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The Heir and the Treasure: The Grammatical Construction of Aragorn and Arwen

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The number of female characters in *The Lord of the Rings* can be counted on your fingers. The series is known as a “man’s world,” and for good reason: it is a story in which the majority of the plot is carried by the male characters. The female characters all fit into very specific molds of idealized femininity, or they are shunned and punished for their lack of it. Scholarship, critics, and fans alike have noticed this and commented on it, wondering at its origins and criticizing its impact on the text. The question of what the text really says, especially in the case of characters such as Arwen Undómiel, Aragorn’s love and eventual wife, who rarely makes an appearance in the text except to be admired from afar. The way this admiration is constructed lends itself to a linguistic analysis of Arwen’s existence, especially the way her body occupies her space in the narrative, constantly under the gaze of others. My paper will build on the stylistic work of Robin Anne Reid, whose examination of the grammatical construction of women’s bodies in *The Lord of the Rings* discussed the possibility of expansion on Arwen’s grammatical construction, specifically in terms of comparing her to Aragorn in “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen”. Aragorn and Arwen are both described in terms of light and darkness, but the way their bodies and agencies are formed are starkly different.

Arwen is a controversial character in *The Lord of the Rings*. Simultaneously central and ignored, she occupies a curious space within the narrative, one constructed mostly by the observations of those around her. The granddaughter of Galadriel and daughter of Elrond, she comes from a long line of powerful elves, and she is “of greater lineage than yours,” as Elrond

says to Aragorn in “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen.” When first introduced to her, Frodo spies her from across the room and recognizes her as one of Elrond’s kin. “Young she was and yet not so,” Tolkien writes,

“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.” (LotR, 227)

She does not speak in this first encounter. Arwen, it seems, is overall a character who is meant to be seen and not heard. She is admired from afar by Frodo, seen talking to Aragorn in the distance, seen arguing with Elrond, but her voice is rarely heard. Her loveliness is much discussed, but in the entirety of the text she remains basically silent, speaking only rarely. The only impression that we, the readers, receive of Arwen is fundamentally constructed by the gaze of the male viewer, whether that is that of the male characters on whose shoulders the bulk of the story rests, or the male author. Aside from a particular voicelessness, she suffers also from a lack of action. When considered through the lens of stylistics, this is particularly noteworthy.

According to Robin Anne Reid, “her significance in the text comes not from any action, any behavior or effect upon the material world; it is in her being, embodying the characteristics of both elves and men, bringing the sundered lives together in her marriage” (Reid). The only time she acts in a material way is at the end, “gifting Frodo with a white gem, as Galadriel have him the star-glass, to help him heal” (Reid). Arwen’s significance is rather just her presence, made especially so in how much she resembles her ancestor Lúthien, whose story is told in *The Silmarillion*. “Arwen is not a ‘re-incarnation’ of Lúthien,” Tolkien states in one of his letters, “but a descendant very like her in looks, character, and fate” (Letter 153). Lúthien’s fate is that of a mortal, despite her Elven status. She falls in love with a mortal man, Beren, and chooses to die with him rather than live forever alone. Arwen, as her descendant, possesses the ability to

make the same choice.

The man for which she would make this choice, Aragorn, is described in a very different way, despite being Arwen's counterpart and co-ruler as well as a human of lesser birth than she. He first appears to the hobbits at Bree under the codename "Strider," and is immediately introduced as "strange-looking" and "weather-beaten" (LotR, 156). He makes Frodo uncomfortable with his "keen eyes" (LotR, 157). This description is stark in contrast to that of Arwen, his strange looks and off-putting persona incredibly different from her loveliness and light. Despite his pale face, his description tends towards darkness, as he wears a "travel-stained cloak of heavy dark-green cloth" and "a hood that overshadowed his face" (LotR, 156). His hair, like Arwen's, is also dark. But Aragorn also carries a legacy as mythological as that of Lúthien: he is Isildur's heir, the last of the line of the kings of Númenor. The story of the Númenoreans is told in *The Silmarillion*, and it is one of the rise and fall of a kingdom of Men. The kingdom has since faded into myth and legend, and its people with it, and so Aragorn as its descendant is as Arwen is to Lúthien. In this they are matched. But Aragorn is a major part of the story and spends much of the novel acting and reacting, actively influencing the storyline. His is a very central role to the plot, and his romance with Arwen, though supposedly important to his storyline and to hers as well as to the mythological ramifications of the novel as a whole, is almost entirely glossed over. He mentions her occasionally and speaks to her but once or twice until their marriage at the end of *The Return of the King*.

This lack of focus on the story of Aragorn and Arwen's love seems to paint their relationship as inconsequential, an afterthought. Tolkien himself did not add it to the story until later drafts, thinking instead that Aragorn would end up with Éowyn or not marry at all. Despite this, he described it as "part of the essential story" (Letter 181). It features in one of the

appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*, and is “the most important” of them (Letter 181). It “is only placed so [in the Appendices], because it could not be worked into the main narrative without destroying its structure” (Letter 181), Tolkien explains. Said main narrative was meant to be “hobbit-centric” (Letter 181), and “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen” was supposedly the only story not set down by hobbits. Rather, it was told by Éowyn and Faramir’s grandson, and is written as if it is a story told orally, with quotation marks surrounding its text on the page. It recounts the love story of the two rulers of Gondor from their first meeting when Aragorn is only twenty years old to their marriage and eventual deaths. Arwen “makes the choice of Lúthien” in her wedding to Aragorn (Letter 153), choosing death and the love of a mortal man over her immortal heritage like her ancestor before her. It is, according to Tolkien, “the highest love-story” (Letter 131) and “an allegory of naked hope” (Letter to Rayner Unwin). It is also the only part of the story in which Arwen’s presence is tangible and her voice and thoughts are heard.

In her article “Light (noun, 1) or Light (adjective, 14b)? Female Bodies and Femininities in *The Lord of the Rings*,” Robin Anne Reid states that her “analysis in this paper cannot do justice to Arwen since a full discussion of her grammatical construction must include ‘The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen’ ... and should include a comparative analysis with Aragorn” (Reid). Though she lacked the space to include this in her paper, I plan to expand on her analysis and compare the grammatical construction of both Aragorn and Arwen in “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen.” There are several reasons why a linguistic analysis of Tolkien’s work is both important and relevant to the overall discussion of the literature. The first is that Tolkien’s work is fundamentally linguistic, both in its sentence-by-sentence construction and in the process that went into its creation (Kisor). The second, as Reid acknowledges in her paper, is that “gender, as constructed socially, is constructed in part through language, and as not contingent on the body.”

The white male is situated as “falsely universal” and gender differences are reduced to false assumptions of binarism and heteronormativity (Reid). Therefore, a linguistic analysis of how gender is constructed in Tolkien’s work is appropriate, especially because Tolkien espoused extremely binary and heteronormative ideas of gender. He believed that women “can be corrupted but... are naturally and ‘instinctively’ monogamous... happiest when married, unlike men” (Reid). These ideals may show through his carefully crafted prose and can be analyzed to illuminate the nature of Aragorn and Arwen’s relationship.

I will be using the same methodology that Reid did: namely, M.A.K. Halliday’s functional grammar model of stylistic analysis. First I will be looking at Arwen’s agency in “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen” as compared to Aragorn’s. Reid’s examination of agency was based on the following:

“Agency, in Halliday's system, is based on identification of the grammatical subject of clauses; when the process of the clause is a material one, the subject is the one doing the action... in regard to my excerpts for this analysis, I considered how often the female character was the subject of the clauses in sections focusing on her (as opposed to other characters).” (Reid)

In Reid’s work, Arwen is the subject of clauses referring to her 40% of the time in her introduction and the other selections from the text (Reid). She has the least “in terms of grammatical agency,” and there is a pronounced focus on “her function as Aragorn’s reward and queen” (Reid). Her body is “constructed in terms of her hair, eyes, and clothing,” as well as her genealogy (Reid). In sentences in which Arwen was the grammatical subject, she is referred to by a name or pronoun 72% of the time, more often than any of the other analyzed female characters save Galadriel. After that, she is referred to using a part of her body 22% of the time, and using her clothing 6% of the time. According to this analysis, she has the lowest amount of agency, but when she does have agency it belongs to her rather than her looks.

The section I chose for my analysis of Agency is found in Appendix A, “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen,” page 1058 from “the next day” to “Arwen Undómiel, daughter of Elrond,” describing the circumstances under which Aragorn and Arwen first met and the first conversation they had. Here, Arwen’s voice is heard, and her presence felt more strongly than in any other part of the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*. She shares the story with Aragorn, conversing with him often. The story is not told from her point of view, but from his, and the emotions and story focused on are his, which lends an inherent bias to any analysis given that the majority of actions are going to be Aragorn’s because it is from his point of view, but also supports the idea that Aragorn’s point of view is given more weight than Arwen’s, as female emotions and thoughts are still rarely discussed. This analysis is done on the clause-level rather than sentence-level, as Reid’s was.

Table 1. Agency of Aragorn and Arwen

Aragorn	Arwen
N = (24)	N = (17)
83% (20)	65% (11)

Table 2. Subjects (types)

	Aragorn	Arwen
	N = (20)	N = (11)
Name or pronoun	90% (18)	73% (8)
Part of body	10% (2)	18% (2)
Clothes	0% (0)	9% (1)

In the section from “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen,” Arwen is the named subject of 65% of clauses involving her. 73% of these clauses reference her by her name or pronoun, though 18% reference parts of her body in description. In contrast, Aragorn is referred to as the subject of 83% of the clauses that talk about him, referred to by name or pronoun in 90% of those. He is

only referred to by a body part in 10% of clauses dealing with him. In the case of both Aragorn and Arwen this amounts to two clauses each, but the percentages differ due to the number of clauses both feature in. Interestingly, when Aragorn is referred to by a single part of his body, it is only his heart that Tolkien references, i.e. “his heart was high within him” and “his heart had rejoiced”. This synecdoche refers rather to Aragorn’s mood or emotional state than any sort of physical description. When referring to Arwen by a body part, it is the opposite. She is referred to by “her dark hair” and “her brows... bound with gems like stars,” providing a physical description of what she looks like. Little to nothing is gleaned of Arwen’s emotions from this first encounter between them, and this is reflected in the linguistics of the text.

Imagery of light and darkness is another aspect that Reid analyzed in her work. Tolkien tends to use light and darkness as imagery heavily, though not in the way of a “Manichean binary: dark = bad, light = good” (Reid). In Aragorn’s introduction he is described as dark, and Arwen as well, though a particular attention is paid to the idea that her skin glows with a white light. Both of them have dark hair. Both are associated with stars, and Arwen and the Elves especially are associated with “the Twilight” and nightfall. This analysis was performed on the word level rather than the clause level (Reid), and throughout the entire story of “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen” rather than only in one section of it. I once again used Reid’s methods of analysis, looking at nouns, adjectives, and verbs (processes) for signifiers of light.

Table 3. Light Imagery

	Aragorn	Arwen
Nouns	N = (6)	N = (8)
Light	17% (1)	63% (5)
Dark	0% (0)	12% (1)
Neutral	83% (5)	25% (2)
Adjectives	N = (6)	N = (7)
Light	17% (1)	14% (1)

Dark	17% (1)	29% (2)
Neutral	66% (4)	57% (4)
Processes	N = (1)	N = (1)
Light	0% (0)	0% (0)
Dark	100% (1)	100% (1)
Neutral	0% (0)	0% (0)

This data shows an obvious bias towards Arwen in terms of the use of light imagery. 63% of nouns referring to her are associated with light, whereas only 17% of Aragorn's are. Aragorn is referred to with mainly neutral nouns, Arwen referred to mainly with nouns associated with light. In terms of adjectives, both of them use mainly neutral adjectives, though Arwen is referred to with adjectives associated with darkness twice, which is more than Aragorn.

Arwen's association with light is not surprising. "One characteristic shared by Tolkien's primary female characters is their association with light, whether that association is that of power from (Galadrien, Arwen, Eowyn), or vulnerability to light (Shelob)," Reid says. This association harkens back to myths and stories of Valkyries in Norse mythology. Though Eowyn is more of a shield-maiden than Arwen is, the way the Evenstar appears within the story solidly after a battle, to bring Aragorn to his hard-won prize, is remarkably similar to the function of Valkyries as a whole. Arwen lacks the association with battle, but Valkyries "seem divine" (Self) and are associated with whiteness, lightness, and beauty in the same way she is, though this classification of beauty did not apply only to women (Self).

Examining the processes is what remains. I looked for the same processes that Reid described, i.e. those pertaining to "lightening," "darkening," "shining," etc. I also included verb phrases with similar end results. Both Aragorn and Arwen only had one instance of a light, dark, or neutral light-related verb used to describe their bodies, and, in contrast to the conclusion that Reid draws that processes are "least useful". I find the one instance of "darkening/dimming" in each case to be extremely interesting and worthy of note. In both instances, the verb used was in

the context of Aragorn’s death. Aragorn’s “world is fading,” he says, describing how he knows his death approaches. For Arwen, after Aragorn’s death “the light of her eyes was quenched” (LotR, 1063). The interesting thing here is the passive acceptance of Arwen’s phrase vs. the active description of Aragorn’s. Aragorn describes his own death approaching, how he sees the light from the world leaving and knows that his time approaches. In Arwen’s case, the quenching of her light is done *to* her by some outside force (Aragorn’s death), and is not something she describes. Rather, after his death she recedes into silence, both linguistically and within the narrative. She does not have another line of dialogue, and after she “said farewell to Eldarion, and to her daughters, and to all whom she had loved,” (LotR, 1063) she goes in silence to Lothlórien, where she spends the rest of her days “alone under the fading trees until winter came.” This silence is commented on in the text itself. “Galadriel had passed away and Celeborn was also gone,” Tolkien says, “and the land was silent,” much like Arwen herself. Her light, therefore, seems almost dependent on Aragorn within the text. It is described from his point of view and the point of view of others when looking at her in his presence, and it leaves her after he dies.

For my final point of analysis, I chose to look at something Reid did not, which is the method of comparison through simile, metaphor, and parallelism of Aragorn and Arwen to different things. I looked specifically at whether they were associated with people, either of ancestry or of legend, or with things, not in description but in equation.

	Aragorn	Arwen
	N = (6)	N = (6)
To a person	83% (5)	33% (2)
To a thing	17% (1)	67% (4)

Aragorn is associated mainly with people of legend and with his ancestry. 83% of the time the narrative referred to him as “Heir of Isildur,” “descendant of Kings,” or in relation to the line of Númenoreans. This emphasizes his nobility and strength, his eventual destiny and birthright, and his agency. When Arwen is compared to other people, it is to Lúthien, and only 33% of the time. She is referred to as Lúthien or as “like” Lúthien twice in the text, once when Aragorn mistakes her for the lady of legendary beauty, and once when she is compared to her again later on. Her beauty and looks are strikingly similar to Lúthien.

Arwen is more commonly referred to in relation to an object or a thing. 67% of her comparisons to another noun were to a thing, twice to treasure, once to nightfall, and once to twilight. Aragorn states that “I have turned my eyes to a treasure [i.e., Arwen] no less dear than the treasure of Thingol that Beren once desired” (LotR, 1059). Though cementing her comparison to Lúthien once again, the description of Arwen as a treasure, as something beautiful to be won, does little to further her agency and personhood past being Aragorn’s perfect, covetable prize at the end of his journeys. When Aragorn is referred to with a “thing,” it is “Hope”.

The overwhelming trend shown by this data, in comparison with the data that Reid included in her paper, shows Arwen’s narrative function as being not only less than Aragorn’s, but less than the other women in Tolkien’s story. This holds true to the idea that she was added in late in the process of writing, and perhaps her story was not worked into the center of the narrative because of the lack of time and the amount of effort it would have taken at that point. But I would argue that, though Tolkien calls it “the highest love-story,” it is nothing of the kind, because of the fundamental imbalance between the two of them, not only narratively but linguistically. Arwen’s main function comes down to her beauty and her inherent light, and she

seems to be naught more than a prize or a treasure for Aragorn to win, something that drives him through the heat of battle and the toils of his life, a goal that he works towards rather than a person in her own right. She is a literal “trophy wife”. Her comparison to Lúthien, therefore, is interesting, because it can be argued that in the story of Lúthien and Beren, Lúthien is the one possessing more agency and performing more action. That may be the case for a further study and comparison, in another, longer paper.

It is true that in “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen” Arwen possesses more agency and life than she does in the entirety of *The Lord of the Rings*, but Aragorn still dominates the story with his point of view and his emotions. As an important character, it makes sense that the story would focus on him, but as a character who also featured largely in the main novel, it seems unfair and tragic in some way that the only piece of the Legendarium in which we get an insight into Arwen’s character is still devoid of her emotions and her point of view.

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