



Masculinity in Tolkien: Social Criticism and the Rejection of the Heroic Code in The Lord of the Rings, The Hobbit, The Silmarillion and other works

Melanie Rost

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In a review of *The Return of the King* published in the *Observer* in 1955, Edwin Muir criticizes that "all the characters are boys masquerading as adult heroes [...] and will never come to puberty [...]. Hardly one of them knows anything about women," and similar observations have been made by critics over time. Yet can Tolkien's portrayal of masculinity truly be reduced to such a simple formula? Are his men all simply "boys" or, as other critics argue, simplistic good heroes, a romanticized version of the medieval knight who fights a dragon to win the princess in the end?

In *Masculinity in Tolkien*, Rost argues that despite Tolkien's often conservative views when it comes to sex and gender, a closer look at how masculinity is performed in his works actually shows the social criticism hidden within, the rejection of the heroic code and the search for a hero and a masculinity which is built on love and loyalty, not the excess of courage and pride that can be found in many of his mythological and literary sources.

To do so, Rost looks at Anglo-Saxon literature, and how Tolkien criticizes the heroic code by his portrayal of the costs of pride. Afterward, she explores the concept of Chivalry which Tolkien describes in his essay on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to show how this chivalrous masculinity is criticized and rejected in Tolkien's fiction. Rost furthermore examines Tolkien's conception of 'good' and 'bad' kingship, and afterward looks at Tolkien's war experiences and how this might have shaped the portrayal of his hobbit characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. At last, she looks at contemporary, queer readings of Tolkien's portrayal of masculinity which try to deconstruct the conservative heterosexual matrix of his world.

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