



DE GRUYTER
OPEN

DOI: 10.1515/genst-2017-0018

**MASCULINE AND FEMININE INSIGHTS INTO THE FANTASTIC
WORLD OF ELVES: J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*
AND MURIEL BARBERY'S *THE LIFE OF ELVES***

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***Abstract:** The paper focuses on the fantasy universes created by J.R.R. Tolkien and by the more recent French writer, Muriel Barbery. The two authors excel in their depiction of the elusive world of the elves, each offering a deeply personal vision (a man writer's and a woman writer's) of what such magical beings may be like and how they may relate to humankind.*

***Key words:** art, creativity, elves, harmony, nature, spirituality.*

1. Introduction

Almost everyone is familiar with the name of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973), the African-born Oxford professor, philologist and linguist, speaker of more than a dozen modern and classical languages, inventor of fictional languages, and author of the book often called “the book of the 20th century”, *The Lord of the Rings*, and also of other books

that complete his legendarium (*The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales* and so on). Although she has a growing readership around the world, not so many people are familiar with the more recent French writer Muriel Barbery. Born in Morocco in 1969 and raised in a rural area in the Loire Valley, she is a former philosophy teacher who lived in Kyoto for two years and currently lives in France. She became known to the general public through her first novel (*Une Gourmandise*, 2000; in English, *Gourmet Rhapsody*, 2009), and became a best-selling author with her second, *L'Élégance du hérisson*, Gallimard, 2006; in English, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* 2008. Her choice of subject for a third novel, *La Vie des Elfes* 2015, in English *The Life of Elves* 2016, was a surprise for her fans. Many enthusiasts and literary critics immediately placed this volume in the tradition of fantasy literature, more precisely that of Tolkien and J.K. Rowling. In fact, as Barbery has stated in several interviews, while she appreciates the books of those authors and grew up reading *The Lord of the Rings* among others, they did not constitute a source of inspiration for the writing of her *The Life of Elves*. And although we may certainly see Barbery's book as belonging to the fantasy genre, it is a different kind of fantasy, with a more lyrical writing and a rather philosophical approach to issues such as nature preservation, war as a cosmic calamity, or the power of femininity. Nevertheless, the fact that, for one reason or another, both Tolkien and Barbery chose to make the enigmatic figures of elves central presences in their novels makes a parallel between their works possible and quite interesting. And this is precisely what the present paper endeavours to do, after a brief but necessary introduction to Barbery's new book.

2. Muriel Barbery's Novel Concept

Considered by many readers too loose in terms of the coherence and organisation of the plot, and written with a daunting complexity of phrase, the book can present fantasy fans with a challenging task. The author herself has said in a number of interviews that, while she did not intend to write a fantasy novel or a fairy tale, the book borrows elements from both genres. Its subject was, it seems, inspired by the beauty of Japanese gardens – so indescribably beautiful that they appear to have been made by elves. Another factor that triggered the writing of this book was the French writer's love of art. These seem to be the coordinates around which the world of Barbery's elven and human characters revolves: art, nature, the power of imagination, a kind of pantheism, and a spirituality older than Christianity, with its own traditions.

In fact, the two books this paper will address, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Life of Elves*, could not be more different. Tolkien's book is a work of epic proportions and magnitude, resulting from the author's ambition to construct a mythology for his beloved England and from his desire to provide a background for the languages he had invented. Barbery's novel is much more mundane and, at the same time, poetic and feminine in style. As the French author states in interviews, her mother was a feminist and she herself is a supporter of feminism. This may offer an explanation for the fact that some of the most memorable characters in the book are women (both human and elven). The novel opens with the stories of two girls in their early teenage years, Maria, from France, and Clara, from Italy – the first one born of elven parents, the second the fruit of the love between an elf and a woman. Endowed with special powers, they are the heroines in a war unleashed by an evil elf, Aelius, against the world of elves and that of

humans. Clara acts as a catalyst and a channel of communication between the elves and the two girls through her talent – she is a pianist of genius, who can access the stories and dreams of others and make them come to life when playing. Maria, in her turn, can open a breach between the world of elves and that of humans, allowing the elven warriors to come into this world. She is in close contact with nature, animals, and the elements, whose powers she can master and use in battle.

Interestingly, the readers are not informed that many of the seemingly human characters in the book are actually elves until towards the end, although they may suspect that there is more to these characters than meets the eye. In fact, in some ways the title acts as a spoiler, prompting us to look for elves in the pages of the book and wondering where they could be hiding. What we as readers do see as the story begins are the two orphan girls being raised in two mountain villages, in close contact with traditions, nature and stories, and completely unaware of their ancestry and of each other's existence. As Clara moves to Rome, we find the world of art, music and painting. Nature and art seem to be the elements through which the world of elves connects to ours, but only the two girls possess the key to the door between the two realms. Ultimately, the two girls contribute decisively to the victory in the battle against the evil forces, but we are led to understand that this was only the first battle. As the war unfolds, the heroines will finally meet; this will most probably take place in the second volume that Muriel Barbery has announced in her interviews. It is in this next volume that the readers will find out even more about the world of elves and their way of life.

3. Tolkien's and Barbery's Elves – Similarities and Differences

As previously mentioned, Muriel Barbery does not include Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* among the writings that constituted sources of inspiration for the writing of her book. However, as mythological creatures, elves are always surrounded by an aura of mystery, magic and nobility. Tolkien's and Barbery's elves are no exception.

Inspired by the Northern mythologies, but creating his own autonomous universe, Tolkien sees elves as noble and lofty beings, one of the ancient races of Arda. The only race directly created by Eru Ilúvatar, they are also called the First-born, while men, created by lesser gods, are known as the Second-born or the After-comers. The elves are supposed to guide the Second-born and then to gradually make room for them. As the latter increase in number and become the dominant race in Middle-earth, the elves will gradually retreat to the West, to the Undying Lands. The web abounds in pages narrating the history of Tolkien's elves, as there is so much information to be found on the subject in the author's posthumous books, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Not so with Muriel Barbery's elves. If we accept that hers is a work in progress, as a second volume is to follow, we must keep our curiosity to ourselves for now. There is not much to be found out about her elves' history, except for the fact that they seem to have shared part of it with humans, that they are kindred species; even this brief piece of information is presented in the last pages of the novel. What the French novelist does repeat through and through is the idea of harmony and unity. Separation, scission, is regarded as a disease. The world is a better one when all races, men and beasts, trees and stones, the animate and the inanimate function together in complete harmony as a whole, as they once

used to. And this unity may be achieved again through the powers of the two girls who represent the plenitude of art and nature.

When I first thought about the elves, I couldn't see what they looked like, just what their world would look like, which was very close to what I had experienced in Japan. [...] getting deeper into the story, it became very obvious that they would not be the elves of Tolkien, with their pointy ears — they would really represent a sort of unity of all that is alive, and respect between all living beings. (CBC-Radio Canada, Writers and Company, Interview with Muriel Barbery, Feb. 2016)

The two authors' elves differ in their appearance and in their abilities. Those who inhabit Middle-earth resemble mortal men and women, but they are clearly superior to them in many respects. They have a fairer countenance and possess greater wisdom; they are strong and resilient, yet slender and graceful, and they have very sharp senses. Tolkien's elves are highly skilled in battle, but also in the art of healing; they cherish the fine arts, and they value freedom most of all. They are not affected by age or disease and are usually immortal, though they may be killed by certain severe wounds or negative feelings. Their leaders in *The Lord of the Rings* (Elrond, Galadriel) are able to foresee the future and possess great magical powers. They may marry mortals, in which case they lose their own immortality, as was the fate of Arwen Undómiel after marrying Aragorn, a man soon to be king but a mortal man nevertheless. Here is a description of Arwen, as it appears in *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

Young she was and yet not so. 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. (Tolkien 2007:227)

In conceiving her elves Muriel Barbery takes the idea of unity in diversity even further than readers may have expected and presents them as some kind of multi-beings. In ancient times they could assume any shape of man or beast, all of these coexisting in one and the same being. However, at present, elves have lost part of their ability to connect to all beings and retain only three facets – one human and two animal, as little Maria sees on her first encounter with her elven father:

[...] a fine tall white horse with arms and legs, and dewclaws too, a horse that is neither a horse nor a man nor a wild boar but a combination of all three, although not wholly assembled – at time the horse's head turns into a man's while its body expands and is fitted with hooves that shrink to little trotters then grow again until they are those of a wild boar. This goes on unendingly [...] (Barbery 2016: 10-11)

This shape shifting is possible only when elves are within the borders of their world or among their own kind, and they display only their human facet when they are among people. In the latter case they look like ordinary people, although elves from the higher classes of society display a fairness and nobility that is attractive and forbidding at the same time (Maestro Gustavo Acciavatti reminds Clara of a vigorous tree or a living rock). From what the author allows us to see, some of the higher elves have managed to acquire positions of power even in human society (Governor Santangelo), or play important parts in the world of culture and are held in high esteem (Maestro and his wife, Leonora). But there are also the common elves, among whom a picturesque figure is that of Petrus. Maestro's secretary in the world of people, a sweeper and a soldier in elven

society, he declares himself Clara's friend and protector. If the other elves we see are awe-inspiring, though not in the same way as Tolkien's, this character is different through the sympathy he awakens in Clara and the reader. He is perpetually drunk and unkempt—elves have no tolerance of alcohol, as he explains to Clara – but is, nevertheless, as ferocious as a watchdog. He is also the one who found the only prophetic text in elven history, which announces the important part to be played by the two girls in forging a new alliance between men and elves.

Like Tolkien's, the elves in Muriel Barbery's world have a clear hierarchy. Their leader is the *Head of the Elfin Council*, Maria's father, whose authority is challenged by another powerful elf, Aelius. We learn that in a confrontation that took place in their world many elves lost their lives and the same happens during the decisive battle in our world, so they are not immortal as Tolkien's elves are. Love stories between people and elves are possible, though they are not normally blessed with children. Nor are elven marriages any longer. It seems that the entire elven world is becoming sterile, static, unable to change. That is why Clara's birth to an elf (*the Guardian of the Pavilion of the Mists*) and a mortal woman (Teresa) and Maria's birth to an elven father (*the Head of the Elfin Council*) and an elven mother (of whom we are told nothing) are regarded as miracles.

An interesting similarity between the two books, although perhaps not unexpected when it comes to such ethereal characters, is the way elves spend their time. Tolkien's elves are preoccupied with smithwork, woodcraft, sculpture, music and other arts, as they are great lovers of beauty and gifted artists. They sing hymns dedicated to Elbereth, the Valar who made the brightest stars in the heavens and whom they worship. The description of their realms, their constructions, their music and verse and,

above all, the creation of the nine Rings of Power – all these bear testimony to their creative powers. They are also very keen on preserving their stories, the memory of their people. In his essay *On Fairy Stories* (1939:20-22), Tolkien claims that in order to create a Secondary World, one that would be believable and valid by its own rules, a certain “elvish craft” would be required. He calls this special skill Enchantment and states that man-made Fantasy must aspire to it, although it is a very difficult endeavour. The elves are sub-creators; they are the real artists in Middle-earth, working with the tools nature provides to preserve and enhance the beauty of the realm. However, the weakness that even Tolkien sees in his elves is their exaggerated attachment to the past. In a letter to his publisher the author calls the elves “embalmers”, emphasising their preoccupation with the past and resistance to change (Carpenter; Tolkien 1981:212). They wish to remain in Middle-earth, which they regard as home, but, at the same time, they want to stop its progress and preserve an ideal past.

Barbery’s elves are also art lovers; they practice calligraphy, painting, gardening, pottery, walking in nature; they celebrate the twilight and the mists. They sing and write poems about what already exists but, interestingly, they lack one important ability humans still possess: that of changing the world through imagination, creativity. In their world, as Petrus informs Clara, nobody tells fictional stories, which is unfortunate as these constitute the wisdom and understanding of the world. In Barbery’s fictional world, stories are given a huge importance. The elves are attracted towards the humans precisely because the latter can tell a story. Stories are the key towards bridging the gap between elves and humans and winning the war.

With both authors, there seems to be a deep concern for nature and its preservation. The elves in both books have a special connection with

nature. The names and descriptions of the two elven realms, Rivendell/Imladris (*Deep Cleft Dale*) at the foot of the Misty Mountains and Lothlórien (*The Land of Blossoms Dreaming*)/ Laurelindórinan (*Valley of the Singing Gold*), reinforce the idea that Middle-earth elves nurture and protect nature and the entire created world. Tolkien depicts the two elven realms in detail; these are enchanted territories, of unearthly beauty and peace, where time seems to have stopped and no one can enter without the elves' consent – a haven for the Ring party. Here is how Frodo perceives Lothlórien in *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured for ever. He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. In winter here no heart could mourn for summer or for spring. No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lórien, there was no stain. (Tolkien 2007: 350-351)

Through the power of the Elven Rings, Elrond and Galadriel manage to prevent the evil influence of Sauron from penetrating their domains and preserve an ideal refuge for their kind. They also seem to have power over nature and its elements, as we are shown in the memorable scene from *The Fellowship of the Ring* where the Elf-lord Glorfindel commands the waters of the River Bruinen to rise in order to stop the Ringwraiths from pursuing the wounded Frodo.

The elves in Muriel Barbery's novel have a deep connection with nature, too. As previously mentioned, in time immemorial they seem to have lived in a fully harmonious relationship with nature in all its forms and manifestations. However, due to a kind of lethargy, they have lost this ability over time. They can still manipulate nature and the elements, using them as formidable weapons. But if the evil elves are able to unleash a destructive thunderstorm against the village, with strong winds that blow the roofs off and floods that almost destroy the houses, Maria's far greater powers become manifest as she causes abundant snow to fall and to annihilate the enemy's troops almost instantaneously. Clara, in her turn, seems to be able to tame the violence of these manifestations through playing the piano and letting stories unfold.

The connection Barbery's elves have with nature and natural phenomena is reflected in the name of the only elven realm presented in the book: *the Pavilion of the Mists*. Descriptions of this elven world are few and very vague, as they mostly appear in the two girls' dreams or visions. The only way to enter it is to cross a beautiful red bridge guarded by Clara's father and then follow a path of black stones.

Access was along a passage of flat black stones beneath a canopy of chiselled trees until one reached a wooden pavilion with windows that had neither glass nor curtains, then finally across a wooden pier over a misty valley. (Barbery 2016:120)

The mists that permanently cover this realm are special in that they are both opaque and transparent at the same time. More than that, the mists seem to be alive, to provide protection and fulfil other needs of the community. They are probably the element that enables the elves inside the

Pavilion to see everything that goes on in the world of elves and people. What worries the elves is the gradual disappearance of the mists, which they associate with losing some of their ability to shape shift. Aelius and his followers believe that this is all due to the damage people have done to nature and are prepared to destroy mankind in the hope of preserving their own world intact and gaining absolute power. The elves grouped around the *Head of the Council*, however, are starting to believe that the primordial unity may be restored in a different manner from the way it once was, that new bridges between the two worlds could be created through the powers of art and nature, of fiction and imagination.

War is a theme common to both writers and, again, used to very similar ends. Participation in the First World War left its mark upon Tolkien, who wrote about the chaos and perversion of the human mind and soul such a conflagration produces. In *The Lord of the Rings*, war is caused by the desire for absolute power of the evil principle embodied by Sauron. The One Ring is the symbol of this thirst for power. All of Middle-earth's races find themselves caught in this war, and the elves' involvement is instrumental in achieving victory against the dark forces. Barbery sees war as a loss of the harmony and the unity of the world. Once the worlds of humans and elves used to be connected, but their separation and the estrangement of the two races has led to a much poorer existence for both of them. Aelius and his acolytes seem to represent the aspirations of the modern world, a world that is, paradoxically, old and sad, a world that is marked by scission. Like Tolkien, Barbery opposes a peaceful rural existence in close communion with the elements to the modern, mechanised and sterile world where the natural order of things is under threat.

4. Conclusion

Although Muriel Barbery did not use Tolkien's legendarium as a source of inspiration, common points between the two novels can easily be spotted. Such themes as communion with nature, art as a channel of communication, the power of imagination, the fight between good and evil, and separation and rupture seen as a disease are present in both novels. Ultimately, the reason for writing these books is common to both authors: the world is becoming increasingly modern and disenchanting. Stories like these can help to bring a sense of wonder and enchantment into our lives.

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