

Where's Mama? The Construction of the Feminine in The Hobbit.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

“Where’s Mama?”
The Construction of the Feminine in *The Hobbit*

William H. Green (bio)

There are no living female characters, human or animal, in J. R. R. Tolkien's 255-page fantasy *The Hobbit*—a fact that makes it unusual among stories of its length and complexity. Other adventure tales for boys project masculine worlds but do include at least token women. *King Solomon's Mines*, for instance, of which the narrator remarks that there is “not a petticoat in the whole history” (9), still includes a minor love interest, a powerful crone, and dancing girls. *Treasure Island*, womanless in the latter chapters, includes Jim's mother in the earlier ones. The boy heroes of G. A. Henty's late-Victorian military novels have mothers and formalize their social success with marriage. *White Fang*, though set in a man's world, centers on a female wolf, and Christopher Robin has a motherly kangaroo. Tarzan has Jane. The old boys in *The Wind in the Willows* interact with female characters such as a gaoler's daughter, a barge woman, and mother weasels. Boys' books typically construct male worlds outside the supervision of the mother—but Tolkien's story of Bilbo Baggins carries this to an extreme.

This is particularly odd because Bilbo's dead mother is mentioned in the fourth paragraph of the book, even before his name is given. She is “the famous Belladonna Took, one of the three remarkable daughters of the Old Took, head of the hobbits who lived across the water” (12). Not only is she prominent at the head of the story, but her family's heroic traits—traits for which Tolkien coins the term *Tookish*—are the basis for the unfolding of the hero's character, his successful individuation by leaving his womb-like hobbit hole and facing the dangerous world. When the wizard Gandalf summons Bilbo to adventure, he calls him “Belladonna Took's son” (14). The buried mother is the dynamic half of Bilbo's personality, the neglect of which has led to his stagnation, and so—as a complex within her son—she is central to *The Hobbit*. She is rooted in the **[End Page 188]** life of Tolkien, who was orphaned at age twelve, identified with his mother's family ([Letters 54](#)) and kept her portrait on his bureau all his life.

Other than the references to Belladonna Took, there are only minor references to females of any kind in *The Hobbit*, a book with more than

thirty individual characters. Bard is said to be a hereditary chief because he is descended from the “wife and child” of the lord of Dale, who fled a dragon invasion centuries before (211); a mountain height is said to have once been the home of two ravens, “Carc and his wife” (218); and old stories are said to include “princesses” (14). Living women are mentioned once in the book when we are told that an army marches from the Laketown, leaving behind the cowardly town master “with the women and the children, the old and the unfit” (216). This line, dismissively associating women with weakness, is the sole reference to women existing in the story—indeed the only clear mention of any character younger than fifty. *The Hobbit* is a story of old kings without queens, courts without ladies, towns of men and blurry others. Even eagles, horses, wolves, goblins, spiders, and dragons are, according to pronouns, all masculine—an unnatural condition.

The absence of women is all the more odd in episodes indebted to sources which included women. For instance, Tolkien based Bilbo’s journey over the Misty Mountains on his 1911 hike through the Swiss Alps with a botanist aunt and “a mixed party of about the same size as the company in *The Hobbit*” (*Letters* 308–9). However, when Bilbo’s party shelters in a goblin cave—the equivalent of a Swiss cow shed—a male wizard takes the place of the aunt; the female hikers are transformed into male dwarves. But, after all, the biologist aunt was “one of the first women to take a science degree” (*Letters* 309), and so, like the female hikers, was an atypical...



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