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The Mariner (and his wife): Queering Aldarion's (A)sexuality

Rory M. Queripel

Eden Project University Centre, Cornwall College, rory.queripel@gmail.com

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The tale of Aldarion and Erendis is an unusual example of a failed marriage in Tolkien's work; as Sara Brown (2023, p. 5) says, it is "one of the best arguments for divorce to be found in Tolkien's legendarium." Many readings choose to focus on the personal qualities of both parties to the relationship to account for its failure. Benvenuto (2006) points out that Erendis' negative qualities outweigh the positive ones presented in the text, while Michel (2006) identifies Erendis as perhaps one of the closest things to a human female villain in the legendarium, going against the "self-sacrificing ideals" expected of women. On the other hand, Fitzsimmons (2015, p. 51) identifies Aldarion as an anti-hero who "demonstrate[s] what *not* to do in life" while other authors take a more balanced view, identifying qualities in both parties that led to the collapse of the relationship without apportioning the majority of blame to either (Mathews, 1992; Brown, 2023). However, I believe that the fundamental assumption that underlies all these readings is that both Aldarion and Erendis are equally attracted towards one another and that it is purely personal choice that makes them behave as they do. This paper will propose an alternative reading that suggests Aldarion may be asexual, situating his choices within an oppressive set of social norms that are anathema to him. I will also attempt to explore this reading of Aldarion alongside some of Tolkien's personal views on sex and marriage expressed in Letter 43 in order to demonstrate some potential links with Tolkien's own thinking on the matter.

"Asexual" is an umbrella term that describes people who do not experience sexual attraction, either totally or in part – the opposite of this is "allosexual" – though definitions vary even among asexuals and arriving at a useful definition is all but impossible (Chen, 2020). Asexual identities exist on a spectrum of varying relationships to sexual attraction and/or desire, including but not limited to those who experience no attraction at all, who experience it rarely and/or conditionally, and who experience it to a greater or lesser extent over time. Sexual attraction is equally difficult to define (especially for those who do not experience it), but Angela Chen (2020) defines it as "the desire to have sex with a specific person for physical reasons." However, as Sherronda J. Brown's (2022) definition in *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality* specifies, "these things are not evidenced by either the presence or absence of sexual arousal or activity". Attraction, desire, and action are all separate and related concepts, and asexuality does not equal celibacy.

Susan Brake coined the term "amatonormativity" in 2012 to refer to the societal assumption that everyone is, or should be, aiming for a singular sexual/romantic relationship as the pinnacle of human social interaction (Chen, 2020). The related concept of compulsory sexuality, "the idea that sex is universally desired as a feature of human nature" (Brown, 2022), was elucidated in Kristina Gupta's 2015 article *Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept*. It is a primary factor within amatonormativity that

marginalises asexual people, though Gupta also points out that it “regulates the behavior of all people, not just those who identify as asexual” (quoted in Brown, 2022). These terms are crucial to an asexual understanding of Aldarion, his choices, and his relationships with both Erendis and Númenorean society, particularly his family.

The first paragraphs of *Aldarion and Erendis* set out several points that underlie this reading. Firstly, the very first lines describe the line of Elros to that point, establishing its importance as a theme throughout the story, and mirrored in the description of the continuation of the line via Ancalimë at the end. Additionally, Aldarion’s description is heavy on his physical attributes, describing him as “strong and vigorous in mind and body, golden-haired as his mother,” setting these qualities against those of his father, “a man of gentle mood, without pride, whose exercise was rather in thought than in deeds of the body” (Tolkien, 2009). Aldarion, as an heir to the throne of Elros and a physically attractive man, is immediately contextualised against a number of social pressures that have their roots in amatonormativity and compulsory sexuality, and the reader’s expectations of him (conscious or otherwise) are set.

However, once Aldarion’s own behaviour begins to feature in the story, we see the first signs that these expectations will be confounded. His reluctance to marry is clear from the beginning of his seafaring career, as well as his parents’ disappointment with this. Additionally, the Guild of Venturers’ nickname from Númenorean society, the *Uinendili* (the lovers of Uinen) suggests the idea of some sort of substitute for romance/love. The tension between societal and familial pressures and Aldarion’s desires are already clear.

Erendis’ introduction reveals much about both Aldarion’s relationship to sexuality and her own position between these expectations. While Erendis falls in love with Aldarion almost immediately, it is notable that Aldarion’s first impression of her is her inner strength, rather than her external looks. When Aldarion later speaks of “fairer things in Armenelos,” she assumes that he is talking about her, though crucially, she does so without any corroboration of this fact.

As their relationship evolves, the divergences between their interests and approaches becomes ever clearer. When the subject of love between them appears, Tolkien is very clear that Aldarion’s love of Erendis occurs later and, importantly, because of her presentation of the *Oiolairë*, the Branch of Return, which can be read as her encouragement to go to sea against the wishes of his parents. However, Aldarion is repeatedly described in terms of his reluctance to marry, reinforced by his repeated sea voyages, something that his mother suggests should be “cured.” (Tolkien, 2009) This pathologisation of perceived ‘faults’ of attraction is a familiar idea for asexual people, whose experiences

are often put down to a lack, or some external factor that can be fixed. This idea is further reinforced by his father, who asks “how else will you cure him, if not by love?(Tolkien, 2009)”, a version of the oft-invoked idea that asexual people “just need to find the right person.”

When the two do eventually marry, it is after a period of 12 years of engagement and 70 years after they met. Even now, though, Aldarion’s attention is not wholly devoted to his new bride – the very morning of their wedding feast a few months after their marriage, Aldarion’s gaze is once again pulled towards the Sea at the arrival of the Eldar. It is telling that, the next morning, Erendis wakes alone, though no reason for this is given in the text. As Erendis struggles with her marriage, seeking advice from her mother Núneth, Aldarion’s desire for the Sea and consequent lack of attention to his marriage is once again pathologised as “some heat in his mind, or some dream that pursues him.” Upon Aldarion’s return from the voyage with Hirilondë, his parents are unsympathetic to him and his reasons for taking more time than hoped to return, trying to return his focus to his wife and his sense of home. Their disapproval is clear. This is the same year in which Aldarion and Erendis separate, finally accepting that their marriage is not, in fact, fated to be a happy one (a fact perhaps obvious to the reader, well before this point). An unusual confrontation between Meneldur and Aldarion takes place soon thereafter, where Aldarion’s frustration at the disjunct between his desires and his father’s appears to come to a head. Meneldur’s response is at once more compassionate than sometimes, accepting that he has misunderstood his son, yet still resolute that Aldarion has wronged him, Erendis, and, by extension, his family.

From this point on, the emphasis is mainly on the ramifications of Aldarion’s decisions on Erendis, Ancalimë, and himself, as well as his reign upon Meneldur’s surrender of the sceptre. Ancalimë’s own choices and desires seem akin to her father’s, though with the benefit of hindsight, as she at first resists Hallacar before eventually marrying him, it may seem, to ensure the line of Elros above all other reason. Christopher Tolkien writes that “Ancalimë did not desire love, nor did she wish for a son,”(Tolkien, 2009) and that her marriage to Hallacar was unhappy, as her parents’ had been. Aldarion’s part in the story is all but over, with sparing mention only of his subsequent voyages, while Erendis was doomed to bitterness for the rest of her life, before she is, somewhat euphemistically, said to have “perished in water” – perhaps a suggestion of suicide, though no further details are given.

From these pieces of textual evidence, many authors draw an image of Aldarion as a selfish man, centred too much on his own desire at the expense of his family’s, particularly his wife and children’s. However, if we assume that Aldarion’s mode of attraction is not geared towards romance, sex, love, and/or marriage, we may be able to see the root of his frustration not as

selfishness, but rather as a fundamental inability to engage with the amatonormative expectations of Númenorean society due to being asexual. It not that he *won't* do the right thing; it's that he *can't*.

The assumption from the text throughout the story of Aldarion and Erendis is that our sympathies are supposed to lie with Erendis over Aldarion. This is evident through a number of points in the text: the subtitle "The Mariner's Wife", the emphasis on Erendis' feelings at the expense of Aldarion's (which are mentioned infrequently), and the ending of the chapter in *Unfinished Tales* on Erendis' and Ancalimë's fates, with only a passing mention of Aldarion's subsequent future. The most visceral description of Aldarion's emotions we get is in the year when everyone expected Aldarion's marriage to Erendis, when "the sea-longing took him...his heart hammered, and his breath was stopped." (Tolkien, 2009) This wording sounds like it might better belong to a description of someone falling in love, and does not bear much if any resemblance to the scant descriptions of Aldarion's feelings towards Erendis. Additionally, the ways in which Tolkien both does and does not write about Aldarion echo some of his own thinking about sex, relationships, and gender, as expressed in his Letters, namely letter 43. This letter was written in its own real-world context between a father and his son, and can be charitably interpreted as Tolkien trying to dissuade his son from inadvisable sexual decisions while away at war. Thus, a one-for-one correspondence between points made in it and later works of fiction is impossible. However, where these correspondences do occur, the similarities are, I would argue, too strong to ignore outright.

In this letter, Tolkien takes a distinctly gender-essentialist view of men and women in relationships, i.e., he states qualities considered inherent to being male and female that dictate choices and behaviours between them. One example of this is his statement that "men are not [monogamous]...not by their animal nature." (Tolkien, 2023) This tying of sexuality with masculinity remains a common stereotype today, identified in Tessler and Winer's 2023 paper on men as a minority in asexual communities, thus adding a gendered dimension to the aforementioned idea of compulsory sexuality. This idea finds its echo in the assumptions upon Aldarion in *Aldarion and Erendis*. The first of these is the name "Uinendili" or "Lovers of Uinen" given to the Guild of Venturers by the Númenorean public, gendering the sea as female and thus framing the Guild's desire for sailing as having a possible sexual/romantic motive. The second is Erendis' jibe that she will not "share her husband with the Lady Uinen," rightly called out by Aldarion as "a twisted saying (Tolkien, 2009)". The assumption that a) there *exists* sexual/romantic competition against Erendis, and b) that this competition comes in the form of Aldarion's desire to voyage on the sea assumes a mistrust of Aldarion's fidelity to her, even though no textual evidence to the contrary is given.

Tolkien's gender essentialism and sexualisation of masculinity continues in letter 43 as he talks about the possibilities of relationships between men and women. He states that "a man's dealings with a woman can be purely physical", with the caveat that, philosophically and religiously speaking, this is not how things should be. He goes on, later, to say that in this 'fallen' world, "'friendship' that should be possible between all human beings, is virtually impossible between man and woman" (Tolkien, 2023). Again, this assumes that male/female relationships necessarily must be characterised by romantic and sexual attachment because of the nature of human beings and the inherent differences between the sexes. Applied to Aldarion, this presents his reluctance to marry as 'other' or somehow deviant from his 'natural' masculinity, which is demonstrated by those around him with assumptions of infidelity and some sort of attraction to the Sea itself.

The idea of Erendis as a wronged woman, constantly made to wait for her husband's whims, tallies with Tolkien's assertion in a footnote to Letter 43 that women "are apt to break down if asked to 'wait' for a man" (Tolkien, 2023). Again, this essentialist view of 'women' and a man's role in ensuring their sanity echoes Erendis' oft-stated distress at her husband's voyaging, despite the fact that she initially enabled it via her presentation of the Oiolairë. This does not call us to blame Erendis for what happens, though, as this same view stands to reduce *her* agency in the face of Aldarion's choices.

In conclusion, Tolkien's characterisation of Aldarion as deviating from the expectations of both masculinity and Númenorean royalty tie into a number of amatonormative assumptions held by real-world society, both when Tolkien was writing and today. While asexuality was, in one way or another, a known phenomenon within Tolkien's lifetime, none of this serves to comment on any *intentional* depiction of Aldarion as asexual, but rather as an offshoot from an amatonormative society that constantly espoused and still espouses the concept of compulsory sexuality. What I hope to achieve with this asexual reading of Aldarion is an understanding of the ways in which society erases, stigmatises, and pathologises asexual people, as reflected in *Aldarion and Erendis*. This is not to say that Aldarion's choices are, or should be, free from judgement: his asexuality in no way exculpates him entirely from the harm he causes. However, a compassionate reading of him as an asexual man burdened by society's expectations of him does not demand this. Queer pain is still queer pain, even when it expresses itself in a harmful manner, and no one is obliged to like Aldarion more as a result of that. By acknowledging that the root causes of the situation between Aldarion and Erendis comes from the outside influence of Númenorean society's assumptions on them both, we can perhaps navigate a new view on him. Additionally, we can use this reading and the echoes of Letter 43 contained within it to question further Tolkien's thinking, and grapple with some of the real-world ramifications of his views, some of which are still held today. Finally, through this understanding, we may be able

to expand our views of love and attraction in Tolkien's world, acknowledging and creating space for asexual realities and people where they have been missed before. This is sometimes painful, especially for asexual people ourselves, but it is nonetheless important to acknowledge, even, and perhaps especially, if it means we must reckon with and find fault in some of Tolkien's own thinking.

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