
The Tolkienian War on Science

By Dr. Joan Bushwell

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When I was a little kid, I frequently snuck into my older brother's room and read his collection of science fiction books and pulp magazines (see previous post on SF&F books). My mother, who was (and is) a big fan of *The Princess and the Goblin* by George MacDonald (a lovely book and recommended) thought I might benefit from reading some fantasy so she bought *The Hobbit* for me when I was 12 (6th grade; 1966, yes, I am that old) which I happily read. My brother, who was a college student at the time, then brought home *The Lord of the Rings* in 1968, and I devoured it. I re-read *The Hobbit* and the trilogy throughout high school, and when *The Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales* were published, these were added to my Tolkien collection which, in addition to many other fantasy and sci-fi books, I read throughout grad school and into my post-doctoral years as wonderful escapism from the realities of thesis research and fellowship proposals.

A funny thing happened. Real Life, that is, children and a career intervened, and although I remained an avid reader, I rarely read science fiction and fantasy, and JRRT's works were among those that went by the wayside. I did, however, turn my kids on to Tolkien, and my son, in particular, became a fan.

My family and I dutifully went to the Harvard Square theater for three successive Decembers to see Peter Jackson's interpretation of Tolkien, and I have to say he did a decent job. But I still didn't pick up the books to re-read at the time, mostly because I knew this would be too much of a juxtaposition with the movies, and I didn't want to get all weird over orthodoxy. However, it turned out that it was easy for me to enjoy the Jackson-Walsh-Boyens "non-canon" vision.

After a hiatus of a number of years, I re-read *The Silmarillion* this past winter. What a difference life experience makes. When I first read the book, I was fresh out of undergrad and not really too aware of a lot of the politics surrounding science and technology. I just liked science and was eager to know more, so off I went to grad school and a post-doc. During that pleasantly naive time, I re-read *The Silmarillion* but not quite the way I did recently. So what has happened between then and now? Well, I read it through the prism of my experience and the current climate surrounding science in our culture.

My screed won't make much sense to anyone who is not nerdsome enough to have read *The Silmarillion* and an even more extensive encyclopedic collection, *The History of Middle-earth*, but those of you who have "Kick Me" signs taped to your backs should be able to follow along.

By way of background, the meddlesome Valar, Tolkien's angelic beings/pagan god-critters, have dragged a number of Elves to their paradise in the West, Aman. This was in the Elves' "best interest" since Middle-earth was filled with badness and darkness, and just generally icky marred stuff, thanks to the bad Vala, Morgoth. Hence, the well-meaning Valar wanted to protect them. Of course, they left behind the Dark Elves, who were unwilling to leave Middle Earth, to

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deal with Morgoth's crap as best they could. There were three groups of Elves living in Aman in the West: the Vanyar, the pious faithful who were sycophants of the Valar, the Teleri who were the surfer-dudes who dug tunes, built ships and lived by the sea, and finally, the Noldor.

This time I recognized the Noldor. Tolkien called them "craftsmen and smiths." Read that in 21st century-speak and you know that these people are our people: scientists and engineers. Now science and engineering are amoral in and of themselves, but those who practice such crafts are only human, so are equally subject to good and bad influences, but Tolkien really, *really* did not like modernism and science/technology. Thus, there were plenty of morality lessons to be had among the crafty Elves. In his milieu, the most talented of sci-tech types among the Noldor were prideful and possessive, easily corrupted and therefore worthy of punishment.

Fëanor, the master smith/scientist/engineer created three high tech artifacts, the Silmarils. Morgoth coveted the Silmarils. In his efforts to gain the jewels, Morgoth worked to create divisions among the Noldor and subsequently tainted their work, not unlike the US administration's pressure on those scientists who studied global warming to withhold data or those in the FDA who stopped Plan B.

Morgoth turned out to be a nefarious intellectual property thief when he made off with Fëanor's Silmarils. Fëanor was justifiably pissed off, and pursued him. The Valar were not much better than Morgoth in that they subtly coveted the three jewels, and chastised Fëanor for being so angry that his IP rights had been violated. Plus they just wrung their divine hands and generally were whiny and ineffectual.

OK, so maybe Fëanor's hijacking the ships in Alqualondë and killing their Telerin owners were extreme reactions in his drive to recover the Silmarils, but figuratively speaking, the same thing happens in the contemporary, er, *real* world of science and technology if someone gets in the way. Companies have been broken because of patent infringement, and in academia, major shittola hits the fan if there is a hint of unethical scooping between competing labs. Kinslaying abounds.

Fëanor didn't think too highly of the Valar, and as a skeptical and fiercely independent scientist/technologist, he was an outright agnostic when it came to worshipping them in contrast to the Vanyar, the blond Elves who surely would have been comfortable at Liberty College. The Vanyar genuflected and sung hymns to these allegedly angelic beings, who interfered just as much with the Elves as the obnoxious Greek pantheon did with the residents of Troy and Athens, or the Christian Right does with, well, a lot of people. So Fëanor's decidedly jaundiced view of the divine was yet another thing I recognized and with which I identified.

This time around, I could see where Fëanor was coming from. The Valar and Morgoth roundly screwed him on all sides. Even though I realized it before, and just didn't want to face it years ago, it was obvious that JRRT really did not think well of scientists and technologists. If we get too big for our britches, we should be punished. This sentiment rings out loud and clear in his books. I mean, the rebellious Noldor went through a lot of misery for millennia. Tolkien punished them all *relentlessly*.

Less sympathetic, but still recognizable as a sci-tech type, is the lesser of two Evils with a capital "E", i.e., Sauron. He's not quite as horrible as his big boss, Dick Cheney, er, I mean,

Morgoth, although still pretty bad. Sort of like a CEO who loves to micromanage. In his original uncorrupted state, he did his grad work and post-doc with Aulë, the Vala who was the patron of smiths and craftsmen, again, read, the scientists and engineers. Sauron seemed like a fairly creative sort, and Tolkien even states that he loved order. That's familiar: the desire to understand the order of the world. However, Sauron also wanted to force order on the world, sort of a control freak, really, but I know a few of those in the scientific arena. Don't we all? There are certain features of Sauron, well, maybe not so much the werewolf thing, which are apparent in scientists and engineers, and he has some features in common with Fëanor from the science and technology angle.

As an esoteric aside, Tolkien also wrote a little piece on Elvish anthropology in *Morgoth's Ring* ([History of Middle-earth, vol. 10](#)) in which he briefly describes Elvish gender roles in "Laws and Customs of the Eldar." Given when it was written, it was relatively progressive, but still, the women avoid hard science. Oh, but the men cook, you say, Professor? Does that mitigate the fact that the women are relegated to embroidery, healing and the softer arts? Well, Manwë in Varda, I don't think so!

Yeah, I know, Tolkien's attitude should not come as a surprise to me, and really, it doesn't. I can still read all the books and enjoy them, even if they are drenched, quenched and incensed in Tolkien's Catholicism and his longing for a noble, pastoral world. After all, a number of the virtues that JRRT extols can be found aplenty in atheists and agonistics. But the punishment of scientists and technologists? Well, that is a little tough to stomach. My advice to Fëanor: next time, get yourself a phalanx of good patent attorneys. Morgoth will wither in fear at the prospect of litigation.

My apologies to Chris Mooney, ([The Republican War on Science](#)), but I couldn't resist.

See also [We Hobbits are a Merry Folk: An Incautious and Heretical Reappraisal of J.R.R. Tolkien](#) by David Brin. This was called to my attention by a commenter in the original article.

About the Author

Doc Bushwell is a biochemist and a minion of the dark lords of pharma. She is a longtime Tolkien fan, having first read JRRT's works in the Years of the Lamps. Her public blathering on things scientific may be found on [Dr. Joan Bushwell's Chimpanzee Refuge](#) where she occasionally gets a word in edgewise amongst the raucous hoots of the boisterous young male bonobos. She discreetly indulges in her newly acquired vice of Tolkienism and offers mostly non-scientific yammering at [The Bad Clam Incident](#) as "pandemonium_213."