

10-1-2015

# J.R.R. Tolkien and his Influence on Modern Fantasy Writer Tamora Pierce

Alexandria Curry  
*Marquette University*

J.R.R. Tolkien and his Influence on Modern Fantasy Writer Tamora Pierce

By Alexandria Curry

December 18, 2015

Abstract

Tolkien's writing of female and racial minority characters has been criticized as misogynistic and racist by many critics of Tolkien. However, these critics come to these conclusions due to the limited quantity of these characters overall, especially those of the female sex, and their involvement in the overall story's plot. Tolkien uses women sparingly and because of this, each one has important characteristics and roles that they play. Therefore, if not invalidating the critics position on his supposed misogynistic views, then, at least, dissolving some of their support platforms. However, the roles that the women play are important in understanding Tolkien's true moral and world view points. We are able to more clearly see these subtle aspects in Tolkien's writing when we separate it from the moral overarching story of the One Ring. However, in order to do that, it helps to analyze these characters along with a mirror character that modern fantasy authors have created. Tamora Pierce is such a writer, and her characters in her first series align very succinctly with the characters in Tolkien's series. Through a close character analysis, we are able to see that the criticisms lobbed at Tolkien for his treatment of Arwen and Éowyn are not as substantiated as some would believe.

## TOLKIEN AND HIS INFLUENCE ON MODERN WRITERS

In the very broad genre of literature, there are specific recognized categories that range from science fiction to fantasy. While often fantasy is considered the lesser form of fiction writing, not everyone sees it as so. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien thought that fantasy was “not a lower but a higher form of Art” because it was at a “more pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent” of fiction (Tolkien, 1947). While the sub-genre has faced many critics over the years, it is still popular among authors and readers, especially children. However, just because childhood is the time for reading and the point in our lives where we are introduced to most fantasy novels, does not mean that fantasy is exclusively for children. According to Tolkien (1947) imagination “has often been held to be something higher than the mere image-making” craft that fantasy writers produce, but he disagrees and thinks that the distinction that those critics are trying to make is more aligned to “a difference of degree in Imagination, not a difference in kind” (Tolkien, 1947). Most modern authors would agree with Tolkien’s statements made so long ago in his lecture *On Fairy-Stories*, in fact, Michael Cart believes that “fantasy, light or dark, is not only a source of wonder and dread, but also a reliable catalyst to imagination. Reading of darkness is an invitation to imagine light” (Cart, 2013).

Fantasy can be used in multifaceted ways for the author to explore “the human condition” or “exercise in expansive creative play” (Baker, 2006). For Tamora Pierce, “Fantasy is our imaginary life’s blood” and the authors who use this genre “are speaking directly to people’s souls” (Baker, 2006). They are able to connect to the readers because often times these books “offer familiar experience in intensified form” and the readers are able to identify with the characters and understand the struggles they face (Gopnik, 2011). Baker (2006) is of the opinion that the authors that delve deeper into “their exploration of human nature and how we make meaning” are “more rewarding, wise, and enduring,” but that does not take away from the world

## TOLKIEN AND HIS INFLUENCE ON MODERN WRITERS

creators. Tolkien was able to do both of these things in his series on Middle Earth, including *The Lord of the Rings* series and the *Silmarillion*. He created “the cultures, the histories, the myths” and invented the “world and magical beings” that inhabited it (Picker, 2007; Barker, 2006). In fact, Tolkien has heavily influenced the way authors write about and conceptualize the subject matter of the epic or heroic fantasy sub-genre. He established “the foundation of the modern fantasy industry” (Gopnik, 2011).

However, while Tolkien has surely contributed greatly to the genre of fantasy, he is also one of the field’s authors that receives the most criticism. He is criticized for a multitude, of what people consider, shortcomings in his writings such as his handling of different races in his stories, his supposed misogyny, and the plot holes or forgotten narratives that sometimes crop up due to his editing process. However, I believe that by analyzing the way that a more modern author has approached the character archetypes that Tolkien used, we will be able to see how he has influenced authors that have followed him and perhaps even gain insight into the characters that some see as marginalized within the original series.

*The Lord of the Rings* series is divided into six books and three volumes. It is an epic high-fantasy that was published in London between the years 1954 and 1955 (Belz, 2003). It follows the story of several characters as good battles against evil on Middle Earth. The journey to save the world, by destroying a magical object known as the One Ring to rule them all, relies on the least likely of heroes, a rag-tag team of Men, Elves, Dwarves, and Hobbits. Even though the series is now 60 years old, it still remains in the public eye due to its own ingenuity, the adaptations for films that have followed it, and the scores of authors that have followed after him. According to Chan (2002), “his characters became these archetypal, perfect characters that just continue to ring in the reader’s imagination.”

## TOLKIEN AND HIS INFLUENCE ON MODERN WRITERS

For this reason, I think it is important to look at how Tolkien has influenced the authors that came after him. One particularly prolific author, Tamora Pierce, is an admitted fan of Tolkien and according to her, she “wouldn’t probably be the writer [she is] if not for Tolkien” (Simon, 2003). She grew up reading and writing what is now referred to as fanfiction, but back then was called “Tolkien stories and ‘Star Trek’ stories” (Simon, 2003). Tolkien was a huge influence on Pierce’s writing not only because it showed her that there was a deficit in the genre when it came to certain demographics.

“I noticed at a subliminal level” and later “on an overt one, was that the girls; they weren’t there. So when I started out writing, I did what we all do, I wrote what I wanted to read. And what I wanted to read was girls having adventures and girls kicking butt” (Simon, 2003).

For Pierce “fantasy works best if you make it as real as possible” so she includes situations that other writers gloss over (Simon, 2003). She makes her characters human in a way that allow her readers to see them as normal people and identify with them because they do go through the normal day to day struggles, just with more magic involved. Tamora Pierce’s first quartet *The Song of the Lioness* follows a young woman who disguises herself as a boy in order to live her dream to become a warrior maiden, instead of a Lady.

The first character archetype that we come across in both series in that of the warrior princess found in Tolkien’s Éowyn and Pierce’s Alanna. Both of these young girls were raised in environments that led to them identifying not with the stereotypical position of a Lady of their status, but that of a shield maiden. Éowyn and Alanna were raised in isolated households, Éowyn in Edoras and Alanna in Trebond. Due to the location of these fiefdoms, these families often had to respond to attacks from outsiders, this lead to Éowyn learning how to “ride and wield a blade” and “Alanna could already use a bow and a dagger. She was a skilled tracker and a decent rider”

(Return of the King, 58; Alanna: The First Adventure 48). Also, due to the nature of their upbringing, both women have a deep sense of duty for their nation and their people and neither of them feel comfortable waiting on the side while others are out there helping. “I have my duty Highness. And this is my home, too. I’m trained to defend it, and defend it I will” (In The Hand Of The Goddess, 114). This inability to remain idle leads them to assume fake identities in order to accomplish their goals “I wasn’t useful where I was” and “I cannot lie longer in sloth” (ITHOTG, 106; ROTK, 236). Éowyn disguises herself as a man so that she too may join the battle to protect her people as a member “of the House of Eorl” (ROTK, 58). It was because of this decision that Éowyn makes, along with deciding to secretly bring Merry along with her, that the Nazgûl King and his beast were killed and the battle won. Her victory in this arena is interesting because it is a prophetic battle that turned in Man’s favor when she revealed that she was no man, but a woman and, therefore, could technically kill the Black Rider. Prophecies also play a part in Pierce’s series, where the Bazhir, a nomadic people of the desert, believe that two gods, the Night One and the Burning-Brightly One, will go into the City to battle with the immortals there” and free their children from the siren’s call of the abyss known as the Black City (ITHOTG, 242).

It is interesting to note that Gandalf tries to explain to Éomer why his sister might decide to disguise herself as a man in order to fight in the battle when he had not previously noticed any unhappiness from her.

“My friend...you had horses, and deeds of arms, and the free fields; but she, born in the body of a maid, had a spirit and courage at least the match of yours. Yet she was doomed to wait upon an old man, whom she loved as a father, and watch him falling into a mean dishonoured dotage; and her part seemed to her more ignoble than that of the staff he leaned on” (ROTK, 143).

## TOLKIEN AND HIS INFLUENCE ON MODERN WRITERS

Alanna also went through a struggle dealing with her sex and her desired position in life. Even Alanna's own man servant wondered "why Alanna couldn't have been the boy. She was a fighter" and while "Coram had taught her at first because to teach one twin was to teach the other, poor mother things" it quickly became evident that "she learned quickly and well—better than her brother" (ATFA, 15). "Alanna was much quicker than her brother. She rarely tired, even hiking over rough country. She had a feel for the fighting arts, and that was something that never could be learned" and she "was also as stubborn as a mule" (ATFA, 19). "When she was a child at Trebond, planning to be a warrior maiden when she grew up there was only one problem with her ambition... The last warrior maiden had died a hundred years ago" but after she had achieved her knighthood and it was revealed to the court that she was a woman, she still desired to be useful for her nation "I feel as if I'm a sort of weapon, but a weapon must have someone to wield it, or it just lies around rusting (Woman Who Rides Like A Man, 4; Lioness Rampant, 283). Another interesting parallel between the characters in these books is that they have both learned to accept death. Éowyn is described as having "the face of one without hope who goes out in search of death" (ROTK, 76). Whereas, Alanna "was dying, and she knew it. For the first time in her life, Alanna stopped fighting... with an inner sigh—almost one of relief—she accepted that fact... Alanna took the knowledge of her own death and made it part of her" (ITHOTG, 195).

Another similarity between these two characters is their interesting love story lines. Both Éowyn and Alanna fall in love with the future king of their nation, however, these love stories do not work out. Aragorn is already in love with another woman when he first meets Éowyn, and therefore her love for him "cannot be returned" (ROTK, 143). For Alanna, the story plays out a little differently, because she knew Prince Jon for a long time since she was ten years old and he was 13. She served as his squire, in fact, he asked her to be his squire even after he found out that



she was actually a female. Jon actually asks Alanna to marry him, but she was not prepared to give up on her freedoms, “I couldn’t go wherever I wanted. No risks, and no adventures...I’m not certain I’m ready to marry” (WWRLAM, 184). Alanna also spends some time reflecting on the relationship she has had with Prince Jon; “Jon had always treated her as a comrade, except when they were making love. She usually likes the way the prince handled her, but a small, treacherous part of her longed for the gentle courtesy he gave noble ladies” (WWRLAM, 226). It is due to these failed relationships that would normally end in the stereotypical happy ending that these characters find other love interests that play different functions in the narrative.

King Aragorn and King Jonathan of Conté both fall in love with the exotic beauty of another race. For King Aragorn, he has been in love with Arwen since he was but a young man, and after he returns from his travels Arwen decides to give up her immortality or ability to go westward to the Gray Havens and stay with Aragorn, even though he will eventually pass away. Prince Jonathan falls in love Princess Thayet jian Wilima on sight, whom Alanna had brought to Tortall with the hope that she would be able to “treat him like a person, not just a king” or allow “him to turn into a prig” or become “smug” which is something that she cannot do herself because “I am his vassal, for all I’m his friend” whereas Thayet was “born and reared to be royalty” and being royal “doesn’t frighten” her as it does Alanna (LR, 376). And while Thayet does not immediately fall in love with him, after getting to know him, it becomes evident that they do have a mutual attraction and eventually they too marry (LR, 253).

The characters involved in this aspect of the complicated love interactions are parallels for each other in multiple ways. Both King Aragorn and King Jonathan are very humble characters and they do not flounce their titles around when they are in the common public with their people.

## TOLKIEN AND HIS INFLUENCE ON MODERN WRITERS

“Jonathan met the people of his city....Jonathan hushed and listened....He was seeing life very differently from the way it was seen from the palace, and he was eager to learn all he could. No one ever guessed that the heir to the throne was sitting there” (ATFA, 215).

Both are also leaders that unite their nations. Aragorn accomplishes this by becoming the king of the entire nation and taking back control, although a very lenient and relaxed one, over all the land from the Shire to Gondor. While Jonathan is able to do this by assuming the role known as The Voice of the Tribes, which is the ultimate leadership position among the desert people the Bazhir, “the Voice of the Tribes was a priest, father, and judge to the Bazhir” (WWRLAM, 187). By taking this role within the often marginalized minority group, Jonathan was able to further integrate them within the Tortallan society that they were technically a part of. Both of these kings not only bring their countries together, but they fight for them in battles against their foes and heal their people afterwards. Many times after the battle against the Sauron it is mentioned that Aragorn is both a king who battles against the enemy but also heals the people with a special jewel that he received from Galadriel and Arwen. Jonathan also receives a special jewel that allows him to heal his land and people. Pierce and Tolkien believe that healing is just as important if not more so than fighting. Very early on in Pierce’s series Alanna is told to use her healing magic, “use it all you can, or you won’t cleanse your soul of death for centuries. It’s harder to heal than it is to kill” (ATFA, 11).

Not only are the kings of these lands similar but the queens are as well. Arwen and Thayet are both very beautiful and fair women, but they are also strong and independent characters. Arwen chooses to disobey her father’s wishes and stay with the man she loves, even knowing that it can only end in heartache (ROTK, 252-253). And Thayet, quite literally, fights for Tortall when there is an assassination and coup d’état at Prince Jonathan’s coronation to

become king of Tortall. Both of these characters act as a more feminine foil for their more masculine character counterparts Éowyn and Alanna, however, they also prove that noble women aren't just "delicate flowers" or "ornaments" for their families and husbands (LR, 92-93; LR, 170).

However, since our heroines are not destined to become queen, their love story continues on. "Jonathan was born to rule, as you were born to make your own way," (WWRLAM, 58). This line is very important because it is an outside observation that shows that the role of the champion, which Alanna and Éowyn have assumed, require one to be more flexible and less chained down than what would be available as a queen. "People like you change the world; a smart man keeps track of such folk" (LR, 15). Therefore, it's not surprising that the person that these unconventional Ladies fall for are unconventional Lords. Faramir, Captain and Steward of Gondor, is a man that is descended from the Numenor line, just as Aragorn is, for "the blood of the Westersse runs nearly true in him" and he has an air about him that reminds Samwise Gamgee of "Gandalf, of wizards" or the

"air of high nobility such as Aragorn at times revealed, less high perhaps, yet also less incalculable and remote: one of the kings of Men born into a later time, but touched with the wisdom and sadness of the Elder race...He was a captain that men would follow...even under the shadow of the black wings" (The Two Towers, 291; ROTK, 31; ROTK, 89).

Faramir is a character that is often underestimated because he is both a scholar and a warrior,

"he is bold, more bold than many deem; for in these days men are slow to believe that a captain can be wise and learned in the scrolls of lore and song, as he is, and yet a man of hardihood and swift judgement in the field" (ROTK, 39).

He is also "less reckless and eager than Boromir, but not less resolute" (ROTK, 39). Even

Aragorn is impressed by Faramir because of his "staunch will" against the darkness that has

infected so many of the wounded that have battled against the Nazgûl king and rewards his loyalty and bravery with the title and land for Ithilien, naming him a prince of Gondor (ROTK, 141; ROTK, 255).

George Cooper, King of Thieves, Master of the Court of the Rogue and eventual Lord of Pirate's Swoop, is as unconventional a love as a noble woman can have. He too also exudes a feeling, "Alanna felt something powerful about him, something almost royal," the first time that they met (ATFA, 61). Even though George's occupation is not legal or commendable, he himself has many qualities befitting a person of admirable character. He is loyal to his friends of which Alanna and Prince Jonathan count themselves, he cares about the rogues under him, wanting to check on their well-being before he himself could become healed (LR, 203). He considers his duty towards the rogues "sealed to him" an important aspect of his duty and to neglect that would be shameful (LR, 193). King Jonathan recognizes the risks that George took for him when he broke one of the most tantamount codes for rogues, don't snitch to the provost another rogue's plans. Even though George did this because the plans were those of assassination and regicide is a crime that even the rogues think too heinous to commit, his court is punished by being ambushed and the majority slaughtered. In order to apologize for the loss of George's rogues, who were the only reason he remained as the Rogue, even though "he no longer enjoyed being master" there, Jonathan grants George a full pardon of all his previous crimes and rewards him with a title and land (LR, 200; LR, 304). George receives a "grant of nobility and the title of baron" while "the deeds go to the lands and incomes traditionally belonging to the lord of Pirate's Swoop" (LR, 304).

It is these two interesting characters that are able to love and be loved by the heroines of the story. Lord Faramir and Lady Éowyn first meet within the healing halls of Minas Tirith, and

they too, like Prince Jonathan and Princess Thayet had a moment when their eyes met that would lead them down the road to marriage. It was not love at first sight per se, but a realization of respect and admiration for the other person.

“He looked at her, and being a man whom pity deeply stirred, it seemed to him that her loveliness amid her grief would pierce his heart. And she looked at him and saw the grave tenderness in his eyes, and yet knew for she was bred among men of war, that here was one whom no rider of the Mark would outmatch in battle” (ROTK, 237).

At first, Éowyn wishes to be released from the healing halls, but even as she states her desire “her heart faltered and for the first time she doubted herself” (ROTK, 237). Faramir acquiesces that she will not be trapped with the hall but be allowed to wander the garden, as long as she remains and attempts to fully heal from her wounds gained in battle. And their mutual appraisal of the other war hero leads to their ability to talk amongst each other and become familiar and comfortable in each other’s company. When Faramir confronts Éowyn on her ability to accept sympathy from others he reveals that he loves her.

“Do not scorn pity that is the gift of a gentle heart, Éowyn! But I do not offer you my pity. For you are a lady of high and valiant and have yourself won renown that shall not be forgotten; and you are a lady beautiful, I deem, beyond even the words of the Elven-tongue to tell. And I love you” (ROTK, 242).

And shortly after this moment, the after effects of the One Ring being destroyed are felt across the land, and “the heart of Éowyn changed, or else at last she understood it. And suddenly her winter passed, and the sun shone on her” (ROTK, 243). From that moment, she was able to accept not only Faramir’s love for her but her own love for him as well. She then accepts Faramir’s proposal to be his wife (ROTK, 255). A very similar situation occurred for Alanna. She had been afraid of marriage and turned down Prince Jonathan’s proposal because she was not ready at age 18. But after a few years of traveling around not only Tortall but the continent,

## TOLKIEN AND HIS INFLUENCE ON MODERN WRITERS

gaining life experience and finally defeating the evil that was the Sorcerer Roger of Conté, she is finally able to admit to George that she loves him. It's not only that she loves him, for she loved Jonathan as well, but "George gave her...courtesy, as well as treating her like a comrade, and she liked the mixture" (WWRLAM, 226). She realizes that "her old goals appeared silly—a child's dream, not an adult's. But what was she going to do with her life...What did acclaim matter if you had nowhere to go, nothing to do" (LR, 144). "Enough to wed with me? Enough to give up roamin' and settle down and be the lady of Pirate's Swoop...Well, to roam with me along" (LR, 383). Even George knows that although Alanna is willing to marry him, he would not be able to hold her down and "chain" her "to their" lands (LR, 170).

Through analyzing the similar characters within these two works, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series and Pierce's *The Song of the Lioness* you are able to see that while Tolkien overall was much more focused on the thematic issues within *The Lord of the Rings*, and therefore sometimes the dialogue and reasoning for character's decisions did not come across as well as he might have meant, the characters that many considered marginalized may not have been so, at least to the extreme of misogyny. Due to Pierce's different style in writing she shows us how a character like Éowyn would have struggled through the decisions of her nationalistic pride and her own desires in life. Pierce takes a much more psychological approach in her writing that allows the characters to be a bit more fleshed out than some of Tolkien's efforts. However, that does not mean that these characters do not mirror what both authors were trying to say. Éowyn and Alanna are "modern-day women at war" they struggle with the same questions that many women face now in our society, such as whether they can have it all, can they be both woman and warrior (Darga, 2014; Pierce, 308). Tolkien actually was very progressive in his "gendering heroism to create a new form of a female champion" and Éowyn is one of his more

## TOLKIEN AND HIS INFLUENCE ON MODERN WRITERS

complex and complicated characters due to inhabiting both “medieval and modern-day values”. She is protective of her nation and people, she is a pure character that resists the temptation of her pride, and values the art of history (Darga, 2014).

Through Thayer and Alanna we learn more about Arwen and Éowyn, we learn about their wisdom, power and sacrifice; we learn about Tolkien’s views on how men and women are both masculine and feminine, and his high regard to healing, even over and above fighting. One could say that Tamora Pierce’s first four books work almost as a retelling of *The Lord of the Rings* series, where the focus moves away from the morality of magical objects, because in Pierce’s world magic is neither good nor bad, it depends on who is using the object and their purpose, and towards a psychological analysis on the characters and their decisions. I think through Pierce we are able to gain more insight into where Tolkien was coming from and what he meant by the actions of his characters, especially where decisions seemed to be rushed and character’s personalities seemed to undergo a complete overhaul. While Tolkien was not perfect in his handling of characters that are considered a minority, such as women and those of different races, I think most of the criticisms lobbied against him derive from a misunderstanding in his exposition of these characters and we can see that in how authors that followed after him have adopted and used his character archetypes, especially when they flip the script and make the stories a female led cast rather than the traditional male-led one. Through this character analysis we are able to see that Tolkien’s influence on the fantasy genre was a positive one, and his work can be saved by the authors that followed after him and from the critics who would wish to diminish his affluence and influence in the literature world.

References

- Baker, D. F. (2006). Special Effects. *Horn Book Magazine*, 82, 621-625.
- Belz, A. (2003). Father of epic fantasy: scores of authors have paid tolkien the highest homage—imitation. *Christian History*, 78, 40-41.
- Cart, M. (2013). Suspending the old disbelief. *Booklist*, 109, 50.
- Chan, S. (2002). Lord reigns in pop culture. *CBS News*. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/lord-reigns-in-pop-culture/>
- Darga, J. M. (2014). Tolkien's women: the medieval modern in the lord of the rings. 1-95.
- Gopnik, A. (2011). The dragon's egg: A critic at large. *The New Yorker*, 87, 86-97.
- Picker, L. (2007). Creating a credible fantasy world. *Publishers Weekly*, 254, 37.
- Pierce, T. (1983). *Alanna: The first adventure*. New York: Atheneum Books.
- Pierce, T. (1984). *In the hand of the goddess*. New York: Atheneum Books.
- Pierce, T. (1986). *Woman who rides like a man*. New York: Atheneum Books.
- Pierce, T. (1988). *Lioness rampant*. New York: Atheneum Books.
- Simon, S. (2003). Profile: Tamora pierce and her books written for young girls. *Weekend Edition Saturday*.
- Stenberg, E. (2012). I am no man: the strength of women in j.r.r. tolkien's major works. 1-23.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1947). *Tolkien on fairy-stories*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1954). *The fellowship of the ring*. London: George Allen and Unwin Publishers.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1954). *The two towers*. London: George Allen and Unwin Publishers.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1955). *The return of the king*. London: George Allen and Unwin Publishers.