonishment of Galadriel's husband, Celeborn, and the Elves at this moment of farewell gift-giving in Lorien suggests that they perceive Gimli's request as presumption, a perception perhaps underlain by their recollection of the legend of Fëanor's request and Galadriel's response many years before in another age of Arda.

But Gimli is careful to clarify that his admiration of Galadriel's beauty is neither sexual nor selfish in nature, but rather reverent. Unlike Fëanor, he has no dark intentions. Instead, Gimli intends to take Galadriel's hair and encase it in "imperishable crystal," making a kind of reliquary out of it that may be passed down to future generations of his family as an "heirloom." This explanation demonstrates that Gimli does indeed love Galadriel, not romantically, but devotedly, as a pilgrim might love a patron saint.

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<sup>3</sup> "For Fëanor beheld the hair of Galadriel with wonder and delight. He begged three times for a tress, but Galadriel would not give him even one hair. These two kinsfolk, the greatest of the Eldar of Valinor, were unfriends forever." Quoted from J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Shibboleth of Fëanor," in *The History of Middle-earth*, Vol. XII: *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (HarperCollins Publishers, 2000, repr. 2002), 337. Note that Tolkien wrote "The Shibboleth of Fëanor" in 1968, after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is possible that Tolkien himself had not imagined it before he wrote the scene in which Gimli makes his plea. Yet within Tolkien's revisionary imagination, he establishes a chronology in Arda, which allows readers to re-read this scene in light of narrative contexts Tolkien later provided.

<sup>4</sup> The eighteenth-century, English writer and poet Alexander Pope mocks this tradition in his satiric poem, "The Rape of the Lock." Lilian Darvell sees Pope's poem, as well as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's nineteenth-century poem, "Lady Lilith" and the legend of Bernice II, Queen of Egypt, who sacrificed some of her hair as a votive offering to the gods, as contexts for interpreting Tolkien's representation of Galadriel's hair. See "'Beautiful and Terrible': The Significance of Galadriel's Hair in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Unfinished Tales*," *Mythlore* 56 (Winter 2015), 22-24.

<sup>5</sup> The incest motif recurs multiple times in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. It is explicit in the relationship between the siblings Túrin Turambar and Nienel, which is depicted in detail in *The Silmarillion* and *The Children of Hurin*. Tolkien was familiar with classical literature dealing with this theme, including the plays of Sophocles, *Oedipus*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus Rex*, and medieval romances featuring it, including stories of King Arthur and Kullervo. Witting and unwitting incest is consistently tied to tragedy in Tolkien's writing and his sources. However, in the Constance legend, which was re-told by both Gower and Chaucer (and was thus very familiar to Tolkien), redemption is made possible after Constance's father confesses and repents, and she forgives him.

Indeed, there is much to suggest in this particular passage, as well as elsewhere in *The Lord of the Rings*, that J.R.R. Tolkien is drawing on medieval saints' lives to characterize Galadriel, especially in terms of her beauty, holiness, and power in Middle-earth. In a sense, Tolkien is acting as her hagiographer, revealing signs of her sanctity that correspond to a rich, medieval cultural tradition. Considering Galadriel in light of this tradition fosters a deeper understanding of her character in Tolkien's stories as well as of Tolkien himself.

### **Saint Galadriel?: Some Initial Considerations**

Within Middle-earth, Galadriel is perceived differently by different people. She is most commonly called "Lady Galadriel," a title that implies her nobility and the respect of Elves and Men. Yet she is also suspected by some Men and Dwarves of possessing magical powers that are threatening to them. Boromir of Gondor is hesitant to enter her wood, which he deems a "perilous land" from which "none escape unscathed";<sup>6</sup> Eomer initially classes her with "net-weavers and sorcerers,"<sup>7</sup> offending Gimli when they first meet; and Wormtongue calls her "the Sorceress of the Golden Wood,"<sup>8</sup> an unfriendly epithet at best.

Tolkien is careful to show that the morally good characters in his story (e.g., Gandalf, Aragorn, Frodo) all correctly perceive Galadriel's beauty, goodness, and power while morally evil characters do not (Wormtongue). But Tolkien also depicts a group of characters in the middle of this spectrum. Such Men as Boromir and Eomer, who are courageous and ethical for the most part, are suspicious of Galadriel, in part because they do not know her or understand the nature of her power. In Gimli's case, Tolkien depicts a Dwarf, from a race traditionally at odds with Elves, who is essentially converted from negative suspicion of Galadriel to genuine adoration of her.<sup>9</sup> Gimli goes on in the story as a

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<sup>6</sup> Tolkien, *LOTR*, 338.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.

<sup>9</sup> There has been some discussion in scholarship and the popular press suggesting that Tolkien represented dwarves as types of the Jews in his legendarium. Tolkien himself acknowledged that the language of the dwarves, Khuzdul, is constructed from Semitic languages, and he saw parallels between dwarves and Jews in that both peoples were exiles from their own lands, wanderers in the world, and learners of languages in other countries than their own (Tolkien, "176 From a letter to Naomi Mitchison (8 December 1955)," 228-29). Given these

staunch defender of the Lady, a kind of proselyte who seeks to convert Eomer in particular to his new-found understanding.

Diverse perceptions of Galadriel occur not only within Middle-earth, but outside of it in scholarship on Tolkien and his legendarium. In some ways, she is a liminal figure, on the threshold between Middle-earth and Valinor, and between secular and sacred influences from the primary world Tolkien actually lived in and drew upon as well. Galadriel has been compared to a fallen angel (Shippey), a Valkyrie (Donovan), Morgan le Fey (Carter), and various Celtic goddesses as well as H. Rider Haggard's She / Ayesha (Rateliff, Burns).<sup>10</sup> At the same time,

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connections, Gimli's conversion to the love of Galadriel might represent, in some sense, a Jewish conversion to Christianity.

Some scholars see the connection that Tolkien drew between dwarves and Jews as a form of racism in the legendarium, and if considering the antisemitism prevalent in medieval hagiography as a context, readers of this article might be tempted to do the same. However, it is important to point out that Tolkien was explicit in his rejection of racism against the Jewish people in the real world. In a letter to a German publisher that wished to ascertain whether Tolkien was "Aryan" before publishing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien wrote with barely suppressed fury, "But if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of *Jewish* origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have *no* ancestors of that gifted people ... I cannot, however, forbear to comment that if impertinent and irrelevant inquiries of this sort are to become the rule in matters of literature, then the time is not far distant when a German name will no longer be a source of pride" (Tolkien, "30 To Rütten & Loening Verlag (25 July 1938)," 37-38). Tolkien also wrote to his own publisher, Stanley Unwin, "I do not regard the (probable) absence of all Jewish blood as necessarily honourable; and I have many Jewish friends," and, he added, he regarded Nazism as a "wholly pernicious and unscientific race-doctrine" (Tolkien, "29 From a letter to Stanley Unwin (25 July 1938)," 37). He (on the home front) and his sons (abroad) fought for England and against racist, Aryan, and Nazi ideologies in World War II.

For discussion in the popular press, see Matt Lebovic, "Are Tolkien's Dwarves an Allegory for the Jews?" *The Times of Israel* (11 December 2013). Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/are-tolkiens-dwarves-an-allegory-for-the-jews/>. For peer-reviewed discussion, see Rebecca Brackmann, "'Dwarves are not heroes': Antisemitism and the Dwarves in J.R.R. Tolkien's Writing," *Mythlore* 28:3, art. 7 (Spring / Summer 2010), 85-106. Available at <https://dc.swosu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1172&context=mythlore>.

<sup>10</sup> See, respectively, T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, 271-72; Leslie Donovan, "The Valkyrie Reflex in *The Lord of the Rings*: Galadriel, Shelob, Éowyn, and Arwen," in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance, Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture 3 (London and New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2003), 106-132, repr. as chap. 11 in *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, eds. Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie Donovan (Altadena, Calif.: Mythopoeic Press, 2015); Susan Carter, "Galadriel and Morgan le Fey: Tolkien's Redemption of the Lady of the Lacuna," *Mythlore* 25:3/4 (Spring / Summer 2007), 71-89, John Rateliff, "She and Tolkien," *Mythlore* 8:2 (Summer 1981), 6-8, and Marjorie Burns, *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 106-27. Burns argues for Shelob as a "shadow self" for Galadriel, seeing the negative characteristics of Celtic goddesses and She / Ayesha as going to the spider while the positive ones go to Lady of

she has been compared to the Pearl-Maiden, Matilda, and Beatrice (Downey, Bowers) as well as the Virgin Mary (Maher).<sup>11</sup> Summing up a wide range of scholarship, Kristine Larsen has recently remarked that Galadriel can be seen variously as “a witch, a bitch, a heroine, or a demi-goddess.”<sup>12</sup> In her edition of Tolkien’s *Lay of Aotrou and Itroun*, Verlyn Flieger observes that Tolkien apparently borrowed two specific motifs associated with the Corrigan, a phial and a fountain, for use in his depiction of Galadriel.<sup>13</sup> Of these diverse interpretations, some readers lean toward interpreting Galadriel as the Mary of Middle-earth, in part because Tolkien gave some credence to this possibility in his letters – or, rather, such credence was leant in his readers’ letters to him, to which Tolkien replied without trying to dissuade his correspondents of the parallel.<sup>14</sup> Yet as Romauld Lakowski has noted, Tolkien also conceived of Galadriel as a “penitent,” someone who “fell” and “repented,” and only very late in his life did Tolkien re-write Galadriel’s story so as to exonerate her of any direct

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Lothlórien. On the strengths and weaknesses of her approach, see Dimitra Fimi’s review of the book in *Tolkien Studies* 3 (2006), 187-90.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Downey, “Cordial Dislike: Reinventing the Celestial Ladies of *Pearl* and *Purgatorio* in Tolkien’s Galadriel,” *Mythlore* 29:3/4 (Spring / Summer 2011), 101-17; John Bowers, “Teaching *Pearl* when Teaching Tolkien,” *Approaches to Teaching the Middle English Pearl*, ed. Jane Beal and Mark Bradshaw Busbee (New York, NY: MLA, 2018), 156-63, esp.161.; and Michael W. Maher, “‘A Land without Stain’: Medieval Images of Mary and their Use in the Characterization of Galadriel,” in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance (London and New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2003), 225-36.

<sup>12</sup> Kristine Larsen, “Guinevere, Grímhild, and the Corrigan: Witches and Bitches in Tolkien’s Medieval Narrative Verse,” *Journal of Tolkien Research* 4:2, Art. 8 (2017), 1, 12. Beginning in the 1970s, but particularly in the 1990s, *Mythlore* published a series of articles on Galadriel as “archetype” of the Great Mother or Wise Woman and as a “heroine” in her own right, in which ideas of the hero’s journey, popularized by Joseph Campbell, were considered and critiqued in relation to Galadriel (as well as Arwen and Éowyn) from Jungian and feminist perspectives. Galadriel has also been compared to Eve, Lilith, Titania, and the figure of the Fairy Queen found in medieval romance and in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, an English Renaissance epic poem, allegory, and Arthurian romance. Galadriel has also been compared to other female characters from Tolkien’s legendarium, especially Varda, Melian, Lúthien, and Goldberry. She is not infrequently contrasted with Shelob. See References.

<sup>13</sup> Verlyn Flieger, “Introduction,” J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun*, ed. Verlyn Flieger (London: HarperCollins, 2016), xvi. These connections had been previously made by Burns in *Perilous Realms* (2005).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Letters 142 and 320 in J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin; Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

responsibility for the kinslaying of the Noldor in Valinor in the First Age of Arda.<sup>15</sup>

None of these comparisons are improbable, including the supposition of the influence of Norse mythology on Tolkien's characterization of Galadriel. Tolkien knew Icelandic sagas well, having delved deeply into them as a founding member of the *Kolbítar* (the Coalbiters), with whom Tolkien read the sagas in their original languages.<sup>16</sup> In his *Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, Tolkien re-tells part of the Völsunga saga, which includes the character Brynhild (Anglicized from Brynhildr), who was a Valkyrie.<sup>17</sup> The Valkyrie (from Old Norse *valkyra*, meaning "chooser of the slain") were warrior-maidens with supernatural powers who served Odin and were sent by him to choose those slain in battle who were deemed worthy of Valhalla.<sup>18</sup> They could guard and protect warriors they favored; they also could cause the death of warriors who lost their favor. Certainly, Tolkien drew on Brynhildr in his characterization of Éowyn in *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>19</sup> His depiction of Galadriel in his epic, however, is not as clearly influenced by the warring aspect of the Valkyrie.<sup>20</sup> Only by looking further back in *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth* does it become clear that Galadriel was herself war-like (although she does not "choose the slain" per se).

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel is more Marian than Valkyrie-like, though this parallel, too, can be over-emphasized. Clearly Galadriel is *not* like

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<sup>15</sup> Romauld Lakowski, "The Fall and Repentance of Galadriel," *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, eds. Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie Donovan (Altadena, Calif.: Mythopoeic Press, 2015), chap. 7. This analysis is summarized by Jason Fisher in the entry on "Galadriel" in *The J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, ed. Michael Drouot (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 227-228.

<sup>16</sup> See Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977, repr. 1978, 1987), p.125-27.

<sup>17</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: Mariner Books / Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> "Valkyrie," *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Accessed 24 July 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Valkyrie-Norse-mythology>.

<sup>19</sup> See Donovan, "The Valkyrie Reflex," and Jane Beal, "Tolkien, Eucatastrophe, and the Re-Creation of Medieval Legend," *Journal of Tolkien Research* 4:1, Art. 8 (2017), 1-18, esp. 10-12.

<sup>20</sup> Donovan does point out that Tolkien's descriptions of Galadriel as "fair," "white," and "shining" parallel descriptions of Valkyrie as do Galadriel's associations with light and gold. It is worth noting that these descriptors are commonly associated with the Virgin Mary and Christian saints.



Tolkien's Catholic conception of the Virgin Mary in several ways: she is not conceived immaculately; she is not virginal; she is not the mother of God (or a Christ-figure). Instead, she is married to Celeborn and her conception of her daughter, Celebrían, apparently came about the usual way.<sup>21</sup> She is wise but flawed, having made mistakes in an earlier age of the world. Though she is a mother, she is not the mother of a Christ-figure. Her daughter is mainly notable in Tolkien's legendarium as the mother of Arwen, who marries Aragorn (who can be considered a figure of the Christ the King). Galadriel's color symbolism is not blue and white, but rather white and gold.<sup>22</sup>

Yet Galadriel *is* Marian in her virtue, humility, beauty, intercessory role, illumination, and ability to reveal the secrets of human hearts as well as the future.<sup>23</sup> These Marian qualities do not necessarily make her a figure for Mary in Middle-earth, but perhaps rather the figure of a saint or "holy one." For female saints in Christian tradition were often compared to Mary. Bowers has clearly considered this idea when he compares Galadriel to the Pearl-Maiden, whom he calls the Pearl-Queen, of the Middle English dream vision, *Pearl*. The maiden of *Pearl* has Marian qualities, too, but she is careful to distinguish herself from the Queen of Heaven; she is a holy bride of Christ (*sponsa Christi*), but not, of course, the Virgin Mary herself.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Tolkien is generally reticent about sexuality in Arda, but if Galadriel's conception had been on the order of the miracle of Christ's conception, and Mary's subsequent virgin birth, presumably he would have mentioned it.

<sup>22</sup> Of Celeborn and Galadriel in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien writes, "They were clad wholly in *white* and the hair of the lady was a deep *gold*" (345, italics added). Traditionally, in Christian iconography of the saints, white stands for purity or innocence and gold for sanctity or holiness.

<sup>23</sup> On these characteristics of the Virgin Mary, as these were celebrated in the Middle Ages, see Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in Medieval England* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2011) and Heiko Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, 1983), esp. chap. 9 "Mariology." Tolkien was familiar with the Gospel stories of Mary, her reception in the cult of the saints in the Middle Ages, and all orthodox Catholic teaching about her. He refers to Mary multiple times in his *Letters*, meditating at length at one point on her purity as the *only* "unfallen" human being and on her Assumption into Heaven (authorial footnote 78).

<sup>24</sup> See *Pearl*, section VIII, lines 433-444, in which the Pearl-Maiden answers the Dreamer's question about whether she is the Queen of Heaven. She differentiates between herself and Mary, saying, "But usurpers, sir, here have no place. / That empress' realm doth heaven embrace, / And earth and hell she holds in fee, / From their heritage yet will none displace, / For she is the Queen of Courtesy" (trans. Tolkien).

Romauld Lakowski's analysis is particularly relevant for drawing comparisons between Galadriel and Christian saints and between Tolkien and Catholic hagiographers.<sup>25</sup> For Christian saints may fall and repent, and they may later be recognized by believers for their beauty, holiness, and intercessory power. Gandalf, Aragorn, and Frodo recognize these qualities in Galadriel, and Gimli comes to see them in her. It's also worth noting here, furthermore, that medieval male hagiographers had a tendency to idealize the female saints whom they wrote about, especially as the genre of the saint's life developed and reached its apotheosis in Jacobus da Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* (Golden Legend). In like manner, Tolkien's revisions of Galadriel's story, composed late in his life, tend to absolve her of fault and idealize her. The vision that the morally good characters of Middle-earth have of Galadriel is thus fully adopted in the end by her hagiographer, Tolkien.

Tolkien characterizes Galadriel by drawing on several motifs often associated with female saints in medieval Christian hagiography. Among these are her long, lustrous hair; her worthiness of veneration; and her perceived ability to intercede for and provide help to the members of the Fellowship when they are in need. Each of these in turn is worthy of consideration.

### **The Beauty of Saints: The Long, Lustrous Hair of Galadriel**

Long, lustrous hair is characteristic of many beautiful noblewomen, romance heroines, and Faërie queens in medieval literature.<sup>26</sup> Though less commonly known, the fact that long hair is also characteristic of saintly women whose holy lives and often miraculous deeds are described in medieval Christian hagiography. Among saintly women notable for long hair, the best known is Mary

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<sup>25</sup> Lakowski, "The Fall and Repentance of Galadriel." See full citation in footnote 15 (above).

<sup>26</sup> In this section, the primary focus is on one aspect of Galadriel's beauty – her long, shining hair – in relation to the iconography of medieval female saints. For a broader discussion of Tolkien's conception of beauty, see Lisa Coutras, *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendour, and Transcendence in Middle-earth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Drawing on the work of theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, Coutras considers how the ideal of beauty in Tolkien's work encompasses awe, dread, joy, pity, power, and sacrifice. It is worth noting here that Coutras sees in Tolkien's characterization of Galadriel a tension between Valkyrie-like self-will and Marian self-sacrifice.

Magdalene. As Richard Stracke observes, “The saint herself is usually depicted as young and beautiful, with long, blond hair that flows loosely over her shoulders.”<sup>27</sup> Mary Magdalene is depicted most often with a jar of alabaster, and several medieval images of her, as well as later ones, show her not only with very long hair, but with hair so long that it covers her body from head to toe.<sup>28</sup> This iconography also occurs in images of St. Mary of Egypt and stories of St. Agnes of Rome.

In his writings, Tolkien emphasizes Galadriel’s long, lustrous hair: it is her iconographic marker in several of his texts, including *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and *The History of Middle-earth*. In a letter to Mrs. Catharine Findlay, he remarks on the connection between Galadriel’s name and her hair:

Galadriel, like all the other names of elvish persons in *The Lord of the Rings*, is an invention of my own. It is in Sindarin form and means “Maiden crowned with gleaming hair.” It is a secondary name given to her in her youth in the far past because she had long hair which glistened like gold but was also shot with silver. She was then of Amazon disposition and bound up her hair as a crown when taking part in athletic feats.<sup>29</sup>

Here Tolkien notes that the name *Galadriel* is “secondary.” Readers of Tolkien’s larger legendarium know that she was also called Artanis (“Noble Woman” by her father), Nerwen (“Man-Maiden” by her mother), and Alataríriel (“Maiden Crowned with Radiant Garland” by Celeborn) in earlier ages of Arda, but the members of the Company (with the exceptions of Aragorn and Gandalf) in *The Lord of the Rings* do not: they know her primarily as Galadriel. Yet *Galadriel* is a “secondary” name, or perhaps a title, which ties Galadriel’s identity to her hair. It emphasizes the long, lustrous hair that crowns the woman who bears the name.

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Stracke, “Saint Mary Magdalene: The Iconography,” <https://www.christianiconography.info/magdalene.html>. Accessed 26 July 2019.

<sup>28</sup> The story of how a woman came to anoint Jesus from an alabaster jar while he was at the home of Simon the Leper is told in Matthew 26:6-13. After anointing the feet of Jesus, and washing them with her tears, the woman dries them with her hair; Jesus says this is done to prepare his body for burial. The woman is unnamed in the gospel but came to be associated with Mary Magdalene is later Christian tradition, hence the consistent tendency to depict Mary Magdalene with long, beautiful hair in her iconography. Giotto painted her in his fresco of Zosimus and the Magdalene as *only* clothed in her long hair (Stracke).

<sup>29</sup> Tolkien, “348 From a letter to Mrs. Catherine Findlay (6 March 1973),” *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey with Christopher Tolkien, 428.

By using this name in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien suggests how the Company sees her and identifies her.

Tolkien's use of the word "crowned" in his definition of Galadriel's name is important. Galadriel is *crowned* by her hair, and a crown is a symbol not only of royalty and nobility (and sometimes marriage), but also of sanctity. To give some context for this, it is worth observing that there are five different types of crowns named in the New Testament:

- the imperishable or incorruptible crown (1 Cor. 9:24-45)
- the crown of rejoicing (1 Thess. 2:19)
- the crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:18)
- the crown of glory (1 Peter 5:1-4)
- and the crown of life (James 1:12 and Rev. 2:10)

These crowns are promised or given to saints, the faithful followers of Jesus. Similarly, in the Old Testament of the Bible, a "crown of beauty" (Isaiah 61:3) is bestowed on those who grieve in Zion along with the oil of joy and a garment of praise. Indeed, it is not unusual in icons of saints to depict them with crowns and/or golden halos. The Coronation of the Virgin is a specific example of the image of a crowned saint, indeed, a standard fixture in Catholic iconography, represented in medieval books of hours, early printed incunabula like the *Biblia pauperum*, and famous Renaissance paintings by Botticelli and Fra Angelico, among many other representations.<sup>30</sup> That Galadriel is specifically *crowned* by her gold and silver hair is significant and can be interpreted in the light of what we know about the iconography of Christian, female saints.

The fact that Tolkien speaks of Galadriel's "Amazon disposition" – a reference to classical mythology – indicates that he uses more than one context to characterize Galadriel. But being a female athlete or warrior does not preclude comparing Galadriel to female saints. Certainly St. Joan of Arc is a famous warrior-maid.

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<sup>30</sup> Called the Fifth Glorious Mystery, the Coronation of the Virgin Mary as the Queen of Heaven is also memorialized in the Rosary. To see a wide variety of medieval and Renaissance paintings, sculptures, and images in books of hours of the Coronation, enter "Coronation of the Virgin" in Google and select the images tab. On the Coronation of the Virgin in a fifteenth-century, Dutch incunabulum, see Jane Beal, "*Mens tua hortus meus est: Christ and the Canticle Bride in the Biblia Pauperum,*" *Integrité* 14 (Fall 2015), 3-19.

The beautiful hair, and overall beauty, of female saints as an outward sign of their inward virtue was emphasized by their medieval male hagiographers. This beauty impacted those who saw the saints and heard them with a desire for divine things. As Claire Waters remarks about female virgin martyr saints in particular:

The extraordinary emphasis on beauty in the tales of the virgin martyrs has often drawn comment. It is sometimes seen as part of a prurient side to the tales, which are, it is said, voyeuristic stories of the sexual torture and violent death of beautiful young women. While it would perhaps be naïve to dismiss the role this kind of attraction played in the stories' popularity, to regard physical beauty primarily in this light is to miss the point of the lives and ignore the way beauty functions in the narrative. The virgin martyr's beauty is in fact fundamental to her mission, and yet paradoxically so. It stands in complex relation to the effectiveness of her speech, both attracting and distracting her listeners. While many of the virgin martyrs deliberately confront their future tormentors, numerous others are harassed merely because a man is attracted by their beauty. However the meeting comes about, the tormentor is often struck with the virgin's beauty, even if he is not her suitor, and it is sometimes implied or stated that this beauty is *one of his reasons for listening to her*.<sup>31</sup>

This explanation for the emphasis on the beauty of female saints, recorded by their medieval hagiographers, relates to Tolkien's depiction of Galadriel. Her enchanting beauty makes her the special focus of attention by the members of the Company, who listen carefully to her words. This is certainly true of Gimli, who is portrayed as being prejudiced against Elves, but who is converted to a special love for Galadriel, who becomes to him a kind of patron-saint.

### **The Holiness of Saints: Gimli's Veneration of Galadriel**

The interaction between Gimli and Galadriel when the Company leaves Lothlórien, which was briefly considered at the beginning of this essay, deserves closer attention. The episode highlights Galadriel's saintliness, or holiness, and Gimli's response: veneration of Galadriel, which is demonstrated by his humble request and adoration of the Lady. More particularly, Gimli's stated intention – to enclose the three strands of Galadriel's gold hair in a case of crystal – suggests

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<sup>31</sup> Claire Waters, *Angels and Early Creatures: Preaching, Performance, and Gender in the Later Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 104. In several instances, female saints are recorded as cutting off their hair to turn aside the sexual interest or advances of men.

that he plans to make a reliquary.<sup>32</sup> The role of reliquaries in the medieval cult of the saints provides the context from Tolkien's study of medieval literature and culture, as well as his Catholic faith, necessary to interpret this scene and its immediate aftermath.

Peter Brown, in his seminal work *The Cult of the Saints*, makes many valuable observations about the roles of saints in early Christendom, roles which persisted through the Middle Ages and certainly shaped Tolkien's practice of his Catholic faith as well as his depiction of Galadriel's saint-like qualities. Brown observes that saints provided people with a strong sense of access to power and protection, especially when they lived under oppressive governments, in socially and economically unstable times, and when they were threatened by death and disease in their environments.<sup>33</sup> The opportunity to reach out to a saint, and the belief that saints could obtain divine intervention in times of need, gave people hope.

Tolkien's Galadriel appears in *The Lord of the Rings* in this role: a saint's role. Galadriel is a powerful, protective character, one who aids the Company, collectively and individually. She intervenes in a time when Sauron's rule is oppressing Middle-earth and the societies of Men have become unstable due to increasing battles and the threat of war. She gives hope when those in the Company fear death, especially because they have just lost their guide, Gandalf, and they are going either to Mordor, in a nearly hopeless quest to destroy the Ring, or to Gondor, in a nearly equally hopeless quest to fight off the armies of Mordor.

It is not only Galadriel's overall role that marks her as saint-like in *The Lord of the Rings*, but also the specific way in which Gimli venerates her. His request for three strands of her golden hair, and his plan to enclose them in crystal

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<sup>32</sup> Reliquaries specifically containing hair do survive from the Middle Ages to this day. One reliquary purports to hold the hair of St. Clare, shorn by St. Francis on the night when she became a nun. To see an image of the reliquary of the hair of St. Clare, visit <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/theanchors/2011/08/11/dear-st-clare/> (accessed 12 August 2020).

<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed overview, see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Enlarged Edition, Haskell Lectures on the History of Religions, New Series, No. 2 (Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press, 1981, repr. 2014). On the idea of the saints' power as an influence on Tolkien's legendarium, see Matthew Dickerson, *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in The Lord of the Rings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2003), a book later revised and published as *A Hobbit Journey* (2012), cited below.

to be an heirloom for future generations of his family, looks remarkably like a medieval Catholic praying (making a request) to his patron saint and taking a relic (something that remains) of his saint with the intention of creating a reliquary to honor that saint. Indeed, the practice of making reliquaries was a very widespread and essential part of the medieval cult of the saints.<sup>34</sup>

When someone who was recognized (or in the process of being recognized) as a saint died, the saint's remains, or relics, were considered holy. Thus the fragmented bones and body parts of the saint, and even those things simply associated with the saint – things the saint had used or touched – were considered holy.<sup>35</sup> Sometimes a saint's whole body was buried in, under, or near a church altar to be venerated, but other times, the holy relics of a saint were collected in multiple different types of *reliquaries*: containers for relics. Throughout the early and high Middle Ages, a common type of reliquary was a small or mid-sized casket, often highly decorated with silver, gold, and jewels, containing the relic. Yet reliquaries could have many shapes and be of many sizes. As Seeta Chaganti sets forth:

Reliquaries ranged enormously in shape and nature, from caskets and portable disks, objects shaped like the body parts held up in ceremonial processions, to large and elaborate altarpieces decorated with busts containing relics, to architecturally inspired artifacts constructed of metalwork and windows.<sup>36</sup>

Especially toward in the later Middle Ages, reliquaries were designed with “windows” made of crystal that allowed people to look into the reliquary and see the relic of the saint, which they were venerating in hopes of obtaining the

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<sup>34</sup> For an introduction to medieval reliquary-making practice, see Herbert Thurston, “Reliquaries,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, N.Y.: Robert Appleton Company, 1911). Also available online at <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12762a.htm> (accessed 10 August 2020). See also Caroline Walker Bynum and Paula Gerson, “Body-Part Reliquaries and Body Parts in the Middle Ages,” *Gesta* 36:1 (1997): 3-7.

<sup>35</sup> Very early relics include the Veronica, a veil that belonged to Saint Veronica, which legend says she used to wipe sweat from the face of Jesus as he walked the Cross to Calvary. The sweat then formed the image of the face of Jesus on the cloth. “Veronica” combines two words, “vere” and “eikon,” which together mean “true image.” In Christian tradition, the idea that something that touched someone “holy” has holiness itself goes back to a reference in the New Testament. When touched by the sick, handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched the Apostle Paul brought healing. See Acts 19:12.

<sup>36</sup> Seeta Chaganti, *The Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary: Enshrinement, Inscription, Performance* (New York and London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 1.

favorable intervention of the saint with God to help to meet their needs. Chaganti points out, "... one of the forms of reliquaries in use during the fourteenth century was the reliquary monstrance, incorporating a crystal component – sometimes columnar – that allowed the relic to be seen within the reliquary."<sup>37</sup> The existence of medieval reliquaries partially made of crystal, having "crystal" windows, allowed people a closer sense of connection to the saint's power through their visual perception. As Michael Camille has argued, "conceptions of the sacred were affected by the 'earthly luminosity' and 'the transforming power of transparency'"<sup>38</sup> that reliquaries of crystal suggested to their viewers. The saint, though absent, was present to aid people in a powerful way. The saint, though seemingly far away in heaven, was yet living and able to intercede and intervene.

Gimli's intention to make a reliquary of crystal for Galadriel's hair suggests a whole chain of inter-connected devotional practices common in medieval Catholicism and Tolkien's twentieth-century faith. Gimli's intention bespeaks the possibility that he and the next generations of his family will regard this "heirloom" as betokening Galadriel's presence, even in her absence; her power, even when she is far off; and perhaps even her willingness to intercede and intervene, especially when there is need. In this context, it is striking that Tolkien describes Galadriel herself, at the time when the Company finally departs Lothlórien in their boats on the Great River after receiving their gifts:

Soon the white form of the lady was small and distant. She shone like a window glass upon a far hill in the western sun, or as a remote lake seen from a mountain: a crystal fallen in the lap of the land ... But now she sang in the ancient tongue of the Elves beyond the Sea ...<sup>39</sup>

Already Galadriel is becoming distant, like a powerful saint in the spiritual realm, and Tolkien is describing her like the reliquary Gimli intends to make for her hair in her honor: shining "like a window of glass," like "a crystal." The comparison invites readers to understand that Galadriel's "earthly luminosity" reveals her connection to divine power. Indeed, the song Tolkien gives Galadriel in this

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<sup>37</sup> Chaganti, *Medieval Poetics of the Reliquary*, 135.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 135. Quoted phrases within the quotation from Camille. See Michael Camille, "Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing," in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 197-223.

<sup>39</sup> Tolkien, *LOTR*, 376.



moment, rendered first in Elvish and then translated into the “Common Tongue,” is a hymn to “the Kindler, Varda, the Queen of the Stars.”<sup>40</sup> Of all the Valar she could call upon, Galadriel sings directly to Varda, more frequently called “Elbereth” by the Elves of Middle-earth, whom she calls in her hymn by the honorific title, “Queen of the Stars.”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps Galadriel is already interceding for the protection of the Company as they go forth.

At this parting, all the members of the Company have tears in their eyes, but Gimli weeps openly. He says he will call nothing fair, “unless it be her gift,” and he puts his hand on his breast. Tears, hand over heart, and promises to value the gifts of the saints over worldly things: these are the gestures of “affective piety,” the emotional form of devotion practiced by many late-medieval Catholics in response to the love of God, Mary, and the saints.<sup>42</sup> In the aftermath of his encounter with Galadriel, Gimli is responding the way a devoted medieval Christian would after having his prayer answered.

To encourage Gimli, his friend Legolas promises him that “the least reward that you shall have is that the memory of Lothlórien shall remain ever clear and unstained in your heart, and shall neither fade nor grow stale.”<sup>43</sup> In so saying, Legolas suggests that Gimli will deeply internalize, *in his heart*, the *memory* of all that has happened to him in Lothlórien. This resonates with another aspect of late medieval affective piety.

For affective piety was not simply the practice of emotive responses to the sense of being blessed by the presence or power of the divine, but more particularly a practice of meditation on and memorialization of the meaning of the comparatively rare moments of holy intervention in the lives of believers. The

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<sup>40</sup> Tolkien, *LOTR*, 377.

<sup>41</sup> This title ought to make readers think of the Virgin Mary, who is called the “Queen of Heaven,” and who is often depicted in medieval iconography with a crown of stars. This connection has been explored in a chapter by Barbara Kowalik, “Elbereth the Star-Queen Seen in the Light of Medieval Marian Devotion,” in *O What a Tangled Web: Tolkien and Medieval Literature – A View from Poland*, Cormarë Series No. 29 (Zollikofen: Walking Tree Publishers, 2013), 93-114.

<sup>42</sup> See Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, Penn.: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), esp. chap. 4, “Feeling Like a Woman.”

<sup>43</sup> Tolkien, *LOTR*, 378.

words of Legolas affirm that Gimli will remember Galadriel and his meeting with her in Lothlórien. Considering what is known of the use of reliquaries in the medieval cult of the saints, it is reasonable to conclude that Gimli's remembrance will be facilitated by the making and treasuring of his crystal reliquary. For it will contain the three strands of Galadriel's hair: the relics of Galadriel.<sup>44</sup>

Legolas specifically says that Gimli's memory of Lothlórien that will be "clear and unstained" in his heart. Like the reliquary of crystal that Gimli plans to make to house and safeguard the three strands of Galadriel's hair, Gimli's heart is also the house and safeguard of a crystal-clear memory of the Lady, his patron saint. In a spiritual sense, Gimli's heart has become a reliquary for the memory Galadriel.

Throughout the remainder of *The Lord of the Rings*, Gimli remains a staunch defender of Galadriel and her beauty, especially against seeming nay-sayers like Éomer. This certainly provides more evidence of Gimli's conversion to loving Galadriel and adopting Galadriel as his patron saint. But Tolkien does not limit his characterization of Galadriel as saint-like to Gimli's perceptions only. He characterizes Galadriel not only by her beauty and holiness, but also by her power.

### **The Power of Saints: The Mirror, Phial, and Ring of Galadriel**

Galadriel is powerful. Her powers are strange and marvelous, ranging from the ability to test the thoughts in the hearts of the Company, to anticipating the future through visions seen in her Mirror, to capturing the light of Earendil's star, the heavenly Silmaril, which, in the hands of Frodo and Sam, later helps to defeat the monstrous spider, Shelob, and the Watchers in Minas Morgul. She possesses a ring of power, Nenya, also called the White Ring or the Ring of Water, made of mithril and set with a white stone of adamant. It has the power of "preservation, protection, and concealment from evil,"<sup>45</sup> and Galadriel uses it to protect and preserve Lothlórien. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel's power seems like

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<sup>44</sup> Chaganti notes that "the reliquary also participated in the performance of the act of prayer, constituting representational spaces in its interaction with the worshipper" (28). The notion that medieval Christians prayed in the presence of reliquaries, venerating the relics of the saints which they enclosed, is probably not irrelevant to Gimli's plan to make reliquary for Galadriel's hair and to readers' understanding of how he will make use of it.

<sup>45</sup> "Nenya," *Tolkien Gateway*. See <http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Nenya>. (Accessed 5 October 2019).

magic; that is certainly how Frodo and Sam see it. Yet Galadriel questions the hobbits' perception, and letters by Tolkien give a fuller explanation of why, one that hints that Galadriel's power is less like "magic" and more like the power given to saints.

When Frodo and Sam are awakened by Galadriel on a night when they are sleeping in Lothlórien, she invites them to look into her Mirror, where she tells them that they may see "things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be."<sup>46</sup> She adds to Sam, who is curious:

"For this is what your folk would call magic, I believe; though I do not understand clearly what they mean; and they seem to use the same word of the deceits of the Enemy. But this, if you will, is the magic of Galadriel. Did you not say that you wished to see Elf-magic?"<sup>47</sup>

In so saying, Galadriel makes a distinction between the magic of Elves and the magic of the Enemy. In his letter to Milton Waldman, in a clear reference to this passage from *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien once admitted, "I have not used 'magic' consistently, and indeed the Elven-queen Galadriel is obliged to remonstrate with the Hobbits on their confused use of the word both for the devices and operations of the Enemy, and for those of the Elves."<sup>48</sup> But Tolkien has a reason for this. Just as Galadriel is not quite sure what Hobbits mean by the word 'magic,' neither are English speakers in general, because 'magic' is a word that means many things. Tolkien expounds further on what he means by Elven magic:

But the Elves are there (in my tales) to demonstrate the difference. Their 'magic' is Art, delivered from many of its human limitations: more effortless, more quick, more complete (product and vision in unflawed correspondence). And its object is Art, not Power; sub-creation, not domination and tyrannous re-forming of Creation. The 'Elves' are 'immortal,' at least as far as this world goes, and hence are concerned rather with the griefs and burdens of deathlessness in time and change, than with death. The Enemy in successive forms is always 'naturally' concerned with sheer Domination, and so the Lord of magic and machines; but the problem: that this frightful evil can and does arise from

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<sup>46</sup> *LOTR*, 361.

<sup>47</sup> *LOTR*, 361-62.

<sup>48</sup> Tolkien, "131 To Milton Waldman (ca. late 1951)," 146.

an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others – speedily and according to the benefactor’s own plans – is the recurrent motive.<sup>49</sup>

Here readers learn something very important that helps us to understand Galadriel’s magic: it is creative; it is Art. With it, Galadriel’s Mirror was made, in which visions are beheld, and her phial was crafted, in which the light of Eärendil’s star is held, glimmering by day and shining by night. Elven power, creative and good, contrasts with the Enemy’s ‘magic,’ which is motivated by a desire to dominate, which is evil. Yet, Tolkien points out, a major motif in his epic is that evil can and does grow from a good root: “the desire to benefit the world and others.”<sup>50</sup> Ironically, the good root can produce a poisonous tree because of the benefactor’s desire to proceed “speedily” and “according to the benefactor’s own plans.”<sup>51</sup> This is, of course, an important spiritual, philosophical, and psychological insight, and one to which Tolkien repeatedly returns in his work.

As T.A. Shippey and Matthew Dickerson have both emphasized, Tolkien’s depiction of “power” (*sic* “magic”) in *The Lord of the Rings* has two sides to it. On the one hand, the power of the Ring always tempts, even the wisest, such as Gandalf and Galadriel, and tends to corrupt even the most innocent, like the Hobbits, Bilbo and Frodo. Through the symbolism of the Ring, Tolkien engages with an idea summed up in Lord Acton’s famous proverb, coined in an 1887 letter to a bishop about the Inquisition, that “power corrupts, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men ...”<sup>52</sup> Yet Tolkien balances this idea, which so often proves true among Men, by depicting another kind of power – power that is creative and good, able to protect and preserve – in Middle-earth. As T.A. Shippey says, this latter depiction of

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 146. On a similar note, Verlyn Flieger has opined, “*The Lord of the Rings* is not a story about good and evil, but a story about how good can become evil, a story whose strength lies in the tension created by deliberately unresolved situations and conflicts.” See Flieger, “But What Did He Really Mean?” *Tolkien Studies* 11 (2014), 149-66.

<sup>52</sup> Qtd. in Tom Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000; Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 115.

power may be inspired by Tolkien's understanding of the power of the saints in the Middle Ages.

The medieval world had its saints' lives, in which the saints used their immense and indeed miraculous power entirely for good purposes; while there is no shortage of evil kings in medieval story, there is rarely any sign that they became evil by becoming kings.<sup>53</sup>

From a medieval perspective, then, power does not *always* have to corrupt, and greater power does not necessarily lead to greater corruption. Indeed, Shippey points out in his interpretation of an Old English proverb, power *reveals* character; it does not alter it.<sup>54</sup> Dickerson elaborates on the idea:

And yet, ultimately, I think that Tolkien did hold to a more medieval view even on this issue. The power of the Ring is fundamentally corruptive, but power itself is not. It is possible, Tolkien's narrative suggests, to be both powerful and good! Though I think Shippey is certainly correct that Tolkien understood more clearly than did the medieval poets he loved that there is *potential* for power to corrupt, he nevertheless also believed in the *possibility of saints*.<sup>55</sup>

Both Shippey and Dickerson connect the depiction of the "good" power of the saints to the depiction of "good" power in Tolkien's Middle-earth. Dickerson particularly points out three people who have this kind of power: Gandalf, Elrond, and Galadriel. "None of these three are corrupted by their own power ... Galadriel wields such power and remains uncorrupted."<sup>56</sup>

Tolkien's understanding of the power of saints, however, is more complex than simply that it is good in contrast to the evil 'magic' of the Enemy. For him, one of the key points about the power of saints is where it comes from: it is not innate; it is divinely given. As he says in a letter, "There is only one 'god': God,

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<sup>53</sup> Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, 115.

<sup>54</sup> *Man deþ swa he byþ þonne he mot swa he wile*. ("A man does as he is when he can do what he wants") (Shippey 115).

<sup>55</sup> Matthew Dickerson, *A Hobbit Journey: Discovering the Enchantment of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2003, 2012), 88 (emphasis added to the last three words).

<sup>56</sup> Dickerson, *A Hobbit Journey*, 88-89.

*Eru Ilúvatar*” and for “help they [Elves] may call on a *Vala* (as *Elbereth*), as a Catholic might on a Saint, though no doubt knowing in theory as well as he that the power of the Vala was limited and derivative.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, a saint’s power, like the power of the Valar, is not omnipotent (it’s limited); it is not innate (it’s derivative). It is God’s gift to the saint, granted to work through the saint for the benefit of others. As Tolkien further observes, a Vala is like a Saint, Elbereth (or Varda) particularly so.

Interestingly, Elbereth and Galadriel are closely associated in *The Lord of the Rings* when Sam, not knowing why, invokes Elbereth as he holds out Galadriel’s glass against the Watchers as he and Frodo are escaping from the torments of Minas Morgul. The phial then:

blazed forth suddenly, so that all the shadowy court was lit with dazzling radiance like lightning ... “*Gilthoniel, A Elbereth!*” Sam cried. For, why he did not know, his thought sprang back suddenly to the elves in the Shire, and the song the drove way the Black Riders in the trees. “*Aiya elenion ancalima!*” cried Frodo once again behind him.

The will of the Watchers was broken with a suddenness like the snapping of a cord, and Frodo and Sam stumbled forward. Then they ran. Through the gate and past the great seated figures with their glittering eyes. There was a crack. The keystone of the arch crashed almost on their heels, and the wall above crumbled and fell into ruin. Only by a hair did they escape.<sup>58</sup>

In this moment, Sam calls on the power of Elbereth by name, the power of Galadriel by deed. The stream of light from the phial breaks the power of the Watchers, and “only by a hair” do Frodo and Sam escape. The power of both Elbereth and Galadriel called upon in Minas Morgul is, of course, “limited” and “derivative”: ultimately, their power comes from *Eru Ilúvatar*, though neither Sam nor Frodo knows it.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, their power, which Sam and Frodo call ‘magic,’ is saint-like.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Tolkien’s footnote 33 to Tolkien, “Letter 153 To Peter Hastings (draft of September 1954),” 193.

<sup>58</sup> *LOTR*, 914-15.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Footnote 33 to Tolkien, “153 Letter To Peter Hastings (draft),” 193.

<sup>60</sup> It’s worth noting here that if there is a Marian figure in the Middle-earth depicted in *The Lord of the Rings*, it isn’t really Galadriel. It is rather “Elbereth Gilthoniel,” Varda, Queen of

Like her Mirror and her Phial, Galadriel's ring, Nenya, betokens her power and allows her to intervene to preserve, protect, and conceal from evil her own land, Lothlórien. Because of Galadriel's good power, wielded through Nenya, the White Ring or Ring of Water, Lothlórien is a blessed place. Strikingly, Tolkien depicts that when Galadriel leaves Lothlórien, the strength and beauty of the flourishing trees slowly but steadily fades away.

Galadriel predicts this future fading in a conversation with Frodo in Lothlórien beside her Mirror when she says:

“Yet if you succeed, then our power is diminished, and Lothlórien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and be forgotten.”<sup>61</sup>

These words can be placed in the broader context of change in Middle-earth when the Ring is destroyed and the Third Age ends. Gandalf explicitly announces the end of the Third Age and the beginning of the Fourth Age to Aragorn, saying, “For though much has been saved, much must now pass away, and the power of the Three Rings also is ended ... For the time comes of the Dominion of Men, and the Elder Kindred will fade or depart.”<sup>62</sup> Then, in an appendix to *The Return of the King*, Tolkien depicts the reality of the fading of Lothlórien after the Aragorn's death when Arwen returns there in her grief:

But Arwen went forth from the House, and the light of her eyes was quenched, and it seemed to her people that she had become cold and gray as nightfall in winter that comes without a star. Then she said farewell to Eldarion, and to her daughters, and to all whom she had loved; and she went out from the city of Minas Tirith and passed away to the land of Lórien, and dwelt there alone under the fading trees until winter came.

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the Stars, who is called upon by the Elves in their songs and by the Hobbits when they are in trouble. That Tolkien compared Varda to a “Saint” does not make her less Marian in her role; the Virgin Mary is also called Saint Mary. As the Pearl-Maiden is to the Virgin Mary in the Middle English dream vision *Pearl*, so is Galadriel to Elbereth in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien also compared the Valar to “angelic guardians” (Tolkien, “320 From a letter to Mrs. Ruth Austin (25 January 1971),” 407).

<sup>61</sup> Tolkien, *LOTR*, 365.

<sup>62</sup> Tolkien, *LOTR*, 970-71.

Galadriel had passed away, and Celeborn also was gone, and the land was silent.<sup>63</sup>

As Galadriel's prophecy, Gandalf's announcement, and Arwen's experience of grief all show, the departure of the Elves in general, and of Galadriel in particular, will result in the fading of Lothlórien. Specific members of the Company – Gandalf, Aragorn, and Frodo – recognize that this fading will come to pass when Galadriel departs Middle-earth for the Blessed Realm of Valinor beyond the Western Seas. For with her goes Narya, the ring of adamant set in mithril, and so Galadriel's power to preserve, protect, and conceal her land from evil. Frodo's sight of her when he is leaving Lothlórien foreshadows this eventuality: "Already she seemed to him ... present yet remote, a living vision of that which has already been left behind by the flowing streams of Time."<sup>64</sup>

Significantly, the effects of Galadriel's departure on the land of Lórien parallels medieval Catholic beliefs about the way that the presence of a saint, or saint's relics, could bring blessing to a particular well, or church, or town, or land while the departure of the saint, or the removal of the saint's relics, could result in the loss of that special blessing or blessedness. In medieval England, numerous places were associated with the blessing of saints to whom said places were dedicated. To name only a few examples, Holywell was dedicated to St. Winifred, a seventh-century, Welsh virgin-martyr; Canterbury Cathedral housed the relics of St. Thomas Becket, who was murdered by knights of the king in 1170; London was considered to be under the patronage of St. Erkenwald; and England itself, under the patronage of St. George. These places were considered to be blessed by the presence of their saints' relics.

Likewise, in medieval England, the removal of a saint's relics from one place to another was associated with the transfer (or "translation") of blessing from one location to another. For example, some relics of St. Winifred were moved from Holywell to Shrewsbury in 1138; later, the relics of her uncle, St. Beuno, were actually stolen by the Abbot Nicholas Stevens of Shrewsbury – both moves having been made in an effort to enhance the prestige of the Norman abbey at some distance from Holywell on the Welsh border.<sup>65</sup> This desire to possess

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<sup>63</sup> Tolkien, *LOTR*, 1063.

<sup>64</sup> Tolkien, *FR*, 364.

<sup>65</sup> See *The Life of St. Winifred: The Vita S. Wenefrede from BL Lansdowne MS 436*, introduced, edited, and translated by James Ryan Gregory, Medieval Feminist Forum, Subsidia Series, Vol. 4 / Medieval Texts in Translation 2 (The University of Iowa Libraries, 2016), 11-13.



relics, which was manifested in an effort to secure the spiritual and material blessings of the saint, illustrates the medieval belief that blessing went along with the bones of saints – whether those saints were alive and physically present – or encased in reliquaries. This medieval context can help readers to better understand why Galadriel’s departure from Lothlórien results in the fading of her land, but presumably, the brightening of Valinor in the West.

Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien gives several clues to his readers that suggest that Galadriel fulfills the role of the patron saint of Lothlórien and of the Company. Her beauty, signified by her “crown” of shining hair; her holiness, evident from Gimli’s commitment to make a crystal reliquary for three strands of that hair; and her power, wielded through her Mirror, her Phial, and her Ring, can all be contextualized by the understandings and practices of the medieval cult of the saints. This can help us better comprehend not only Galadriel, but Tolkien himself.

### **The Remembrance of Saints: The Hagiography of J.R.R. Tolkien**

Hagiography (‘holy writing’) is the writing of saints’ legends. Individual saints’ lives, or *vitae*, most often consist of stories of their virtues, especially chastity, poverty, and obedience, as well as their temptations and their faithful manner of overcoming their trials with God’s help. Saints’ lives often make reference to miracles (*miracula*) performed through divine intervention either for or by the saint whose life it is. In the case of martyred saints, the genre includes narration of the *passio* or suffering of the saintly Christ-follower.

Hagiography was widely practiced among Christians, beginning with the New Testament account of the first Christian martyr, Stephen (Acts 7), and continuing with stories of other early Christian martyrs, like Perpetua and Felicity (d. 7 March 203). The virtuous lives and miraculous deeds of the saints have inspired some writers to compare them to modern-day superheroes. Like superhero stories today, any given saint’s life could be told in many versions. While certain episodes were standard for certain saints (St. Francis preaching to the birds, for example), others were embellished or shared across different saints’ lives. The twelfth-century compilation of saints’ lives called the *Legenda Aurea*

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Available online at <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2033&context=mff>. The story of the translation of Winifred’s relics has been reimagined in Ellis Peters, *A Morbid Taste for Bones* (London and New York: MacMillan, 1977), which was adapted for a television episode in the ITV Brother Cadfael mystery series in 1996.

(or Golden Legend) of Jacobus da Voragine is, in a sense, the apotheosis of the genre. Such a compilation is called a *legendarium*. It is worth noting that Tolkien's corpus of writings about Middle-earth is also called a *legendarium*, a term applied by Tolkien himself.<sup>66</sup>

In the Middle Ages, writing down the lives of saints provided a means for remembering them (*recordare*) in the community of the universal Church, which celebrated saints' feast days throughout the year on a calendar that assigned certain days of the year to the saint based on the day of the saint's birth or death. Writing down the legends of Middle-earth, as Tolkien did, provided a means for remembrance as well: for him; for his early readers, including his children and the Inklings; and for his later readers, a world-wide audience. Like medieval saints' legends, Tolkien's legends were written, revised, and re-written, over many years, with many variations, as Christopher Tolkien's publications of the twelve-volume *The History of Middle-earth* (1983-1996) and three-volume *The History of the Lord of the Rings* (1988-1992) clearly demonstrate. It is perhaps this specific, revisionary-over-time characteristic of his writings that inspired Tolkien to label the entirety of his writings a "legendarium."

This context helps us to appreciate a specific legend within Tolkien's writings: the life and deeds of Galadriel, the development of which bears resemblance to a medieval saint's *vita*. In a letter to Robert Murray, S.J., which he wrote in 1953, Tolkien responded to his reader Murray's comparison of Galadriel to the Virgin Mary (a saint) with these words:

I have been cheered specially by what you have said, this time and before, because you are more perceptive, especially in some directions, than anyone else, and maybe revealed to me more clearly some things about my work. I think I know exactly what you mean by the order of Grace, and of course by your references to our Lady, upon which all my small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded. *The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.<sup>67</sup>

This passage reveals Tolkien's belief that the Virgin Mary inspires *all* of his perception of beauty (perception which, in humility, he characterizes as "small"). That Tolkien says this in response to the connection that his reader draws between

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<sup>66</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, 149, 189, 197, 214. Tolkien also called his writings a "mythology."

<sup>67</sup> Tolkien, "142 To Robert Murray, S.J. (2 December 1953)," 171-73.

Galadriel and Mary suggests that the beauty of Lady Galadriel is inspired by “our Lady.” But this is not all that this passage suggests.

After writing to Robert Murray, S.J., that “you are more perceptive ... and maybe revealed to me more clearly some things about my work,” Tolkien specifically adds three points derived from Murray’s letter to substantiate this claim: first, reference to the “order of Grace”; second, to “our Lady”; and third, to the “fundamentally religious and Catholic” character of *The Lord of the Rings*, which Tolkien points out was developed *unconsciously* originally, but *consciously* in revision.<sup>68</sup> Tolkien seems to be aware that his unconscious mind, shaped by his faith, presented Galadriel as Marian in part because the Lady of Lothlórien is beautiful and “our Lady” is the one who allows Tolkien to perceive beauty.

It should be taken into consideration that Tolkien is here responding to a specific reader, Robert Murray, S.J., a member of the Society of Jesus, a Jesuit, a close family friend who proofread *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien, as a Catholic, had great respect for Catholic priests – his guardian was one; his eldest son became one – and all of those in the Church hierarchy who had taken holy orders. If a reader such as Murray perceived Galadriel as a Marian figure, that reader’s authority as a spiritual director or leader in the Church could influence Tolkien’s own perceptions of his story. Hence his remark that “maybe” Robert Murray, S.J., “revealed to me more clearly some things about my work.”<sup>69</sup>

This is an important point because it seems that Tolkien’s conception of Galadriel’s character as Marian may have been “unconscious” at first. A “conscious” connection between Galadriel and Mary may actually have been made for Tolkien by his readers, such as Murray. Keeping this in mind, it is very interesting to review Tolkien’s apparently changing ideas about Galadriel, as Romauld Lakowski has done in “The Fall and Repentance of Galadriel.”

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 172. Verlyn Flieger has correctly pointed out that Tolkien went back and forth in his own mind about his characterization of Galadriel, and responded to the letters of different readers who questioned his characterization in various ways. In the case of a letter from Ruth Austin (discussed further below), for example, Tolkien’s response to the suggestion that Galadriel had Marian qualities was appreciative but corrective: Tolkien noted that Galadriel was “actually” a “penitent.” As Flieger says, “Since Catholic dogma holds that Mary was conceived without sin, Tolkien’s ‘but actually’ really means ‘on the contrary.’ It separates Galadriel’s penitence for wrongdoing from Mary’s sinlessness. The distinction is doctrinal, and his use of doctrine rather than diplomacy to discourage this interpretation of his work is notable” (Flieger, “What Did He Really Mean?,” 153).

Lakowski has observed that between 1967 and 1971, Tolkien made at least five remarks in letters and other notes on his conception of Galadriel as one of the Noldor involved in the kinslaying of the Teleri at Alqualondë, who was exiled to Middle-earth by the Valar as a consequence (or punishment).<sup>70</sup> Tolkien observes in these writings that Galadriel mourns her exile from Valinor in the “Lament of Galadriel” included in *The Lord of the Rings*, but also observes that, by refusing the temptation of the Ring when Frodo offered it to her, she redeemed her past “fall.” She then was given the opportunity to return to the West at the end of the Third Age.<sup>71</sup>

This conception, of course, fits with the idea that Galadriel is saint-like. She is not perfect; she makes mistakes; she falls from grace. But she also is redeemed. She does penance for her involvement in the kinslaying, in her exile in Middle-earth, and she chooses the right when faced with another temptation to use her own strength to solve the problems of the world. With the strength of her will, she resists with the temptation to take the Ring; she refuses to give in to Sauron. This picture of Galadriel fits rather well with Tolkien’s understanding of what a saint is, a definition he shares in a letter to his son Christopher: “saints,” Tolkien says, “are those who have, for all their imperfections, never finally bowed heart and will to the world or the evil spirit.”<sup>72</sup>

However, Lakowski also observes that, in the last year of his life, Tolkien’s understanding of Galadriel shifted significantly. In a 1973 letter to Lord Halsbury, written a month before he died, Tolkien wrote that Galadriel was “unstained” and “she had committed no evil deeds.”<sup>73</sup> He adds:

She was an enemy of Fëanor. She did not reach Middle-earth with the other Noldor, but independently. Her reasons for wanting to go to Middle-earth were legitimate, and she would have been permitted to depart, but for the misfortune that before she set out, the revolt of Fëanor broke out,

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<sup>70</sup> In “The Shibboleth of Feanor,” Tolkien even identifies a dark motivation behind Galadriel’s actions: pride. Lakowski points this out in his analysis.

<sup>71</sup> Romauld Lakowski, “The Fall and Repentance of Galadriel,” chap. 7, loc. 3204-3267.

<sup>72</sup> Tolkien, “96 To Christopher Tolkien, (30 January 1945),” 110.

<sup>73</sup> Tolkien, “353 From a letter to Lord Halsbury (4 August 1973),” 431.

and she became involved in the desperate measures of Manwë and the ban on all emigration.<sup>74</sup>

The word “unstained” and the idea that Galadriel “had committed no evil deeds” makes her more than an ordinary saint. It makes her a Marian figure, for these are ideas commonly associated with the Virgin Mary, as one who was immaculately conceived, living ever after as holy and innocent – more so than most saints – and, as it were, a saint above other saints.

Clearly, toward the end of his life, Tolkien moved away from the idea that Galadriel has “fallen” because of “pride” and “repented,” and he moved toward the idea that Galadriel was “unstained.” In other words, he began to elevate her status in his hagiographical conception from a saint-like figure to a figure of “our Lady.” This actually corresponds in part with his “unconscious” depiction of Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings* as a woman who has Marian characteristics. Lakowski speculates about the reasons for this final shift to seeing Galadriel as someone “unstained” and “who had committed no evil deeds,” noting that Tolkien was a perfectionist, constantly revising; that we cannot expect consistency between his versions of Galadriel; and that Tolkien “decided to rehabilitate and exonerate Galadriel in a way that can perhaps best be described with Tom Shippey as being a bit ‘soft-hearted.’”<sup>75</sup>

In addition to these possibilities, it is worth considering that Tolkien may have conceived of Galadriel as a type of saint from the beginning of her story, but that as his readers began to see her as Marian, he too began to consider that she might represent “our Lady” in Middle-earth. As he approached the end of his own life, his faith would have motivated him to meditate more on the Virgin Mary, who inspired him to perceive beauty and who certainly became, after the death of his own mother, Tolkien’s spiritual mother. In reflecting on Galadriel in 1973, who he knew some of his readers saw as Marian, he moved toward seeing her that way, too.

### Conclusions

Galadriel is perceived in different, sometimes contradictory ways both within the world of Middle-earth and the world of Tolkien scholarship. In some ways, she is a liminal figure: Tolkien drew on multiple influences to shape her character, including magical ones, like the Corrigan and the romance tradition of the “Faërie

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>75</sup> Lakowski, “The Fall and Repentance of Galadriel,” chap. 7, loc. 3521.

Queen.” He also drew on marvelous sources from sacred tradition and his own Christian faith. Indeed, as this study has shown, there is a previously neglected context that may help readers to understand Tolkien’s characterization of Galadriel: the medieval cult of the saints. The cult of the saints provides specific practices and beliefs that shaped how Tolkien consciously characterized the Galadriel as saint-like, especially in terms of her beauty, holiness, and power.

Her saintliness has Marian qualities, in that female saints were expected to be like the Virgin Mary, but Galadriel is distinctly different from the Virgin Mary in key ways. So she may not necessarily be a figure of Mary in Middle-earth – at least, not in terms of Tolkien’s conscious, authorial intention. However, in his letters, Tolkien acknowledges the possibility of the formation of an *unconscious* connection between Galadriel and Mary. The shift in Tolkien’s thinking between characterizing Galadriel as an ordinary saint, who “fell” at the kinslaying of the Teleri at Alqualondë because of her “pride” but was redeemed through her penitence and resistance to the temptation of the Ring, to one who is “unstained” and “committed no evil deeds” may be motivated by the perceptions of influential readers of *The Lord of the Rings*, like Tolkien’s proofreader, Father Robert Murray, S.J..

When Tolkien’s priestly reader saw the connection between Galadriel and Mary in 1953, Tolkien acknowledged it. However, he continued to conceive of Galadriel as a “penitent.” Even as late as 1971, he wrote in a letter to Mrs. Ruth Austin that Galadriel was “in her youth a leader in the rebellion against the Valar (the angelic guardians). At the end of the First Age, she proudly refused forgiveness or permission to return. She was pardoned because of her resistance to the final and overwhelming temptation to take the Ring for herself.”<sup>76</sup> But then, in a letter written toward the end of his life in 1973, Tolkien began to characterize Galadriel in ways that were specifically Marian. Tolkien had come to see her as pure and “unstained.”

Thus, Tolkien is not only the sub-creator of Middle-earth, but a kind of hagiographer – the hagiographer of Middle-earth – who writes and revises the life of Galadriel, idealizing her at last. This re-vision may not simply be the result of his own perfectionism or soft-heartedness. Rather, it seems that Tolkien relates the *vitae* of Galadriel in his legendarium in order to inspire us all.

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<sup>76</sup> Tolkien, “320 From a letter to Mrs. Ruth Austin (25 January 1971),” 407.



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