
Women Find a Room of Their Own in Tolkien Fanfiction

By Oshun

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This article began as an examination of fanfiction through the prism of the genre as inspired by Tolkien's world with the intention of positing that it is a legitimate form of storytelling. But, similar to the process involved in the writing of fiction, this story grew in its telling. As I organized my material, I realized that one would be like Don Quixote and merely tilting against windmills if one did not address, *centrally*, the fact that the vast majority of Tolkien fanfiction is written by women.

Women and Fanfiction

After the release of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* (LotR) series of movies in the early-2000s, the community of Tolkien aficionados began for the first time in large numbers to write fanfiction. The exuberant growth of the community of Tolkien fanfiction writers intersected an explosion of youngsters (and adults) writing in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter world. Thus, fanfiction, although it was not a new phenomenon, became widely known in popular culture for the first time. Although thousands upon thousands engaged in this form of creativity, it was generally met by scorn or dismissal as a juvenile activity which had nothing to do with "real writing," within both the world of Tolkien's readers and the literary community at-large.

Prior to the post-LotR film period, the few people who had even heard the term fanfiction, related it in large part to Star Trek and fan-published underground pamphlets called "zines," containing stories that expanded upon and developed the adventures of Kirk and Spock. Megan Abrahamson, a Medievalist active in the Tolkien fandom, notes in a recent article in the journal *Mythlore* that "Fanfiction is usually maligned on grounds of legality, the ownership of ideas, and intellectual property."¹ She is entirely correct in this assertion, but the proponents of this argument are also attacking a straw man. Writers of fanfiction are quick to acknowledge their relationship to the existing source. The question of claiming ownership of or seeking to make a profit from the Tolkien's body of work is not a serious issue for the overwhelming majority of writers who create stories set in Middle-earth.

The Oxford dictionary defines fanfiction as "Fiction written by a fan of, and featuring characters from, a particular TV series, film, etc."² The Organization for Transformative Work (OTW) has drafted a better and more complete definition, stating that fanfiction, to which they refer as one aspect of "transformative works," is creative work based upon and "about characters or settings created by fans of the original work, rather than by the original creators."³ The difference between the two definitions is in and of itself revealing. The Oxford dictionary's definition mentions only TV and films, all other sources, most importantly literary ones, are assumed and subsumed under the category of "etc." Such literary sources include anything from Shakespeare and the classics to the newest bestselling Young Adult novel.

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Finally, it is useful to contrast the Oxford definition with the mission statement of the OTW that reveals its partisanship of such work. The OTW examines fanfiction and finds it a worthy endeavor, and regards it in a positive, serious, and non-judgmental manner.

The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) is a nonprofit organization established by fans to serve the interests of fans by providing access to and preserving the history of fanworks and fan culture in its myriad forms. We believe that fanworks are transformative and that transformative works are legitimate.⁴

The OTW goes on to acknowledge that the contemporary practice of creating transformative fan-work is historically rooted in a primarily female culture.⁵

Women as Writers of Fanfiction

"A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."
— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*⁶

There are, of course, many young people who write fanfiction simply to amuse themselves and their friends (and, like the OTW, I would assert there is nothing wrong with that). They usually begin by first reading fanfiction, finding it accessible and engaging, and then deciding, "I'd like to try that," or "I have a version of this story that I want to tell." The exercise may contain elements of wish-fulfillment, diversion, sexual exploration, developing a sense of oneself, or all of the above. The impulse to write often precedes the discovery of fanfiction. Many Tolkien fans began writing fanfiction in response to the movie series. Among those lovers of Middle-earth was a significant minority of serious readers who were drawn to further study Tolkien's work and his sources. Their interest first extended beyond *The Lord of the Rings* to encompass *The Silmarillion* and expanded further to include the *Histories of Middle-Earth*, *The Hobbit*, and the *Unfinished Tales*, etc. Many also sought to master the art and craft of writing solid fiction. Young writers made up the bulk of the practitioners of Tolkien fanfiction. However, the sheer numbers of teenagers dabbling in fanfiction may not tell us as much about the art form as the news media and publishing community would have one believe.

Not insignificantly, in fact, perhaps *most* importantly, the world of fanfiction provides a welcoming place within which women may write. It is both a haven and a workshop for young women writers. One might say it is similar on a metaphysical level to the material "room of one's own" spoken of by Virginia Woolf more than 90 years ago. Today that "room of one's own" might be an intellectual sphere within which young girls, as well as mature women, may feel comfortable to pursue what the lady Victorian writer might have self-disparagingly called "my scribbling." Fanfiction can be a personal space for women who wish to write and create, many of whom, so many decades later, still find the mainstream world of literary fiction impermeable and inhospitable.

However, one might say, "Look at J.K. Rowling—she certainly is a success!" Or if her work is not sophisticated enough for other reviewers, they might consider Hillary Mantel's popular biography of Thomas Cromwell, *Wolf Hall*. Although not without her detractors, on balance Mantel has gained critical acclaim and financial rewards for her writing, and no one dares accuse her of writing "women's fiction." But despite the instances of financial success and praise won by individual female authors, the world of literature today is still very much a man's world (but more on that below).

Fanfic Writers Want To Tell the Woman's Story within Tolkien's World

It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men,
or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate,
considering the vastness and variety of the world,
how should we manage with one only?
— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*²

The Tolkien fandom differs in one major way from many other inspirations for this form of writing in that the source material is far richer. Good books and great literature in general inspire more challenging fanfiction, that which is more demanding of both the consumer/reader and the writer. Furthermore, many good fanfiction pieces, arguably the best of them, reflect directly or indirectly the insights gained from other literature, contemporary or classic, much in the same way that original fiction or scriptwriting uses such sources to enrich or stimulate a story-line, a style, or even insight into human nature or history. Tolkien's body of work is fertile beyond comparison in the world of fantasy fiction. In fact the entire last thirty years of fantasy fiction writing at least has been molded and shaped by his influence.

Why do adult women write Tolkien fanfiction? One might speculate that they may want to travel to Middle-earth and leave behind their mundane lives of the soul-deadening jobs that do not really pay enough to provide financial security. One could opine that they are tired of the frustrations of urban daily life and turn to fantasy, wearied by the lack of the moral certainties of past ages which romanticize the ability of one to draw a clear line between the good and the wicked, leaving one haggling in a modern age over choosing a lesser evil. Actually, often the reader of Tolkien turned fanfiction writer enjoys on a purely visceral level the details of Tolkien's world and the problems he introduces for his characters. What they do not buy is the romantic yearning for an idealized past period. The majority are too clever and sophisticated to accept the dictates of the Valar without wanting to argue about them. They recognize that the fuss in *The Silmarillion* goes beyond the vanity of one scientist or the nationalism of one people whipped into a frenzy over the theft of their greatest artifact. They see ideology, not only that of Tolkien but also that of the Noldor, Vanyar, and Teleri/Sindar. There exists a level beyond how enchanted they are with Middle-earth, how much they love Tolkien as a writer, a level where they want to argue with his expectations and conclusions.

They want to introduce moral ambiguity, flaws, and creative solutions for the Elves and Men, Dwarves and Hobbits they encounter in this world. They want to explore more fully the ways in which even the blackest villains may not be wholly without contradictions and how the purest heroes of Tolkien's world may have sympathetic and endearing imperfections (or be *annoying* to a given reader as well). They often yearn less for escape than for relevance. The hope of an eucatastrophe eludes them.

Fanfiction writers increasingly cite the need for more stories from the point of view of Tolkien's women characters (both named and unnamed), as well as more people of color and a greater representation of non-Eurocentric ethnicities, as well as wanting to read and write characters of varying sexual orientations and gender identities more representative of what may be observed in our primary world. One can hardly argue that Tolkien's Arda is not broad enough to have contained wildly diverse cultures and the full range of experiences of the human condition. Today's fanfiction writers and consumers are more likely than ever to express a desire to explore a romantic relationship between two women, the culture of the Corsairs or the Haradrim,

not to mention the untold history of the Avari, or even the lifestyle and culture of the long-sundered tribe of the Drúedain.

Una McCormick notes in an article in the recently-published anthology *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J. R. R. Tolkien*, that, "It came as a point of interest to me—if not exactly a surprise—to learn, at a recent conference on Tolkien, that there are more named horses than named women in *The Lord of the Rings*."⁸ Meanwhile, Margaret Atwood, speaking as part of a generation of young women who came of age in the 1950s when there were many fewer women writing science fiction and fantasy literature, noted in a recent interview, "In Tolkien, there are hardly any women at all, only two, but three if you count the spider, which I do."⁹ Well, as much as I respect Margaret Atwood as a writer, I have to point out that this is not technically correct. There are several more than three in *The Lord of the Rings* alone, with or without Shelob. One wonders which two women Atwood is counting here? Probably Galadriel and almost certainly Éowyn, shield maiden of Rohan and brave slayer of the Witch-King. (Sorry, Arwen, you did not make her A-team. Stitching a banner and marrying the hero/king, even if one gives up one's quasi-immortality to do so, is not dynamic enough apparently. Actually, Arwen is a very late addition to *The Lord of Rings*.) Atwood's point, however, is well taken. There are not nearly enough women in Tolkien's work. I prefer *The Silmarillion* where there are proportionately more women, although the biggest movers and shakers are still men. There are women in *The Silmarillion* who lead, who rebel, who are good when it is not easy, and wicked, problematic, or damaged in interesting ways, who are brilliant, skilled, innovative, and determined—in other words, real women. The ranks of *Silmarillion* women also contain the only bona fide super-hero (in the modern franchise sense of the term) in Tolkien's legendarium with the character of Lúthien—and she is a woman.

A big part of why many women want to write fanfiction in Tolkien's world is to develop those women characters, to take the history one is given and fill in the missing pieces, the elements which one knows *necessarily* had to have existed. Tolkien inspires the fanfiction writer to do this because his world is so rich and real. He succeeds in creating a world that leads the reader to suspend disbelief to an almost unparalleled degree, with his languages, the geography, the creation myths, the history and pre-history, the hints of disputes and unreliable narrators running like a subterranean stream beneath that world. No one does world-building like Tolkien, and no one leaves out so much detail, only to further convince the reader that they are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. Of course, for some of us, a world like Tolkien's begs to be expanded beyond the generalizations of the high, epic tone of much of his writing. *The Silmarillion*, in particular, gives only the barest of outline of many of its narratives, while leaving myriads of tantalizing hints of emotions, motivations, misunderstandings, logical fallacies, and all of the prejudices and shortsightedness one finds in the histories of our real world.

Mainstream Publishing Is A Man's World—Tolkien Fanfiction Is Not

"I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a sister;
but do not look for her in Sir Sidney Lee's life of the poet.

She died young—alas, she never wrote a word."

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Why do women still feel, ninety-plus years after Virginia Woolf wrote her famous piece, that "women who write literary fiction frequently find themselves in an unjust world?"¹⁰

This is not to say that there are no areas of genre fiction (like Young Adult, children's literature, and romance novels) that are not dominated by women writers. Similarly, however, other so-called genre fiction such as sci-fi and adventure, as well as non-fiction books, are heavily weighted with male authors. Male writers also are known for ponderous history tomes, whereas women dominate the field of historical romance fiction. Katharine Dubois, a professor of history at Duke University, who moonlights as a romance fiction novelist, provides a list of words which she finds offensive when reading discussions of the romance fiction genre. "These terms not only cast judgment but devalue the craft."¹¹ Her list includes: bodice ripper, dirty, trashy, beach reading, smut, garbage, and Chick lit. Fair enough. It's no accident that words like these are used when speaking of a genre of literature dominated by women writers. Most women have read mystery, spy, thriller, and adventure novels, written largely by and for men. (Women read a variety of books—in general women read a wider selection of genres than men do.) These manly specimens of popular literature are not categorized as dirty, trashy, smut, garbage, or jock lit, although they may include explicit sex scenes, often more graphic than those in romance novels. They tend today to be described simply as mystery, spy, thriller, and adventure novels.

American novelist, essayist, and literature professor Meg Wolitzer has written an excellent article about the status of women in the U.S. publishing community which makes a series of significant points showing the ways in which women writers still today are not treated equitably in comparison to men, one salient point is that women are far less likely to review or be reviewed by the most respected publications. "No wonder that when we talk about today's leading novelists—the ones who generate heat and conversation and are read by both men and women—we are talking mostly about men."¹² Wolitzer concludes her article with the point that "the top tier of literary fiction—where the air is rich and the view is great and where a book enters the public imagination and the current conversation—tends to feel peculiarly, disproportionately male."¹³ Fanfiction, on the other hand, is disproportionately female.

Why Do Women Write More Fanfiction than Men?

"Therefore I would ask you to write all kinds of books,
hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast. . . .
contemplate the future or the past of the world,
to dream over books and loiter at street corners
and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream."
— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Henry Jenkins points out that fandom provides more than a space within which to write and encounter those who share an abiding interest, but also "provides space within which fans may articulate their specific concerns about sexuality, gender, racism, colonialism, militarism, and forced conformity."¹⁴ He goes on to articulate that the community of fandom "contains both negative and positive forms of empowerment. Its institutions allow the expression both of what fans are struggling against and what they are struggling for. . ."¹⁵

The marginality of fanfiction naturally at times leads to a sense of frustration among its practitioners. Such frustration among women in fandom is never more obvious than when the existence of fanfiction shows up as a blip on the radar screen of popular media (something which is still all too rare an occurrence) and, to put it bluntly, is completely misrepresented. Everyone knows that *Fifty Shades of Grey* was originally written as fanfiction, reprocessed, and finally published, to be met with phenomenal sales, and then made into a movie. Was it even a

good book? No. Are there better examples of what writers produce through fanfiction? Many. Do I wish that I, as a fanfiction writer, had written it? No. (Although the compensation the writer has received thus far has been super!)

Similarly, a friend recently pointed me in the direction of a Tumblr blog by Tolkien scholar and fanfiction writer Dawn Walls-Thumma who was reacting to an online article featuring Tolkien fanfiction.¹⁶ (The mention of fanfiction—Tolkien fanfiction in particular—in the media is still unusual enough to attract the particular interest of those involved in fandom writing.) Dawn Walls-Thumma remarked

... normally I'm happy whenever benighted attitudes toward fanfic are shown as less prevalent in the mainstream media. This is an article not just about fanfic but about *Tolkien* fanfic and about a *specific Tolkien* fanfic, and it is positive!

Because Tolkien fanfic warranted a mention in Salon and guess what? It's by a man.

This weekend, I downloaded and crunched the first round of data from my Tolkien fanfiction survey. Where gender is concerned, there were no real surprises: We are 91% women. We are 6% gender minorities. We are a mere 4% men. (The numbers are rounded and so don't add up to 100%.)¹⁷

So *Salon* decides to write an article in praise of a Tolkien fanfic. The Tolkien Society picked up on it too. . . .¹⁸

She points out that the story appears "well-written and entertaining," but continues to make the obvious point that, "Thousands (if not more) of fun, well-written, and entertaining Tolkien fanfics have been written by people who aren't men!"¹⁹ Interestingly, enough the *Salon* article is written by one of their senior writers, Laura Miller, also a woman. (This selective notice of male authors follows the practice of reviewers in the major print journals and newspapers, who historically have tended to disproportionately review men's writing, even in the cases where the reviewers are women.²⁰) Una McCormick, in her *Perilous and Fair* essay referenced above, also points out that popular attention has focused upon male-authored works like Kirill Yeskov's *The Last Ringbearer* and Steve Hillard's *Mirkwood*, despite how rare such works are in comparison to the large volume of excellent Tolkien fanfiction written by women. She also disputes that their works are in any way superior examples of fanfiction based in Tolkien's world. "Why these texts receive attention when *more accomplished* [emphasis added] ones do not, I cannot say. But this attention highlights the double bind in which women—and, perhaps, other marginalized readers—find themselves when reading texts from which they are absent or ambivalently present."²¹

The Tolkien fandom does include a large number of male participants. Men edit and contribute to scholarly journals; they are often the organizers of conferences. Many of the best-known Tolkien scholars are men—a few of the most respected include Tom Shippey, Humphrey Carpenter, Michael C. Drout, Douglas Anderson, in addition to many, many more. (However, many of my personal favorite and internationally recognized Tolkien scholars are women—Verlyn Flieger, Jane Chance, and Dimitra Fimi, immediately jump to mind.) The One Ring.net is a place online where a fair number of men in the fandom—although never exclusively men—pundits, gamers, writers, and amateur Tolkienists alike, gather to argue the minutiae of Tolkien's work. The community of Tolkien scholars is remarkably open to those who share this interest outside of the enclave of academia, sharing platforms with fans at conferences, and

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acknowledging their work. A point made by Michael Drout some years ago is still relevant today and reflects that broadmindedness. He opines in relation to Tolkien scholarship within the fandom community, "Maybe they are scholars with day jobs, but they are scholars nonetheless. And it is important that we in academia continually remind ourselves that it is the *work* not the credential or the institution that really matters."²²

Although the best-known and most extensive work in the area of cartography of Tolkien's world was published by a woman, the late Karen Wynn Fonstad, in her book *The Atlas of Middle-earth*,²³ it is generalized that male fans appear to make more maps than women, graphing also the placement of armies in the battles featured in LotR, and the great Battles of Beleriand of *The Silmarillion*. They estimate actual numbers of troops in the field although Tolkien gives them few concrete details with which to work. Historically, men have done important work in the Tolkien fandom in the area of linguistics. Recently, however, a newer generation of young women with a presence on Tumblr are notable for their interest in Tolkien's languages as well.

But it is indisputable that women are much more likely than men to examine in a novelistic form the political and/or personal context of the same battles through the point of view of the combatants, as well as reaching out to include the women and children left behind. More men come to the Tolkien fandom through the gaming community, while women tend to approach fandom through reading fanfiction in larger numbers. Women write fanfiction as a means of analyzing and interpreting, expanding and describing Tolkien's world. Dawn Walls-Thumma posited in her presentation "Transformative Works as a Means to Develop Critical Perspectives in the Tolkien Fan Community" at a 2015 Mythmoot conference that

Ultimately, it is Tolkien's texts that invite and sustain this kind of deep reading, analysis, and criticism by fan fiction authors. Tolkien's work forms one of the richest and most complicated canons of any fandom. Writers must select from this wealth of very often contradictory and incomplete details to determine the factual basis, or canon, in which they will set their stories.²⁴

The community of women writing Tolkien fanfiction embodies within its established, if highly informal, structure a basic writers-workshop component. Writers are encouraged to find a Beta reader, i.e., one more experienced in writing fiction who is willing to not only to copy check their work, but willing to discuss effective choices of language, style, and organization of one's story. Since there are no formal editors (and, arguably, every writer needs an editor) seasoned writers, as well as new ones, exchange feedback and comments with one another.

The online and print media often write about how fanfiction largely consists of teenagers writing stream-of-consciousness wish-fulfillment fiction in massive un-proofread quantities. The community-accepted standard for what constitutes "good fanfiction," however, is much higher. Short stories, novels, novellas, and shorter pieces are often extensively edited and polished before publication, after many discussions and much feedback relating to character and point of view, plot and pacing, and canon details and their interpretation. These forms of preparatory and editorial work occur in informal discussions online in public spaces, writing groups, and through personal correspondence. They cover everything from grammar and format to questions about the degree to which, for the purposes of a given story, one might wish to imitate or abandon the ambience, style, or even canon context of the original work. Women have a general tendency to be at least as knowledgeable, if not more so, of the canon texts in comparison to men, but are more likely to depart from them for creative reasons.

The fanfiction writer often seeks inspiration outside of the primary canon and may find it directly or indirectly in other literary sources. In this manner, fanfiction writing differs little in method from that used in mainstream fiction where an author of a screenplay or a novel borrows extensively in plot or tone from Shakespeare or Jane Austen and transforms the original into something new and unique. While much of Tolkien fanfiction may follow the timeline and events of the original books without drastic departures, at other times the transformative writer will seek to explore new territory by setting a piece in an alternate time frame or context. As much as the woman writing fanfiction is attached to and immersed in Tolkien's world-building, this does not mean she seeks no stimulus outside of the primary canon. There is significant world-building in fanfiction.

Women come to Tolkien fanfiction with a desire to bring a relevance that they may find lacking in the original works, but also to find a sense of community, intellectual stimulation, a space where they can stretch and grow as writers and not as a dismissed or disadvantaged element fighting for a level ground upon which to work. One cannot deny that Tolkien's work itself, his characters and themes, and his aspiration to create a new mythology appeal to many women readers and writers. Tolkien's belief in the importance of storytelling and in the truth to be found in imagined worlds resonate with women. In bending, twisting, and adapting his world to speak more directly to her reality, the woman writing fanfiction has found a room of her own in which to practice the craft of writing and exploit the creation process.

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Oshun's *Silmarillion*-based stories may be found on the [SWG archive](#).