Fair to See, Soon to Fall:

The Classical Heroine and Tolkien's "Unmortal" Women

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The female characters of J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium, although oft-criticized for their scarcity in number, fully embody one of the most central themes of the story: the complicated interplay between death and immortality. While Tolkien admitted that the love and anguish of mortal Men and immortal Elves make up the heart of his Legendarium, the women possess the distinct ability to transcend the boundary of life and death. Interpreting them according to this paradigm reveals an archetype which I call "the unmortal woman," and that likewise reveals the unique power that their boundary-crossing enables, leading to strongly feminist readings of the text.

Although Tolkien was adamant that *The Lord of the Rings* contains no "inner meaning or 'message,'" the unmortal woman's appearances throughout history prove that she is an enduring figure with an enduring purpose: to challenge the often rigid ways that women and femininity are represented in literature. As such, this paper examines several of not only Tolkien's unmortal women, such as Lúthien, Arwen, and Éowyn, but also several iterations of the figure which came before, such as Alcestis, Psyche, and Juliana. I will demonstrate how Tolkienian women transcend the mortal/immortal binary in much the same manner as their predecessors, and thus use the unmortal woman as a lens through which to cast new light on the women of fantasy past, present, and future.

In drawing these connections between women in Tolkien and older texts, it is not my goal to simply prove the existence of classical and medieval influence on Tolkien as a writer—a fact which is already well known and indisputable. Rather, I wish to explore the reception of these influences, and in doing so, to show how the connections I have drawn serve to shed new light on the place of women within the Legendarium.

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1. Introduction

The female characters of J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium, although oft-criticized for their scarcity in number, fully embody one of the most central themes of the story: the complicated interplay between death and immortality. This relationship underlies Tolkien's entire corpus; without at least acknowledging this fact, any further criticism becomes impossible.[1] While Tolkien himself stated that the love and anguish of mortal Men and immortal Elves make up the heart of his world,[2] the women of the Legendarium possess the distinct ability to transcend the boundary of life and death. Interpreting them according to this paradigm reveals an archetype that I call "the unmortal woman," and that likewise reveals the unique power that their boundary-crossing enables, leading to strongly feminist readings of the text.

For nearly as long as Tolkien scholarship has existed, his treatment of women within the Legendarium has also been discussed. Critiques over the years have been many and varied: some argue that the comparative dearth of female characters speaks for itself, while others would say that the massive importance of the few more than makes up for their lack. One of the earliest critics to disparage Tolkien for his portrayal of women is Catharine Stimpson, whose 1969 review famously describes *The Lord of the Rings* as "irritatingly, blandly, traditionally masculine" and as

[1] Verlyn Flieger, "The Broken Scythe: Death and Immortality in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien," in *The Broken Scythe: Death and Immortality in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Roberto Arduini and Claudio A. Testi (Walking Tree Publication, 2012), p. xxiii-xxvii, xxiv.

[2] J.R.R. Tolkien, Humphrey Carpenter, and Christopher Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), Letter 186.

displaying a "subtle contempt and hostility toward women."[3] Nearly thirty years later, Patrick Curry claims that Tolkien's female characters are "more complex than Stimpson allows," but ultimately concedes to her that his work as a whole is at minimum paternalistic, if not patriarchal.[4] Una McCormack rather pointedly highlights the fact that the *Lord of the Rings* features more named horses than women.[5] Some scholars have argued that Tolkien's treatment of women is a reflection of his religious values;[6] others have attempted to justify his portrayals by insisting that he was simply a product of his time, and that his work cannot be expected to reflect contemporary feminist principles.[7] Still others have produced much more positive critiques on the subject. Lisa Hopkins praises Tolkien for his progressive and empowered female characters; Leslie Donovan writes of the strong influence of the Germanic Valkyrie on Tolkien's women; many highlight the mortal shieldmaiden Éowyn in particular as the most outwardly feminist of Tolkien's characters, claiming that her narrative emphasizes feminine power and influence.[8] The discourse remains

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[3] Catharine R. Stimpson, *J.R.R. Tolkien* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 18-19.

[4] Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1997), 127.

[5] Una McCormack, "Finding Ourselves in the (Un)Mapped Lands: Women's Reparative Readings of The Lord of the Rings," in *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R.* Tolkien, ed. Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie A. Donovan (Altadena: Mythopoeic Press, 2015).

[6] Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride, *Women among the Inklings: Gender, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001); William Henry Harrison (University of British Columbia, 2013); Adam Roberts, "Women," in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Stuart D. Lee (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), pp. 473-486; Lisa Coutras, "Tolkien and Feminist Criticism," in *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendor, and Transcendence in Middle-Earth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan - Springer Nature, 2016).

[7] Edith L. Crowe, "Power in Arda: Sources, Uses and Misuses," in *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie A. Donovan (Altadena, CA: Mythopoeic Press, 2015), 272.

[8] Lisa Hopkins, "Female Authority Figures in the Works of Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 21, no. 2 (1996); Leslie A. Donovan, "The Valkyrie Reflex in J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: Galadriel, Shelob, Éowyn, and Arwen," in *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie A. Donovan (Altadena, CA: Mythopoeic Press, 2015); Marjorie Burns, *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's*

ongoing, with more works being published every year that investigate Tolkien's portrayal of women and gender.[9]

Although they are few in number, the women of the Legendarium exert an undeniable influence on the text. The fact is that they are complex—far more so than they appear upon cursory examination. In many cases, they actively resist classification. This transcendent quality is key to the unmortal woman, who straddles the line between seemingly opposite categories: mortal and immortal; secular and sacred; even male and female. Historically, these binary categories were foundational to the ways that people perceived and interacted with the world; gender roles and religion in particular are defining characteristics in a plethora of ancient—and modern—texts. In the works of Tolkien, these boundaries are portrayed as not only blurry, but malleable. This blending of opposites is a common motif, but it has yet to be explored in the context of death and immortality as it relates to feminine power in the Legendarium.

The unmortal woman is one who exists in a unique, liminal space between mortal and immortal, possessing the ability to traverse the boundaries of life and death."[10] This figure materializes in a number of ways: in the most literal sense, where a woman physically travels between the realms of the living and the dead; in the transformation of a woman from immortal to mortal (or vice versa); and in a more metaphorical sense, where a woman faces a literal or symbolic

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Middle-Earth (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2008); Matthew T. Dickerson, *A Hobbit Journey: Discovering the Enchantment of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012).

[9] Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie A. Donovan, *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Altadena, CA: Mythopoeic Press, 2015); Coutras, "Tolkien and Feminist Criticism"; T.S Miller and Elizabeth Miller, "Tolkien and Rape: Sexual Terror, Sexual Violence, and the Woman's Body in Middle-Earth," *Extrapolation* 62, no. 2 (2021): pp. 133-156.

[10] I am not the first scholar to have studied the heroine's connections with liminal death and immortality; Deborah Lyons' 1997 book *Gender and Immortality: Heroines in Ancient Greek Myth and Cult* explores the heroine's ability to transcend death, and her role as a symbolic mediator "between the remoteness of divinity and the direct experience of mortals. See Deborah Lyons, *Gender and Immortality: Heroines in Ancient Greek Myth and Cult* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 171.

"death" and emerges from the encounter immortalized in some way, be it in name, body, or deed. Although not every heroine is an unmortal woman, and the archetype is by no means unique to Tolkien, the Legendarium is nonetheless filled with them. Numerous female characters across *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* fits the archetype: the shieldmaiden Éowyn, the Elven women Arwen, Galadriel, Lúthien, and Míriel, and others. Even unconventional figures like the monstrous primordial Ungoliant and her daughter Shelob are worth examining for their complex relationships with death, immortality, and the unmortal woman herself. This thesis will use the unmortal woman as a lens through which to cast new light on the women of fantasy past, present, and future. As an inherently transgressive figure, she functions as an incredibly effective means of doing so. Just as she transcends the boundary between life and death—arguably the most fundamental binary there is—she transcends others as well, actively calling into question existing notions of gender and power.

It is worth acknowledging that, while it is my goal to assign "feminist" readings to these texts, and while ever-shifting cultural expression is an integral part of my argument, I am writing from the perspective of a white American woman in my late twenties. I also recognize the impossibility of speaking for all women on the topic of feminist ideals, or even for all feminists. Not every individual agrees on what constitutes progressive change, and it is thus impossible to categorize any of these women in a way that will resonate with everyone. With this in mind, I have consciously not relied too heavily on any one specific model of feminist theory. Rather, I hope to fit these arguments into a *landscape* of feminist study as a whole.

1.1.Scholarship and the World

"As for any inner meaning or 'message,' [*LotR*] has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical."[11] So Tolkien himself states in the foreword of *The Lord of the Rings*' second-edition printing. Although he was well in favor of analysis of his works—suggesting to a curious student in a 1938 letter that to draw one's own conclusions on a text might well be a research student's "[sole] excuse for existing"[12]—he was also famously circumspect about revealing his own sources of inspiration, and he certainly never committed to any prevailing interpretation of his Legendarium. In fact, he admitted in the same letter that his inspirations were so many and varied that he himself could not pinpoint them all: "I could guess, of course, but the guesses would have no more authority than those of future researchers, and I leave the game to them."[13]

Indeed, a significant portion of Tolkien scholarship has thus far been dedicated to the study of his source material, which spans across genres and centuries. Countless fantasy authors have since tried to replicate the vast depth of his worldbuilding. George R. R. Martin, author of the massively popular *Game of Thrones* series, said that "Tolkien's world is like an iceberg, where the story is the tip of the iceberg and the background is the mass underneath."[14] This is certainly true:

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[11] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), xvi.

[12] Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 25.

[13] Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 25.

[14] "4 Finals Week Lessons We Learned From George R.R. Martin," The Northwestern Business Review (The Northwestern Business Review, March 28, 2017).

Middle-earth, the land where the *Lord of the Rings* is set, is but one tiny fragment of Tolkien's entire sub-created universe, Eä.[15] For many, the sheer scale of Eä—a world separate from our own, but with its own detailed histories, languages, cultures, and more—is part of what makes the Legendarium so impressive. It is easy to get the sense that each character exists as more than a simple vessel to carry a plot; their lives and histories extend beyond the words on the page. We, as readers, are thrilled and amazed by the opportunity to lose ourselves in such an immersive story.

However, Tolkien's works also inspire in us a sense of strange familiarity. This is because Tolkien was a master of "recasting the time-worn archetypal figures of Western cultural history and thought into new models."[16] He did not invent the world of Eä out of thin air. Rather, it should be acknowledged that Tolkien originally conceived of his world as an ancient precursor to our own. In a 1956 letter to W.H. Auden, he wrote, "I am historically minded. Middle-earth is not an imaginary world. […] The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary. The essentials of that abiding place are all there (at any rate for inhabitants of N.W. Europe), so naturally it feels familiar, even if a little glorified by the enchantment of distance in time."[17] He was highly skilled in using existing mythologies and tropes as a set of building blocks, creating the effect of a realistic series of evolving myths and legends for a fictional culture (but which mimicked the way that such things evolve in real life).

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[15] "Sub-creation" is a term coined by Tolkien to describe the process of world-building and creating myths. According to his beliefs as a Christian, true creation is only possible for God himself; thus, Tolkien's role as the "creator" of Eä is actually that of "sub-creator." This is also true within his Legendarium, where Eru Ilúvatar (the One) is the only true creator. His creations—the Ainur, Elves, Men—are themselves sub-creators. See J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tolkien: On Fairy-Stories*, ed. Douglas A. Anderson and Verlyn Flieger (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008).

[16] Hamish Williams, *Tolkien and the Classical World* (Walking Tree Publishers, 2021), xi.

[17] Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 183.

It is known to anyone even peripherally familiar with Tolkien that he was a lifelong academic. By the time he was four years old, he could read and write fluently; soon after, his special aptitude for languages was discovered.[18] The classics were a staple in his early education, and he excelled in his studies, winning multiple scholarships and prizes for his proficiency in Latin and Greek.[19] As an adult, he spent nearly thirty-five years as a professor at Oxford, studying and teaching Anglo-Saxon literature and history, English literature, and philology. His masterful ability to repurpose existing traditions was no doubt owed to his deep familiarity with those traditions and the cultural and historical significance surrounding them.

This is all to say that to study these traditions ourselves, or at least to keep them in mind when reading Tolkien, can only serve to enhance our experiences in reading and understanding the Legendarium. In Hamish Williams's *Tolkien and the Classical World*, he states that the de-emphasis of the classics in modern education means that modern readers necessarily approach premodern texts through a wholly different lens than their authors might ever have anticipated.[20] The overwhelming majority of twenty-first century schoolchildren are not afforded the opportunity to study Latin or Greek at all, much less to develop the proficiency that Tolkien and his contemporaries would have had. The reading curriculum has also shifted significantly: at the time that Tolkien was writing *The Lord of the Rings*, he was writing for consumers of an established and expected literary canon. Many of the classical and medieval texts that would have been commonly read in schools are now relegated to upper-level courses in higher education, rendering

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[18] Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), Part 2, "Birmingham".

[19] Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography;* Williams, *Tolkien and the Classical World*, "Tolkien the Classical Scholar".

[20] Williams, *Tolkien and the Classical World*, xvi.

them inaccessible to the general public. Although Tolkien famously insisted that his work should be consumed as a whole rather than stripped down to its individual components—better to enjoy the "soup," he claimed, than the "bones" that flavored it[21]—I remain of the opinion that deconstructing the "ingredients" that comprise the whole is the most productive avenue toward understanding the cultural implications of particular aspects of the text. Thus, in this paper I will not only examine Tolkien's unmortal women, but also the classical and medieval iterations of the figure which came before.

1.2.Why the classics?

As with many of the other aspects of Tolkien, it is possible to trace the conception of the unmortal woman backward through history. Many scholars have done just so with Tolkien's other influences, teasing out his source material in classical, medieval, religious, and myriad other reception studies. *The Lord of the Rings* was, and continues to be, a massive cultural phenomenon, and Tolkien's impact as a father of modern fantasy is undeniable. As the genre continues to evolve, however, so too do its readers and scholars. On this topic, Williams highlights the literary theory of Wolfgang Iser, who claims that a text itself is a lifeless (and meaningless) object until it becomes activated by a reader.[22] The problem that arises then is, of course, that no two readers are exactly

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[21] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tolkien: On Fairy-Stories*, ed. Douglas A. Anderson and Verlyn Flieger (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 39.

[22] Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 274-275.

alike, and that the interaction between text and reader reveals the "inherently dynamic character" of the literary work in question.[23] The larger the period of time grows between a work's publication and modernity, the more that the average reader's knowledge base and experience continues to change, and thus, the greater the potential grows for the reader to lose out on some of the particular nuances that the original author would have incorporated. It is evident that the foundations of the Legendarium—classical, medieval, and otherwise—are lost on many contemporary readers, particularly as these elements are increasingly considered to be less and less essential to the fantasy genre. In this thesis, I intend to bring this nuance back to the forefront. To return to the original roots of the text, and to explore the ways that they have shifted over time, is to reveal new, and perhaps lost, ways of reading not only Tolkien, but also those that came before.

The range of figures I examine here serves a similar purpose. We use classical and medieval texts to contextualize contemporary works, but in the same way, contemporary works may also be used to bring new context to the classics. I will demonstrate how Tolkienian figures such as Lúthien, Arwen, and Éowyn transcend the mortal/immortal binary in much the same manner as their predecessors. In drawing these connections, it is my goal to unearth a more nuanced perspective of the roles that Tolkien's heroines play within his narratives, and to challenge perceptions of gender in both Tolkien and the texts which influenced him. To accomplish this, I have selected several case studies to showcase the unmortal woman's appearances throughout classical and medieval literature. Rather than examining them chronologically, I have chosen to sort them into the three subcategories mentioned previously: women who traverse the literal, physical realms of life and death; women who undergo a transformation from mortal to immortal (or vice versa); and women who experience a metaphorical death and immortalization. In addition

[23] Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 275

to Tolkienian women, these categories will also feature figures who appear in classical and medieval literature. These categories are by no means exclusive or exhaustive, and as such I will also briefly discuss those unmortal women who are not so easily categorized. The unmortal woman may appear in literature in myriad ways, and several of the women I discuss may also fall into multiple, or even all three, categories. I have chosen to group them this way because it allows for the broadest strokes of comparison, and because I hope that these categories will prove effective in highlighting the ways that this archetype has evolved over time.

By drawing these connections between women in Tolkien and older texts, it is not my goal simply to prove the existence of classical and medieval influence on Tolkien as a writer—a fact which is already well known and indisputable. Rather, I wish to explore the reception of these influences, and in doing so, to show how the connections I have drawn serve to shed new light on the place of women within the Legendarium.

2. The Travelers: Lúthien, Alcestis, and Míriel

Perhaps the most obvious form that the unmortal woman takes is as a Traveler: she who physically journeys between the worlds of the living and the dead. In Tolkien, we see this in several Elven characters—contrary to wide belief, the Elves' "immortality" actually exists in the form of cyclical reincarnation. The Elves are not incapable of dying; rather, they cannot die of sickness or old age, but they can be killed. Should this happen, their *fëa* (soul) becomes separated from their *hröa* (body) and is called to the halls of Mandos for judgment.[24] After a period, the *fëa* may become re-embodied and return to physical life in Arda, should Mandos deem them worthy to do so.[25] As a realm of bodiless spirits ruled by a Keeper of the Dead, Mandos may naturally be likened to the underworld. The two Tolkienian women whom I will discuss in this section are Lúthien Tinúviel, the elf-princess of the famous Beren and Lúthien tale, and Míriel Serindë, mother of the tragic king Fëanor. Not only do both of these women travel between the worlds of the living and the dead, but they do so in unique ways which set them apart from any other Elf's typical "death" and reincarnation.

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[24] Also called the Halls of Awaiting. The Vala Mandos (also called Námo) is one of the two Fëanturi, or "Masters of Spirits." He is the Doomsman of the Valar and keeper of the Houses of the Dead. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York, NY: Del Rey Books, 2002), 19.

[25] Arda is essentially Earth within the larger universe of Eä.

2.1.Lúthien

In *The Silmarillion*, the chapter "Of Beren and Lúthien," is in fact a prose "re-telling" of Tolkien's unfinished poem "The Lay of Leithian."[26] Although the work was never actually completed, it is considered to be the original version of Lúthien's tale. The story goes that Lúthien's father, Thingol, is so appalled that his daughter wishes to marry Beren, a mortal man, that he sets Beren an impossible task in order to win Lúthien's hand: to steal a Silmaril from the Iron Crown of the dark lord Morgoth himself. Against her father's wishes, Lúthien sets out to help Beren with this task, and, after many trials and tribulations, the two of them eventually succeed in stealing the Silmaril together. In the process, however, Beren is mortally wounded, and he dies shortly after their return. Overcome by her love for Beren, Lúthien's *fëa* departs from her body:

> The spirit of Beren at [Lúthien's] bidding tarried in the halls of Mandos, unwilling to leave the world, until Lúthien came to say her last farewell upon the dim shores of the Outer Sea, whence Men that die set out never to return. But the spirit of Lúthien fell down like a flower that is suddenly cut off and lies for a while unwithered on the grass. […] [Then] Lúthien came to the halls of Mandos […] [where] those that wait sit in the shadow of their thought. But her beauty was more than their beauty, and her sorrow deeper than their sorrows; and she knelt before Mandos and sang to him.[27]

Rather than being killed in battle and forcibly separated from her *hröa*, Lúthien's love for Beren compels her to willingly follow his spirit to Mandos. There, the song she sings is so powerful that

[26] J.R.R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien, *The Lays of Beleriand*, vol. 3 (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2015), 183-374.

[27] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York, NY: Del Rey Books, 2002), 221.

it moves Mandos himself to pity. He recalls Beren's spirit, and together, Beren and Lúthien are permitted to return to Middle-earth to live out the remainder of a mortal lifetime.

Lúthien's arc demonstrates a surprising level of feminine power and agency. Although she may seem in the beginning of the tale to embody the role of simple love-object—a prize for Thingol to offer and for Beren to win—Lúthien is plainly the heroine of her story. It is she who defies her father's patriarchal demands, going so far as to break free from the tower he imprisons her in Doriath; it is she who rescues Beren from his own imprisonment by Sauron; it is she alone who creates the distraction necessary for Beren to cut the Silmaril free from Morgoth's crown. Lastly and ultimately, it is her own sacrifice which makes possible Beren's resurrection.

Lúthien's journey between the living world of Arda and the halls of Mandos cements her role as an unmortal woman and, in the process, cements her unique power as a heroine. It should also be emphasized that Lúthien's acts of heroism are largely connected to traditionally feminine actions. Her power lies in her singing and dancing, weaving, and in her beauty itself. Tolkien goes to specific lengths to emphasize her feminine power when he invokes the traditional Rapunzel tale during Lúthien's escape from Doriath. She first uses her "arts of enchantment" to cause her hair to grow to great length. Then, she uses it to weave two things: a shadowy cloak which allows her to appear supernaturally hidden, and a long rope which she uses to escape from the window of the tower in which she is imprisoned. Both of these items are imbued with a sleeping spell, which she uses to lull the guards at the bottom of her tower into slumber.[28] The emphasis on Lúthien's hair as an instrument of power in this Rapunzel-tale underlines the importance of bodily autonomy. It is also not the only place in the Legendarium where a female character's agency is connected to

[28] Tolkien, *Silmarillion,* 203.

her hair; we see this again when Galadriel gives three strands of her golden hair to the dwarf Gimli: an incomparable gift, and one which she had previously refused three times to give to her uncle, the Noldorin king Fëanor.[29] Lúthien utilizes her own bodily processes as a means of personal agency, and as a result saves not only herself, but also Beren. The physicality of her abilities also lends power to her "human-ness": Lúthien is capable of magical arts of enchantment, but the ways that she uses them—singing, dancing, transforming, shape-shifting, weaving—are all strongly physical actions involving use or manipulation of the body in some way.[30] The combination of her supernatural abilities (decidedly non-human) and her physical body is another way of blurring the line between Lúthien as mortal and as immortal.

Further, Lúthien's role as a Traveler is not limited to her journey from Arda to the halls of Mandos. Her story consists of a series of descents and escapes: from Doriath, to Tol-in-Gaurhoth, to the depths of Morgoth's fortress Angband, and finally to Mandos, Lúthien's entire tale is a sort of slow *katabasis*. When Beren first falls in love with Lúthien, he sees her dancing in the woods in Doriath:

> There came a time near dawn on the eve of spring, and Lúthien danced upon a green hill; and suddenly she began to sing. Keen, heart-piercing was her song as the song of the lark that rises from the gates of night and pours its voice among the dying stars, seeing the sun behind the walls of the world; and the song of Lúthien released the bonds of winter, and the frozen waters spoke, and flowers sprang from the cold earth where her feet had passed.[31]

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[29] In *Unfinished Tales*, it is told that Fëanor asked Galadriel three times for one strand of her hair to use in his crafting, and she refused him each time. Yet, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gimli was respectful to her, and she offered him three just because he thought that they were beautiful.

[30] Cami D. Agan, "Lúthien Tinúviel and Bodily Desire in the Lay of Leithian," in *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie A. Donovan (Altadena, CA: Mythopoeic Press, 2015).

[31] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 194.

Here, at the very beginning of Lúthien's tale, great emphasis is placed on the magic and beauty of new life. She dances near dawn on the eve of spring; her song is likened to that of a lark, which sings in the earliest hours of the morning; new flowers grow wherever she passes. Lúthien's voice in particular is an important source of her power. Thus, it is notable that, after Beren first departs on his impossible journey, Lúthien ceases to sing: "[F]rom that hour she sang not again in Doriath. A brooding silence fell upon the woods, and the shadows lengthened in the kingdom of Thingol."[32] Meanwhile, Sauron himself begins his own song:

> He chanted a song of wizardry,
> Of piercing, opening, of treachery,
> Revealing, uncovering, betraying.[33]

The transfer of song here is used to indicate the transfer of power[34]—and, if Lúthien at the beginning of her tale represents life, then her yielding of power to Sauron represents the beginning of her journey from the world of the living to that of the dead. The next time Lúthien sings, it is on the bridge before Tol-in-Gaurhoth where Beren is imprisoned. Her journey into the blackness of Sauron's Isle mirrors a descent into the underworld, and after she escapes with Beren, flowers once again begin to spring up wherever she walks.[35] But the story does not end there. Together Beren and Lúthien descend once again as they travel to Angband for their final confrontation with Morgoth.

> They passed through all perils, until they came with the dust of their long and weary road upon them to the drear dale that lay before the Gate of Angband. Black chasms opened beside the road, whence forms as of writhing serpents issued. On either

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[32] Tolkien, *Silmarillion,* 198.

[33] Tolkien, *Silmarillion,* 201.

[34] Jon Michael Darga, "Tolkien's Women: The Medieval Modern in The Lord of the Rings," *University of Michigan Library* (2014), https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/107711, 19.

[35] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 207.

> hand the cliffs stood as embattled walls, and upon them sat carrion fowl crying with fell voices.[36]

This vivid imagery starkly opposes the magical flowers and lush greenery that characterize Lúthien at peace. Further, this particular descent is followed by a literal ascent: Beren and Lúthien are rescued from the depths of Angband by eagles, who bear them skyward through the clouds. Beren nearly dies here, with his spirit "[wandering] upon the dark borders of death," but he ultimately recovers to find Lúthien singing to him.[37] The descent and return from Angband, with Beren's near-death, foretells Lúthien's final descent into Mandos, where she "dies" for love and returns a mortal woman.

2.2.Alcestis

Looking back to the classical tradition, Lúthien's tale possesses remarkable similarities to the story of Alcestis: the only mortal woman to have made the journey to the underworld and returned.[38] [39] Perhaps the most famous account of her story is told in Euripides' play *Alcestis*. His earliest surviving work, dating back to 438 B.C., *Alcestis* itself blurs nearly as many boundaries as its namesake. To begin with, the question of genre when it comes to *Alcestis* remains a long-

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[36] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 212.

[37] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 216.

[38] Sue Blondell et al., eds., *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 96.

[39] I am not the first scholar to draw this comparison; Gloria Larini analyzes both Lúthien and Arwen in comparison with Alcestis. See Gloria Larini, "To Die for Love: Female Archetypes in Tolkien and Euripides," in *Tolkien and the Classics*, ed. Roberto Arduini, Claudio A. Testi, and Giampaolo Canzonieri (Zürich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2019), pp. 25-34.

standing subject of debate. In the play, the Thessalian king Admetus is given the opportunity to escape his fated death—but only should he find someone willing to die in his stead. In the end, the only person willing to do so is his wife, Alcestis. She lays down her own life for love of her husband, and with the help of the hero Heracles, she returns to the world of the living at the end of the play.

Despite its serious subject matter—a somber exploration of death, loss, and mourning—Euripides chose to stage this play in the fourth position of the tragic tetralogy. Under typical circumstances, this position was occupied by a satyr play.[40] *Alcestis*, which does not quite fit the box of either tragedy *or* comedy, or even "tragicomedy," as some call it, has thus been dubbed "pro-satyric" by scholars ("taking the place of a satyr play").[41] Like Alcestis herself—and like Lúthien—the play is situated between opposite extremes, further emphasizing her transgressive role in a transgressive narrative.

At its heart, *Alcestis* is a story about the divisions between life and death, mortal and divine. This core theme, which is, of course, shared with the Legendarium, is strongly emphasized by the setup of the tale. Admetus' opportunity to escape death is granted to him by Apollo, who grew fond of the king after spending a year as his servant in punishment for a feud with Zeus. That feud began when Zeus killed Apollo's son Asclepius, a healer who had the ability to bring the dead back to life. Zeus was angered by this ability, believing that it would eliminate the division between gods and mortals. Thus, it is notable that Alcestis's story culminates in her return to life: the very

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[40] The satyr play was a genre of ancient Greek drama which would blend elements of both tragedy and comedy. Their defining feature was a chorus comprised of satyrs, who would wear indecent costumes emphasizing the phallus, and make raunchy, inappropriate jokes and commentary.

[41] Mary R. Lefkowitz et al., *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides* (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2017), 439.

debate which sets the rest of the tale in motion comes full circle in the end, with Alcestis transcending the division between not only life and death, but also the mortal and the divine. Although Admetus is the one given the chance to escape death, he never actually crosses its boundary in the same way as Alcestis. He is not the Traveler; she is the one who holds all the power in their exchange, and it is impossible for him to live without her sacrifice.

It is also important to consider that while Euripides' portrayal of Alcestis may be the most well-known version of her narrative, it is not the only one in existence. In Plato's *Symposium*, Heracles has no part in Alcestis's return from the underworld. Instead, Hades and Persephone (the gods of the underworld) are so impressed by Alcestis's dedication to her husband that they allow her to go free.[42] In Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*, it is Persephone alone whose respect for Alcestis prompts her to free her.[43] [44] This version especially underlines the power of the unmortal woman, as all the power to transcend life and death lies in the hands of the women. Even the powerful song that Lúthien sings as she begs for Beren's life is an appeal for Mandos, a male deity-like figure, to grant her lenience. It is up to his discretion, his pity, to allow her and Beren to be reunited. When Persephone allows Alcestis to walk free from the underworld, she is, in a way, reasserting the agency which was taken from her in her own abduction.[45] It also grants more agency to Alcestis,

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[42] Plato, "Plato, Symposium," trans. Harold N. Fowler, Plato, Symposium, section 179c, n.d., http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg011.perseus-eng1:179c.

[43] Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Robin Hard (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 48.

[44] Although the *Bibliotheca* was compiled after Euripides' *Alcestis* was written, the tales that it contains are older. Thus, it is likely that Apollodorus' version of Alcestis' story, where Persephone is the one to free her, is a more "original" version. Euripides' decision to add Heracles may well have been due to the hero's popularity at the time. See Joshua J. Mark, "Alcestis," World History Encyclopedia (World History Encyclopedia, July 24, 2014), https://www.worldhistory.org/Alcestis/.

[45] Persephone became queen of the underworld after being abducted by Hades.

as Persephone's decision to free her is entirely owed to Alcestis's sacrifice and love for her husband, and emphasizes the relationship between two women. Indeed, this version of Alcestis' tale, as well as Plato's, serves to highlight the connections between Persephone and Alcestis. Persephone's abduction by and marriage to Hades leaves her to reside in the underworld—a symbolic "death," and one which mirrors Alcestis's situation. Admetus, too, is a name which shares a similarity to Adamastos, "the unconquerable one," and also a name for Hades.[46]

2.3.Míriel

Unlike Lúthien and Alcestis, whose heroic sacrifices are more obvious, the Elven woman Míriel Serindë's brush with death comes with more unconventional—and potentially more selfish—circumstances. This makes her an especially interesting unmortal woman to consider. After giving birth to her only son, Fëanor, Míriel loses her will to live:

> But in the bearing of her son Míriel was consumed in spirit and body; and after his birth she yearned for release from the labour of living. And when she had named him, she said to Finwë [her husband]: 'Never again shall I bear child; for strength that would have nourished the life of many has gone forth into Fëanor.' […] She went then to the gardens of Lórien and lay down to sleep; but though she seemed to sleep, her spirit indeed departed from her body, and passed in silence to the halls of Mandos.[47]

Like Lúthien, Míriel's *fëa* is not forcibly separated from her *hröa*. Her husband, Finwë, does not want her to die; he still desires to have many more children, and it is he who delivers her to Lórien in the hope that she will find rest there, and that she might return to him refreshed and ready to

[46] Blondell, *Women on the Edge*, 96.

[47] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 65.

resume life as normal. It is Míriel herself who makes the decision to leave her *hröa* behind and go to Mandos. Indeed, her body remains in Lórien, and for a long time, Finwë lives on in sadness. "[He] went often to the gardens of Lórien, and sitting beneath the silver willows beside the body of his wife he called her by her names. But it was unavailing; and alone in all the Blessed Realm he was deprived of joy. After a while he went to Lórien no more."[48] Here the distinction of the unmortal woman as her own category separate from men becomes especially apparent. Where Lúthien descends again and again in pursuit of Beren, repeatedly crossing the boundary of life and death in order to save him, and where Alcestis specifically volunteers to die in order to save her husband, Finwë does not even attempt to follow Míriel to Mandos. The idea is never even presented as an option. Instead, he grieves for a while, but he eventually moves on, remarrying and going on to have the many other children he still desired. He no longer loves Míriel, giving his love instead to Fëanor and, later, to his new wife and other children.[49]

When considering Míriel's power as an unmortal woman, it is important to also consider the *transfer* of power between herself and her son, Fëanor. She gives so much of her strength to him that it leaves her too weary to go on living—and indeed, Fëanor goes on to become one of the strongest, and most infamous, figures in the Legendarium. It is he who crafts the Silmarils, and he whose stubbornness and pride ultimately results in several of the greatest tragedies in the history of Arda. Míriel almost seems to have some level of foreknowledge of this. When she first departs

[48] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 65.

[49] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 65-66.

for Lórien, leaving her son alone and knowing that she will not be there to help raise him, she asks Finwë to "hold me blameless in this, and in all that may come after."[50]

Míriel's story is complex, and in the end it may be viewed in a number of ways. Her utter weariness after giving birth to Fëanor might be read as an exploration of the post-partum depression that many women experience following childbirth. It also might, however, be read as an extreme example of wielding the bodily autonomy that Lúthien also demonstrates. Indeed, Míriel is explicitly likened to Lúthien in a several small ways: her mother-name, Serindë, *Broideress*, was given to her "because of her surpassing skill in weaving and needlework; for her hands were more skilled to fineness than any hands even among the Noldor."[51] She was also known for her sweet, soft singing while working.[52] Míriel openly states after giving birth to Fëanor that she does not want to have any more children. Her husband, however, still desires many more.[53] This means that, despite the previous strength of their love, they are no longer compatible in this respect. Though Finwë does take actions to help Míriel and attempts to change her mind before her passing, her decision to pass to Mandos—and to remain there—can be read as her way of asserting her own agency and bodily autonomy. Míriel does not return to her *hröa* until many years later, after the death of Finwë.[54] Regardless, it is her position as an unmortal woman which gives

[50] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 65.

[51] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 64.

[52] Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring*, 257.

[53] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 65

[54] J.R.R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien, *The Peoples of Middle-Earth*, vol. 12 (London: Harper Collins, 2015), "The Shibboleth of Fëanor."

her the power to make this decision; as she disrupts the boundary between life and death, she also disrupts the expected bounds of traditional femininity.

3. The Shifters: Arwen and Psyche

The Shifter is the unmortal woman who undergoes a transformation from immortal to mortal, or vice versa. In Tolkien, the most obvious example comes in the form of Arwen Undómiel, Lady of Rivendell, and the eventual wife of the mortal king Aragorn. Arwen's story is clearly intended to be compared to Lúthien's: not only is Arwen a descendent of Lúthien, described in appearance as "the likeness of Lúthien [come] on earth again," but her star-crossed love story with Aragorn also makes a neat parallel to that of Beren and Lúthien. [55] Like Lúthien, Arwen ultimately gives up her immortality for love. She does not, however, physically travel between the mortal world and Mandos as Lúthien does. Where Lúthien's character hinges on her multiple heroic descents and escapes, Arwen's most defining character moment is her willing transformation from immortal to mortal.

3.1.Arwen

In the main text of *The Lord of the Rings*, Arwen is largely absent. She does not receive anywhere near the same amount of page time as Lúthien does in "Of Beren and Lúthien," and many of her appearances are in passages that praise her physical beauty rather than her actions, comparing her appearance to that of Lúthien. In spite of film-only embellishments that would

[55] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 221.

suggest otherwise, she is also not an outwardly "badass" character—she cannot be found wielding a sword or riding into battle, or even overcoming foes using more traditionally feminine magics à la Lúthien.[56] She desires to get married and to have children, and she is willing to make immeasurable sacrifices to do so. For this reason, she is often held up as the least feminist of Tolkien's female characters. It is easy for some to write her off as nothing more than the motivation for Aragorn's own heroic character arc, claiming that her main function in the narrative has more to do with her absence than with her presence. To do so, however, is also to dismiss the many and varied ways that it is possible to be a feminist, and to diminish the strength and validity of Arwen's own choices.

The full text of Aragorn and Arwen's tale is only found in the appendices at the end of *Return of the King*, which are made up of additional material which Tolkien could not fit into the main story. In this tale, we are afforded a much clearer view of Arwen as a character, her choices, and her reasoning behind them than in her meager part in *The Lord of the Rings*. At the very end of their life together, as Aragorn is on his deathbed, he tells her:

> 'The uttermost choice is before you: to repent and go to the Havens and bear away into the West the memory of our days together that shall there be evergreen but never more than memory; or else to abide the Doom of Men.'[57]

But Arwen's choice has long since been made, and Tolkien writes here that at last "she tasted the bitterness of the mortality that she had taken upon her."[58] Arwen's feminine power is inextricably

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[56] In Peter Jackson's *Fellowship of the Ring* adaptation, Arwen takes on the textual role of the Elf warrior Glorfindel when she comes to rescue Strider and the hobbits from the Nazgûl riders. She is also the one to raise the Bruinen river against the riders, where in the book, it is her father Elrond who does this.

[57] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings,* 1037.

[58] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1037.

tied to her loss; to her transition from immortal to mortal. From the moment she and Aragorn pledge their love to one another in Lothlórien, years before the events of *The Lord of the Rings* ever take place, Arwen's immortal life is forsaken.[59] What cements her role as an unmortal woman is the reason that drives her transformation: Arwen loves Aragorn; she desires a future with him; and she does what is necessary to achieve her goals. In making her decision, she not only asserts her power over her own life, but becomes a part of the eucatastrophe which saves Middle-earth.[60] Like Míriel with Fëanor, Arwen seems to have some level of foresight of the roles that she and Aragorn will play in the story to come:

> And Arwen said: 'Dark is the Shadow, and yet my heart rejoices; for you, Estel [Aragorn], shall be among the great whose valour will destroy it. […] I will cleave to you, Dúnadan, and turn from the Twilight [immortal life in the West]. Yet there lies the land of my people and the long home of all my kin.'[61]

Again, some may be tempted to dismiss Arwen's role here as nothing more than the inspiration for Aragorn's heroism. To do so, however, is to ignore the reality that without her, Aragorn never would have been able to become a hero in the first place.

In *Unsung Heroes of The Lord of the Rings*, Lynnette Porter describes Arwen as a "visionary": one who has a specific vision for Middle-earth and knows what she must do to achieve it. She is also someone whose mystic qualities (her foresight and the ability to motivate others to complete their own quests) makes her an "inspirational hero."[62] This foresight lends even more

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[59] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1036.

[60] "Eucatastrophe" is a term coined by Tolkien, meaning "good catastrophe," or "the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears" (Tolkien, *Letters,* Letter 89). For further context, see "On Fairy-stories."

[61] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1035-1036.

[62] Lynnette R. Porter, *Unsung Heroes of "The Lord of the Rings": From the Page to the Screen* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 115.

weight to Arwen's sacrifice, as it further indicates that she is not giving up her immortality wholly for Aragorn's sake, but for her own—and for that of Middle-earth. Additionally, Nancy Enright points out in "Tolkien's Females and the Defining of Power" that this paradoxical "power through the abdication of power" holds a distinctly Christ-like quality.[63] While Tolkien self-admittedly detested allegory, and he certainly did not write one into *The Lord of the Rings*, the choices that Arwen makes to prioritize love and loyalty over longevity do lend her a distinct kind of power, one which Tolkien clearly valued, and which is emphasized again and again throughout the Legendarium.

The effects of Arwen's choice, and her pattern of sacrifice for love, continue to be seen long after it has been made. We see it exemplified once again at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, when Arwen offers her passage to the West to Frodo:

> But the Queen Arwen said: 'A gift I will give you. For I am the daughter of Elrond. I shall not go with him now when he departs to the Havens; for mine is the choice of Lúthien, and as she so have I chosen, both the sweet and the bitter. But in my stead you shall go, Ring-bearer, when the time comes, and if you then desire it. If your hurts grieve you still and the memory of your burden is heavy, then you may pass into the West, until all your wounds and weariness are healed.'[64]

This action does multiple things. First, it places Arwen in the powerful position of gift-giver, not for the first time in the narrative. This is a role filled by several powerful Tolkienian women, and one drawn from classical and medieval traditions. Mac Fenwick writes in his article "Breastplates of Silk: Homeric Women in *The Lord of the Rings*" that Galadriel mirrors both Circe and Calypso

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[63] Nancy Enright, "Tolkien's Females and the Defining of Power," in *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie A. Donovan (Altadena, CA: Mythopoeic Press, 2015).

[64] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 952-953.

in this way, as all of these women shelter and provide gifts to the hero or heroes which will help them on their journey.[65] Leslie A. Donovan also writes of the significance of Tolkienian women as gift-givers, linking the practice to the legendary figure of the Germanic Valkyrie.[66]

An earlier example of Arwen as both gift-giver and inspirational hero comes in the form of the jeweled standard that she makes for Aragorn, which directly contributes to the turning of the tide at the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. She sends it to him in a moment when all seems like it may be lost, shortly before he departs on his journey through the Paths of the Dead. *"The days are now short,"* she says in the message she has Halbarad deliver to him. *"Either our hope cometh, or all hope's end. Therefore I send thee what I have made for thee."*[67] Aragorn carries the banner with him as he calls upon the Army of the Dead and vanquishes the Corsairs of Umber, taking over their fleet. Then, just as Gondor's defeat seems imminent, he arrives with his men on the captured ships of the Corsairs, Arwen's banner fluttering from the mast. The immediate surge of hope and joy is palpable as the Rohirrim realize that all is not lost:

> Behold! Upon the foremost ship a great standard broke, and [there] flowered a White Tree, and that was for Gondor; but Seven Stars were about it, and a high crown above it, the sign of Elendil that no lord had borne for years beyond count. And the stars flamed in the sunlight, for they were wrought of gems by Arwen daughter of Elrond; and the crown was bright in the morning, for it was wrought of mithril and gold. Thus came Aragorn son of Arathorn, […] and the mirth of the Rohirrim was a torrent of laughter and a flashing of swords, and the joy and wonder of the City was a music of trumpets and a ringing of bells.[68]

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[65] Mac Fenwick, "Breastplates of Silk: Homeric Women in The Lord of the Rings," *Mythlore* 21, no. 3 (1996): pp. 17-50, 17.

[66] Donovan, "Valkyrie Reflex."

[67] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 758.

[68] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 829.

Although Aragorn is the one bearing the standard, the fact that Arwen is the one who made it and who gave it to him is of great importance. It is emphasized several times, by Arwen ("I send thee what I have made for thee"), by Halbarad ("It is a gift that I bring you from the Lady of Rivendell. [...] She wrought it in secret and long was the making"),[69] and by the narrative itself ("wrought of gems by Arwen daughter of Elrond"). Through her gift, she is directly responsible for the sudden lift of spirits which allows for the battle to be turned around, even without being physically present. This is also another connection between Arwen and Lúthien, as the work of their hands (weaving and artistry) become pivotal objects in heroic narratives.

In the case of Arwen and Frodo, however, the gesture of her gift-giving is even more significant. Her place aboard a ship to the West is an especially powerful gift because it once again emphasizes her position as a Shifter: the voyage signifies Arwen's last opportunity to hold onto her immortal life and family. The story has come to a close, and Arwen has nothing left to gain; thus, by not only giving up her passage, but giving it *to* Frodo, she asserts her choice for the final time—and also is able to offer salvation to someone else in the process. In her loss, she once again becomes even more powerful. Finally, in her transformation from immortal to mortal, Arwen not only asserts her own agency but completes her transformation from object to subject. This is best explained by turning to the classical world, where a mirror to Arwen may be found in the mortal-turned-goddess, Psyche, whose famous tale is told across three chapters of the Roman author Apuleius' novel *Metamorphoses* (or *The Golden Ass*).

[69] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 758.

3.2.Psyche

The youngest and fairest of three sisters, Psyche's beauty is said to be "so exceptional, so outstandingly radiant, that in the poverty of human speech it could not have its measure taken, could not even be approximately praised."[70] She is so beautiful that the common people actually treat her like a goddess, traveling just to look upon her and make offerings to her. In fact, they begin to worship her instead of Venus, the actual Roman goddess of love and beauty. This enrages Venus, so she orders her son, Cupid, to enact vengeance by forcing Psyche to fall in love with the most hideous, monstrous man possible. In a twist of fate, however, Cupid himself falls in love with Psyche instead.

For a time they live together in opulence in Cupid's palace, with one caveat: Cupid never shows Psyche his face. He visits her only in complete darkness, and he tells her that if she should ever look upon his face, she will never see him again. It does not take long for Psyche to grow suspicious of this, however. Her two older sisters, jealous of her wealth and doting husband, convince her that her mysterious lover is secretly a monster. They tell her to wait until he falls asleep that night and then lift a lamp in the darkness to look upon his face: if he is the monster they claim he is, she should cut off his head. That night, Psyche obeys—but when she lifts the lamp, she sees that her husband is no monster at all, but the god Cupid himself. In her shock and excitement, she accidentally spills hot oil from the lamp on his bare skin, waking him. He immediately flies away, betrayed. Psyche of course pursues Cupid, but he is locked away by his mother Venus, nursing his wound from the hot oil spill, so she does not find him. Instead she is

[70] Joel C. Relihan and Apuleius, *The Golden Ass: Or, A Book of Changes*, trans. Joel C. Relihan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 86.

found by Venus herself, who assigns Psyche a series of impossible trials: sorting enormous piles of mixed grains, collecting a strand of legendary Golden Fleece from a flock of monstrous sheep, bottling water from the river Styx, and even traveling to the underworld to ask Persephone for a share of her legendary beauty. After Psyche successfully completes all of the trials (with the help of Cupid, who has been assisting her from his sickbed) the finally-recovered Cupid intervenes with his mother and seeks the counsel of Jupiter. Jupiter then calls a divine assembly, where he convinces Venus to leave Psyche alone and offers Psyche ambrosia to turn her into a goddess. The tale culminates in Psyche's ascension from mortal to immortal, legitimizing her marriage to Cupid in the eyes of the world and the other deities.

Psyche's transformation is a reversal of Arwen's, but the connection between them is undeniable. The two tales even mirror one another in format, as they each take place outside of the larger narrative that contains them. This should not be mistaken as a sign of lesser importance, however. Tolkien explains in a letter that he considered the tale of Aragorn and Arwen to be "the most important of the appendices; it is part of the essential story, and is only placed so, because it could not be worked into the main narrative without destroying its structure."[71] For Psyche, her story is an interlude to the main plot of *The Golden Ass*, which is focused upon a totally separate main character named Lucius. The interlude is inserted as a story that Lucius overhears being told to someone else. However, just as Tolkien deems the tale of Aragorn and Arwen to be essential, so is the tale of Cupid and Psyche. The length and abruptness of the interruption calls attention to itself; indeed, the episode's positioning and difference in tone from the rest of the novel has made it a highly discussed subject among scholars. Many argue that Psyche's journey is intended to

[71] Tolkien, *Letters,* Letter 181.

serve as a mirror to that of Lucius's in the rest of *The Golden Ass:* a "parallel miniaturization" of the overall plot of the novel.[72] Susan L. Haskins claims, however, that to interpret Psyche only according to her relevance to Lucius's narrative is to disregard the importance of her femaleness altogether, and that a gendered reading reveals Psyche's role to be a demonstration of the importance of traditional marriage and family values.[73] Other interpretations include Psyche's story as an allegory for the journey of the soul, for the myth of Isis, or as a parallel child's coming of age story.[74] The most important thing about all of these different theories is their abundance: Psyche's tale may seem peripheral to Lucius's, but her very presence in the story demands attention and interpretation from the reader. For both her and for Arwen, the attention that their narrative formats command corresponds to their power within the narrative, and for the assertion of agency which comes alongside their respective transformations.

For Arwen, giving up her immortal life is not only a means of asserting her right to choose her own future—a mortal lifespan with Aragorn and their future children—and of making a heroic sacrifice for the good of Middle-earth, but also a way of defining her position as subject rather than object. Prior to her transformation, Arwen is almost reduced from an individual woman to simply the second coming of her ancestor Lúthien, just as Psyche is worshiped in place of Venus. Even Aragorn, the first time he sees Arwen in the woods of Rivendell, calls out to her saying, "*Tinúviel, Tinúviel!*."[75] She is looked upon as the faded image of Lúthien, a reminder of a story

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[72] Stephen Harrison, "Divine Authority in 'Cupid and Psyche': Apuleius Metamorphoses 6.23-24," *ANS 5 Authors, Authority, and Interpreters in the Ancient Novel*, 2006, pp. 172-185, 184.

[73] Susan L. Haskins, "A Gendered Reading for the Character of Psyche in Apuleius' Metamorphoses," *Mnemosyne* 67 (2014): pp. 248-269, 250, 265.

[74] Haskins, "A Gendered Reading for the Character of Psyche," 248-249.

[75] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1033.

long past. And while their choices do, indeed, end up mirroring one another's, Arwen's sets her apart from Lúthien. Where Lúthien makes the decision to forfeit her immortality in the sudden, emotionally fraught moment of Beren's death, Arwen is left with many years to ponder the choice she has made. Even in his final words to Arwen, Aragorn offers her once more the opportunity to change her mind: *"[R]epent,"* he says, *"and go to the Havens,"* but still Arwen remains unyielding.[76] Her individual choice leads to individual consequences, and her individual power makes possible her contribution to the eucatastrophe which saves Middle-earth. In transforming from immortal to mortal, Arwen becomes an agent of power in her own right.

Likewise for Psyche, her transformation from mortal to immortal is not only a means of legitimizing her marriage to Cupid, but it is equally a transformation from object to subject. In the beginning of Psyche's tale, she does not hold any power. While she is worshipped for her beauty, she is not truly treated as a human being *or* as a goddess:

> In the meantime, Psyche and that beauty of hers, everywhere acknowledged and admired, enjoys not one benefit from her loveliness and comeliness. All would gaze and all would praise, but not one single man—neither king, nor king's son, nor even the common man—comes forward as a suitor or seeks her hand in marriage. To be sure, they are astounded at the divine paradigm; but all are astounded as if at an image, a statue polished to perfection by some true artist's skill.[77]

In the Roman world, the distinction between "viewer" and "viewed" is a weighty thing. Just as ancient Greeks and Romans considered there to be a massive sexual power imbalance between "penetrator" and "penetrated," there is power in the act of sight (penetrating someone or something with your gaze). Varro, in his *de Lingua Latina*, draws a direct connection between sight and

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[76] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1037.

[77] Relihan, *The Golden Ass*, 89.

violence when he says that the verb *videō*, "I see," is derived from the noun *vis:* strength, power, or violence.[78] Although this linguistic connection is actually incorrect, David Fredrick points out that the very fact that Varro purported it says something about the way that ancient Romans viewed the world: to Varro, sight is the strongest of the five senses, and power is thus wielded by the viewer. Varro also associates "visual command of the natural world with the power of the male gaze to violate the female body."[79] Jonathan Walters takes this even further when he says that "[s]exual penetration and beating, those two forms of corporeal assault, are in Roman terms structurally equivalent."[80] When we consider Psyche's role as a visual object through this lens, her lack of agency is thrown into even sharper focus. Even once Cupid falls in love with Psyche and she moves into his palace, she does not yet hold any power in their relationship—she cannot see him! Removed from the pedestal of the common people, she remains the subject of Cupid's gaze, kept in darkness and isolation so that she cannot return it. It is only in the moment that she finally lifts her lantern and looks upon Cupid's face that Psyche becomes "sighted" and, thus, gains power of her own.

It is easy to dismiss the power in Psyche's transformation by claiming that she plays only a small role in it. After all, it is Cupid who helps Psyche succeed in the tasks that Venus sets her, and it is Jupiter who ultimately makes it possible for Psyche's apotheosis to happen at all. However, it is crucial to remember that the first step on the path toward Psyche's transformation

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[78] David Fredrick, *The Roman Gaze: Vision, Power, and the Body* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 1.

[79] D. Fredrick, *The Roman Gaze*, 2.

[80] Jonathan Walters, "Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 29-43.

happens in the moment that she becomes the viewer, thus asserting agency for herself. The actual transformation is the culmination of this process, as Psyche becomes the ultimate viewer, a goddess looking down upon mortals from the "height of heaven."[81] She is no longer worshiped in place of Venus, but respected in her own right, just as Arwen becomes recognized for her own deeds separate from Lúthien's. They have Shifted, and those who look upon them now do so *because* they are powerful.

[81] Relihan, *The Golden Ass*, 127.

4. The Martyrs: Éowyn, Juliana, and Camilla

While all three of the categories I am discussing in this paper have some overlap, the Martyr stands slightly apart from the previous two. Where the Traveler and the Shifter transcend the boundary of life and death in more tangible ways, this category leaves more room for metaphor: the Martyr is the unmortal woman who faces death and emerges from the encounter immortalized. Her immortalization need not be physical; she may live on in memory, celebrated for her strength or her deeds. The obvious Tolkienian example of this archetype is Éowyn, Shieldmaiden of Rohan.

4.1.Éowyn

Éowyn is frequently cited as the lone example of a strong female character in Tolkien. She seems to be the obvious choice on account of her ostensibly stereotypical "masculine" heroism; any casual viewer of Peter Jackson's film adaptations can call to mind the iconic image of Éowyn tossing aside her helmet, long blonde hair flying free, just after she beheads the flying steed of the Witch-king of Angmar. Éowyn longs to buck the traditional trappings of her station as a royal woman, wishing to go into battle alongside her kinfolk instead of remaining behind to rule in her uncle, the King Théoden's, absence. In *The Lord of the Rings*, she says, "For I am weary of skulking in the hills, and wish to face peril and battle. […] [I fear] a cage. To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or

desire."[82] As with many of the Legendarium's women, however, Éowyn's characterization is complex. She does not boil down to simply "a woman who desires to act like a male hero," nor do her traditionally masculine feats in battle negate her femininity. In fact, in several instances, we see in the text that Éowyn's male counterparts approve of and respect her for her abilities as a leader and soldier. King Théoden himself presents her with arms: "Éowyn knelt before [the King] and received from him a sword and a fair corslet," legitimizing her position as a defender of the people; on a separate occasion, Gandalf tells Éowyn's brother, Éomer, "[She has] a spirit and courage at least the match of yours."[83] Thus, Éowyn's identity as a woman has little bearing on her ability to wield power; rather, her position as the niece of King Théoden determines that her value as a noble leader outweighs her personal desire to fight in the thick of battle. When she disguises herself as a man to ride with the Rohirrim, it is not intended to hide the fact that she is a woman, but instead to hide the fact that she is Éowyn, the particular woman whom Théoden has forbidden to ride with him.[84]

Éowyn is a character whose femininity and masculinity are equally at play throughout her arc, and she is none the lesser for it; in fact, the boundary-blurring makes her stronger. This is especially evident in that famous moment where she stands between her dying uncle and the Witch-king, where her power is emphasized not only by her transcendence of the gender binary, but also by her symbolic transcendence of death. When the Witch-king claims that "No living man can hinder me," she laughs and responds:

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[82] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 766-767.

[83] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 512, 848.

[84] Donovan, "The Valkyrie Reflex."

> "But *no living man am I! You look upon a woman.* Éowyn I am, Éomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin [Théoden]. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him."[85]

She laughs in the face of one of the most threatening adversaries to appear in the text, only moments after he has threatened her with torture and eternal damnation. While her physical act of wielding a sword to slay the Witch-king may appear to be one of traditional heroism, her femininity is not without its influence. As her attack upon the Witch-king is in defense of Théoden and the people of Rohan, it can be argued that it is love (a traditionally feminine value) which gives her the power to act—here a blurring of boundaries between femininity and masculinity.

This moment is of key importance to Éowyn's position as an unmortal woman, as her facing the Witch-king on the battlefield is akin to her facing down death himself. The Witch-king is the leader of the undead Nazgûl, former kings of Men who have been corrupted by Sauron's Rings of Power. As a wraith, he himself exists in a state between life and death. The wraith's liminal existence does not, however, equal the power and agency of the unmortal woman. Where the unmortal woman wields power through the crossing of the mortal/immortal boundary, the wraith is trapped there against his will, the subject of necromancy or some other dark sorcery. He is a servant of his creator and possesses no agency of his own; if anyone's, the Witch-king serves to emphasize the power of Sauron. He represents the inverse of everything Éowyn might be as an unmortal woman. Further, it is often overlooked that, while Éowyn inarguably exhibits great bravery in riding to battle with the Rohirrim, disguised as Dernhelm, she also makes the final decision to do so out of desperation. When she removes her helmet, revealing her identity, Merry thinks: "Éowyn it was, and Dernhelm also. For into Merry's mind flashed the memory of the face

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[85] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 823 (emphasis mine).

that he saw at the riding from Dunharrow: the face of one that goes seeking death, having no hope."[86] She rides to battle hoping, in at least some deep part of her heart, to find death—and find him she does, in the form of the Witch-king.

For someone caught in the throes of suicidal ideation, this is an especially formidable foe, as he has the specific ability to manipulate her hopelessness. Tom Shippey emphasizes that "the Ringwraiths work for the most part not physically but psychologically, paralyzing the will, disarming all resistance,"[87] elaborating on Pippin's observation that the wraiths have the power to "[pierce] the heart with a poisonous despair."[88] Éowyn, who rides to battle already weighed down with grief, should be the perfect victim for the Witch-king's particular brand of evil. The protective nature of Éowyn's attack is crucial for Tolkien, however, and it is emphasized in her brief rhetorical battle with the Witch-king just before they come to actual blows. The fact that she herself is already hopeless matters little when it is her love for Théoden which drives her. Twice she commands him, saying, "Begone[!]" and "I will smite you, if you touch him."[89] Her surety is what dispels the Witch-king's psychological power over her. In his rhetorical analysis of this scene, Drout says that "Just as the sound of [Éowyn's] ringing sword begins to cut through the haze of fear generated by the Lord of the Nazgûl, so too does the parallel 'steel' of her voice shatter the supernatural malice of the monster as effectively as her eventual sword stroke."[90] This battle, and

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[86] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 823.

[87] T. A. Shippey and T. A. Shippey, "The Lord of the Rings (2): Concepts of Evil," in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), pp. 112-160, 125.

[88] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 791.

[89] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 823.

[90] Michael D.C. Drout, "Tolkien's Prose Style and Its Literary and Rhetorical Effects," *Tolkien Studies* 1 (2004): pp. 137-163, 154.

Éowyn's ultimate victory, is the overcoming of more than a villain: it is Éowyn's defeat of her own death, and the preservation of her "feminine" values—love, loyalty, protection—in the face of a stereotypically masculine clash of steel. Although the path to healing, both physically and mentally, after the battle is still long and arduous for Éowyn, her confrontation with the Witch-king is the first and most significant turning point in her recovery. In this, she has already become unmortal.

In slaying the Witch-king, Éowyn also fulfills a prophecy. A thousand years earlier at the Battle of Fornost, as the Witch-king fled from the advancing army of Rivendell, the Elf warrior Glorfindel warned, "Do not pursue him! He will not return to these lands. Far off yet is his doom, and not by the hand of man shall he fall."[91] The Witch-king is a foe so formidable that he has evaded more experienced warriors for centuries. Éowyn's victory over him is essential for the overall victory at the Battle of the Pelennor fields, and a deed that wins her great renown. She is never forgotten by her people, and is thenceforth remembered in the songs of the Mark as the Lady of the Shield-arm, since her arm was broken by the Witch-king's mace.[92] Although Éowyn does not literally become immortal, she clearly lives on in memory even after her physical death, thus transcending the line between mortal and immortal.

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[91] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1027.

[92] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1045.

4.2.Juliana

In the middle ages, an unmortal predecessor of Éowyn may be found in the Old English poet Cynewulf's *Juliana*. Juliana is a literal martyr; she is a Christian saint whose story appears in multiple other places, including Bede's *Martyrologies* and the *Acta Sanctorum*.[93] The story goes that, after her father promises her hand in marriage to a wealthy pagan suitor called Eleusias, Juliana refuses to marry him unless he converts to Christianity. Eleusias is deeply insulted by this and punishes Juliana for her rejection in a variety of gruesome ways, including stripping her naked and suspending her from a tree by her hair, whipping and beating her, and attempting to burn her in hot lead. He also throws her in prison, where she has a physical confrontation with the devil himself. Ultimately, when none of this abuse is successful at persuading Juliana to renounce her faith, Eleusias snaps and beheads her, for which she becomes a Christian martyr and a saint.

What makes Cynewulf's portrayal of Juliana particularly interesting is that he depicts her as a "full-fledged, warrior-like character in the Anglo-Saxon sense."[94] Unlike in other iterations of the tale, Cynewulf takes care to exaggerate both Eleusias' wickedness and Juliana's heroism in a number of ways, with the effect of heightening the poem's conflict to a cosmic battle between good and evil.[95] Most notably, Juliana's categorical refusal to marry Eleusias is bold and straightforward:

> Condemning it all, Juliana spoke a word amongst
> a multitude of men: "I can say to you that you need not

[93] Jill Frederick, "Warring with Words: Cynewulf's Juliana," in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. David Frame Johnson and Elaine Treharne (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 60-74, 61.

[94] Hiba Amro, "Re-Examining the Role of Women in Medieval Literature: Beowulf, Juliana, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as a Case Study," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 13, no. 2 (June 2021): pp. 342-357, 348.

[95] Frederick, "Warring with Words," 63.

> trouble yourself so greatly. If you adore and believe
> in the True God and exalt his praise, you would recognize
> the Comfort of Souls and I would immediately, without faltering,
> be prepared to submit to your desire. Likewise I say to you,
> if in fact you confide in an inferior god through devil-worship,
> or call to heathen idols, you cannot have me
> nor can you compel me to be your wedded wife.
> Never will you, through your violent spite,
> prepare so harsh pain of severe torments
> that you should turn me from these words.[96]

This is a departure from other versions of Juliana's tale. For example, in the *Acta Sanctorum*, she agrees to marry Eleusias if only he becomes a prefect—but, after he does so, she backtracks and demands that he then convert to Christianity as well.[97] In that version, it is her deceitfulness and manipulation which leads to her imprisonment and eventual beheading.[98] In Cynewulf's version, Juliana shares Éowyn's defiance and willingness to stand up to the men in her life. Not only does she defy her father and Eleusias, but a large portion of the poem is dedicated to her "battle of words" with the devil who comes to visit her while she is imprisoned. In "Warring with Words: Cynewulf's *Juliana*," Jill Frederick argues that, although Cynewulf does not outright describe Juliana as a warrior, her eloquence evokes the image of one: "she does battle, resists conquest, with her words."[99] This act of rhetorical battle is called *flyting*, and is a behavior enacted in other Old English poems. The ability to cut one's enemy down with words and logic is considered heroic—one might reference the quintessential Old English epic *Beowulf*, where the Danish shore-

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[96] Cynewulf, *Juliana*, trans. Aaron K. Hostetter, Old English Poetry Project, n.d., https://oldenglishpoetry.camden.rutgers.edu/juliana/, 44b-57.

[97] "Prefect" was a civil or military leadership title.

[98] Amro, "Re-Examining the Role of Women in Medieval Literature," 348.

[99] Frederick, "Warring with Words," 67.

guard who first challenges Beowulf and his men observes, "A man of keen wit who takes good heed will discern the truth in both words and deeds."[100] Juliana humiliates the devil both physically and intellectually, as she grabs hold of him and refuses to let him go until he has confessed the multitude of his sins.[101] By the end of their encounter, which goes on for several hundred lines, he is weeping and begging her for mercy:

> 'I entreat you, my lady Juliana, before the peace of God,
> to work me no further insult, no disgrace in front of these earls
> […]
> I know as truth that I have never met, before or since,
> in worldly realms a woman like you—more bold in your thoughts,
> nor more cross-timbered of all womankind!
> It is clear to me that you have become in all things
> unabashed and wise in mind.'[102]

This intellectual battle and Juliana's unquestionable defeat of the devil himself, combined with the way that Cynewulf adapts *Juliana* in the style of other Old English epics (especially *Beowulf*), suggests that he means for Juliana as a character to be viewed as a warrior heroine.[103]

Although Juliana's story is that of a Christian martyr—her strength and courage is largely tied to the strength of her belief in God and Christ as her savior—her story, especially Cynewulf's version, is clearly that of an unmortal woman. The heightening of her tale from a typical medieval *passio* to an epic warrior's narrative already raises Juliana's stakes in itself.[104] But Juliana's refusal

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[100] J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary, Together with Sellic Spell*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston & New York: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 21.

[101] Cynewulf, *Juliana*, 282b-286.

[102] Cynewulf, *Juliana*, 539-553a.

[103] The opening lines of *Juliana* directly mirror *Beowulf*'s, and the language that Cynewulf uses emphasizes and dramatizes the setting, evoking warlike, military imagery in the vein of poems like *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*. See Frederick, "Warring with Words," 65.

[104] The *passio* is a medieval genre of tales which tell the story of a saint's martyrdom.

to marry a suitor she does not wish to be with, and her desire to remain a virgin, are as much a rebellion against patriarchal constructs as they are a defense of her faith. It is two men—Juliana's father and Eleusias—who attempt to control her and subject her to the torture she goes on to endure; still, she defies them: "Condemning it all, Juliana spoke a word amongst / a multitude of men" (Cynewulf, *Juliana*, 44b-45). Just as Míriel elects to die rather than submit to a life of motherhood she does not desire, and as Éowyn rejects what is expected of her to instead pursue acts of physical valor on the battlefield, Juliana is willing to go to her death before relinquishing her agency and bodily autonomy.

As a Martyr, Juliana does not literally become immortal; like Éowyn, she is immortalized due to the strength of her deeds. Also like Éowyn, she overcomes death several times throughout her narrative. Most notably, after Juliana wins her battle of words with the devil and rejects Eleusias yet again, he attempts to kill her by burning her alive in hot lead:

> Swiftly then, Eleusias, swollen with rage, ordered the woman
> sinless and devoid of fault, to be shoved into the surging lead.
> Then the fire became separated and scattered.
> Lead burst wide, hot and hungry—Warriors were terrified, seized by the rush.
> There were in number five and seventy of the heathen host
> forburned through the searing sneeze.
> Yet Juliana the holy woman stood
> uninjured in her beauty. Nothing of her hem or garment,
> her hair or skin, was damaged by the fire,
> neither body or limb. She stood in the flames
> totally unharmed, saying thanks for all to the Lord of Lords.
> Then the deemer became stormy and mind-savage;
> he began to tear his clothes and bared and gnashed his teeth.
> He raged in his wits as if he were a wild beast,
> roaring sad-minded and cursing his gods,
> because their power could not withstand a woman's will.[105]

[105] Cynewulf, *Juliana*, 582-600a.

In this gruesome scene, seventy-five male warriors are killed by the burning lead intended for Juliana, while she stands "uninjured in her beauty" and "totally unharmed." It is also significant that, as Eleusias curses his gods for being unable to kill her, he does not accuse them of being too weak to overcome Juliana's Christian God, but rather of being too weak to "withstand a woman's will." Juliana's own strength gives her the ability to not only stand firm against Eleusias' abuse, but also to literally, physically escape death in an impossible scenario. In this moment, she is functionally immortal. Even once she is beheaded and finally killed, Eleusias does not prevail over her. He and his men are all killed and doomed to Hell, while Juliana lives on forever, immortalized in the tales of her martyrdom. While Juliana's narrative follows the typical strokes of a saint's tale, in which the martyr often experiences supernatural ways of escaping torture before they eventually succumb to death, Juliana's is different. Ostensibly she is holding firm for her love of Christ, but it is clear that her desire to retain some independence and some level of control over who she will marry also plays a large part in her defiance. Eleusias' punishment at the end of the tale serves to emphasize this, because it is yet another example of an unmortal woman overcoming the source of her oppression, even if it does result in her ultimate physical death.

4.3.Camilla

In the classical world, threads of both Éowyn's and Juliana's stories may be found in Vergil's *Aeneid*, in the form of the warrior maiden Camilla. Like Éowyn, Camilla is deliberately situated in between the two extremes of the traditionally fair and feminine royal woman, and the exaggeratedly masculine warrior woman. She is an especially important example of the unmortal

woman because of what she represents: an ancient example of a deliberately transgressive heroine. In ancient literature, warrior women were most frequently portrayed in a negative light. Women like the Amazon Atalanta and her warriors were deliberately "Othered," or distanced from "typical," idealized women and civilization, in an effort to reinforce stereotypical gender binaries and discourage women from the desire to break free from them—this despite the fact that women did, in fact, contribute significantly to ancient military campaigns. The common narrative erases the everyday woman's contributions to warfare, exaggerates the female warrior, and reduces her to a cautionary tale: the inversion of everything "woman," a barbaric anomaly who ultimately exists to be overcome by men. Camilla, however, is both Othered and not. Vergil does compare her outright to Atalanta and the Amazons, but he also takes care to separate her from them, emphasizing her femininity and her nationalism. Her portrayal in the *Aeneid* is curious, because it is clearly an intentional blurring of boundaries. By comparing Camilla to the Amazon while simultaneously subverting the expected tropes of the genre, he almost pokes fun at the unsubtlety of the stereotypical, mythologized warrior woman, perhaps even acknowledging that the Othered female warrior is unrepresentative of reality.

In Book 7 of the *Aeneid*, when Camilla makes her first appearance, she is described with a mixture of praise for her heroic qualities and her femininity. Her swiftness, a highly valued characteristic of male heroes, is emphasized, as Vergil says that she could have "skimmed the tips of grain that stood / In a field and never hurt the tender heads."[106] She is also explicitly likened to royalty, with special attention being drawn to the "royal splendor / Of purple on smooth shoulders"

[106] Vergil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Sarah Ruden (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 7.808-809.

and her golden hair adornment.[107] She also receives the epithet "Royal Camilla."[108] This is important because, of the real-life women who participated in ancient warfare, the contributions of royal women are some of the most well-documented. As the daughter of the Volscian King Metabus, Camilla *is* royalty—but she simultaneously fills the role of Othered Amazon warrior. In Book 11, we learn of her wild childhood, and that she was raised very similarly to the Amazon warriors of myth:

> In lonely heights, where shepherds live, [Metabus's] life passed.
> And there, among the thickets and the beasts' lairs,
> He milked a half-wild brood mare from the herd
> Into his daughter's tender lips to nurse her.
> And when the baby's first steps pressed to the ground,
> He placed a sharp spear in her hand and hung
> A bow and quiver from her tiny shoulder.
> Instead of a gold headband and a long robe,
> A tiger skin was on her head and back.[109]

This description does several things to Other Camilla. Firstly, it deliberately evokes the image of the "unsuckled" Amazon child, raised on animals' milk instead of a mother's breast milk. Secondly, it draws attention to her wild, foreign garb, as opposed to the headband and robe she wore when she was first introduced in Book 7. Camilla is a warrior, indeed, but she is also a woman—and not the savage, eroticized woman of the Amazonian myths, but a proper, idealized royal woman whom other, "regular" women might actually be able to look up to. Unlike other warrior women, Camilla's Othering does not limit her role to that of negative role model and is

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[107] Vergil, *Aeneid*, 7.814-815.

[108] Vergil, *Aeneid*, 11.498.

[109] Vergil, *Aeneid*, 11.569-577.

not entirely portrayed in a bad light. Thus, just as Éowyn is not derided by her people for her masculine aspirations, Camilla's fitting into multiple categories is a symbol of her transgressive role in a transgressive narrative. After she is struck down on the battlefield, her death becomes a rallying cry for the remainder of her allies:

> When Camilla fell, the fight grew raw. The whole force
> Of Trojans, Tuscan chiefs, and Evander's horsemen
> From Arcadia stormed massively together.[110]

Diana's spy, the goddess Opis, then watches Camilla fall and declares that she will be remembered forever for her bravery:

> But even at the end, your queen [Diana] won't leave you
> Unhonored. The whole world will praise your death
> And know you didn't shamefully lack vengeance.[111]

Also like Éowyn, Camilla does not literally become immortal; she becomes immortalized through her deeds. It is also important that, while Camilla does not ultimately survive, she nevertheless overcomes her confrontation with death. Arruns, the Etruscan warrior who kills Camilla, is representative of the typical deaths that fictional warrior women faced in ancient literature: those which served only to emphasize the strength of their masculine counterparts.

As negative role models for women, the strength of ancient female warriors would often be emphasized solely so that their inevitable defeats would carry more weight and glory for the male heroes who kill them. We see this in the poet Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Fall of Troy*, where the Amazon warrior Penthesilea is built up only for Achilles to effortlessly defeat her, lamenting the fact that he was "forced" to kill such a beautiful woman instead of taking her for a wife ("Yea, and

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[110] Vergil, *Aeneid*, 11.833-835.
[111] Vergil, *Aeneid*, 11.845-847.

Achilles' very heart was wrung / With love's remorse to have slain a thing so sweet, / Who might have brought her home, his queenly bride").[112] Camilla is certainly built up as a formidable warrior, but, unlike Penthesilea, she is never torn down—not even in death. When Arruns kills her, it is not easy for him; he knows he is no match for her hand-to-hand, so instead he stalks her, seeking his best opportunity to kill her dishonorably. [113][114] He is described as "sly" and "crafty" as he follows her, slinking across the battlefield as a coward.[115] Even after he successfully kills her, he is not praised for the accomplishment. He is portrayed in a negative light, terrified of retaliation from Diana and attempting to run from the battlefield like a dog with its tail between its legs,[116] and he is indeed struck down by Diana in punishment. Thus, although Camilla does not survive her encounter with Arruns, the circumstances surrounding her death are meaningful. Instead of being subject to the typical humiliation of the warrior woman—powerful, but never good enough to overcome a man—Camilla retains all of the characteristics which make her strong, without being reduced to a stereotype that only exists to be defeated. Thus, she is facing down, and defeating, more than her death, but a misogynistic stereotype of the warrior woman's fate. Vergil's portrayal of Camilla is deliberately confusing, flitting back and forth over the line between Othered and not. In the words of Alison Sharrock, "Vergil, with almost Ovidian playfulness, offers and retracts and

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[112] Quintus Smyrnaeus, "The Fall of Troy," trans. Arthur Sanders Way, Project Gutenberg, August 30, 2008, http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/658/pg658.html, 1.917-919.

[113] Vergil, *Aeneid,* 11.760-763.

[114] In *Fall of Troy*, it is said that Penthesilea is no match for Achilles: "She, for all her prowess, none the less / Would cost Achilles battle-toil as light, / As effortless, as doth the dove the hawk" (1.779-781).

[115] Vergil, *Aeneid,* 11.760, 11.765, 11.814.

[116] Vergil, *Aeneid,* 11.810-813.

offers again the temptation to read Camilla as an 'Amazon.'"[117] Her boundary-blurring nature is typical of the unmortal woman, situating her neatly within the archetype.

[117] Sharrock, "Warrior Women in Roman Epic," 165.

5. The Others: Galadriel, Hervör, and the Spiders

The unmortal woman is not limited to these three subtypes. It is undoubtedly possible to identify countless others, and, indeed, the three that I have identified do not perfectly encapsulate all of Tolkien's unmortal women. Many will fit into multiple categories—Lúthien, for example, possesses elements of both the Shifter and the Martyr in addition to the Traveler. Like the Shifter, she is transformed from immortal to mortal; like the Martyr, she is immortalized after her physical death in tales and songs, including the very "Lay of Leithian" from which we learn her story. But what about those women who are not suited to any of these subtypes—and those who *do* indeed blur the boundary between mortal/immortal, but without being considered unmortal?

5.1.Galadriel

The Elven lady Galadriel is one who exhibits characteristics of the unmortal woman, but whose relationship to death and immortality is complex, and not so easily categorized as those discussed previously. Like Arwen, Porter refers to Galadriel as a visionary and an inspirational hero;[118] she possesses certain levels of foresight and mystic qualities which enable her to inspire others on their own heroic journeys, furthering her visions of Middle-earth. The Lady of Lothlórien, bearer of the Elven-ring Nenya, and the grandmother of Arwen, Galadriel is described as the "greatest of Elven women," and she is inarguably one of the most powerful, important

[118] Porter, *Unsung Heroes of "The Lord of the Rings,"* 115.

women in the Legendarium.[119] A significant amount of her influence and agency may be attributed to the power that Galadriel exerts over the realms of death and immortality. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and the rest of the Fellowship are in awe of Galadriel and Lothlórien. Frodo perceives that she seems to have power over time—and thus, death—itself:

> 'But the wearing is slow in Lórien,' said Frodo. 'The power of the Lady is on it. Rich are the hours, though short they seem, in Caras Galadhon, where Galadriel wields the Elven-ring.'[120]

Although Galadriel was born in the Undying Lands, she has long dwelt in Middle-earth by the time Frodo and the company meet her. Through her power she is able to hold Lothlórien in suspension: her realm is, as much as is possible, a recreation of the undying Gardens of Lórien in Valinor (the very place where Míriel lay down to die). Even after the defeat of Morgoth at the end of the First Age, she chooses to remain in Middle-earth rather than return to Valinor.[121] In refusing to go into the West, Galadriel is refusing to surrender Lothlórien—the physical representation of her power—to the passage of time, and thus refusing to relinquish the power she holds over life and death. She is able to transcend the boundary as she wishes, making her an unmortal woman.

Another scene which exemplifies Galadriel's control over life and death is the moment in which Frodo offers her the One Ring. For her control over Lothlórien has an end in sight: should Frodo succeed in his quest to destroy the Ring, her own power will also fade.[122]

> 'And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the

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[119] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1057.

[120] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 379.

[121] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 305-306.

[122] The power of all other rings was "bound up" with the power of the One Ring, "subject wholly to it and only to last so long as it too should last." See Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 344.

> Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!'
>
> She lifted up her hand and from the ring that she wore there issued a great light that illuminated her alone and left all else dark. She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! She was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad. 'I pass the test,' she said. 'I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel.'[123]

In this moment, Galadriel stands on the brink of power and loss. She is faced with the choice to either take the Ring and increase her own power beyond measure, ensuring that she can stretch not only Lothlórien into timelessness, but all of Middle-earth… or to allow Frodo to proceed with his quest, thus solidifying her fate. The liminality of this moment is visually emphasized in Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, where she takes on a terrifying, wraithlike appearance, mirroring the way that the Nazgûl are portrayed as they attack Frodo at Weathertop. As Galadriel gives up the opportunity to become more powerful, however, she asserts control over her own self and life. She recognizes that to take the Ring from Frodo would actually mean yielding power to Sauron—and, although she would maintain some level of transcendence over life and death, it would no longer be in the way of the unmortal woman, but rather in the way of the Nazgûl, whose agency is not their own. The most important thing to note about Galadriel's decision is that it is willing. Where for thousands of years she has ruled and protected Lothlórien, she now chooses to relinquish her hold. This echoes the transformative and often sacrificial choices of many other unmortal women.

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[123] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 356-357.

5.2.Hervör

Indeed, Galadriel's liminal moment on the border of life and death is reminiscent of a much earlier character: the shieldmaiden Hervör from the Old Norse poem *Hervararkviða,* published in English as *The Waking of Angantýr*. In this poem, Hervör disguises herself as a man to go on a quest to visit her father Angantýr's barrow. Once there, she summons him and his eleven brothers from the dead and demands that he give her the sword he is buried with, Tyrfing (a cursed family heirloom). The shade of Angantýr is shocked and appalled by Hervör's actions, and as the barrow bursts into flames around them, he warns his daughter to return to her ship, leaving Tyrfing alone. He claims that the sword will be the ruin of all her future sons: "in the world walking / no woman know I / who would dare in her hand to hold this sword."[124] Hervör, however, is unafraid:

> No blaze can you light,
> burning in darkness,
> that your funeral fires
> should with fear daunt me;
> unmoved shall remain
> the maiden's spirit,
> though she gaze on a ghost
> in the grave-door standing.[125]

After much back-and-forth with her father, he finally surrenders the sword to her. The most notable part, however, is Hervör's own description of the moment she took Tyrfing for herself:

> I seemed to myself
> to be set between worlds,

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[124] Christopher Tolkien, ed., *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* (Toronto & New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1960), 35.

[125] C. Tolkien, *Saga,* 31.

> when all about me
> burnt the cairn-fires.[126]

This moment where she is "set between worlds"—between the worlds of the living and the dead—mirrors the moment where Frodo offers the ring to Galadriel. Both women take on a temporarily liminal existence, hovering between life and death as they contemplate taking on powerfully magical objects, which will in turn lend them both great power and ruin. Where Galadriel rejects the Ring and makes the decision to "diminish," Hervör gives in to the temptation to wield Tyrfing, thus dooming her future sons, just as her father has warned her. This does not necessarily lessen the power that she shows in the moment, however. Although the decision to take Angantýr's sword is perhaps selfish and ill-advised, she is still making a decision for herself and asserting power over her own life. In Galadriel's position, taking the Ring would have lessened her agency and placed her under Sauron's control. Hervör is fully informed of the consequences that wielding Tyrfing will bring. It is not that she believes she is somehow strong or clever enough to overcome the effect of the curse on her family—she simply does not care: "I care not at all / O kings' companion, / how my sons shall / strive hereafter."[127] She is not a "good" person, but there is still power in her fearlessness and strength of will.

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[126] C. Tolkien, *Saga,* 43.
[127] C. Tolkien, *Saga,* 40.

5.3.Shelob and Ungoliant

It is not necessary to be "good" to be an unmortal woman; the archetype is about feminine power and agency, regardless of what that power is used to accomplish. There are some characters, however, who transcend the boundary of life and death without being classified as unmortal. In Tolkien, two interesting examples of this are the monstrous spider-women Ungoliant and Shelob. It may seem odd at first to count these two among the rest of Tolkien's female characters, since they seem to be creatures above all else. Tolkien, however, makes a point to separate them from actual spiders: in *The Silmarillion*, Ungoliant is described as having "[taken the shape of] a spider of monstrous form"[128]; in *The Lord of the Rings* Shelob is referred to as "an evil thing in spider-form."[129] In addition, Fenwick writes that Shelob's gender is deliberately emphasized; Tolkien wants for her to be read not simply as a monster or as a woman, but as a female monster.[130] He makes this obvious even through the simplicity of her name, which begins with "She." Both of these spider-women hover somewhere between mortal and immortal: they are certainly larger than life, and they are immortalized through tales of terror rather than the songs of heroes. The most important thing about them both, however, is the emphasis on their roles as both mother and killer. After Ungoliant flees at last from Morgoth, she makes a new home in Nan Dungortheb—a valley thereafter called "the Valley of Dreadful Death, because of the horror that she *bred* there."[131] Indeed, her breeding is one of the most terrifying things about her:

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[128] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 78.

[129] Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings,* 707.

[130] Fenwick, "Breastplates of Silk," 20.

[131] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 87 (emphasis mine).

> For other foul creatures of spider form had dwelt [at Nan Dungortheb] since the days of the delving of Angband, and she mated with them, and devoured them; and even after Ungoliant herself departed, and went whither she would into the forgotten south of the world, her offspring abode there and wove their hideous webs.[132]

Not only is Ungoliant a progenitor of new and monstrous life, but she is equally its destroyer, as she consumes her mates and offspring alike. The surviving offspring continue the cycle, stretching Ungoliant's legacy into perpetuity. And indeed, Shelob—the last remaining daughter of Ungoliant by the time of *The Lord of the Rings*—follows precisely in her mother's footsteps, existing in an endless cycle of reproduction and consumption. Miller and Miller describe her as a "maternal monster, a nightmare of unceasing reproduction rendered in and as violence, negation, and death rather than generation."[133] In this way, they do exert some control over the boundaries of life and death in the way of Galadriel, representing a similar, but ultimately adjacent, level of transcendence to the other unmortal women.

Curiously, both spider-women have some similarities to Tolkien's other unmortal women. They may both be compared to Lúthien, with the emphasis on their roles as weavers; Tolkien describes the webs that litter Shelob's lair as "spun" and "densely woven," thus explicitly drawing to mind the physical art forms of spinning and weaving.[134] Ungoliant weaves webs of both darkness and rope in *The Silmarillion*.[135] Some have also argued that Shelob is the opposite of

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[132] Tolkien, *Silmarillion,* 87

[133] Miller, "Tolkien and Rape," 140.

[134] Darga, "Tolkien's Women," 22.

[135] Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 78.

Galadriel.[136] But despite these similarities, they ultimately do not fit the criteria for the archetype. Although both Shelob and Ungoliant transcend the bounds of life and death—in quite exaggerated ways—their transcendence does not represent agency or power, but rather the opposite. The spider-women are driven by their hunger and their instincts, similarly to the way that the Nazgûl are transcendent creatures that represent power for a master (Sauron) rather than for themselves. While Shelob and Ungoliant do not serve Sauron or Morgoth (their partnerships are more symbiotic than slave-master), they also do not truly serve themselves. Like the Ringwraiths, the spider-women stand in stark contrast to the unmortal woman, who crosses the border of death and immortality with power and purpose; and like any villain, they serve to magnify the heroines. Their very existence proves that while it is certainly possible to disturb the foundational binary of life and death in the service of others, the result is monstrous, terrifying rather than heroic. Again, I would emphasize that to be an unmortal woman does not necessarily mean that one must be "good"—Hervör's self-serving desire to wield Tyrfing at the cost of her family's lives is certainly evil—the distinction lies in the fact that she is making her choice in the service of herself rather than of someone else.

5.4.What About Unmortal Men?

There is an obvious question readers may ask, and which I have yet to address: what about unmortal men? Certainly, there are male characters in the Legendarium (and elsewhere) who are forever remembered for heroic deeds, or who cross the mortal/immortal boundary in some other

[136] Fenwick, "Breastplates of Silk," 20.

way; for example, Beren, who is immortalized alongside Lúthien in "The Lay of Leithian," or Elrond and Elros Half-elven, who are each given the choice by the Valar to live immortal Elven lives or to accept the Gift of Men. Even Heracles in Euripides' version of Alcestis' tale travels to the underworld and back on his journey to retrieve her. So what, then, makes his journey different from hers? In the same way that women exist (i.e. Ungoliant and Shelob) who may transcend the mortal/immortal boundary without being classified as unmortal, the critical difference lies in what these transcendent encounters represent. For all of the unmortal women whom I have discussed in this paper, their status as unmortal represents the overcoming of boundaries and expectations, the seizing of agency, and the wielding of feminine power. Lúthien, for example, is arguably a "powerful" figure prior to her journey to save Beren—she is royalty, after all, the daughter of a king. But despite being born into an inherently powerful position, Lúthien exhibits no real agency of her own *until* she makes the decision to defy her father's orders, thus setting off the series of descents and returns that make up her journey to save Beren. While Beren is immortalized alongside her in tales and songs, that immortalization is not representative of power or agency on his part; rather, his tale is dependent upon Lúthien, and without her he would have failed several times over. The same may be said for Míriel choosing death as a means of asserting her own bodily autonomy; for Arwen, sacrificing her own immortality in order to seize the future she desires for herself, as a mortal wife and a mother, instead of the lonely, ageless life her father wants for her; for Éowyn, going willingly to her own death on the battlefield only to overcome him.

These women, in transcending the boundary between mortal and immortal, all overcome barriers that are traditionally imposed upon women. When Éowyn says that she fears a cage, she is referring to the gilded cage of femininity. Despite the fact that her people individually may not look down on her because she is a woman, it is still traditionally misogynistic constructs that

imprison her. Théoden does not allow her to ride to battle because he needs her to stay behind and act as a leader, protecting and caring for those women and children who cannot fight. Certainly, this is a necessary, even heroic role to play—yet, Éowyn would never have been immortalized in song for doing so, unlike the men who went to fight. By defying her uncle's orders, she also defies the expectations placed upon her by society.

6. Conclusion

Ultimately, the unmortal woman is important because she represents long-standing attempts to challenge the ways that women and femininity are represented in literature; she is an enduring figure that has served an enduring purpose. The older iterations of the archetype that I have discussed here prove not only that this transgressive figure has existed for centuries, but also suggest that the inclusion of numerous unmortal women throughout the Legendarium is unlikely to be coincidental. As an established scholar of both classical and medieval texts, the unmortal woman is a figure that Tolkien was almost certainly familiar with, even if he did not conceptualize her in the exact terms of this paper. Thus, although I do not make any claim as to whether Tolkien personally was feminist or anti-feminist, examining the unmortal women of the Legendarium certainly allows for a feminist reading of the text. Many who believe otherwise are unfamiliar with the classical and medieval predecessors of Tolkien's unmortal women; some of the specific nuances of her portrayal have been lost in the years since publication, particularly given the de-emphasis of the classics in modern education. To redraw the connections between Tolkien's unmortal women and those who came before is an attempt to interpret the women of the Legendarium as they may have been interpreted by Tolkien's original reader-base.

Just as Tolkien's unmortal women were born from a long line of predecessors, the figure continues to grow and evolve in the literature of today. She may be found in numerous contemporary fantasy texts; characters such as Sarah J. Maas' Feyre Archeron from *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015) and Aelin Galathynius from her *Throne of Glass* series (2012-2018), V.E. Schwab's Addie LaRue from *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* (2020), and Madeline Miller's version of the goddess Circe from *Circe* (2018) are all modern iterations of the unmortal woman,

each straddling the line between mortal and immortal as they disturb established gender binaries and exemplify feminine power and agency. By continuing to explore this archetype and to bring the unmortal woman to the forefront, we empower the women not only of literature and the past, but of the real world and the present. True power is found in these female characters who blur the boundaries of not only life and death, but of feminine and masculine. In transcending the most fundamental line between mortal and immortal—in Tolkien's own words, the most central and fundamental theme of the Legendarium—they are placed into an inherently radical role in the narrative.

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