Character Biography
Arwen Undómiel

By Oshun

Arwen Undómiel was born to Elrond and Celebrían in Rivendell in year 241 of the Third Age. She was the last of three children of the Lord and Lady of Rivendell, having two older brothers, the twins Elrohir and Elladan. Like her brothers, Arwen is a descendant of a throng of important characters from the First Age of Arda whose tales are told in *The Silmarillion*. Through Elrond and Celebrían, she represents the bloodlines of the highest in status and most narratively important of both Elves and Men within Tolkien's legendarium. Arwen's Elvish antecedents reached back into the royal houses of the Noldor and the Vanyar in Valinor and earlier, as well as the Sindar in Middle-earth and the Teleri in Alqualondë in Aman. Among the Secondborn or Edain, she had roots within the Houses of Hador, Haleth, and Bëor.[1]

Her mother Celebrían was the daughter of Galadriel, who was the granddaughter of King Finwë of the Noldor, the daughter of Finwë's son Finarfin, who was to become king of the remnants of the Noldor in Valinor after he did not follow Fëanor to Middle-earth along with the rest of his people. Finarfin married Eärwen daughter of Olwë King of the Teleri in Alqualondë. Celebrían's father was Celeborn, considered to be a prince of the Sindar as a kinsman of Thingol, King of Doriath. [2] (There exists an entire alternate history for Celeborn—Teleporno, a Teler of Valinor[3]—which is best addressed on its own at another time.)

Elrond traces his heritage before the Hobbits and the other attendees at the Council of Elrond in Rivendell, stating, "Eärendil was my sire, who was born in Gondolin before its fall; and my mother was Elwing, daughter of Dior, son of Lúthien of Doriath. I have seen three ages in the West of the world, and many defeats, and many fruitless victories." [4] Through Elrond, Arwen can add Maiarin blood to that of the Eldar and the Edain, since her great-great-grandmother Lúthien was the daughter of Melian the Maia.

Arwen was raised in Rivendell and divided her time between Rivendell and Lothlórien, the land ruled by her grandparents Celeborn and Galadriel. Arwen was no longer a child when her mother Celebrían was captured by Orcs in the Redhorn Pass of the Misty Mountains on a trip to Lothlórien to visit Galadriel and Celeborn. Elladan and Elrohir found and rescued her only to discover she had been tortured and received a poisoned wound as well. Elrond was able to physically heal her, but her mind and spirit never recovered from the horror of that experience. Celebrían finally decided to leave Middle-earth and sail to the West from the Grey Havens, hoping to find peace in the land of the Valar. [5]

At the death of his father Arathorn, two-year-old Aragorn became the "thirty-ninth Heir of Isildur in the direct line." [6] He was brought along with his mother Gilraen to be raised under the tutelage and protection of Elrond in Rivendell. Elrond had long supported the heirs of Isildur, whose direct line and traditions were preserved within the Rangers of the North. Elrond believed that at some point a king from that line would reunite the realms of Arnor and Gondor. Meanwhile, the Enemy sought to find and destroy the Heirs of Isildur. As an extra measure of security, Aragorn was raised without knowledge of his inheritance or even his true name, being called *Estel* (Sindarin "hope") by Elrond. [7]

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Aragorn grew into young manhood fostered and educated by Elrond, who loved him as a son, and trained in roving and hunting Orcs by his foster brothers Elladan and Elrohir. Aragorn had never met Arwen, since she had been staying in Lothlórien with her grandparents during his childhood and young adulthood:

> . . . when Estel was only twenty years of age, it chanced that he returned to Rivendell after great deeds in the company of the sons of Elrond; and Elrond looked at him and was pleased, for he saw that he was fair and noble and was early come to manhood, though he would yet become greater in body and in mind. That day therefore Elrond called him by his true name, and told him who he was and whose son; and he delivered to him the heirlooms of his house. [8]

Those heirlooms included the ring of Barahir and the shards of Narsil. Elrond saw great things in Aragorn's future (foresight is implied if not explicitly stated), a long life and much hardship, but the texts seem to hint also that he may have expected that Aragorn might be different from the previous heirs of the line of Isildur that he had fostered. He told him, "The Sceptre of Annúminas I withhold, for you have yet to earn it." [9] In the way of all young men faced with an exciting shift in their expectations, this news unsettled and energized Aragorn. The following day he went for a walk in the woods, singing to himself, nothing less than a part of the "Lay of Lúthien":

> [H]is heart was high within him; and he sang, for he was full of hope and the world was fair. And suddenly even as he sang he saw a maiden walking on a greensward among the white stems of the birches; and he halted amazed, thinking that he had strayed into a dream, or else that he had received the gift of the Elf-minstrels, who can make the things of which they sing appear before the eyes of those that listen. [10]

The Elf-maiden Aragorn encountered appeared to him to be Lúthien herself: "And behold! there Lúthien walked before his eyes in Rivendell, clad in a mantle of silver and blue, fair as the twilight in Elven-home; her dark hair strayed in a sudden wind, and her brows were bound with gems like stars." [11] The vision of loveliness he encountered is similar in small details and parallel in its circumstance to Beren's first sighting of Arwen's foremother Lúthien:

> But wandering in the summer in the woods of Neldoreth he [Beren] came upon Lúthien, daughter of Thingol and Melian . . . as she danced upon the unfading grass in the glades beside Esgalduin. Then all memory of his pain departed from him, and he fell into an enchantment; for Lúthien was the most beautiful of all the Children of Ilúvatar. Blue was her raiment as the unclouded heaven, but her eyes were grey as the starlit evening; her mantle was sewn with golden flowers, but her hair was dark as the shadows of twilight. . . such was her glory and her loveliness; and in her face was a shining light. [12]

Needless to say, Aragorn instantly fell in love with Arwen. Older and more cautious, Arwen nonetheless seems intrigued:

> Then the maiden turned to him and smiled, and she said: "Who are you? And why do you call me by that name?"
>
> And he answered: "Because I believed you to be indeed Lúthien Tinúviel, of whom I was singing. But if you are not she, then you walk in her likeness."

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> "So many have said," she answered gravely. "Yet her name is not mine. Though maybe my doom will be not unlike hers. But who are you?" [13]

Aragorn then stumbles around for a few days in an infatuated haze, until both his mother and Elrond figure out that he is totally smitten. Gilraen says to him, "[Y]our aim is high, even for the descendant of many kings. For this lady is the noblest and fairest that now walks the earth. And it is not fit that mortal should wed with the Elf-kin." [14] He tries to argue with her at first that they share a kinship, but she lets him know in no uncertain terms, that such things happened in another Age, before their paths diverged and his line had "diminished." [15]

A short time later, a day or two perhaps, Elrond confronts him:

> "Aragorn, Arathorn's son, Lord of the Dúnedain, listen to me! A great doom awaits you, either to rise above the height of all your fathers since the days of Elendil, or to fall into darkness with all that is left of your kin. Many years of trial lie before you. You shall neither have wife, nor bind any woman to you in troth, until your time comes and you are found worthy of it." [16]

Aragorn, and this part contains some subtle humor, is shocked that Elrond figured out his feelings for Arwen. Elrond tells him,

> "Your own eyes have betrayed you. But I do not speak of my daughter alone. You shall be betrothed to no man's child as yet. But as for Arwen the Fair, Lady of Imladris and of Lórien, Evenstar of her people, she is of lineage greater than yours, and she has lived in the world already so long that to her you are but as a yearling shoot beside a young birch of many summers. She is too far above you. And so, I think, it may well seem to her. But even if it were not so, and her heart turned towards you, I should still be grieved because of the doom that is laid on us." [17]

Elrond is trying here to explain a few things to this young pup: Arwen is older, wiser, and of a higher station than he is; he needs to remember and understand what the choice to wed a Mortal Man would mean for her, and for Elrond himself.

> "But there will be no choice before Arwen, my beloved, unless you, Aragorn, Arathorn's son, come between us and bring one of us, you or me, to a bitter parting beyond the end of the world. You do not know yet what you desire of me." He sighed, and after a while, looking gravely upon the young man, he said again: "The years will bring what they will. We will speak no more of this until many have passed. The days darken, and much evil is to come." [18]

Aragorn, unlike movie-Aragorn instantly stops acting like a lovesick fool, accepting his fate without whining, and goes off to pursue his responsibility and prepare himself for the future he might face. Still this is not Aragorn's story so we will not list here all of the places he goes and things he learns in order to more effectively fight the increasing darkness and to engage it if it should come to that. It is some thirty years later, when Aragorn passes through Lothlórien and finds that Arwen is there. Galadriel steps in and plays matchmaker for the two. She cleans up the dirty ranger and dresses him as an elegant Elf-lord. Arwen falls for him and on the mound of Cerin Amroth they commit themselves to marry. There is no asking daddy in the book version; they simply return to Rivendell after spending a nice little interlude of time together in Lothlórien.

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> When Elrond learned the choice of his daughter, he was silent, though his heart was grieved and found the doom long feared none the easier to endure. But when Aragorn came again to Rivendell he called him to him, and he said: "My son, years come when hope will fade, and beyond them little is clear to me. And now a shadow lies between us. Maybe, it has been appointed so, that by my loss the kingship of Men may be restored. Therefore, though I love you, I say to you: Arwen Undómiel shall not diminish her life's grace for less cause. She shall not be the bride of any Man less than the King of both Gondor and Arnor. To me then even our victory can bring only sorrow and parting -but to you hope of joy for a while. Alas, my son! I fear that to Arwen the Doom of Men may seem hard at the ending." [19]

An important thing to realize about the narrative of the Aragorn and Arwen story is that neither of them existed in Tolkien's mind before he started writing the requested sequel to *The Hobbit*. Their tale was a late addition. He introduces Arwen without her backstory and then wrote that essential missing piece as an Appendix.

The first time a reader encounters Arwen in a story context is when Strider/Aragorn and the Hobbits arrive at Rivendell. The first description the reader has is through the eyes of Frodo. He is taken aback by her beauty, not simply the physical elements of it, but the intellectual and spiritual essence of it—a nobility and highness of station that he had never encountered before:

> Young she was and yet not so. The braids of her dark hair were touched by no frost; her white arms and clear face were flawless and smooth, and the light of stars was in her bright eyes, grey as a cloudless night; yet queenly she looked, and thought and knowledge were in her glance, as of one who has known many things that the years bring . . . .
>
> So it was that Frodo saw her whom few mortals had yet seen; Arwen, daughter of Elrond, in whom it was said that the likeness of Lúthien had come on earth again; and she was called Undómiel, for she was the Evenstar of her people . . . .
>
> Such loveliness in living thing Frodo had never seen nor imagined in his mind. [20]

Meanwhile, Frodo is surprised to find that the grubby ranger Strider cleans up nicely, when they encounter him in Elrond's Hall of Fire. At the end of the evening filled with new experiences, Frodo sees him again and Arwen as well:

> Frodo halted for a moment, looking back. Elrond was in his chair and the fire was on his face like summer-light upon the trees. Near him sat the Lady Arwen. To his surprise Frodo saw that Aragorn stood beside her; his dark cloak was thrown back, and he seemed to be clad in elven-mail, and a star shone on his breast. They spoke together, and then suddenly it seemed to Frodo that Arwen turned towards him, and the light of her eyes fell on him from afar and pierced his heart. [21]

Arwen is not mentioned again in *The Lord of the Rings* until the Fellowship reaches Lothlórien. Frodo comes upon Aragorn there—whether communing with her telepathically or visiting her in his dreams of the past is unclear.

> At the hill's foot Frodo found Aragorn, standing still and silent as a tree; but in his hand was a small golden bloom of elanor, and a light was in his eyes. He was wrapped in

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> some fair memory: and as Frodo looked at him he knew that he beheld things as they once had been in this same place. For the grim years were removed from the face of Aragorn, and he seemed clothed in white, a young lord tall and fair; and he spoke words in the Elvish tongue to one whom Frodo could not see. *Arwen vanimelda, namárië*! he said, and then he drew a breath, and returning out of his thought he looked at Frodo and smiled.
>
> 'Here is the heart of Elvendom on earth,' he said, 'and here my heart dwells ever, unless there be a light beyond the dark roads that we still must tread, you and I. Come with me!' And taking Frodo's hand in his, he left the hill of Cerin Amroth and came there never again as living man. [22]

This is an important passage because it makes clear that Aragorn's ability to function at his highest level, harnessing his focus and his will, depends greatly upon the capability of either communicating with Arwen or at very least trusting in their shared purpose and her capacity to inspire. Leslie Donovan in "The Valkyrie Reflex" refers to this quality when she notes that "Arwen is not only radiant in her person, but she also partakes of the courtly attributes of Germanic valkyrie figures by bestowing gifts of inspiration and reward with illuminative properties to heroes." [23] Of course, the poignancy of this moment is stronger, because—unknown to Frodo, or the reader who has not yet read "The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen"—the hill of Cerin Amroth is the location where they first plighted their troth and for that reason is especially revered by Aragorn.

Arwen again is referenced at the gift-giving in Lothlórien when Galadriel presents to Aragorn the Elessar from which he will take his name as king:

> Then she lifted from her lap a great stone of a clear green, set in a silver brooch that was wrought in the likeness of an eagle with outspread wings; and as she held it up the gem flashed like the sun shining through the leaves of spring. 'This stone I gave to Celebrían my daughter, and she to hers; and now it comes to you as a token of hope. In this hour take the name that was foretold for you, Elessar, the Elfstone of the house of Elendil!'
>
> 'For the gifts that you have given me I thank you,' he said, 'O Lady of Lórien of whom were sprung Celebrían and Arwen Evenstar. What praise could I say more?' [24]

When Halbarad arrives with the Grey Company and Arwen's brothers to accompany Aragorn, he brings with him a gift of the highest importance from Arwen, along with a message:

> And Aragorn said to Halbarad: 'What is that that you bear, kinsman?' For he saw that instead of a spear he bore a tall staff, as it were a standard, but it was close-furled in a black cloth bound about with many thongs.
>
> 'It is a gift that I bring you from the Lady of Rivendell,' answered Halbarad. 'She wrought it in secret, and long was the making. But she also sends word to you: *The days now are short. Either our hope cometh, or all hope's end. Therefore I send thee what I have made for thee. Fare well, Elfstone*!' [25]

Canon Arwen's strength is not dependent upon swordplay and errantry but upon symbolism and a magic so subtle that we are left guessing at its extent. Those long years she waited for Aragorn were not spent pining or in idleness:

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> Arwen remained in Rivendell, and when Aragorn was abroad, from afar she watched over him in thought; and in hope she made for him a great and kingly standard, such as only one might display who claimed the lordship of the Númenóreans and the inheritance of Elendil. [26]

It was that banner she had woven valkyrie-like that provided more than simple symbolism, but also contained a preternatural potency and promise. She sent it to him unasked for before he entered into the Paths of the Dead, before he even knew that he would take them. And it provided a renewal of hope and revitalized the forces of good at the lowest point of the Battle of Pelennor Fields:

> And then wonder took him [Éomer], and a great joy; and he cast his sword up in the sunlight and sang as he caught it. And all eyes followed his gaze, and behold! upon the foremost ship a great standard broke, and the wind displayed it as she turned towards the Harlond. There flowered a White Tree, and that was for Gondor; but Seven Stars were about it, and a high crown above it, the signs 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. [27]

After the victory at Pelennor Fields and the last desperate march on the Black Gate, the Ring is destroyed and Aragorn is crowned king of Arnor and Gondor. Arwen arrives at Minas Tirith to fulfill her promise to marry Aragorn when he has achieved his objective:

> Upon the very Eve of Midsummer, when the sky was blue as sapphire and white stars opened in the East, but the West was still golden, and the air was cool and fragrant, the riders came down the North-way to the gates of Minas Tirith. First rode Elrohir and Elladan with a banner of silver, and then came Glorfindel and Erestor and all the household of Rivendell, and after them came the Lady Galadriel and Celeborn, Lord of Lothlórien, riding upon white steeds and with them many fair folk of their land, grey-cloaked with white gems in their hair; and last came Master Elrond, mighty among Elves and Men, bearing the sceptre of Annúminas, and beside him upon a grey palfrey rode Arwen his daughter, Evenstar of her people. [28]

This breathtaking vision is reminiscent of nothing less than one of Edward Burne-Jones' paintings or tapestries depicting an element of Arthurian legend. It is visually stunning with a romanticized vaguely medieval ambience. One sees it through the eyes of Frodo and he is besotted by the sight. (This would have been a marvelous scene to capture on film. And it is a much more regal presentation of a higher and loftier Arwen than, "Oh, look! Surprise! Arwen showed up for his coronation.")

> And Frodo when he saw her come glimmering in the evening, with stars on her brow and a sweet fragrance about her, was moved with great wonder, and he said to Gandalf: 'At last I understand why we have waited! This is the ending. Now not day only shall be beloved, but night too shall be beautiful and blessed and all its fear pass away!' [29]

After a dearth of Arwen to this point, she continues to make a few appearances throughout the rest of the book:

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> Then the King welcomed his guests, and they alighted; and Elrond surrendered the sceptre, and laid the hand of his daughter in the hand of the King, and together they went up into the High City, and all the stars flowered in the sky. And Aragorn the King Elessar wedded Arwen Undómiel in the City of the Kings upon the day of Midsummer, and the tale of their long waiting and labours was come to fulfilment. [30]

After the wedding, Frodo continues to heal, but as we know, he never will truly heal in Middle-earth. However, the time comes when he desires to return to the Shire. He goes to the Court of the Fountain and finds Arwen and Aragorn sitting there together near the fledging White Tree. She is singing a song of Valinor. They have an extended conversation, in which Arwen participates fully. She has barely spoken to this point in the story. She and Frodo discuss how he misses Bilbo and wants to return home, and she raises the issue of how difficult it has been for him simply to have borne the weight of the Ring for so long, expressing her understanding of his need for healing and his weariness. Her implication is she fears it is a terminal weariness for which he will not find solace without crossing to the West. [31]

But she offers him a gift and a possible solution:

> '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. But wear this now in memory of Elfstone and Evenstar with whom your life has been woven!'
>
> And she took a white gem like a star that lay upon her breast hanging upon a silver chain, and she set the chain about Frodo's neck. 'When the memory of the fear and the darkness troubles you,' she said, 'this will bring you aid.' [32]

She has already relinquished that right. It is the consideration offered here and her belief that his service to the greater good will guarantee that he will be welcomed—his service and the fact that he will never heal and deserves every comfort that can be granted him.

"Many Partings" is an apt name for this chapter. A lot of activity ensues in preparation for leave-taking. The Hobbits desire to return home. Éomer and his knights from Rohan have arrived to carry the body of Théoden home for burial. Arwen and a number of others intend to accompany the group to Rohan to show honor to the fallen king of the Rohirrim.

When all are gathered for a court dinner that evening, there is the famous scene where Éomer and Gimli argue about which of the ladies is more beautiful, Arwen or Galadriel.

> 'Gimli Glóin's son, have you your axe ready?'
>
> 'Nay, lord,' said Gimli, 'but I can speedily fetch it, if there be need.'
>
> 'You shall judge,' said Éomer. 'For there are certain rash words concerning the Lady in the Golden Wood that lie still between us. And now I have seen her with my eyes.'
>
> 'Well, lord,' said Gimli, 'and what say you now?'

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> 'Alas!' said Éomer. 'I will not say that she is the fairest lady that lives.'
>
> 'Then I must go for my axe,' said Gimli.
>
> 'But first I will plead this excuse,' said Éomer. 'Had I seen her in other company, I would have said all that you could wish. But now I will put Queen Arwen Evenstar first, and I am ready to do battle on my own part with any who deny me. Shall I call for my sword?'
>
> Then Gimli bowed low. 'Nay, you are excused for my part, lord,' he said. 'You have chosen the Evening; but my love is given to the Morning. And my heart forebodes that soon it will pass away forever.' [33]

The time also has come when Arwen must bid farewell to Elrond, knowing she will never see him again and he must face her mother in Aman and tell her that their daughter does not accompany him:

> When the Great Ring was unmade and the Three were shorn of their power, then Elrond grew weary at last and forsook Middle-earth, never to return. But Arwen became as a mortal woman, and yet it was not her lot to die until all that she had gained was lost. [34]

Although we have reached the end of the story which includes Arwen and Aragorn, we can already see that she will not be a remote and standoffish figure as the Queen of Gondor and Arnor. She concerns herself with the welfare of others and the political needs she ought to fulfill as Aragorn's consort. She participates in official visits as a reigning monarch. She bore a son, Eldarion Telcontar, who is the heir of Aragorn. And we know that she has at least two daughters because of a line in "The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen," which states when discussing the death of Aragorn that "she said farewell to Eldarion, and to her daughters." [35]

The scene between Aragorn and Arwen, when he reveals to her that he is ready to die, is a long and painful one, as was foretold so many decades ago by her father. Arwen, however, shows strength even in her weakness—she does not go gentle into that good night. Indeed, she rages against the dying of the light and abandons Minas Tirith and travels to Lórien, where she had spent much of her youth and which had such memories for her and Aragorn and "dwelt there alone under the fading trees until winter came." [36] But it was not as she remembered it. Everyone was gone. Galadriel had sailed West and Celeborn moved to Rivendell where he lived for a time with his grandsons.

> There at last when the mallorn-leaves were falling, but spring had not yet come, she laid herself to rest upon Cerin Amroth; and there is her green grave, until the world is changed, and all the days of her life are utterly forgotten by men that come after, and elanor and niphredil bloom no more east of the Sea.
>
> Here ends this tale, as it has come to us from the South; and with the passing of Evenstar no more is said in this book of the days of old. [37]

She is indeed a symbol of strength yet also one of waning influence. The Evenstar of her people symbolizes the withdrawal of the Elves from direct intervention into the lives of Men and the fate of Middle-earth. But she is also a harbinger of the coming of the Age of Men. Her role is not a weak or passive one, for she drew upon the same strength exercised by Lúthien to choose to

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stay with her beloved, renouncing an immortal life in Elvenhome. In doing so, she plays a double role as the symbol of the twilight of the Eldar—their Evenstar—and then the Queen of the Reunited Kingdoms who will help usher in a new world.

Arwen and the Legacy of Lúthien

Arwen, despite the repeated mentions throughout the texts of her symbolic link to Lúthien, does not share that superhero persona. Lúthien, with her preternatural skills, ingenuity, magic, and a very human determination, succeeds where the greatest heroes among Mortal Men and the most impressive of the stereotypical warriors among the Elf Lords in the First Age of Middle-earth have failed. But Arwen does not resemble her elder kinswoman in that sort of action-hero mode. The element that they share is their willingness to sacrifice their Elven immortality for the sake of love. They resemble one another in their choice to accept the so-called Gift of Death in order to live a mortal life with their beloveds.

Noted Tolkien scholar Verlyn Flieger explains that

> [t]hrough death, Men can let go of life; they can be released from bondage to the world. With the exceptions of Fëanor's mother Míriel, who chooses to die after his birth, and of Lúthien, who chooses to share the fate of Beren, Elves, in their deathlessness, their bondage to life, cannot let go. The half-Elven have the freedom to choose either fate. They can keep the immortality of the Elves, as does Elrond of *The Lord of the Rings,* or choose the mortality of Men, as does Elrond's daughter, Arwen. [38]

Arwen is given, along with her brothers, what is called the choice of the Peredhil or Half-Elven. Elrond and his brother Elros received that choice, first given by the Valar to Eärendil and Elwing: "There were three unions of the Eldar and the Edain: Lúthien and Beren; Idril and Tuor; Arwen and Aragorn. By the last the long-sundered branches of the Half-elven were reunited and their line was restored." [39]

The twin brothers Elrond and Elros, sons of Eärendil, are offered the choice of the quasi-immortal life of the Eldar, living throughout the Ages until Arda breaks apart, or the Gift of Men that is to live a natural life as a mortal and eventually die. Elros chose a mortal life and was sent by the Valar to rule as the first king of the island of Númenor, a land intended to be gift from the Valar to the Edain in reward for their participation in the war against Morgoth in Beleriand. Elros's heritage would be preserved in the line of the Kings of Men, which would eventually return to Middle-earth, after the destruction of the isle of Númenor. His descendants come down through Elendil and then Isildur into the Third Age in the person, finally, of Aragorn. On Elrond's side, this gift of choice was part of the lineage that he handed to his three children. The decision on the part of Arwen to renounce Elven immortality and cast her lot with Aragorn is what ties her in spirit and in the remembrance of her people to Lúthien, who made the same choice in the First Age.

Tolkien explains in a draft letter in response to Peter Hastings of the Newman (Catholic) Bookshop in Oxford, who had posited metaphysical objections relating to *The Lord of the Rings,* that

> Arwen is not a 're-incarnation' of Lúthien (that in the view of this mythical history would be impossible, since Lúthien has died like a mortal and left the world of time) but a descendant very like her in looks, character, and fate. When she weds Aragorn (whose

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> love-story elsewhere recounted is not here central and only occasionally referred to) she 'makes the choice of Lúthien', so the grief at her parting from Elrond is specially poignant. [40]

The Problem of Women in Tolkien's Work: Do the Films Offer a Mitigation?

There is a plethora of critical writing, largely produced over the last forty years, which focuses in no small part on the fact that Tolkien's work features too few women. Literary criticism of Tolkien's work is also littered with theories and justifications of his lack of attention to the development of his women characters:

> The contrastive nature of myths like these was, however, for Tolkien almost an everyday concern. Virtually every day of his working life as a Professor of Anglo-Saxon, or of English Language and Literature, he found himself reading, teaching, or referring to works like *Beowulf,* the *Elder Edda,* or Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda,* which were in one way or other ambiguous in their Christian status. [41]

Tolkien dealt every day in ambiguities—among those his obsession with literature, language and myths of the heathen north and his sincere devotion to the Church of Rome. He appeared to be untroubled in his writing by the increasing sensitivity within his potential readership to the careless misogyny of his background. Since *The Lord of the Rings*' first publication, it has come to be known and read by generations of women and often greatly beloved by them. Nevertheless, it has been subjected ceaselessly to criticism, and rightly so in this reader's opinion, for its paucity of female representation.

Here is a people's criticism of the role of women in *The Lord of the Rings* movies, hot off the presses of the *New York Daily News* of December 2002. It is actually a paean to movie-Éowyn, characterizing her as "at last, a strong, angry woman" [42] and "the only complex female character in *The Lord of the Rings*."[43] Peter Jackson was criticized at the time for giving Arwen an additional action-hero role in *The Fellowship of the Ring* that departed dramatically from canon. He put a beautiful young woman on Glorfindel's horse and had her rescue Frodo. When she is introduced in the first film, it is by surprising Aragorn by approaching him from behind and putting a weapon to his throat. This Elven warrior-princess is neither Lúthien nor Arwen.

Some might say that story did not need a better Ranger—the book provided Aragorn, Halbarad, Elladan, and Elrohir and their comrades-in-arms the stern Rangers of the North, bearing the weight of an entire Age of history and more upon their shoulders. In the south we had Faramir and his crew of terrific woodsman, guarding the rest of their world from their position on devil's doorstep: loyal, tough, and self-sacrificing to the end. But Peter Jackson and his screenwriters realized that the story needed more women who could be perceived as strong and proactive to keep the story relevant to a mass-market movie audience in a world, which at least in theory, if not in practice, has moved beyond the casual misogyny of Tolkien's prime mentioned above. The question of whether they succeeded or not is arguable:

> Arwen uses her telepathic powers to rescue Aragorn and is then seen lamenting his death in a flash-forward to the future. The omniscient Galadriel (Cate Blanchett) fleetingly comments on the perils of the sundered all-male Fellowship in its quest to destroy the Ring of Power coveted by Sauron, the enemy. But these are slender roles, ethereally rendered. Pleasing though they are, the Arwen sequences have a Maxfield Parrish-like artifice. [44]

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The New York Times' initial review of the first film, *The Fellowship of the Ring,* describes the Elven women in a notably similar tone. It explains Tolkien's world as "a whopping composite of Christian allegory, Norse mythology and a boys' book of adventure." [45] The review goes on to note that there is "not much of a place for women on the loamy, rich dreamscapes of Middle Earth [sic]; they enter the action briefly as if they were dream figures, part of the film's subconscious, like the glorious Elf queen Galadriel (Cate Blanchett) and the magical Arwen (Liv Tyler)." [46]

The accusation that *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrates a "boys' book of adventure" type of story implies that it is literarily based in a world in which women are not yet necessary. (Ahem! This reader is not arguing this is true, but simply playing devil's advocate here.) The aesthetic of the boys' world is based around the assumption that everything that is needed can be found in the company of men. In the U.S. one is prone to think this attitude might be based at least partly in the British class system, more obvious and self-conscious than its more hypocritical counterpart across the pond. And then there is the tradition of the all-male public school background, which reinforced the intellectual separation of men and women:

> Although the films introduce a number of women, some of them presented as sexually desirable, none of them are for Frodo. And even the handful of fully grown males who bond with these women do so only in brief and awkward set pieces not nearly as exciting and exhilarating as the many battle sequences. At the trilogy's conclusion, Arwen is brought out for a quick smooch with Aragorn and then hustled off the screen so that the film can dwell at length on its child-like characters. [47]

Reading that summary of a series of things that occur in the movie that are foreign to the book might strike some readers as unintentionally humorous. The above article throws the critics a bone by acknowledging that there *is* a paucity of women in Tolkien's work. But it asserts also that the way in which women are represented in the films mitigates this lack in the books. The overall comments are particularly positive relating the movies' interpretation of Éowyn. The slayer of the Witch King is acknowledged as palatable to both the canon purist and feminist critic.

But the *Daily News* article says little of Arwen, not mentioning the striking factual omissions and changes within the movie to her role in the narrative. She gets to ride a horse and save Frodo from the Dark Riders at the flight to Bruinen Ford. *The New York Times* review of *The Two Towers,* while generally favorable to the movie and impressed with the epic scope it juggles, is a bit harsher on its handling of the woman question, although it blames Tolkien more than Peter Jackson:

> "Towers" is like a family-oriented E-rated video game, with no emotional complications other than saving the day. Women have so little to do here that they serve almost as plot-device flight attendants, offering a trough of Diet Coke to refresh the geek-magnet story. (It is a lapse in Tolkien's work that Mr. Jackson has not figured out a way to correct, even with the token reappearances of Liv Tyler and Cate Blanchett from the first film.) [48]

Perhaps the starkest among the many invented Arwen moments is the Arwen-is-dying plot point. That one must have had the Professor rolling over in his grave:

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> **Elrond:** I come on behalf of one whom I love. Arwen is dying. She will not long survive the evil that now spreads from Mordor. The light of the Evenstar is failing. As Sauron's power grows, her strength wanes. Arwen's life is now tied to the fate of the Ring. The Shadow is upon us, Aragorn. The end has come. [49]

What does it even mean by her "life is now tied to the fate of the Ring"? It makes very little more sense than movie-Aragorn, the "reluctant hero," who must be constantly prodded by Elrond to stay on track. Movie-Aragorn is infuriatingly reluctant and indecisive. Book-Aragorn, on the other hand, may make mistakes and takes upon himself harsh blame for those at times, but he never falters in his purpose or intent. BookAragorn has spent his entire adult life readying himself for the events that come to a head in the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Actually, Liv Tyler gave an up-close-and-personal perspective on film-Arwen in a 2002 interview:

> I think originally that [screenwriters] Fran [Walsh] and Philippa [Boyens], when they were really looking at this character . . . wanted her to be a strong character. She is a strong character, but they were trying to figure out how to incorporate her into the film as a strong character. And maybe they kind of thought, "Oh, well if she's a fighter she's strong." And over time they realized that you don't have to put a sword in a woman's hand to make her seem tough. That's little of the actual makeup of who Arwen is, and her sheer will and strength and love for this man was strong enough. [50]

Apparently, Tyler was coached in sword fighting and horseback riding, but the filming of scenes that placed Arwen at Helm's Deep were dropped. But the scene within which Aragorn dreams of kissing Arwen is retained. There is another invented scene wherein Arwen argues with Elrond about leaving for Valinor. In the books there is no discussion early or late between Elrond and Arwen about her choice, although Elrond does tell Aragorn early on that, "Alas, my son! I fear that to Arwen the Doom of Men may seem hard at the ending." [51] The most incomprehensible of all the added Arwen scenes might be the one where she leaves for Valinor—that slow-motion crawl through a shadowy forest via horseback, a mass exodus of the Elves to the Grey Havens (?). Thank god, Arwen changes her mind and turns back when she sees a vision of her future son Eldarion. This is some fairly strange material for the book nerd to swallow, transitional material that is designed to approximately bring the story back to the spirit of the canon. To be scrupulously fair, one might have to wrestle with the script itself, the director, the budget, and the dramatic needs of converting from book to film to know how any of these might have been better handled.

On the subject of romantic scenes or kisses in the film, romantic and otherwise, there are several. However, in the book we find far fewer. A recent useful fan-produced piece of textual analysis, "All the Kisses Tolkien Wrote" by Amy Fortuna, [52] actually counts them. In *The Lord of the Rings* we find a grand total of two romantic kisses, and the second one may be called romantic without being remotely sexual in nature.

The first is that lovely and unforgettable romantic kiss between Éowyn and Faramir on the walls of Minas Tirith (which incidentally is omitted from the film):

> And he took her in his arms and kissed her under the sunlit sky, and he cared not that they stood high upon the walls in the sight of many. And many indeed saw them and the

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> light that shone about them as they came down from the walls and went hand in hand to the Houses of Healing. [53]

And the second is Aragorn kissing Arwen's hand on his deathbed:

> "Estel, Estel!" she cried, and with that even as he took her hand and kissed it, he fell into sleep. Then a great beauty was revealed in him, so that all who after came there looked on him in wonder; for they saw that the grace of his youth, and the valour of his manhood, and the wisdom and majesty of his age were blended together. [54]

In true boy-adventure-story mode, there is a notable dearth of what young boys call yucky kisses in the three volumes and the Appendix to *The Lord of the Rings*. However, it is irresistible to note that *The Silmarillion, Unfinished Tales,* and the *Histories of Middle-earth* have significantly more—seventeen kisses between canon lovers. [55]

It is not only fanfiction writers who read a homoerotic subtext in *The Lord of the Rings*; here is an opinion on that subject:

> If a young man can resist the feminine and the passage into adult sexuality, he can engage in endless adventures such as playing in the woods with his male friends, even bonding with them at an emotional level entirely unlike what women have to offer. At the end of the first film, the kiss that Aragorn bestows on the brow of the dying Boromir is decidedly more passionate than any of the trilogy's occasional heterosexual kisses. [56]

But to return to the discussion of what Tolkien's contemporary audience wants and what they have been given in relation to both women and gender in the books and the movies, the *Daily News* article above cites Sam McBride, co-author of *Women Among the Inklings*: "Tolkien's attitudes are relatively one-dimensional compared with more complex, contemporary, feminist-influenced attitudes that are becoming more common within Westernized nations." [57] That is inarguable. The book *Women Among the Inklings* itself has elicited differences of opinion, but in general has succeeded in positing that readers and critics ought to "accept gender studies as a legitimate lens through which to view the Inklings." [58] In other words it asserts that "men of their time" is not completely accurate, much less an acceptable excuse for misogyny or gender blindness.

McBride points out that "The most shocking element of the movies is the prominent, active role given Arwen." [59] Not shocking that the film would choose to develop her role, but that it chooses to do so outside of canon instead of tackling her role in the books, which is intellectual, psychological, and spiritual at its core. It is not surprising that they would prefer to do it by placing a sword in her hand than to try to explain what she means to Aragorn and her people in the context of seven thousand years of history in an already exposition-laden film. It seems unlikely that anyone could justifiably object to a more active role for Arwen, but the way in which the narrative was changed to provide room for that enhancement is open to discussion.

If he is speaking here of Arwen arriving at the Ford and carrying Frodo back to Rivendell on Glorfindel's horse Asfaloth—that was a shock to book lovers indeed. A filmmaker always takes a risk when they decide to omit iconic moments from a book or alter them into new and unrecognizable forms. Book nerds, although many doubtless were among those clamoring for more and better female characters, remember fondly their first encounter with Glorfindel, one of the most charismatic and memorable of Elves.

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McBride further opines that

> Arwen's absence in the books is significant to Tolkien, since it mirrors a pattern from his own life: the early death of his mother, the enforced 3-year separation from his beloved Edith before their marriage, the categorization of his life into private and public spheres. For Tolkien, women's absence is an essential part of their natures—or rather, their presence is best behind the scenes. [60]

Huh? That is a stretch. However, most of us would consider the films to be beautiful and flawed, a long-awaited dream come true, but not perfect. The *New York Times* article discussing the first release of *The Fellowship of the Ring* film aptly described it as "Peter Jackson's altogether heroic job in tackling perhaps the most intimidating nerd/academic fantasy classic ever." [61] Those readers who first enjoyed Peter Jackson's production of Tolkien's work are unlikely to see a better one made in their lifetimes and are grateful to him for the largely successful effort.

At the risk of being a far from impartial movie critic, this reader dares to interject the opinion that *The Hobbit* films showed how much worse a movie adaptation of Tolkien's texts can be. But the point of introducing *The Lord of the Rings* movie series into this biography is to note that no one who has not read the texts would understand the degree to which book-Arwen represents a link to Tolkien's enormous history.

At the front of this essay, I described Arwen's background and her genealogy, where she fits into Tolkien's narrative of the long struggle of Elves and Men in Middle-earth. Tolkien, in response to a number of questions from the editor of *New Republic,* wrote in early 1956, in a series of unfinished drafts, that he regarded "the tale of Arwen and Aragorn as the most important of the Appendices; it is part of the essential story, and is only placed so [at the end], because it could not be worked into the main narrative without destroying its structure . . . ." [62] He did not want to minimize what he considered the Hobbit-centric nature of the story.

There are indications, as Tolkien continued to write and edit, that Aragorn, his lineage, and the roles of his antecedents in the vast history of Middle-earth might have pulled it off-center already. As Tolkien said in his introduction to the Second Edition of *The Lord of the Rings,* "This tale grew in the telling, until it became a history of the Great War of the Ring and included many glimpses of the yet more ancient history that preceded it." [63] Trotter the Hobbit became Aragorn son of Arathorn, scion of kings, bearing upon his shoulders a great weight of that ancient history and who succeeds, with fortitude and at great risk to himself, in the wooing of Arwen Undómiel, requiring as it did his assumption of the kingship and reunification of two long divided kingdoms.

Lori Campbell, in her essay "Éowyn and the Female Epic Hero," notes that

> Tolkien was not, of course, intentionally addressing questions of feminism or gender roles, but his ongoing negotiation with the romance and epic genres naturally encompassed a revision of the roles of women within such stories. And while it is impossible to deny that Tolkien's fantasy fiction is overwhelmingly male-centric, it is equally true that women are vitally important to his vision of Middle-earth. [64]

If it is true that "women are vitally important" [65] to this story, that element does not film well. But the screenwriters did love the sources and struggled to stay close to the spirit of the books, largely effectively according to most Tolkien scholars. The final *New York Times* review

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of *Return of the King,* however, is less accepting of the handling of the woman question in the films:

> Ms. Otto stakes a worthy claim for every moment of screen time, while poor Liv Tyler, as the elf princess Arwen, is limited to dialogue that sounds like a spoken portion of a Spinal Tap album. Cate Blanchett's Galadriel hardly appears at all . . . [66]

Only at the end of his life did Tolkien's fiction begin to acquire any true measure of respectability among academics. For the generation of the 1960s and early 1970s, their obsessive love of Tolkien was a source of annoyance for their English professors and a semi-transgressive act in and of itself. A number of the same readers, who were active participants in the movement of second-wave feminism in the 1960s through the early 1980s, appropriated Tolkien and assigned their own meanings to barely existing subtexts—environmentalism and return to nature and objections to the "military-industrial complex," anti-commercialism, etc. As women, they were able to find no small measure of satisfaction in Galadriel's manifestation of both power and wisdom, the sense that Aragorn, despite his nobility and pedigree, married up when he won Arwen as his bride, and that Éowyn's slaying the Witch-king was none too shabby of an accomplishment. Many young women of that generation did not only see Galadriel as Tolkien's most powerful woman, but as *the* most wise and powerful character of any gender in his tale. Martin Barker, in his essay "On Being a 1960s Tolkien Reader," also captures a flavor of the degree to which an entire generation co-opted Tolkien's intent and transformed it to suit their needs:

> People in general did not argue over the books, rather, they talked together about possible expansions of their meanings. The pleasure was in the unlimited new possibilities, rather than specific achieved meanings. The story could not just be private property, for important reasons. In America, this sense of it being especially a public domain was assisted by its circulation in that near-illegal Ace Books version this was something defying privatization. The slogan that arrived from the French May Events[67] captured this expansiveness: 'Be realistic, demand the impossible.'[68]

That first generation of obsessive readers did not require Tolkien's approval in order to alter his intent to suit their own understandings. But despite all that, many young women among them did feel a lack. Author, editor, and artist Terri Windling perhaps most eloquently sums up how she responded as a young woman first reading his work:

> I read Tolkien's great trilogy in one gulp and was profoundly changed . . . not, I have to add, because those books truly satisfied me. What they did was to reawaken my taste for magic, my old desire for dragons. But even then, in the years before I quite understood what feminism was, I saw that there was no place for me, a girl, on Frodo's quest. [69]

One clarification: Terri Windling and her contemporaries are more than a decade younger than the Tolkien readers—those 1968ers—referred to above who had read Tolkien in a different context.

Conclusion

So what can be made of the role of Arwen when one reaches the end of *The Lord of the Rings*? As the Evenstar to her people and as the princess who weds the most traditional of the heroes

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of this epic, she rises to the occasion to give legitimacy and a sense of awe-inspiring gravitas to the reign of Elessar. The reader achieves satisfaction at last with what in Tolkien's own words is

> the overthrow of the last incarnation of Evil, the unmaking of the Ring, the final departure of the Elves, and the return in majesty of the true King, to take over the Dominion of Men, inheriting all that can be transmitted of Elfdom in his high marriage with Arwen daughter of Elrond, as well as the lineal royalty of Númenor. [70]

When one finally says farewell to Arwen, it seems, as Elrond warned Aragorn "hard at the ending." This is when one truly closes the book (although, in most cases, to come back again and again) on the tragic, glorious, and ever compelling history of Tolkien's Elves.

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Oshun's *Silmarillion*-based stories may be found on the SWG archive.

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