



# **The Hidden Femininity of *The Hobbit***

## **The Gendering of Bilbo Baggins**

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The Hidden Femininity of *The Hobbit* -- A Gendering of Bilbo Baggins

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**Abstract**

This essay argues that the protagonist of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins can be considered to be a female character in a male form. By applying feminist literary criticism this essay map out the traditional gender roles in society along with the traditional gender roles in Middle Earth in order to investigate Bilbo's female characteristics, the similarities between him and women in patriarchal society as well as the female imagery present in *The Hobbit*. The results show that Bilbo Baggins' characteristics such as emotionality, sensitivity and compassion corresponds more to the traditional female gender norms than that of the male gender norms. The results also indicate the similarities between Bilbo's experiences and that of women in a patriarchal society, such as the attention to being respectable and difficulties working in a male-dominated field.

**Key words**

gender, gender roles, gender norms, Bilbo, *The Hobbit*, femininity, masculinity

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The aim of this essay is to address the lack of female characters created by J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Hobbit or There And Back Again* by arguing that the protagonist, Bilbo Baggins, could be considered a female character in a male form. In order to do so this essay will use feminist literary criticism to examine if this written male character actually conforms to the male gender, that is to say, how Bilbo Baggins is *gendered* (Tyson 114). In order to define *gender*, it must be separated from the term sex which is determined by our biology and referred to as male or female. Gender is socially constructed and determined by our culture, resulting in gender being either masculine or feminine (Tyson 88). Women and men are socially divided into gender roles which come with certain rules or expectations on how to behave within and outside your gender role. These are called *gender norms* (Merriam-Webster). Traditional gender roles assert that men should be rational, strong, protective and decisive while women should be, or are, emotional, irrational, weak, submissive and nurturing (Tyson 81). These are stereotypical norms partly constructed by patriarchal society but also by *biological essentialism*, the belief in the inborn inferiority of women (Tyson 81). Therefore, when speaking of femininity and masculinity this essay refers to traits that are most commonly expressed by our socially constructed gender. This will be done in order to understand how femininity and masculinity are expressed and recognised. In summary, this essay argues that Bilbo, a male character, conforms more to female gender norms than to male gender norms.

*The Hobbit or There and Back Again* by J.R.R. Tolkien was published in 1937. It is set in Tolkien's fictional world, Middle Earth. It follows a hobbit named Bilbo Baggins as he goes on a quest with thirteen dwarfs and a wizard named Gandalf. Bilbo faces such perils as trolls, big spiders and in the end a dragon named Smaug. The book was intended as a children's bedtime story, but it gained readers from all ages. The book has never gone out of print and has risen even more in popularity in recent years because of Peter Jackson's three-part film adaptation of the book.

This essay will focus on two main areas: the feminine traits of Bilbo Baggins and the similarities in experiences between Bilbo and women in a patriarchal society. There will also be a shorter look at the nature of Bilbo's relationship with Gandalf. There has been some research

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into the fact that there is a lack of prominent female characters in *The Hobbit or There and Back Again* and in Tolkien's work in general but it has mainly been done into the trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings* and the posthumously released *The Silmarillion* (Rawls 5). The research done on the character Bilbo Baggins has mainly been on the subject of heroism and Bilbo's psychological journey during the adventure, such as Dorothy Matthews chapter in *The Tolkien Compass*, which will be looked at further later on.

While *The Hobbit or There and Back Again* itself is still popular, it has become even more so with the recent film adaptations (Jackson, et al.). The makers of the films were concerned with the lack of female characters, so much so, that they felt the need to add female characters not originally found in the book, so as not to offend a feminist audience (Łaszkiwicz 23). It is also important to remember that this is intended as a bedtime story for children, no matter how much adults enjoy it. There is, therefore, a need to consider what properties of gender roles are being passed on to the children reading it, both girls and boys, which will be discussed after the analysis. The rising interest in the book is generating new viewpoints and this essay hopes to add yet another perspective to the character of Bilbo Baggins, that is, whether or not he could be regarded as a female character. The effects that gendering Bilbo as a female has on reading the book will be discussed after the analysis.

## BACKGROUND, PRIOR RESEARCH & FEMINIST CRITICISM

There has been an abundance of studies done on J.R.R. Tolkien's work. The vast world of Middle Earth and its inhabitants lends itself well to interesting research on themes such as power, language, Christian allegory, morality and good versus evil. But only a small amount of this research has been applied to *The Hobbit or There and Back Again* (henceforth referred to as *The Hobbit*). It has been seen as a brilliant children's story that gently introduces the more mature and serious work of *The Lord of the Rings*. One criticism that has been ground for some of the research, has been the lack of written female characters in Tolkien's work. Even less research has been done on the femininity present in *The Hobbit*, as it can be considered to be a marginal issue, with just a few mentions of females and no prominent female characters. There have been a few studies done into the psychological journey of Bilbo, his characteristics and how he develops as a character. There have also been studies into Tolkien's view of femininity

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and masculinity, and in order to later combine the two areas, there needs to be a proper introduction of these previous studies.

Two studies of interest look into the psychological aspect of Bilbo Baggins. The first, *A Journey Into Maturity* by William H. Green, maps out how Bilbo matures during his adventure. The second, *The Psychological Journey of Bilbo Baggins* by Dorothy Matthews, also studies how Bilbo Baggins changes during the course of his adventure. Both Green and Matthews characterise Bilbo Baggins as a small boy, open, but aimless (Green 9) in need of guidance from a parental figure such as Gandalf (Matthews 33). They both describe how Bilbo grows and matures into this unlikely hero by encountering a quest, magical creatures and in the end a dragon, like many fairy tales before (Matthews 30). Both studies take a psychoanalytical approach to femininity and argue that it is represented as Mother Nature (Green 67, Matthews 34). Matthews goes even further into her analysis by applying Jung's theory of the archetype The Devouring Mother, a negative destructive feminine force in nature (Matthews 34). Matthews retells Carl Jung's theory that every human being is in need of psychic wholeness (Matthews 32) and she thus argues that Bilbo's journey is a search for psychic wholeness, that is, a balance between his Tookish side and his Baggins side (Matthews 33). On the note of femininity within Bilbo, Green mentions briefly in the appendix that there is potential for further studies and that a non-gendered reading of *The Hobbit* might be possible (Green 130), however it has yet to be thoroughly researched. In order to identify the feminine and masculine traits in Bilbo, two viewpoints are needed. Firstly, a feminist literary approach regarding traditional gender roles, secondly, Tolkien's definition of femininity and masculinity within the realm of Middle Earth will be applied.

A general, theoretical view of feminine and masculine traits is found in *Critical Theory Today - A user-friendly guide* by Lois Tyson. In a chapter dedicated to feminist criticism, an account is given of traditional gender roles such as men being strong, protective and decisive, while women are emotional, weak, nurturing and submissive (Tyson, 81). In order to get the perspective of Tolkien's view of femininity and masculinity, a paper called "The Feminine Principle in Tolkien" will be used. The author, Melanie Rawls, acknowledges that while it is impossible to gain any insight into Tolkien's view on femininity by reading *The Hobbit*, there is a comprehensive description of femininity in *The Silmarillion* (Rawls 5). *The Silmarillion* is a

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collection of works by J.R.R Tolkien that describe the creation and workings of the universe Eä in which Middle-Earth exists. Rawls maps some of Tolkien's views on femininity and masculinity as described in *The Silmarillion* and she has separated it into three categories: the positive, forms of creativity and the negative. She states that feminine stands for 'understanding' and the positive parts of that are love, counsel, intuition, mercy and compassion. The forms of creativity include song, dance, healing and weaving. The negative traits include impotence, passivity and being consumptive or devouring. She states that masculine stands for 'power' and the positive parts of that are law, action, reason and justice. The forms of creativity are fine arts, crafts and technology. The negative traits include rashness, aggression and self-aggrandising (Rawls 6). By looking at Bilbo's characteristics considering both Tolkien's definition of feminine and masculine as well as the more general traditional gender roles and norms held by western society, it is possible to see how Bilbo is gendered. These four sources will serve as a theoretical background for my first aim, 'What feminine traits does Bilbo carry?'

The second aim of this essay is to compare the experiences of women within the patriarchy with the events Bilbo encounters on his journey. In order to do so, a brief description of what patriarchal society is, and how it affects women, is necessary. As Lois Tyson states in *Critical Theory Today - A user-friendly guide*, a patriarchy is any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles (Tyson 81). These gender roles are used to justify excluding women from leadership and decision-making. Thus, in a patriarchal society, women are innately inferior to men. This is based on the belief in biological essentialism, when in fact these patriarchal structures are socially and culturally created. Women who stay within their gender role and adhere to the prescribed gender norms are put on a 'pedestal' by society, but if they fall off it, that is, by acting outside their gender norms, they are looked down upon as 'unnatural' (Tyson 86). While there are biological differences, the notion that these differences make men superior is generally disputed, yet the remnants of it still exist. If women are repeatedly told by society that they cannot do certain jobs, or that they are too emotional and weak, then eventually they start to internalise these ideas and believe it. The same goes for men because it is not just women who are negatively affected by patriarchy, the same gender roles dictate that men are supposed to be strong, both physically and emotionally. Crying is seen as a weakness, which in itself is seen as a feminine trait. As will be shown later in the analysis of

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Bilbo Baggins, there are similarities between this structural patriarchal treatment of women and that of the dwarves' treatment of Bilbo during their journey.

#### BILBO'S FEMININITY & WOMEN IN PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

As stated before, the first aim of this essay is to map the feminine traits which Bilbo Baggins inhabit. This first part of the analysis shall look at how emotionality and sensitivity are expressed by Bilbo. The following scene takes place when all the dwarves have arrived at Bag End and have gathered around the table to discuss business. Thorin begins by stating that a long journey lies before them and perhaps not everyone who sets off will return:

Poor Bilbo couldn't bear it any longer. At *may never return* he began to feel a shriek coming up inside, and very soon it burst out like the whistle of an engine coming out of a tunnel...then he fell flat on the floor, and kept on calling out 'struck by lightning, struck by lightning!' (Tolkien 21).

As can be read, Bilbo becomes emotional and hysterical. Being overly emotional, irrational and hysterical are all normative behaviours included in the traditional gender roles for women (Tyson 81). Bilbo becomes overwhelmed and cannot stop himself from losing control and gave in to his emotions. Intense emotion expressed by a woman falls within the norm of the gender roles of women. Anger expressed by women is often perceived as being overly emotional and it is considered a negative trait, coming from a person who is unable to control themselves. Strong emotion such as anger from a man however, is considered something powerful and passionate (Shields 98). At the turn of the 19th century, it was thought that women possessed a less developed intellect and therefore were unable to control their feelings (Shields 101).

Of course it cannot be said, based on this alone, that Bilbo conforms more to the stereotypical female gender norm of being overly emotional, however, the responses of Gandalf and the dwarves do. Gandalf tries to explain to the dwarves that Bilbo is just excitable and gets 'queer fits'. The term 'queer' in this context meaning something different or unusual, the underlying sentiment being that this episode is not something considered acceptable or 'normal' within this male company. This is further lamented by the dwarves stating their doubts about the hobbit's ability as a burglar, declaring him more of a grocer than a burglar (Tolkien 22) that is, being more passive than active, which in turn means more feminine than masculine according to Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*.



In *The Hobbit* there are a couple of instances where it is stated that Bilbo 'weeps'. The first instance takes place when Gandalf mentions that he will be leaving them in a couple of days as he has other matters to attend to: "The dwarves groaned and looked most distressed, and Bilbo wept" (Tolkien 133). Both the dwarves and Bilbo are upset about the leaving of Gandalf, however the dwarves are 'distressed' and Bilbo is weeping. Weeping would fall under the category of being distressed, but there is a sense of necessity to mark that they were upset in different ways. The second event takes place after the death of Thorin. Bilbo is again mentioned weeping after walking away alone and the narrator highlights the understanding that this is something the reader would find very strange and unbelievable. This is because it is not an acceptable response within the male gender norm to cry. A man is supposed to be emotionally stoic and expressing sympathy for other men is considered unmanly (Tyson 83). And according to how Tolkien described female traits in *The Silmarillion*, such as understanding, compassion and love, it is evident that Bilbo fits the female norm better than the male.

From emotionality and sensitivity we will move on to look at Bilbo's homeliness and submissiveness. The following excerpt is from the description of Bilbo's house, Bag End.

...bedrooms, bathrooms, cellars, pantries(lots of these), wardrobes(he had whole rooms devoted to clothes), kitchens, dining rooms, all were on the same floor...(Tolkien 3)

Bag End is a luxurious place originally built by Bilbo's father for Bilbo's mother and it is evident that Bilbo loves in his home with the polished chairs and carpeted floors (Tolkien 3), especially the morning after the dwarves' visit when Bilbo takes great care to clean up and turn out rooms (Tolkien 35). Thus, Bilbo can be considered house proud, taking great pride in the many rooms filled with food and clothing. According to the traditional gender norms for women, they are supposed to be domestically skilled and take pride in their home, but according to Tolkien's depiction of femininity and masculinity there is generally little difference between the two genders regarding skills. The feminine skills entail song, dance, weaving and healing while the masculine skills are fine arts, crafts and technology. Therefore, the homely trait Bilbo carries fits more with the traditional gender norm of women than that of the feminine described by Tolkien. A few pages on from the quote the dwarves arrive one by one, and Bilbo the 'Hausfrau'(Green, 50) and ever congenial host welcomes the uninvited guests. Traditional gender roles expect women to be submissive, nurturing, polite and domestically skilled (Shields 98). Women are often expected to feed their family (of course they are biologically constructed to

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feed their young) and in the case of Bilbo it seems as if he takes on a similar role in relation to the dwarves. Bilbo is treated like a servant by the dwarves and Gandalf while they deal with more important matters. Although Bilbo mutters his objection to this, he does not express it openly, possibly out of fear of seeming rude or impolite. This behaviour resembles that of women who are expected to perform all the domestic duties without complaining, because if they complain they might be considered 'bad mothers' or 'bad wives'. Bilbo is not only concerned about his own behaviour but also about his appearance. He has a big wardrobe, dressing mainly in bright colours such as green and yellow (Tolkien 4). He was very concerned that in his hurry he not only had gone out without a hat, but more importantly without a pocket-handkerchief. In its place he is lent a spare hood and cloak by Dwalin. He remarks that they are too big and a little weather stained, and worries what his father would have said if he saw him like this. His only comfort is that at least no one can mistake him for a dwarf as he lacks a beard. Being vain and concerned with appearance is, of course, both a masculine trait as well as feminine but women are more often judged upon their appearance and because of that it is seen as a traditional female gender norm to be vain.

Lastly, here is a look at passivity and compassion, starting when Bilbo has escaped Gollum's grasp and is finally out of the caves:

He wondered whether he ought not, now he had the magic ring, to go back into the horrible, horrible, tunnels and look for his friends. He had just made up his mind that it was his duty, that he must turn back—and very miserable he felt about it—when he heard voices (Tolkien 106).

The rashness and aggression that is needed for action are not inherent to Bilbo. This passivity combined with consideration and understanding finally makes him take action. According to Tolkien's ideas (Rawls 6) this is a perfect balance of feminine and masculine traits. As Rawls puts it: "Action without understanding is rashness; understanding without action is impotence" (Rawls 6). If Bilbo consisted only of Tolkien's masculine traits (Rawls 6) then it is unlikely that he would have paused to consider whether or not he should go back into the mountain. He would have acted with rashness and consequently would probably never have found the dwarves and Gandalf and instead fallen into the hands of the goblins or Gollum. In the end he decides, unwillingly, that it is his duty to do so, but that small moment of hesitation gave him just enough time to realise that they were already out. Earlier in the tunnels, when encountering Gollum, a similar thing occurred:

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He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him. No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him, or tried yet. And he was miserable, alone, lost. A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart... (Tolkien 102).

Bilbo has the opportunity to kill Gollum, but yet again the passive nature gives Bilbo a moment of understanding, he sympathises with Gollum, pities him and shows him compassion and mercy. If any of the dwarves were in the same situation, they would most likely have acted swiftly and rashly with the impulsivity which got them 'bagged' by the trolls before and got them 'bagged' by the spiders later on. When the group for the last time decides to try to approach the elves in the forest, Thorin decides that Bilbo should be the one to go first since the elves will not be afraid of him. Bilbo is not considered a threat, possibly because of his submissiveness (which is included in the traditional gender norms for women), which the dwarves do not possess. It might be argued that this statement of Bilbo being non-threatening is made referring to his small stature which makes him resemble a child. The dwarves are also short-statured but unlike hobbits, dwarves are known to elves and the dwarves, unlike Bilbo, are bearded. Children are often paired with women in the group of innocent people in need of protection, and while the elves at first might see him as a non-threatening child, Bilbo is not portrayed as a child in the book. He is portrayed more as an adult with feminine traits, thus more like a woman than a child. It is in the encounter with the trolls that we can most clearly see how Bilbo and the dwarves differ from each other in the feminine and masculine traits according to Tolkien. When encountering the trolls, Bilbo follows his intuition and starts to discuss with the trolls why they should not eat him, instead of begging for his life. When the dwarves come to his rescue, they do so with power and action but also with rashness and hubris that in the end gets them caught.

The second aim of this essay is to investigate the similarities between what Bilbo experiences on his journey and what women experience living in a patriarchal society. First we will look at Bilbo's fear of losing respect. Bilbo and his ancestors were well-liked in the neighbourhood because they were predictable i.e. respectable. They did not do anything unexpected, and they stayed within the norm of the ideal hobbit. Bilbo's mother Belladonna Took was something else, she did not fit in as a hobbit, she was "something not entirely hobbitlike" (Tolkien 5). A hobbit is supposed to stay respectable by staying at home and not go on any adventures. When Belladonna married Bilbo's father, Bungo Baggins, she stopped the adventures and

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stayed at home, thus becoming a more respectable hobbit. There was something very 'queer' about her and from the description of her she could be considered a norm-breaking hobbit, a trait which Bilbo seems to have inherited. Even though Bilbo spent the first half of his life subduing and denying it, telling Gandalf that they were "plain and quiet folk and have no use for adventures"(Tolkien 7), he could not resist it when an adventure was offered, even though he knew it would lose him the respect of his neighbourhood. There is a saying "making an honest woman out of someone" and it means to settle down and get married, thus becoming honourable and respectable in society. This seems to be what happened to Belladonna Took and the consequences for Bilbo, if he were to step out of the traditional norm for a hobbit, are the same as for women in a patriarchal society: losing respect. Women are respectable if they keep to a certain conduct and appearance and because of that they are also able to identify 'lack of respectability' in other women because of the internalised sexism that comes with living in a patriarchal society. And if they do not take responsibility and acknowledge this in others then they might be blamed for endorsing it (Skeggs 45). Thus, the resemblance between Bilbo and women in a patriarchal society is mainly seen in the consequences of stepping outside the traditional norm.

While Bilbo would mainly be judged upon his behaviour, women are often judged more upon appearance, sexuality and morality, there is an evident resemblance in consequences. In today's society it is mainly social consequences and not physical ones such as fines and jail sentences (Skeggs 104), but these societal consequences for breaking the norm can be just as devastating in terms of being shunned by other people. This fear of losing respect that Bilbo has is mirrored with his politeness and his well-mannered welcome of the unexpected dwarves. So there seems to be a resemblance in the gender norms for women and the general norms for hobbits. Historically being respectable for a woman was a signifier of not being working class, not being of a lower class (Skeggs 51). Bilbo considers hobbits and the Shire as being respectable as the narrator remarks when they leave on their journey "At first they passed through hobbit lands, a wide respectable country, inhabited by decent folk..."(Tolkien 37). And it is evident that those which are not respectable are those outside of the Shire, those outside of Bilbo's 'class.' This is the first time Bilbo is faced with being the 'outsider', he is moving outside his comfort zone, both mentally and physically, and it seems to be a coping mechanism for Bilbo to distance himself from the other characters in order to keep his respectability. An earlier

example being when Bilbo felt comforted that although he was wearing Dwalin's clothes, his lack of a beard made it impossible for anyone to mistake him for a dwarf (Tolkien 37).

The second area of interest is the resemblance between Bilbo's experiences adapting to the role as a burglar and that of women working in a male-dominated field. From the beginning Bilbo is reluctant to the idea of being a burglar, and it is not until the dwarves label him more as a grocer than a burglar that something in him awakens, something 'Tookish' and he decides to prove his worth. Bilbo is very much out of his depth as going on quests, searching for gold and facing enemies comes more naturally to the dwarves. Bilbo tries to prove his worth to the dwarves, much like women has to try extra hard in order to prove their worth in a male-dominated field. When encountering the trolls, Bilbo is reluctant to go up to them, but he is even more reluctant to go back to the dwarves empty handed (Tolkien 43). Bilbo has no need for the content within the troll's pocket, but he does have a need for the respect of the dwarves. As mentioned by Tyson, the internalised patriarchal programming that women develop tells them that they are unable to do certain things such as math, technology or inhabit a role of leadership (Tyson 82). There is nothing biological that suggests that women cannot do these things, just as there is nothing biological that suggests that Bilbo cannot be a good burglar, quite the opposite as he is smaller than the dwarves and by nature much more quiet. Yet he doubts his ability because the dwarves said so. Gandalf is the one who introduces Bilbo to the dwarves, he saw something in him from the beginning and throughout the journey he reassures the dwarves that Bilbo is the perfect burglar. It is not until Bilbo saves the dwarves from the spiders and they find out the full story of Bilbo, Gollum and the ring, that they finally change their minds and start to treat Bilbo with a bit more respect.

Women have been historically underestimated when it comes to work ability or ability in general. One such area in the 19th century was literature as it was considered outright damaging for women to read or write too much. Their writings were either accused of actually being written by men (Morris 43) or discredited entirely because they were 'women's writing', thus not representing all of society, despite male writers being perceived as universal. Today, this type of intellectual discrimination is less prevalent, and writing is a more equal field although there is still room for improvement. But women still encounter difficulties in physically demanding jobs that typically are male-dominated. One such field of work is mining. A study by

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Martin and Barnard showed that women miners consistently had their abilities questioned, which led to low self-esteem and negative self-perception, prompting them to work twice as hard to prove themselves (Martin and Barnard 7). One of the things the women in the study mentioned were that having a mentor, especially a female mentor would help them greatly (Martin, Barnard 8). So the question is, would Bilbo have kept going without Gandalf's support? A female symbolism lies in the relationship that Bilbo has with Gandalf, he acts as a 'fairy godmother' to Bilbo, being considered both as 'the wise old man' as well as 'the wise old woman', archetypes described by Carl Jung (Atre 7). Most importantly Gandalf inhabits the 'anima' that is a man's inner feminine image (Green 66). To start off Gandalf is dressed in a long robe carrying a staff used as a wand, something common in the depiction of fairy godmothers. Gandalf also serves as a maternal guardian of Bilbo. He coaxes Bilbo on to this journey and constantly expresses his belief in Bilbo's abilities. Gandalf does so, not in a masculine way of trying to 'toughen' Bilbo up, but in a more feminine and nurturing way of encouragement and validation. When Bilbo and the dwarves find themselves in trouble with trolls as well as the goblins and the wargs, Gandalf arrives as out of thin air to save them, as would a fairy godmother. Much like it takes Gandalf's insistent belief in Bilbo's abilities for Bilbo to actually believe in it himself, it can be hard for both women and men to look beyond the influences of the patriarchal structures.

The third area relates to the first aim of Bilbo being respectable. Women are often only valued and respected if they stay within the traditional gender role and act in a way approved by others. As seen in the following paragraph, Bilbo is only valued and respected if he acts in the way the dwarves expect him to. In an attempt to end the siege of the mountain and prevent war, Bilbo gives the Arkenstone to Bard, and Thorin upon finding out reacts by calling Bilbo a miserable hobbit, undersized burglar and descendant of rats. Bilbo, who had only acted according to the contract, was no longer respected and valued. The contract being a note left by the dwarves to Bilbo the morning of their departure from Bag End, specifying that his payment would consist of one-fourteenth out of any profit made during their quest (Tolkien 35). Having strayed outside his role of being compliant to the dwarves, Bilbo, no longer being content with being the polite and submissive servant replies "'Descendant of rats, indeed! Is this all the service of you and your family that I was promised, Thorin?'..."(Tolkien 319). This is similar to

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what women in a patriarchal society experience, as women are generally only valued and respected as long as they conform and comply with the prescribed gender norms. Tyson describes this phenomenon as 'bad girls' and 'good girls', if a woman does not stay within the patriarchal social norm for women then she is a 'bad girl'. The 'good girl' is put on a figurative pedestal, raised to the sky as an ideal woman, pleasing her husband, taking care of home and family. But if she falls off this pedestal and goes outside the norm, she is a 'fallen woman' a 'bad girl' (Tyson 86). When Bilbo goes outside the prescribed norm, he is reduced to something small and dirty, a rat, and much like a 'fallen woman' he is treated with disrespect for not living up to the ideal to which the dwarves kept him.

Beside Bilbo carrying feminine traits and similarities with women, *The Hobbit* is full of female symbolism from a psychoanalytical perspective. As mentioned earlier in the theoretical background, both Dorothy Matthews and William H. Green argue that the femininity present in *The Hobbit* takes the form of Mother Nature. This can be seen in the end of every leg of the journey where there is a homely house, nurturing, warm and safe (Green 45). These homely houses; the caves, Rivendell and Beorn's hall are all places that can be interpreted as female imagery. The group is seeking shelter, food and water which they receive. These places; the caves, gardens and secluded dwellings, are all symbols for the womb and the fact that they provide food works as a symbol for the nurturing female or mother. In the cases of Rivendell and Beorn's hall, there are also 'homely hosts' (Green 45) that provides the company with food and act as maternal figures. Especially Beorn, who despite being a male character who occasionally transforms into a male bear, more closely resembles a female bear in his fierce protection of his 'children' (Tolkien 159), that is, the ponies and other animals in his care.

*The Hobbit* was originally written as a children's story, therefore it is necessary to discuss how children perceive gender. Children are always searching for gender cues and a group identity. It has been shown that from a young age children exhibit more positivity towards the group they identify with (Martin and Ruble 68). This could mean that girls identify less with Bilbo than boys would, not yet being able to see the subtlety of Bilbo's personality traits. Children reading or listening to the story will see/hear the gender cue 'he' and the result could be both positive and negative. Boys might be influenced by Bilbo's quest of bravery, but girls might

feel excluded as Terri Windling mentioned in *Meditations on Middle-Earth*, "There was no place for me, a girl on 'Frodo's quest'" upon reading *Lord of the Rings* (Windling 243). There is a possibility of reading *The Hobbit* as non-gendered as Green mentions in the appendix of *The Hobbit: A Journey Into Maturity* (Green 130). It is possible because most of the characters in the book are mythical figures, however this could make it hard for a child to relate to Bilbo because of the previous mention of the continuous search for gender cues.

If Bilbo was a woman, the book would start with her in a traditional gender role of homemaker, providing food while the men tend to business. Her emotionality and fainting-spell would present a stereotypical event of a woman overwhelmed by the situation. Like other women in male-dominated fields, Bilbo is determined to prove her worth to the dwarves despite them constantly doubting her abilities. Bilbo shows the dwarves that what she lacks in physical strength, she makes up for in quick-thinking. It is her quick-thinking that gets the dwarves out of trouble on several occasions. Bilbo becomes a heroine, despite the odds. Originally these odds were that Bilbo was 'only' a hobbit, but if Bilbo was a woman that would be the main difference between Bilbo and the dwarves. Being a hobbit would most likely come second. This can be related to intersectionality. A person's identity is a product of intersectionality (Tyson 352) but it is also relevant when considering the amount of oppression a person suffers from society. For example, a white woman and a black woman generally do not suffer the same amount of oppression, the difference being their race. If a woman is in a male-dominated field then her race does not matter as much as her gender. Imagining Bilbo as a woman makes the unequal power between him and the dwarves more clear. Bilbo is not treated with respect nor is he valued beyond his use. A reader would likely react more to this treatment if Bilbo was a woman than to him being 'just' a hobbit, as it makes it more relatable to today's patriarchal society. In summary: *The Hobbit* with a female protagonist would make it a story of a woman conquering over traditional gender norms, and for children this would make Bilbo a positive and strong female role-model.

There is a rising interest in analysing and revising popular culture from a feminist perspective and it has become an important part of academic feminist study (Rooney and Moody 184). These interests lie in criticism of female role models and stereotypes imposed by patriarchy (Joosen 5). Examples of such re-reading are the Grimm fairy tales Snow White and

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Cinderella, looking at both the perspective of the female protagonist but also the antagonist in the form of an evil stepmother. There are also books written that are retelling classic myths, such as *The Cold Is in Her Bones* by Paternelle van Arsdale which re-tells the myth of Medusa from a more sympathetic perspective and *The Surface Breaks: A reimagining of The Little Mermaid* by Louise O'Neill which highlights the pressure patriarchy puts on physical appearance in women.

This trend exists in television and film as well. There has been a discussion and request for a female actor to portray the part of Agent 007 in James Bond franchise. This has however been refused by the producer saying that he can be of any race by he must always be male (Desta 2020). One franchise where the creators listened to these request is the Doctor Who series which cast the 13th reincarnation of the Doctor with a female actor. There were mixed reactions, one side saying and that the Doctor had always been male and that this was forcing gender equality where none was needed as the franchise already contained strong female representation (Neuman 2019). Others thought it was long overdue and that the Doctor, after all, is an alien and a fictional figure.

## CONCLUSION

The claim of this essay was that the protagonist of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins could be considered a female character in a male form. The aim was to discover how Bilbo is gendered and if he conforms more to the female gender norm than to the male gender norm. This was done first by looking at Bilbo's characteristics and secondly at the similarities between Bilbo's experiences during this journey and that of women living in a patriarchal society. By looking at passages from the book, some characteristics of Bilbo were identified, those being; emotionality, sensitivity, homeliness, submissiveness, passivity and compassion. When putting these characteristics in either male or female traditional gender norms it shows that Bilbo's characteristics fit better in with that of female gender norms but also with Tolkien's own definition of male and female. But it is not what and how Bilbo does or behaves that makes him different, it is in relation to the dwarves and Gandalf that we can see these characteristics more clearly. The second part of the analysis highlighted the importance and lack of respect surrounding Bilbo Baggins and how this is related to women in a patriarchal society. Bilbo values respectability

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and fears losing it, but when looking at the same predicament amongst women it is evident that it is a product of societal structures, Bilbo and women alike are not concerned with respectability for their own personal being but instead for the consequences in an event of them losing it. This outer pressure to perform is further explored in Bilbo's experiences in trying to adapt to the role of a burglar, despite the dwarves' misgivings. The doubt in Bilbo comes from an internalised belief that he is unfit, much like the societal structures that make women believe they are not fit for a male-dominated occupation. In the last part of the analysis, the potential effects of gendering characters were discussed.

Considering the fact that *The Hobbit* was originally written for children and that children are from an early age searching for gender cues, the potential for a non-gendered reading of a female Bilbo Baggins was explored. The experiment of changing Bilbo into a female showed that the story could be one of a heroine conquering over traditional gender norms. The results of a non-gendered reading or a female Bilbo Baggins shows that considering gender properties of all children's literature is an important future field of research. This essay has also shown that the possibilities of applying of feminist criticism to literature where no females are present and the rising interest in how very prevalent patriarchal structures are in every part of society gives this topic great potential for future research. The limitations of this research lie in its reliance on traditional gender roles. These have a tendency to be stereotypical and sometimes even sexist to both men and women. Thus, there is a need to be cautious when making assumptions about gender norms and acknowledge that there are many variations within these norms according to generation, culture, nationality and race. Future research in this field could expand to gender all the characters in Tolkien's works in order to see if this feminine gendering of Bilbo is a singular event or if there are other characters that 'break' their gender norms. Another angle to consider is the historical perspective, as in, what were the traditional gender roles at the time of publishing and what gender roles Tolkien was influenced by during his life.

To conclude, the evidence of the protagonist being a female character in a male form and how the difficulties he faced on his journey resembles those of women in a patriarchal society comes to show that there is more to Bilbo Baggins than meets the eye.

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