

## Competence, Character Growth, and Galadriel By Chris Nagele

Minor spoilers for:

Rings of Power, episodes 1-3

The Black Company, books 3-5

The Rings of Power has received an avalanche of criticism, and though we all delight in corporate missteps, the majority of that criticism has been spurious or worse. Thus I am hesitant to add my own, but a world without criticism is one in which improvement is more difficult.

Many Lord of the Rings fans had high hopes for this Second Age tale of Galadriel. One of the most enigmatic characters of the original trilogy, and as a ringbearer one of its most powerful, Galadriel captivated reader and audience alike with her subtle manipulations and her one obvious moment of strength (or weakness). What, then, could we expect from the not yet Lady of Lothlorien? Would she be less subtle, less wise? Then again, we know relatively little about the development of elves. Do they reach cognitive maturity after three decades, three centuries, how about three Ages? Maybe they never cease to develop? Indeed, Steven Erikson (Malazan Book of the Fallen) has pointed out the challenge of writing from the point of view of [very powerful] immortal beings.

We didn't know what to expect from a Second Age Galadriel, but what did we get? The Galadriel in Rings of Power is driven. She pursues her quest with ceaseless abandon and struggles against an establishment which denies her premise. Yet at no point in the first three episodes does she display those crucial characteristics, agency or competence.

Fantasy has a long history of shunting women into roles which lack the ability to affect the outcome of the tale. The most prominent early counterexamples are Galadriel herself and Dorotea Senjak, of Glen Cook's The Black Company. A quick and dirty description of Senjak is that she is what Galadriel would have looked like if she had taken the One Ring, but this sells Senjak short, as she is— full stop— the most interesting character I have read in fantasy. Both of these women impose themselves on the worlds they inhabit, and it is thus surprising that the Second Age Galadriel lacks even a hint of ability to influence her own story. First, she is forced to turn back from her quest by her own soldiers, then she is cajoled into going to Valinor, after which she drifts around the ocean helplessly, before finally being brought to Numenor under guard. Her only action of consequence in the first three episodes is to dive off a boat, a decision which, while undeniably heroic, is ultimately motivated by emotion over her brother's death. Galadriel's entire storyline in Rings of Power is visibly beyond her control.

Then there is the subject of competence. Here, inevitable (for that small community who has read Cook) comparisons to Senjak emerge. In episode three of Rings of Power, Galadriel finds herself isolated in a foreign land, cut off from her comrades. When Senjak finds herself in a similar situation, she snaps to action, rallying support in places she should and those she probably should not. She weaves past friend and foe at a frenetic pace and eventually emerges into a position of strength. It is not that Senjak does this perfectly, indeed a conspiracy amongst her closest allies does not land where she had anticipated (with devastating consequences), but the point is that she uses all of her intelligence and guile to ensure a favorable outcome. Galadriel, in comparison, angrily requests passage home. And this is to say nothing of the

mutiny that she faces in the opening sequence. Her impotence is made even more puzzling by what we know of her deeds from the First Age and her status as the commander of the northern armies. She is no pampered noble gifted command by birth rather than ability.

Setting is the most important aspect of fantasy (and there the showrunners have nailed it), but character development is not far behind. I think this is because we would like to believe that we ourselves are gradually improving as we stumble through our lives, but evaluating the pace of our own development is difficult. Thus, we enjoy seeing the development of others and take comfort in their successes. Presumably this is the reason that Galadriel is depicted as so helpless in the first few episodes, because by the end of the series, she will have gained not only a ring and a Celeborn, but also the competence and intelligence which she will carry into the Third Age.

But all of this raises the question of where that development will come from. Most commonly, humans (and presumably other races) grow out of failure, but in this instance, we all know how the story ends.

Galadriel will not fail.

She is right about Sauron.

So what will happen when she is vindicated? If her certainty originated more from reasoned argument than from personal trauma, then I would be more optimistic. But if Galadriel does possess evidence, beyond some scratches in stone, that Sauron is alive, she has yet to give any indication of it.

This raises another issue with Second Age Galadriel. In his now infamous Facebook post, Erikson argued that tangential characterization can give us a better impression of a character than straightforward narration. In Rings of Power, we are told Galadriel's story in a very direct manner. There is nothing wrong with that in itself (e.g. Senjak's narrative), but in this case Galadriel is constantly telling anyone who will listen exactly how she feels. We never have a moment of doubt about what she is doing or thinking. This, combined with her lack of agency, makes for a dull storyline.

After decades of unequal gender representation in fantasy, it is phenomenal that the most expensive fantasy tv show ever has a female lead. But if she is not a compelling character, there's a real danger of taking a step backwards. It's hard to imagine Aragorn being as powerless as Galadriel, and that is the comparison that many people will make. What's more, we know that Amazon studios is capable of writing a female fantasy lead with competence and agency (looking at you, Moiraine), which raises the question of how it went so wrong here? It is not sufficient to write a strong woman who can swing a sword. We must write female characters who make the audience want to come back time and again, because that is what we do for men.