



Life-Giving Ladies: Women in the Writings of J. R. R. Tolkien

By Sandra Miesel

J. R. R. Tolkien idealized women. This positive—even too positive—attitude that weaves through all his works began with his deep respect for his widowed mother, Mabel Suffield Tolkien. Converting to Catholicism, along with her sons, sundered Mabel from her disapproving family. She died in appalling poverty when Tolkien was twelve, in his eyes a martyr for the Faith.

Tolkien's second and even stronger feminine influence came from his wife, Edith Bratt Tolkien. He loved her unshakably from his teens, despite the disapproval of his priestly guardian who forbade the lovers' contact until Tolkien came of age. Their difficult romance and war-shadowed marriage in 1916 inspired Tolkien's great tale of the elven princess Lúthien and the human hero Beren. Tolkien even had those names inscribed on the couple's joint tombstone.

Moreover, Tolkien was the father of a daughter and successfully taught women pupils in the male-dominated universities of his day. One former woman student initiated the chain of events that brought *The Hobbit* to the attention of publishers Allen and Unwin, thus igniting Tolkien's astonishing commercial career.

But if women meant so much to Tolkien personally, why are feminine roles so few in his fiction? Indeed, dismissing *The Lord of the Rings* as a mere boys' adventure has become a critical cliché. The usual rebuttal invokes the conventions of medieval literature and fairy tales where the Lady stays on her pedestal and the Knight fares forth to win her. This is certainly valid, but it can equally be argued that skewed sex ratios also suggest failing societies and a falling world, for females are the vessels of life.



Among the five “speaking peoples” or sentient races in Tolkien's universe, we never see female dwarves. The elves are fading, and the most advanced human realm, Gondor, has a declining population. The only intact families shown are three hobbit households. In previous ages, a shortfall of womenfolk had plagued elven dynasties. They leave lasting progeny in Middle-earth only through intermarriage between their daughters and human men. The restorative wedding of Aragorn and Arwen near the close of *Rings* is the sole union in their whole elvish lineage to produce multiple daughters.

Regardless of what the numbers mean, there are few feminine noses to count in Tolkien's most popular works. No female says a word in *The Hobbit*, possibly because its viewpoint character is a middle-aged

bachelor, Bilbo Baggins. Speaking parts in *Rings* include only three major feminine roles and six minor ones—several of these just fleeting cameos. These works, however, are not the only places where Tolkien depicts females. *The Silmarillion* and its accompanying books of fragments offer a more varied cast of feminine characters.

The first of *Rings'* heroines to appear is Arwen, the part-human elf maid, who looms far larger in the plot than in the text. Scorned by some as a mere trophy wife, Arwen's poignant romance with the human hero Aragorn is relegated to an appendix of Tolkien's hobbit-centered novel, but reintegrated into the action of Peter Jackson's film adaptations. Pledging herself to Aragorn while he is still homeless and crownless, Arwen clings to him for forty years despite her father's disapproval. Arwen's loyal love encourages Aragorn during his wanderings. She shows her confidence in his destiny by beginning work on his royal banner blazoned with a White Tree before he has any chance of becoming king. (Discovery of a White sapling is the sign for their wedding.)

Arwen's reward is a century of royal wedlock, longest of any elf-human union known in Middle-earth. But the price of marrying Aragorn is surrender of her elven immortality and separation from her birth family forever. This proves bitter as her father foresaw. Distraught after Aragorn's death, Arwen lays herself down and dies of grief on the hill where they first met. It is the last recorded act of an elf woman in their race's history, balancing an earlier queen's death by depression at the start of the Elder Days.

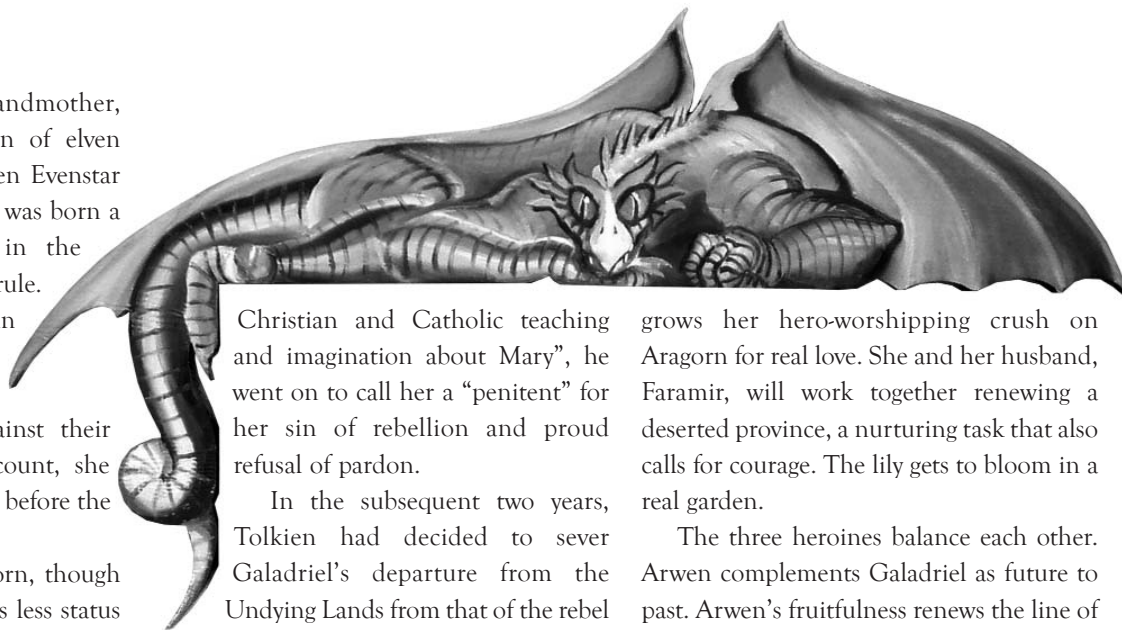
Arwen's maternal grandmother, Galadriel, stands for the dawn of elven realms in Middle-earth as Arwen Evenstar stands for their dusk. Galadriel was born a princess three Ages earlier in the Undying Lands where the gods rule.

Ambitious to rule as a queen in Middle-earth, Galadriel joins the elves' rebellion against the gods and crosses the sea against their express command. In one account, she takes up arms to defend her kin before the departure.

Galadriel's husband, Celeborn, though wise and admirably humble, has less status and power than she. Together they fight "the long defeat" against the original Enemy of goodness, Morgoth, and afterwards his lieutenant the Dark Lord Sauron. After Morgoth's defeat Galadriel refuses the pardon of the gods and remains an exile, the only survivor of her birth-family in Middle-earth. Although queenly, she never attains the title of queen.

Galadriel's wisdom and foresight are essential in the struggle with Sauron. She can penetrate his darkness during their psychic duels but he cannot pierce her light. Wielding the greatest of the Three Elven Rings, the diamond one keyed to the feminine element Water, she guards her golden land of Lothlórien, where time itself is slowed. Galadriel is a subtle reader of hearts who counsels without compulsion. Hard-won humility enables her to reject Sauron's own One Ring when it tempts her with a promise of universal dominion. She surrenders her domain and returns diminished but honorable to the Undying Lands.

Galadriel does have a Marian resonance in that she is the stalwart foe of evil. Tolkien was entirely too enamored of identifying Galadriel with Our Lady because she is a white-clad protective mother—although obviously not a virgin. A month before his death in 1973, Tolkien wrote that "Galadriel was 'unstained': she had committed no evil deeds." This reveals a considerable reworking of her backstory. In 1971, after assuring another correspondent that she owed much of her character "to the



Christian and Catholic teaching and imagination about Mary", he went on to call her a "penitent" for her sin of rebellion and proud refusal of pardon.

In the subsequent two years, Tolkien had decided to sever Galadriel's departure from the Undying Lands from that of the rebel elves and to make her stay in Middle-earth out of helplessness. That, however, still leaves un-Marylike scenes in *Rings* where she tempts members of the Fellowship to test their hearts and is tempted in her turn. If Tolkien had lived longer he might have made more changes in her *Silmarillion* role, perhaps also deciding exactly where she married Celeborn and what variety of elf he was.

Rings' third and best rendered heroine is Eówyn, the mortal White Lady of Rohan. Niece and nursemaid to the king of the horse lords, Eówyn chafes at her confinement in her uncle's palace. Caring for the enfeebled king and managing his household keeps Eówyn the shield-maiden from doing great deeds in the company of men. She dreads dying without a taste of life and love. So she fastens on Aragorn as the answer to her bitter lot, but mistakes the Hero for the man and is rebuffed. Tolkien is sympathetic to the frustrations of the "steel lily" but rejects her notion that men's work is the only kind worth doing.

Convinced that Aragorn is doomed, Eówyn deserts her rear-guard post to seek death and glory in the war against Sauron. Her disobedience, like Galadriel's, is an evil providentially turned to good at the price of great pain. Ironically, it is Eowyn's womanhood, not her military skills, that make her heroic triumph possible. With help from the hobbit Merry, she kills Sauron's chief servant, the Witch-King, who was fated to fall by no man's hand.

After nearly dying herself, Eówyn out-

grows her hero-worshipping crush on Aragorn for real love. She and her husband, Faramir, will work together renewing a deserted province, a nurturing task that also calls for courage. The lily gets to bloom in a real garden.

The three heroines balance each other. Arwen complements Galadriel as future to past. Arwen's fruitfulness renews the line of true kings and her land flourishes, but the rightful elf king never returned to Galadriel's realm and her preserving powers fade. Eówyn corresponds to Arwen as a force of regeneration. Her white house in wooded country is a center of restoration like Arwen's palace in the city of the White Tree, but on the scale of a province rather than a kingdom.

Two of the supporting female characters in *Rings* parallel the leading ones. Goldberry, "the River Woman's daughter", nurtures her forested corner of Middle-earth as the consort of the mysterious Tom Bombadil, first being to walk the land. Like Galadriel her element is water. The wedding of Rosie Cotton the hobbit maid and Sam Gamgee the Ring-bearer is a humble parallel to that of Arwen and Aragorn. Each groom gains a bride of higher status whom he had no realistic chance of winning, and together they revitalize their land. Thoughts of Rosie encourage Sam in his darkest moments on the Ring quest. She is his source of hope and touchstone of normalcy, his garden's perfect bloom.

Thus *Rings'* female characters do loom larger in symbolic space than in wordage occupied. The briefest glance at comparative mythology strengthens this perception. The principle that Christianity makes old myths more true justifies such an approach to a Christian author describing a world before revelation. For example, the association of women in *Rings* with trees, vegetation, water, and the concept of Center

reveal that they are guarantors of cosmic renewal. Notice that only elf women can make the wheat of the gods into a super-nourishing waybread called *lembas* that feeds body and soul, anticipating the Holy Eucharist. Abundant life is a blessing women give.

George Dumézil's interpretation of Indo-European mythology classifies persons and social groups in three categories called *functions*: 1) Authority, 2) Force, and 3) Nourishment. (Think Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite at the Judgment of Paris.) *Rings'* major and minor heroines can be fitted into this system. Eówyn belongs to the second *function* when she fights as a shield maiden, yet she also nurtures as do Arwen, Goldberry, and Rosie. But Galadriel can be considered trifunctional. Besides ruling her realm by law and magic (Authority) and preserving it "unstained" (Nourishment), she was so notably athletic in her youth that her mother called her "Man-Maiden", and in one version of her story, she fought in a battle (Force).

But despite their fertility connotations, Arwen, Galadriel, and Eówyn are not the Three Faces of the Triple Goddess popularized by Robert Graves and revered by neo-Pagans. This Near Eastern/Mediterranean formula of Maid, Mother, and Crone would be uncongenial to a Christian mind saturated by Northernness. And, needless to say, Tolkien's scholarly standards were higher than Graves'.

Tolkien does show hobbit women at different stages of life—something he does not do for the other four sentient races—but they hardly constitute a Great Goddess. The one human Crone figure in *Rings* is a minor one. Ioreth, an older woman without husband or children in evidence, represents the common people of an ageing kingdom living on its past. By remembering herb lore a male professional has forgotten, she causes Aragorn to be recognized as king because he is a healer. She performs the Crone's task of turning the wheel of Life.

Feminine characters get wider opportunities for action in *The Silmarillion* and in the thirteen collections of fragments edited

by Christopher Tolkien as *Unfinished Tales* and *The History of Middle Earth*. The same positive attitudes toward women shine through these works. Some motifs and plot elements appear in both *Rings* and in earlier stages of Tolkien's legendarium.

The Silmarillion, begun in 1916 long before *Rings*, has proven much less popular because it is not a novel but a cycle of legendary histories, some of them exceedingly grim. *The Silmarillion* begins with the creation of the world by Eru, the One, assisted by his blessed spirits. Some of the latter descend to rule the world, incarnate in humanoid forms. There are fifteen great Powers called Valar, served by lesser ones called Maiar. (Although no good Powers are worshipped, Tolkien routinely refers to the Valar as "gods".) Original bliss is shattered by the fall of a Power later known as Morgoth and his Maia henchman Sauron, as well as other corrupted spirits.

Nevertheless the Valar pair off like an Indo-European pantheon in neatly complementary couples: Manwë and Varda, king and queen of gods; Aulë the smith and Yavanna the giver of fruits; Ormë the hunter and Vána the bringer of spring; Mandos the god of doom and Vairë the weaver of history; Lórien the inspirer and

Estë the healer; Tulkas the fighter and Nessa the dancer; plus singletons Ulmo the god of the sea and Nienna the goddess of pity. These are unions of affinity, not sex, but the spirits are innately masculine and feminine by nature as are C. S. Lewis's *eldils*. The goddesses' assignments are attractive although thoroughly conventional. A planned war-goddess was scrubbed from the pantheon early.

The gods invite the elves of Middle-earth to join them in the Undying Lands, but after Morgoth darkens the blessed realm, the elves rebel and return home to fight Morgoth by themselves. Three great elven kingdoms rise and fall until the Valar send help to the rebels and overcome Morgoth. Human allies of the elves are given an island kingdom called Númenor, which becomes corrupted by Sauron and sinks like Atlantis. Virtuous refugees found new kingdoms in Middle-earth and ally with elves to fight Sauron, but their victory does not hold, leaving the decay prevailing in the surviving kingdom of Gondor at the start of *Rings*.

These dramatic events leave ample scope for feminine achievement and heroism. Varda and Yavanna are the most important of the goddesses. White-clad Varda is another Marian figure, for she has hated Morgoth from the beginning and kindles a constellation of stars called the Sickle to hang above his stronghold as a warning of the wrath to come. She reigns with her spouse, Manwë, like Christ and Mary in glory. He sees farther when she is with him, and she hears more when he is with her. A loving intercessor, Varda stands atop the world's highest mountain listening to the pleas of elves and men.

Yavanna, who loves trees so much she briefly incarnated in that form, sows the newly created world with living things. She sings into existence the Two Trees that illuminate the Undying Lands. After Morgoth ruins them, she brings forth their last silver flower and golden fruit that become the Moon and Sun. (The male Maia guiding the Moon is inferior to the female one with the Sun, as in northern European myth.) As



Galadriel, Jef Murray

mistress of organic Nature, Yavanna also begs for the creation of the ents to protect trees from the dwarves, who were made by her spouse the smith god.

Like the goddesses, the females of Middle-earth in the Elder Days prove to be strong, complementary helpmates. Lúthien, Tolkien's greatest heroine, is the incomparably beautiful daughter of a Maia and an elf king. Together she and her human lover Beren wrest a magic jewel from Morgoth's iron crown as a condition for their marriage. Lúthien shows amazing initiative and courage on the quest—although she faints occasionally to show her delicacy. Unwilling to lose Beren by premature death, her tears win his soul back from the god of doom at the price of her own immortality. They share enough years to rear a son and die peacefully, side by side.

Idril, the other elf princess who weds a mortal hero, is less vividly realized. But she prudently prepares a secret escape route from her doomed city that saves some of her people. During the city's fall she struggles fiercely with an armored warrior threatening her child. Her family survives to lead a settlement of refugees. Later, Idril and her daughter-in-law Elwing share perilous voyages with their husbands Tuor and Eärendil to win help for Middle-earth against Morgoth.

Human women of the Elder Days are no less brave. Bearing such names as Emeldir the Man-hearted, they hold their households together under perilous conditions resembling Dark Ages Europe or the American frontier. But self-reliance can be pushed to excess. Morwen is too proud to accept help from elves, beginning a chain of circumstances that ends with the unwittingly incestuous marriage and subsequent suicides of her children. In contrast, Morwen's daughter Nienor and her would-be daughter-in-law Finduilas are too sweetly passive for their own good. The latter ends her life transfixed by an orc spear and the former casts herself into a gorge while pregnant by her brother. This family's story is a saga of unrelieved pagan grimness inspired by the *Kalevala*.

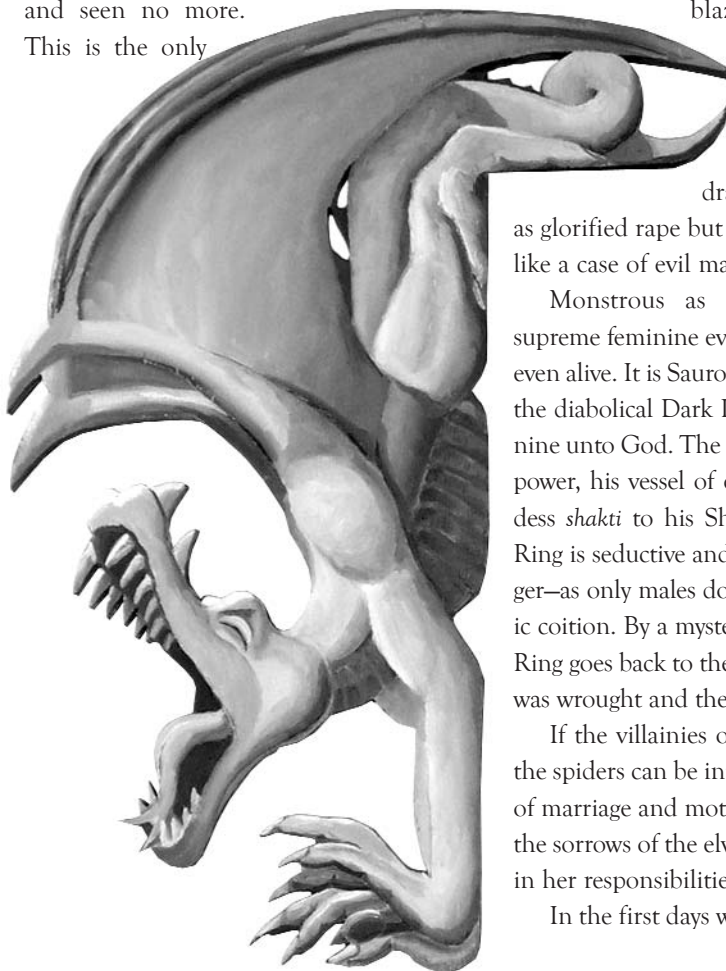
Another cautionary tale on the limits of

conventional femininity is the story of the ents and the entwives. The ents wander the most ancient forest shepherding trees but their mates the entwives settle down to tame vegetation in orchards and gardens. The entwives' absorption in their work, at the cost of procreating entlings, dooms their race.

Tolkien invariably displays his women as chaste. In the legendarium they do not initiate sexual sins, although they may become the objects of illicit desire, harassment, attempted rape, or forced marriage. Feminine vices—in the few instances that Tolkien can bear to show them—are envy, pride, disobedience, self-will, cruelty, and greed.

Middle-earth's wickedest woman is a mere name in a proverb quoted in *Rings*. Queen Berúthiel, a willfully childless consort in Gondor, lives alone in a stark dwelling devoid of color where trees are tortured into curious shapes, a cruel perversion in the eyes of tree-loving Tolkien. She and the wicked cats she used to spy on her subjects are eventually set adrift in a ship and seen no more.

This is the only



marriage Tolkien ends at the husband's initiative. The episode may be his comment on cats and modernity.

But the most deeply evil females in the legendarium are not women but spiders, creatures who traditionally symbolize treachery, sadism, and lust. Ungoliant in *The Silmarillion* is an evil spirit incarnate as a giant spider who devours light and exudes darkness visible. Ungoliant allies with Morgoth to destroy the gods' light-giving Trees and later dies of starvation when there is nothing bright and beautiful left to eat. Giant spiders seen later in *The Silmarillion* and in *The Hobbit* are her descendants as is Sauron's border guardian Shelob in *Rings*. With ravaging maws that can never be filled, Ungoliant, the Mirkwood spiders, and Shelob are monstrous, death-dealing mothers who mate with their sons and eat them.

Light preserved from the Trees before Ungoliant poisoned them is captured in a vial of water by Galadriel to illuminate Frodo's path on the Ring quest. This light blazing up in darkness blinds Shelob as she thrusts her belly on Sam's glowing sword. The hobbit's deed has drawn feminine criticism as glorified rape but to most people it looks like a case of evil marring itself.

Monstrous as the spiders are, the supreme feminine evil in Middle-earth is not even alive. It is Sauron's Ring, feminine unto the diabolical Dark Lord as the soul is feminine unto God. The One Ring is his locus of power, his vessel of energy, playing the goddess *shakti* to his Shiva the Destroyer. The Ring is seductive and putting it on one's finger—as only males do in the story—is symbolic coition. By a mystery of Divine mercy, the Ring goes back to the fiery womb in which it was wrought and the Ringmaker falls.

If the villainies of Queen Berúthiel and the spiders can be interpreted as perversions of marriage and motherhood, the root of all the sorrows of the elves is a woman who fails in her responsibilities as wife and mother.

In the first days when elves mingled hap-

pily with gods in the Undying Lands, the elf queen Míriel loses her will to live after giving birth. Despite her loving husband's pleas, she deliberately slips into death and refuses the elven privilege of reincarnation. By a unique dispensation, her husband is allowed to remarry to beget other children, but the blended family is unhappy and the marriage fails. Míriel's motherless son Fëanor grows up brilliant and ungovernable. He foments the rebellion that constitutes the Fall of the elves and perishes in the futile struggle against Morgoth.

Míriel's tragedy breeds tragedies without number. It highlights Tolkien's principle that fruitful marriage is the normal and honorable destiny for females. But this ideal is not the supreme good: morality trumps marital ties. When Fëanor incites the elves to rebel against the gods, his wife, daughter-in-law, and sister-in-law stay faithful and refuse to follow their husbands into exile. The decision of Fëanor's wife, Nerdanel, costs her dear, for her seven sons depart to die in Middle-earth.

Such conflicts are fortunately rare. Elven marriages—the model for humans—are normally harmonious and permanent. The logic of reincarnation requires one and only one marriage for elves. If one spouse is killed, the other must wait for the other's return to life after centuries of purification in the Halls of Mandos.

An egalitarian spirit prevails between the sexes. Elf men are supposed to stay with their wives during their year-long pregnancies and lend close support during the early years of child-rearing. Elf men usually defer to their wives, as when Eärendil lets Elwing choose that they will take on the elven rather than the human side of their mixed heritage. On the other hand, elf king Thingol ignores the advice of his demigoddess wife, Melian the Maia, causing the destruction of his kingdom and his own death. Centuries of her magical protection are undone by his folly.

Tolkien's most detailed portrait of an unequal marriage crumbling is the story of Aldarion and Erendis, king and queen of Númenor. What starts as the romantic love of a prince and a palace lady turns into the tor-



tured union of two people who cannot share common interests, particularly the Mariner-King's passion for the sea. Their marriage is as doomed as that of the Norse sea-god Njord and his land-loving giantess Skadi. Turning to vulgar feminism, Erendis raises her daughter to despise men, guaranteeing a hate-filled marriage for her as well. Erendis apparently ends her life by hurling herself into the sea that is her husband's symbolic mistress.

The next two ruling queens of Númenor fare little better. The second refuses to wed and the third relinquishes her responsibilities to her husband. The final heiress-princess, Tar-Míriel, is forced into an incestuous marriage with her first cousin who usurps her throne and dooms her realm. The princesses' failure to achieve domestic harmony signals the troubled state of their land. But the successor line of kings in Middle-earth is descended from a Númenorean princess who should have been their first ruling queen—another example of “the last shall be first”.

Through many positive—and a few negative—examples, Tolkien celebrates the dignity of females. He portrays them flowering through complementary relations with males. This need not mean marriage: the dwarf Gimli loves Galadriel only from afar. But marriage is so sublime a relationship that even incarnate angels espouse each other as gods and goddesses. Marriage is a fresh beginning. It sums up the past and looks toward the future, which is why *Rings* climaxes in a glorious round of weddings.

Tolkien's legendarium gives ample scope to feminine gifts. Females inspire, encourage, counsel, pity, nourish, heal, preserve, and renew. They routinely “see farther” than males. They equal or surpass males in courage, loyalty, patience, and tenacity. They call rain, dance under starlight, and sing in running water. They weave fabric, flesh, and fates. Femininity means fruitfulness: it gives life and makes life worth living.

Sandra Miesel, a medievalist and widely published writer, is co-author of The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors of The Da Vinci Code and Pied Piper of Atheism: Philip Pullman and Children's Fantasy, (Ignatius Press).