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**(RE)ASSESSING GENDER ROLES AT WAR THROUGH
TOLKIEN’S LEGENDARIUM: AGENCY, CHOICE AND
REFUSAL IN THE TALES OF ARWEN UNDÓMIEL
AND ÉOWYN OF ROHAN**

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ABSTRACT: Gender roles in J. R. R. Tolkien’s opus have been the object of intense debate through the last years, especially when it comes to the supposedly secondary space feminine figures hold in the Legendarium. In light of those discussions, this article aims to reassess the portrayal of Arwen Undómiel and Éowyn of Rohan during the War of the Ring, discussing whether their actions convey possibilities of theorizing feminine agency at war by refusing traditional gender roles. As specific objectives, I intend to: a) collect Tolkien’s perspectives on these two women throughout the Legendarium; and b) identify real-life feminine personalities who participated in war and civil rights conflicts during the twentieth century. In terms of methodology, I rely upon an exploratory literature review on the subject and apply documental analysis to revisit the Legendarium. The results suggest that, even though feminine figures (especially Arwen) might be said to occupy supporting and somewhat idealized roles in Tolkien’s works, their acts of refusal effectively contest gender paradigms, problematize traditional meanings of a woman’s place in the context of war and provide useful insights for the destabilization of the sexual dispositive in literature, in law and in society as a whole.

KEYWORDS: Tolkien; *The Lord of the Rings*; gender; agency; war.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The works of Tolkien, especially its historical depiction of war, usually undergo criticism because of the oblivion imposed upon women and the prevalent masculinity in the Legendarium (Akers-Jordan, 2004; Miller, 2003; Partridge, 1983). The annals of World War One, as the vast majority of Tolkien's tales, are filled with stories of masculine characters and their great deeds in the defeat of nameless evil, while female characters are inexistent or relegated to a shadowed position, where they can be seen as wives, princesses or helpless maids.

However, three female characters in *The Lord of the Rings* deserve special attention. Galadriel, the elven leader, bearer of Nenyá (one of the three elven Rings), Lady of Lothlórien and only female member in the White Council. Arwen Undómiel, daughter of Elrond, the evenstar of her people, who relinquished her immortality to marry Aragorn. And Éowyn of Rohan, niece to King Théoden, of the House of Eorl, who slayed the Witch-king of Angmar, Sauron's most powerful servant, in the Battle of the Fields of Pelennor.

These two last ones provoked the writing of this article. Following on the tracks of previous legal research over gender and literature (Atienza, 2018; Bentes, 2016; Nielsson; Castro, 2020; Rosário; Oliveira, 2017), I aim to understand how Arwen and Éowyn's actions, despite usually taken as side quests in *The Lord of the Rings*, offer relevant provocations about gender roles at war and the discursive nature of the *nomos*. Historically, I take into account that World War One took place at the very moment Tolkien was writing his magnum opus, which incited me to look for similarities in his writing and the occurrences in the real world.

In this sense, I discuss how a literal interpretation of the Legendarium, by merely suggesting that women's actions in the War of the Ring were irrelevant or secondary in Tolkien's mind, is somewhat erroneous, as these characters play relevant parts in the story. In the next two sections, I recur to the Legendarium in order to situate Arwen and Éowyn in a debate over the feminine role in war, reflecting on these characters' influence on the defeat of Sauron. In light of that, I broach their similarity to real-life figures, such as Emmeline Pankhurst and Rosa Parks, as well as their contributions to question gender roles in law and society today.

2 ARWEN, REFUSAL THE POWER OF CHOICE

Arwen Undómiel is often depicted as a secondary character in *The Lord of the Rings*, mainly because of her absence from the major environments in the plot and her minor interaction with frontline characters, such as Frodo and Gandalf. In fact, Arwen is usually described as “the one who wed Aragorn II after the defeat of Sauron”, and even their love story is omitted from the books². Besides, little is explained about her throughout the annals of the War of the Ring, as she is merely presented as Elrond's daughter, who spent a great deal of her life in Lothlórien, home for Galadriel. Thus, her image as the Lady of Rivendell is shown in an ethereal, idealized fashion, for her voice is seldom heard, while she mostly appears by the manifestation of others. Several moments through the Legendarium may be appropriate to confirm that theory, such as the thoughts of Frodo Baggins³ and the description given to Arwen by Tolkien

² A more detailed account on the tale of Arwen and Aragorn is absent from the main storyline, although briefly narrated in Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings*.

³ One of Arwen's first appearances in the tale of the War of the Ring is narrated through the eyes of Frodo, although no words of Arwen can be seen: “Frodo saw her whom few mortals had yet seen; Arwen, daughter of Elrond, in whom it was said that the likeness of Lúthien had come on earth again; and she was called Undómiel, for she was the Evenstar of her people.” (Tolkien, 2004, p. 227).

himself⁴. In this sense, a variety of writings concerning the feminine role in Tolkien's writings is critic to Arwen's figure. First because of the minimum presence of women in the story, as the account of the War only portrays Arwen, Éowyn and Galadriel as feminine figures⁵. Secondly, because of their said inessential participation in the results of the war, as the main events in *The Lord of the Rings* orbit storylines conducted by masculine characters (Aragorn's journey to claim the throne of Gondor, Frodo's quest to Mount Doom and, even though arguably secondary, Gandalf's transition from the grey cloak to the white one).

In sight of this, several authors criticize feminine presence in Tolkien's writings, as for numbers as for importance, highlighting their opacity in relation to their masculine peers, as they are often not even recognized as counterparts. Melanie Rawls (1984), for instance, states that no female character is pivotal to the story. Regarding the depiction of Arwen, the author suggests that her appearance in the *Legendarium* resembles a "half-glimpsed dream".

However, I take a different approach. Even though Arwen seldom appears in *The Lord of the Rings*, her existence and memory, often depicted as the light of Eärendil⁶, bring light to the darkest times of the story, such as in the arrival of Aragorn and the Dead Men of Dunharrow in the Battle of the Fields of Pelennor. At that point, her standard was the beacon of the victory Gondor and Rohan were to accomplish that day:

Upon the foremost ship a great standard broke, and the wind displayed it as she turned towards the Harlond.

⁴ Even though twelve volumes *The History of Middle-earth* collection, little of them is dedicated to discuss Arwen Undómiel. One of the few lines about her says: "[...] the fairest of all the maidens of the third Age, in whom the likeness of Lúthien her foremother returned to Middle-earth." (Tolkien, 1994, p. 234).

⁵ Some authors consider Shelob as a prominent feminine figure in the *Legendarium*. Considering the scope of this article, we chose not to broach such an interpretation, mainly because Shelob's role in the War of the Ring does not hinge upon her gender role, but rather (and simply) upon her confrontation with the hobbits in Cirith Ungol.

⁶ The light of Eärendil, enclosed in the phial given to Frodo by Galadriel upon the departure of the Fellowship of the Ring from Lothlórien, is defined as capable of capturing the light irradiated by the two trees of Valinor before their destruction by Melkor and Ungoliant. The power contained in the phial was able to diminish the One Ring's influence over Frodo through his journey to Mount Doom and to save Frodo and Samwise Gamgee in their confrontation with Shelob after the climbing of the stairs of Cirith Ungol.

There flowered a White Tree, and that was for Gondor; but Seven Stars were about it, and a high crown above it, the signs of Elendil that no lord had borne for years beyond count. And the stars flamed in the sunlight, for they were wrought of gems by Arwen daughter of Elrond; and the crown was bright in the morning, for it was wrought of mithril and gold (Tolkien, 2004, p. 847).

At first sight, Arwen's most perceivable and highlighted contribution to the War of the Ring would be the boosting of resilience, that is, the power she conveys for men to stay strong and fight for their lives, their families and their beliefs, which represents the presence of love and fondness even in the verge of battle, when all hope may seem lost and forgotten⁷. As one may remember, Arwen's banner was only sighted at a critical moment in the battle for Gondor, when the forces of Sauron nearly overcame the power of Men. The sight of her standard was the first prediction of the return of the King, the triumph of Men and the victory against the Enemy, which would end the War of the Ring.

However, despite that common portrayal (which indeed corroborates the aforementioned criticism on Tolkien's effacement and idealization of feminine figures), I believe Arwen's most important role was played outside of the battlefield. By choosing not to go with her folk to the Grey Havens and take the last ships to the Uttermost West in order to stay in Middle-earth and live a mortal life beside Aragorn, she stated that hers "is the choice of Lúthien, and as she so have I chosen, both the sweet and the bitter" (Tolkien, 2004, p. 974).

Her decision is confirmed in year 3021 of the Third Age, when "she was wedded to Aragorn Elessar and made the choice of Lúthien"⁸

⁷ Arwen's name is also an enunciation of her as a beacon of hope, as "Undómiel" is the *Quenya* word for "evenstar". That symbolism is reaffirmed by the elfstone she gives Aragorn and which he carried for the rest of his days.

⁸ The tale of Arwen and Aragorn is often associated to the story of Beren and Lúthien (Tolkien, 1993, p. 211; Tolkien, 1994, p. 71), as for the similarities in their beginnings as for their unfoldings. In their first encounter, Aragorn mistakes Arwen for Lúthien and immediately falls in love with her. Coincidentally, Aragorn was singing the Lay of Lúthien, which speaks of Beren and Lúthien's first encounter in the forest of Neldoreth. As for their destinies, just as Lúthien managed to come back to Arda from the Halls of Mandos to live a mortal life beside Beren, Arwen chooses to stay behind and marry Aragorn instead of following the Elves into the West. Curiously, Arwen's choice is more clearly depicted in Peter Jackson's movie adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, through which entire dialogue scenes between Arwen, Aragorn and Elrond are dedicated to the explanation of her choice, to the representation of Elrond's grief and to the effect of her determination on Aragorn's storyline.

(Tolkien, 1994, p. 243). Because of such a dramatic resolution, resistance was to be expected⁹. However, the *Legendarium* clearly states that, despite the sadness it inflicted upon Elrond, Arwen's choice was never questioned or delegitimized. Rather, her authority was respected, and no sort of coercion was imposed upon her to abandon the plans she made for herself and depart to the Eternal Lands, which stands up for an absence of hierarchy between masculine and feminine (at least among the Elves, as reinforced by Galadriel's prominent figure) and an equivalence among genders:

There is no war between the sexes in Tolkien's subcreation. Complementary and mutually augmenting positive feminine and masculine qualities are set against enantiomorphic, negative feminine and masculine qualities. Feminine and Masculine are diverse – not subordinate nor antagonistic to one another. Tolkien shows how this is to the greater glory of each (Rawls, 2015, p. 13).

Therefore, and despite the consequences of her choice, Arwen's resolution represents the true meaning of being able to choose one's own destiny. In a moment of global war, one in which women's wills would be ignored in favor of men's ruling, she decided to refuse a destiny selected by others to live a life selected by herself.

In that sense, Nancy Enright (2015) proposes an interesting discussion over power in the *Legendarium*, arguing that even though women might be *less present* in the opus, their presence is *never less important* than men's. On the contrary, women exercise power throughout the story by confronting traditional standards of masculine strength and disclosing a "critique of traditional, masculine, and worldly power, offering an alternative that can be summed up as the choice of love over pride, reflective of the Christ-like inversion of power rooted in Scripture, and ultimately more powerful than any domination by use of force" (Enright, 2015).

Enright also problematizes the critique directed to Tolkien's depiction of power. According to her, the *Legendarium* unveils an

⁹ Once again, the movies explicitly portrait Elrond's efforts to dissuade Arwen from her resolution to stay behind, only to fail when she abandons the Elves' caravan to the Grey Havens and returns to Rivendell. For a deeper study on the feminine ambiguity of Tolkien's opus and its motion picture representation, see Łaszkiwicz (2016).

“inversion of power”, through which *characters’ choices based on love* are paramount to the plot’s power distribution, much more so than the mere spoils of war. Here lies Arwen’s importance, as she is the main character whose actions embody the choice for love over life, despite Elrond’s initial resistance and the consequences that would eventually come across.

In fact, *disobedience* might be Arwen’s greatest contribution in light of Tolkien’s view of good and evil. In this sense, Janet Brennan Croft (2010) provides important intel on the question of *free will* in Middle-earth, as she assumes that one being’s ability to shape their path despite “their Creator’s plans” entails the biggest distinction between light and darkness. Embracing Croft’s perspective, “free will is something the side of evil can’t control, understand, or plan for. If the aim of Evil is domination, then free will is its necessary opposite” (Croft, 2010, p. 134).

Croft expands that point of view by associating disobedience to *eucatastrophe*¹⁰, analyzing how certain defying or unexpected actions during the Legendarium came to change the course of events entirely – with Bilbo’s mercy towards Gollum¹¹ as, perhaps, the clearest example of this phenomenon. From that scenario, how did Arwen’s decision to stay behind act upon the way things happened in her future and in the unfolding of the War of the Ring?

I argue that Arwen *played a double role in the War*, for she refused expected gender and familial positions and took on a life she designed for herself. Furthermore, she served as a beacon of hope and love for the ones around her, as seen from her relationship with Aragorn and her deep (despite brief) connection with Frodo. Ergo, I construe her display of free will as an “enactment of refusal to stay in, or to move to, one’s assigned proper place” (Athanasiou; Butler, 2013, p. 23), and therefore as an image of agency and power in the Legendarium.

¹⁰ As Tolkien narrates in *On Fairy Stories* (and further explores in *Letters*), he created the neologism “eucatastrophe” to define a sudden turn of events, one in which a probable disaster would be avoided to concretize a “happy ending”.

¹¹ As Croft (2010) would defend, the destruction of the One Ring in the Cracks of Doom and the consequent defeat of Sauron represent a singular moment of eucatastrophe, as they were only possible because Bilbo let Gollum live during their encounter under the Lonely Mountain many years before.

Many real-life women keep a resemblance to Arwen during the First World War, but one whose story stands out is Emmeline Pankhurst. Most known for her leadership role in the suffragist movement, Pankhurst was one of the protagonists in the attainment of women's right to vote in Britain, especially after founding the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1913. Widely recognized as the figure who helped turn the tide in the idea of women of her time, Pankhurst widely advocated for women's suffrage, navigating through prison and militant confrontation, though her contribution far exceeds this political ground. In fact, her actions helped give women the right to choose what they wanted to be and to get a grip over their own lives despite the roles men originally assigned to them, as she unyieldingly resisted government persecution and stayed adamant to her beliefs.

Perhaps the stories of women like Emmeline Pankhurst strengthened Rosa Parks' will during the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. Though far in time from the Great War, the famous act of resistance performed by Parks holds the same kind of power Pankhurst irradiated, as her *categorical denial of her assigned place* by refusing to give up her seat to a white man inside that bus in Alabama ensued huge mobilization in the American antiracist civil rights movement afterwards.

The tales of Emmeline Pankhurst and Rosa Parks resemble Arwen's tale as their results coincide, although their means diverge. Again reaching from Croft (2010), these women's original stories, the ones they were "destined" to pursue, led them to very different lives, but their decisions to *disobey* redefined their own existences and enabled a different future.

Just like those women, Arwen's verdict to not embark on the ships of Círdan conveys power in the sense that it enables a narrative of liberty and respect towards women's choices over their own lives, regardless of patriarchal expectations they might overrule. Even though the inevitable

aftermath of her decision was to lose the longevity of the Elves, Arwen made the choice of Lúthien to secure an existence she actually desired to live, as leaving Middle-earth would eventually deprive her of love in exchange for a lone eternity.

3 DEFYING THE CANON: ÉOWYN, WARSHIP AND THE VALKYRIE REFLEX

Arguably the most celebrated feminine character in *The Lord of the Rings*, Éowyn of Rohan is the only woman to play a direct part in the events of the War of the Ring. When hope seemed lost in the fields of Pelennor, especially after the demise of King Théoden, leader of the Rohirrim, Éowyn's actions changed the course of war and avenged the dying soldiers who fought under the shadow of the great white walls of Minas Tirith. Although Éowyn is often depicted as the woman who refused to stay behind while the men who overshadowed her wishes and her existence rode to war, her refusal is present in many accounts through the Legendarium, not only concerning her actions in the Fields of Pelennor. Tolkien broaches her fear of staying behind since the earlier debates over her personality, as in her dialogue with Aragorn in the halls of Rohan:

‘Lord’, she said, ‘if you must go, then let me ride in your following. For I am weary of skulking in the hills, and wish to face peril and battle.’

‘Your duty is with your people,’ he answered.

‘Too often have I heard of duty,’ she cried. ‘But am I not of the House of Eorl, a shieldmaiden and not a dry-nurse? I have waited on faltering feet long enough. Since they no longer falter, it seems, may I not now spend my life as I will?’

‘Few may do that with honour,’ he answered. ‘But as for you, lady: did you not accept the charge to govern the people until their lord’s return? If you had not been chosen, then some marshal or captain would have been set in the same place, and he could not ride away from his charge, were he weary of it or no.’

‘Shall I always be chosen?’ she said bitterly. ‘Shall I always be left behind when the Riders depart, to mind the house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return?’ [...]

‘What do you fear, lady?’ he asked.

‘A cage,’ she said. ‘To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire’ (Tolkien, 2004, p. 784).

Such a fear, fueled by Éowyn’s desire to take place beside the Rohirrim as a defender of her people (and of the race of Men, considering the stakes in the War of the Ring), inspired the woman to disguise herself as a man and to ride to the Fields of Pelennor alongside Meriadoc Brandybuck and eventually vanquish the Witch-king of Angmar, Sauron’s strongest lieutenant. Even when facing a foe way more powerful than her, a foe that “no living man” could overcome, Éowyn did not step back, as their confrontation exposes:

‘Begone, foul dwimmerlaik, lord of carrion! Leave the dead in peace!’

A cold voice answered: ‘Come not between the Nazgûl and his prey! Or he will not slay thee in thy turn. He will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond all darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shrivelled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye.’

A sword rang as it was drawn. ‘Do what you will; but I will hinder it, if I may.’

‘Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!’

Then Merry heard of all sounds in that hour the strangest. It seemed that Dernhelm laughed, and the clear voice was like the ring of steel. ‘But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund’s daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him’ (Tolkien, 2004, p. 841).

After standing adamant in front of the leader of the Nazgûl, Éowyn went on to kill him, at the cost of her arm and, nearly, her life, as she spent a considerable time in the Houses of Healing after the end of the battle¹². However, an earlier version of the events taken place upon the Fields of Pelennor, entitled *Fall of Théoden in the Battle of Osgiliath*, places more emphasis on Éowyn’s bravery in facing the Witch-king, as follows:

¹² Early writings of *The Return of the King* suggest that Tolkien planned for Éowyn to die as a heroine of war (Tolkien, 1990, p. 256/359), but such plans were later abandoned, as the final version of the books led her to wed Faramir, Denethor’s son, and, ultimately, to leave behind her intention to become a full-time warrior.

She stood still and did not blench. ‘I do not fear thee, Shadow,’ she said. ‘Nor him that devoured thee. Go back to him and report that his shadows and dwimor-lakes are powerless even to frighten women.’ The great bird flapped its wings and leapt into the air, leaving the king’s body, and falling upon her with beak and claw. Like a shaft of searing light a pale sword cold as ice was raised above her head.

She raised her shield, and with a swift and sudden stroke smote off the bird’s head. It fell, its vast wings outspread crumpled and helpless on the earth. About Éowyn the light of day fell bright and clear. With a clamour of dismay the hosts of Harad turned and fled, and over the ground a headless thing crawled away, snarling and sniveling, tearing at the cloak. Soon the black cloak too lay formless and still, and a long thin wail rent the air and vanished in the distance (Tolkien, 1990, p. 365).

Tolkien also takes time to confirm Éowyn’s empowerment in the battle before the walls of Gondor, as he assumes (Tolkien, 1996, p. 242) that “the greatest deed of that day was the deed of Éowyn Éomund’s daughter. She for love of the King rode in disguise with the Rohirrim and was with him when he fell. By her hand the Black Captain, the Lord of the Ring-wraiths, the Witch-king of Angmar, was destroyed”. Gandalf later broaches that same deed when discussing the matter with Éomer in the Houses of Healing:

My friend, you had horses, and deed of arms, and the free fields; but she, being born in the body of a maid, had a spirit and courage at least the match of yours. Yet she was doomed to wait upon an old man, whom she loved as a father, and watch him falling into a mean dishonoured dotage; and her part seemed to her more ignoble than that of the staff he leaned on (Tolkien, 2004, p. 867).

This account shows that Éowyn’s actions are considered as legitimate by her peers. As much as it would have been unexpected for a court woman like her to play so great a part in the defeat of the Enemy, her role is not underrated by any of the characters that surround her – although underestimated at first by some of them –, and, therefore, not by Tolkien himself. As one may notice, several mythological tales inspired the author in the construction of the *Legendarium* (Donovan, 2015), and Éowyn’s performance reveals the influence of Norse mythology in the character’s development in the *War of the Ring*:

Like the Valkyries of Norse mythology, Éowyn defies her traditional gender role and rides to war; at the

Battle of Pelennor Fields Éowyn confronts and slays the Witch-king, the greatest of Sauron's servants, whom no man can face. 'Men, cast from the saddle, lay groveling on the ground' (International Baccalaureate Association, 2008, p. 7).

The Valkyries were originally female figures at the service of Odin, who rode to the battlefield to choose among the fallen warriors the one who were worthy of entering Valhalla, the Norse heaven. Their existence itself in the myth canon represented a subversion to the predominant masculinity attributed to war, as it fell to these women to resolve the aftermath of the battle, and not to stay behind and wait to tend for men's injuries who came out alive. That inspiration, considering the context in which Tolkien's books were written, draws from a variety of occurrences from the real world, and the First World War provides us many examples of how women can subvert the roles originally designed for them and conceive things that were not socially intended to (or supposed to) happen in the first place.

Maybe the most famous of these examples would be the one of Dorothy Lawrence, a British journalist who disguised herself as a man soldier in her hopes to produce a veritable account of the war. Having tried to volunteer to the Voluntary Aid Detachment as a civilian employee and being rejected, she went to France and befriended two soldiers, who she convinced to secretly give her pieces of army clothing, which she used to pose as a man and head to the trenches.

Out of fear of being discovered and implicating the men who aided her in her endeavor, she turned herself in after ten days of service in the front, having been made a prisoner of war and prohibited to write about her experiences by the British government. Only after moving to Canonbury in 1919 was she able to put her words in paper, when she released a full account on her story, which was called *Sapper Dorothy Lawrence: The Only English Woman Soldier*.

Another woman to serve at the front (this time legally) was Flora Sandes, the only woman to be officially a part of Britain's army in WWI. In 1914, she left England and headed to Serbia in order to work at nursery

units, but in 1915, during the Great Retreat in Albania, she was enrolled as a private and fought as a soldier until being seriously injured in a grenade explosion in 1916. After that, she was promoted to sergeant major and received the highest Serbian decoration, the Order of the Karađorđe's Star. In addition, she continued to serve in the Army as a nurse until her demobilization in 1922. Her story is often associated with Evelina Haverfield's, who worked with her in nursery and stood beside her in the foundation of Hon. Evelina Haverfield's and Sergt-Major Flora Sandes' Fund for Promoting Comforts for Serbian Soldiers and Prisoners.

The story of Elsie Inglis is also known in the accounts of feminine actions in the First War. Born in Scotland and trained as a doctor in Edinburgh and Glasgow, Inglis is widely known for the advice she was given when trying to offer her services to the War Office. At the occasion, after being told to "go home and sit still" by an unnamed soldier, she went on to create the Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service (SWH), the first all-women health unit to come to existence in that period. Because of her outstanding actions during the war, she came to be considered a war hero in Serbia, although her name is little acknowledged in her hometown country.

The tales of these women intertwine with the story of Éowyn of Rohan in the sense that all of them refused to acquiesce, to "stay home and sit still", to serve as "war brides" (Smith, 2015). These women decided that they would stand up and fight for what they believed, for their countries, for their loved ones and for themselves, in a true demonstration of liberation and self-empowerment. And because of it, their stories help show that women have a part to play other than only waiting and praying for protection while more important men put their boots on and get on horses, planes and tanks to crawl through muddy trenches and wage war against the enemy. Their refusal reveals that the victory in war is also feminine.

4 ENTANGLEMENTS BETWEEN THE ROAD, THE BATTLEFIELD AND THE PRIVATE SPACE

William Harrison (2013) argues that the road and the battlefield were gendered spaces in Tolkien's works. For him, these places were originally designed for men, as the masculine characters were the ones who underwent the journeys, who fought the battles and who occupied the main stages through which the stories transit. As we debated earlier, the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* looks exactly that way, as characters like Aragorn, Elrond, Frodo and Gandalf monopolize the narrative and conduct the pace of the storyline, with very few exceptions, especially Éowyn and Galadriel, both strong women in a context of man superposition.

However, the feminine characters in the story, as few as they may be, are able to subvert the logic of masculinity in the *Legendarium*. First, because male characters do not necessarily convey traditional masculine traits. In fact, many moments of the story turn to men exposing their feelings, their weaknesses and their fragilities, as much of the plot itself unveils because of the mischiefs of these same men¹³. Also, because the resolution of the War of the Ring was only possible because of the direct and indirect actions taken by women, since the importance of Galadriel's phial against Shelob to the killing of the Witch-king by Éowyn. Even though the last steps to enact the undoing of Sauron were taken by men, the value of women actions in such a deed must be recognized, as stated by Elisabet Stenberg:

Not to take away from the obvious force of the armies of Gondor, Rohan and the Elves, but spirituality, love, and sacrifice are examples of the inner strength that aid in the liberation of Middle-earth. Lúthien, Galadriel, Arwen, and Éowyn are all examples of how personal sacrifice for the good of others is essential to the salvation of Middle-earth (Stenberg, 2012, p. 10).

For this reason, traditional gender norms associated with space order are, in a way, dismantled through the War of the Ring, as female

¹³ The relationship between Frodo and Samwise, the tale of Sméagol and the Bane of Isildur being, perhaps, the best examples for this occurrence.

characters succeed in breaking their bonds with the domestic field and develop a sense of freedom and independence towards the men who surround them. Women in Tolkien's work, each one their own way, manage to disrupt the conventional masculine and feminine roles and to transcend the private space in order to walk the road and to step on the battlefield, as Harrison would declare:

Originally, Éowyn was conceived as a flagrant rule-breaker, a woman who could enter the space of the road freely, as a woman. However, Tolkien did not write that Éowyn. Instead, she enters the masculine space of the road and becomes an adventurer by subterfuge, disguising herself as a male. This thesis will argue that, whether or not he did so intentionally, Tolkien has created a character who deconstructs the cultural definition of the road as a space of masculine freedom, proving herself more than able to hold her own in the larger world and to grow through the road experience (Harrison, 2013, p. 18).

Stephanie Bogaert, broaching Aragorn and Éowyn's discourse, reaffirms the position of refusal and the sense of independence that led the woman to engage her future actions:

Éowyn explicitly rejects the patriarchal notion of 'the woman at the hearth'. She refuses to be seen as a helpless serving-woman taking care of the house while the men ride off to battle. Instead, she expresses her capability of defending herself without fear. Furthermore, the quote also holds an important feminist critique. Éowyn clearly contests the centrality of men in society. Further, she points out the injustice of men being able to gain fame in battle, while women are forced to take care of the house, and to pick up the pieces when their husband has died. Furthermore, the second sentence seems to imply that with the death of their husband, the woman has no reason to take care of the household anymore. As if the life of a woman is centred around the household and the husband. Consequently, we see how Éowyn criticises this dependency of women on their husbands. She obviously disagrees with this patriarchal mindset and advocates women's right to independence and her right to fight for her country (Bogaert, 2015, p. 20).

When it comes to war, Arwen and Éowyn's statements reflect a liberation movement that can be spotted in a variety of scenarios in real-world conflagration. The Great War, which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, reflects a historical moment of sexist establishment,

when women were constantly fighting for their rights and for the recognition of equality. As the conflict began, men were summoned to the battlefield, which imposed on women the subservient duty of staying home, taking care of children and obeying strict moral rules in order to preserve themselves and their families. In a general way, women were merely expected to stay faithful to their husbands and to their country, without interfering in the matters of war, which was allegedly something beyond their comprehension and, consequently, out-of-bounds.

However, instead of accepting the roles expected of them, women chose (and sometimes were forced to, due to the lack of alternatives) to follow different paths and even to assume positions originally occupied by men. They started to work in factories, farms, stores, in the production of weaponry and even in the front lines as nurses or actual soldiers, also forming voluntary units, despite government opposition and social discrimination. With the shortage of men in the later periods of war, especially after 1916, the British government started to employ working-class women, and branches of official female contribution to the War Office were created, such as The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps and Women's Royal Naval Service were established, both in 1917, and the Women's Royal Air Force, created in 1918. As unexpected as it may seem, by the end of the war over 200,000 women were officially serving their countries, as Niamh Gallagher details:

New opportunities in the labour market were created for women as governments struggled to free up additional men for the front, and in the UK more than 1 million women replaced men in employment between 1914 and 1918. From tram drivers and bus conductors to postal workers and police patrols, women contributed to the national war effort. It is no wonder that Millicent Fawcett, a leading feminist, president of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (1897-1918) and co-founder of Newnham College, Cambridge, declared: "The war revolutionised the industrial position of women – it found them serfs and left them free." (Gallagher, 2014)

Even with the end of the conflict, the flow of women transitioning between the private and the public space did not stop, as the overcoming of gender expectations was (and still is, though in a different level) not a phenomenon these same women were willing to stop. The death of a monstrous amount of men in the war forced women to assume chief positions in the household, and the possibility of working, making their own money (although hardly underpaid in comparison to men) and stepping at the at-first exclusively masculine space consolidated women's will to keep and protect their power to choose.

One could say that women's participation in the First World War planted seeds that would merge with a multisector emancipatory movement that continues up to today. Since the suffragettes' efforts for the right to vote, the struggle for wage and treatment equality in the workplace and the battle for the recognition of fundamental rights, women have refused to keep quiet and fought to choose and to declare unwavering ownership over themselves.

Tolkien's depiction of Arwen's choice and Éowyn's refusal unfolds a fundamental truth about the Legendarium: even though perhaps unintendedly, as suggested by William Harrison, Tolkien adopts the premise that women are ultimately responsible for their destinies, that their determination is capable of changing the flow of events, and that such a phenomenon directly influences the outcomes of war and of life. Just as Arwen and Éowyn produced essential effects (although distinct in source) in the defeat of Sauron, women's diverse contributions to the results of the Great War have provided an opportunity to place tension over social hierarchies, questioning them and even setting the scene to reconfiguring them in a more equal gender display.

Just as in the real world, women in Tolkien's works are constantly and invariably struggling to divert from the status quo and, despite traditional gender norms (especially taking into account the strongly patriarchal time at which the stories were written and the Christian origins of Tolkien himself), their actions put into question the traditional assumptions on women's place in society.

As James Boyd White (1982) and Robert Cover (2016) have put it, the juridical phenomenon is an argument culture, a result of conflictive discourses, narrating possible worlds (Bourdieu, 1990) and producing rules based on interpretive compromises that sustain or contest what we know as *nomos*. In this context, Arwen and Éowyn's tales help illustrate historical efforts to deactivate the sexual dispositive (Foucault, 1988), as the negation of gendered expectations have led to profound changes in the narrative of women as political subjects and in juridical and social norms regarding a woman's place in the home and beyond it.

Therefore, and despite the relevant criticism over the absence of female characters in Tolkien's opus, the *Legendarium* does not necessarily convey a sense of masculine sovereignty. Rather, it broaches a tale of men and women fighting for what they believe, in a framework where women produce their own interpretation of gender roles, be it through the swing of a sword or by the refusal to accept fixed destinies.

5 FINAL THOUGHTS

The scarce amount of material related to Arwen through Tolkien's books, even in *The History of Middle-earth* series, posed a challenge for this research. Besides, even though part of the writing of the books took place in the middle of the Great War, the influence of female actions in the formulation of Tolkien's feminine premises was not self-evident.

Considering those methodological obstacles, we chose to analyze these two characters through their own presentation, by tracing a pattern based on the resemblance of their actions to the real world and interpreting how Arwen and Éowyn's storylines intertwine with the unveiling of real-life women in the context of war. Despite associating them with individual personalities, our main intention was to confront the symbolism of the characters' actions to the development of feminine position in public and private spaces in the Great War. Furthermore, we look forward to advancing a discussion on the transformation of feminine

portrayals in literature, to which Tolkien's work seems to be an adequate starting point.

As our exploratory literature review stated, a considerable number of authors have criticized Tolkien's books and their movie adaptations over feminine underrepresentation, idealization and shallowness. On the other hand, a more complex analysis of Tolkien's works indicated that female characters were not only influent in books' events, but also decisive for the prevalence of Men in the War of the Ring.

Anyhow, our conclusions do not invalidate previous discussions over this issue. By revisiting a wider collection of Tolkien's works, our main intent is to provide a more systemic view of the author's thoughts on these women and to disclose alternate ways of interpreting gender roles in *The Lord of the Rings*, while also taking into account the historical placement of the books' publication.

For these reasons and despite their apparently secondary role in the Legendarium, Arwen and Éowyn offer interesting insights on women's agency in the public sphere. We believe such an approach to their storylines, while giving way to a counter-history of Tolkien's female characters, enforces emancipatory discursive regularities through literature by densifying feminine portrayals in fiction, while also contributing for gender equality efforts inside institutions such as the military, the justice system and the political scene as a whole.

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