
What does it mean to be a “Shieldmaiden” when martial heroism is, by its very definition, masculine? Why a Shieldmaiden, when there are no others in evidence? If the politics and representation of war, and the politics of representing gender, are inextricably linked, what can we make of a woman whose only chance at heroism is the camouflaging of her gender? Paradoxically, war stories appear to polarize gendered identities and roles, at the same time that the nature of war as a crisis forces a blurring of those same roles. Feminist scholarship into the nature of war, and the ways in which home and battlefronts are gendered in the western tradition provide clear examples of this from Margaret and Patrice Higgonet’s *Behind the Lines*, to Linda Grant De Pauw’s work that traces the history of women and war from prehistory to the present. More traditional military histories emphasize these patterns through the complete absence of women or the discussion of masculinity and ‘the soldier’ as immutable and impenetrable, rather than problematic and
constantly in flux.\textsuperscript{5} War stories, whether literary or cinematic, reinvent the soldier constantly. However, one constant in the reinvention is the primacy accorded to masculinity in these tales that shape so much of our consciousness. Women are either completely absent from these narratives, used to symbolize home and hope, or are constructed as aberrant and threatening.\textsuperscript{6} \textit{The Lord of the Rings}’ cinematic saga provides examples of the ways in which the boundaries of war and gender are navigated through characters like Êowyn, and to a lesser extent the Elvish Princess, Arwen. The presence or absence of other female characters throughout the films, are indicators of the tensions between the importance of the gendered warrior and her isolation. These tensions are crucial to war as narrative and gendered discourse: the isolation of the female warrior serves to underscore the connections between heroism and masculinity, whether warrior or not.

My aim, with this paper, is to explore the narrative traditions of the gendered warrior and how they play themselves out, largely through the “Shieldmaiden of Rohan”, Êowyn, connecting the fantasy text of \textit{The Lord of the Rings} and its heroes with broader western discourses on gender and war. There are many commonalities in the narration of the gendered warrior in history, myth and fiction. These devices, simultaneously underlying and threatening the historical, mythic, and speculative construction of gendered warrior-identity, prominently include transformation and gender camouflage. Both of these narrative strategies serve to enhance the primacy of the masculine heroism and all its inherent justifications for war, and compound the invisibility of women, both warrior and civilian.

Transformation and gender camouflage are very closely aligned and often work in tandem. Both have a bearing on the ways in which warriors are constructed as individuals (which often leads to their construction as heroes) or as a group.\textsuperscript{7} Transformation is necessary in the construction of any warrior or soldier – from foot-soldier through to general. It is the process by which soldiers are made out of civilians (and
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separated from civilian society), through training and associated rituals. It is also the process through which boys are made into men. Similarly, transformation is a means through which heroes are created in the narrative separation of individuals from collective warrior identity.

Gender camouflage refers both to ways in which female (and male) soldiers/warriors are forced to subsume any characteristics that may be defined as ‘feminine’ or in any other way emphasize the notion of ‘difference’. The donning of a uniform or, in the case of The Lord of the Rings, armour, is one of the ways in which transformation and gender camouflage combine when Éowyn kills the Witch King on Pelennor Fields. Interestingly it is the revelation of these two devices for what they are – a performance – that is the ultimate undoing of the Ringwraith. It is not only that Éowyn is a woman, but that she is revealed to be one, that are important in this scene. Transformation and gender camouflage also work in tandem to isolate the acts of war performed by women, by merging the acts of many into the figure of one and rendering traditions of female heroism invisible, an issue demonstrated not only by the question above of ‘why a Shieldmaiden’, but also in the way that Arwen is treated in her initial scenes in The Fellowship of the Ring. These elements are present in the portrayal of the warrior and the hero in The Lord of the Rings films, and will be discussed in more specific depth below.

In December 2003 the king returned in the final installment of Peter Jackson’s adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings [LotR]. But the clanging of swords, clashing of shields and confusion and chaos on the battlefield were not confined to Jackson’s text. War, heroism, and martial valour have dominated history, historical fiction, myth and fantasy in the cinematic realm. The Return of the King was one of many cinematic texts that have emerged in the early twenty-first century, ‘returning’ the warrior in all his anguish and glory. Troy, Peter Pan, Master and Commander and The Last Samurai were all released within twelve months of The Return of the King. Each of these films explores themes relating to war and the complex construction of the
‘ultimate expression of masculinity’: the warrior. The boys’ own stories of war, questing, and sword play cast into sharp relief the ‘Shieldmaiden of Rohan’. These narratives also beg questions, like those above, regarding the ways in which the gendering of the warrior, and of heroism, play themselves out in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The context in which the current incarnation of *LotR*, and the other cinematic texts mentioned above, have emerged is also one where war looms large. Fictional texts and nightly news broadcasts have both contested and/or upheld notions of heroism and the gendered warrior-hero. Tolkien’s original epic was influenced and surrounded by war both in its conception, and in its popularity at different times of publication. Jane Chance sees the *LotR* not only as a war story from within, but one which is also in part a response to ‘real’ war:

A … significant influence on Tolkien’s career was the omnipresent physical and spiritual threats to security – within the family, within society, within his nation – whenever war intervened, as World Wars I and II did during Tolkien’s lifetime…. Even during the time *LotR* became popular among college students and young people throughout the world – that is, during the Korean and Vietnam Wars – a war of one kind or another provided a backdrop for the imagination, whether of author or reader.

Peter Jackson’s cinematic depiction of the battle for Middle-earth is also a war story on screen, and is surrounded by ‘real’ war stories influencing and informing audiences. The context for the appearance of this text on big screen and small is the “War on Terror” and invasion of Iraq by the United States’ “Coalition of the Willing”. This contemporary conflict is one in which the notion of ‘rescue’ looms large with regard to individuals, particular populations, and the world. The mobilization of chivalric images and clear delineations between good and evil on the part
of this Coalition have come into play in the attempt to construct the picture of a ‘just war’. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the ‘War on Terror’ have all, also, mobilized western constructions of war and the warrior along gendered lines.\textsuperscript{17}

Historically, there is an appearance of seamlessness to masculine warrior tradition. To be a soldier has been seen as a ‘natural’ expression of masculinity, bravery and courage (and fighting skill) innate to men. This tradition depends upon the notion of continuity, despite the fact that soldier mythologies and identities shift depending on cultural, geographical, and historical contexts. As Leo Braudy, in his exploration of the mythologies of soldiers and heroes in the Western tradition, has said:

\begin{quote}
\textit{military history has often suffered by being considered in isolation from social reality and cultural context – as if there were little connection between war and the rest of society. But in Europe and the Americas, especially from the Middle Ages through the theater of European war established in the seventeenth century and into the mass wars of the twentieth century, war and masculinity are two mutually dependent myths, merging the technological future, when men would become perfect, with the nostalgic past, when they already were. ... Masculinity is a dynamic system rather than an invariable pattern, and it is more valuable to ask what is mutating and what is unchangeable in masculinity than to assume that it has always been as we now know it.}\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

As Braudy points out, despite necessary changes in the construction of the ideal warrior, and therefore the ideal man, the past is constantly brought into play in present models in order to provide the appearance of coherence and solidity, rather than change and fluidity. Women’s experiences of war, however, have either not been narrated (and this continues in traditional military historiography), or when women’s
stories have been told their wartime participation has been marginalized. While there are narrative patterns that emerge regarding women and war, the possibility of a tradition has largely been negated. Where there are figures who break through the veils that shroud the participation of women and war, they are treated as individuals who are different both from male soldiers, and from other women. Where women have participated in western conflicts in any great numbers, their identities are often obscured through the distillation of a legend that deals with one woman, rather than many. This is in part due to the ‘naturalness’ of men’s relationship to war (making women warriors unnatural according to the gender binaries that uphold so many of the power relationships in western society), and the narrative strategy of seeing women’s participation in war as merely a response to crisis – immediate and punctuated, rather than continuous and seamless. So in many ways it is inevitable that Éowyn be seen to be the Shieldmaiden, rather than a Shieldmaiden. And it is just as inevitable that fan responses to Jackson’s portrayal of Arwen be read to reflect more than outrage at a deviation from the original Tolkien text. Rather, these responses incorporate broader trends that point to the need for much more attention to traditions of active women, than portrayals of female participation in major events as isolated incidents.

The first major female character we meet in the cinematic version of LotR, The Fellowship of the Ring, is Arwen, Elf-Princess and beloved of Aragorn. In order to provide more continuity to characters’ involvement in the films, and possibly as a nod to twenty-first century audiences, Arwen appears in place of an Elf named Glorfindel, and it is she who fends off the Ringwraiths pursuing Frodo in the final stretch of the race to Rivendell. This scene, portraying an active, able, and very engaged Arwen, was not received positively by all LotR fans. It seemed to fulfill some of the fears that Jackson would include, as Brian Rosebury so aptly stated, “[i]mages of a wisecracking, eyebrow-raising Aragorn and a ‘feisty’ kick boxing Arwen shoving Orcs over precipices in between their love scenes”. However, as Rosebury also points out, there is a
tradition within Tolkien’s original work that does not make Jackson’s portrayal of Arwen’s actions at the Ford of Rivendell out of place.\textsuperscript{21} Arwen is a descendant of Lúthien, whom she is supposed to resemble a great deal. Lúthien, like Arwen, was in love with a mortal man – Beren. In the ancient struggle against Mordor, Lúthien rescued Beren and together they fought ‘the Enemy’ with the aid of magic and skill with a sword.\textsuperscript{22} Where the print text makes reference to the resemblance of Arwen to Lúthien, but seems to leave the similarity as a purely physical one, the cinematic text blends the actions of Arwen and Lúthien. This not only constructs a much more active role for Arwen in the text, but is also a tacit acknowledgement of a legacy of courage and strength among Elvish women.\textsuperscript{23}

Willadean Leo, in an exploration of the mythologies both informing and created through Tolkien’s construction of female characters in \textit{LotR}, sees Elvish women as having choices that are not permitted to women in other Middle-earth societies.

In the non-human social orders, the normal arrangement provides freedom, under recognized authority, to both sexes. Role choice is open to both male and female, and neither sex is subjugated by the other. Like the Norsemen, non-humans treat their women as people.

Of the non-humans, it is not surprising to discover that the angelic community of the Valar and the exalted elvish societies have no sexually-based social restrictions.\textsuperscript{24}

Leo’s thesis indicates that if Elvish women are not active as warriors, or in the realm of Elvish leadership and politics, then this is because they choose not to be, and uses the examples of both Lúthien and Galadriel to back up this point. Leo’s point that Elves are a different race from men and therefore may have different ways of dealing with gender politics is an interesting one, particularly when taking into account the physical differences that set Elves apart form men. Elves, particularly in
Jackson’s adaptation, can be seen as much more ‘feminine’ in appearance and in Tolkien’s original, as well as the cinematic adaptation, are associated with nature rather than technology. Elvish men, and women, appear to be clean in Jackson’s text where men and dwarves attract the dirt of travel, camp and battle. Rarely do we see an Elf wield a sword, and certainly never gunpowder like Saruman and his Orcs. Rather they wield bows and arrows which place distance between them and their opponents, and can be viewed as cleaner than the mess made with swords. The greater physical similarity between Elvish men and women potentially complicates the traditional absences of women from battle and politics. However, the context in which images of Elves are viewed, necessitates an assumption of masculinity with action which is compounded by the obvious presence of men acting in the public sphere. In not problematising the invisibility of Elvish women in these forums to which so much importance is attached, Leo falls into the trap of regarding absence as a choice and ignores the representational weight this therefore gives to the male characters.25

In the cinematic Fellowship of the Ring, the absence of Arwen (or any other Elvish women, or women of other Middle-earth races) from the Council of Elrond is in some ways underscored by the dramatic way in which the audience first encounters her. Arwen’s valiant rescue of Frodo foregrounds her character and suggests to the audience her value and role is more than just the far more usual narrative role of prize for the King once he has returned. Quest and fairy-tale narratives often confine women, particularly high-born women, to the role of prize for the hero. An example of this is the fourteenth century romance Guy of Warwick. Well known fairy tales, both literary and of folk origin, that continue to play themselves out through books and films also replay this trend – even potentially subversive reworkings like Shrek. Peter Pan and Troy are examples relevant to the cinematic context of LotR. Peter Pan conflates the idea of mother and love-interest with Wendy as nurturer, rescuee from pirates, and prize. While Peter may have run away the day he was born, and is the boy who will never grow up, Wendy is firmly
situated as mini-adult in the feminine sphere. *Troy* particularly reintroduces the ‘woman as prize’ for contemporary audiences, by replaying the myth of Helen of Troy. Contrary to publicity and popular perception, this story is *not* a love story, but a story about the perception of women as property. This treatment of women is evident not only in the figure of Helen, but in the capture and then sexual conquest of the priestess Briseis. These women reinforce the narrative patterns that see woman as prize, and deny the possibility of actively negotiating or participating in war as anything more than the spoils.

The allusion to a tradition of female elvish warriors is potentially a means of subverting the denial of women’s continuous active participation in war, and their relegation to role of mother or prize. Arwen can be seen as embodying a line of Elvish warriors, rather than a woman who has stepped outside her sphere in an isolated moment of need, when the legacies of Lúthien and Galadrial are considered. However, the potency of this allusion is undermined in part when it must be considered that the cinema-going audience may not be aware of these legacies. Ignorance of Arwen’s elvish ancestry, and the absence of Arwen from later important scenes like the Council of Elrond, isolate her actions from the larger picture of the rescue of Middle-earth. The subversive potential of Lúthien’s heritage is further undermined in the third film *Return of the King*, where Arwen is once again firmly reinstated in her role as prize for Aragorn, providing the heterosexual union that is the closure to so many traditional cinematic narratives.26

Leo has pointed out that criticism of the lack of Elvish action to save Middle-earth is not unwarranted and should be seen in tandem with Arwen’s capacity to be a warrior:

Arwen as a warrior is unlikely but not impossible. Her family has been actively involved in wars throughout Middle-earth’s history, and both Luthien and Galadriel were soldiers. In fact, it is much more to the point to ask why
Elrond, Glorfindel and other Elves at Rivendell with military experience were not more actively involved in the War of the Ring. Elrond did not even make any effort to aid the Shire, which seems to be carrying the traditional elvish policy of aloofness to extremes.\textsuperscript{27}

While this criticism can be waived in the cinematic adaptation, the heroism of Arwen can only be seen to have been further proscribed by the actions of her kinsmen at Helm’s Deep. In another of Peter Jackson’s innovations to the story of \textit{LotR}, Elves honour an ancient alliance to men and appear to assist when the people of Rohan are under siege at Helm’s Deep. When the Elvish warriors arrive they are uniformly cloaked and depicted in formation, under the command of Haldir. While it is not possible to visually discern whether or not there are any bow-women among the Elves, the poignancy of this scene is underscored by previous vision of Arwen departing Rivendell. Arwen’s departure from the war-torn land, in the company of other Elvish women,\textsuperscript{28} implies a separation of women from war and the actions of warriors and emphasizes the presumption that all of the Elves at Helm’s Deep were male. The visible separation of women from ‘the action’ is further affirmed by footage of the women of Rohan cowering in the caves under the fortress of Helm’s Deep while their fathers and young sons are forced to take up arms in their defence.

It is important to acknowledge the possibility that there may have been Elvish women among the warriors of Rivendell, but the impossibility of visually identifying them is problematic. If women were present, but invisible, the prejudices of history and narrative regarding military or warrior-women are reinforced. Like Lúthien, or the historical examples of Molly Pitcher, Joan of Arc or Boadicea, invisible female elvish warriors, even if they are discussed, will be treated as the products of myth or as anomalies. If their gender is camouflaged, so too their actions will be camouflaged, and either ignored, treated as fiction, or regarded as aberrations.
The presumption of masculinity in the Elvish warriors, and hence the designation of war as a masculine sphere is, however, also potentially upset by the possibility of cloaked women at war. The invisibility cloak works both ways: it both upholds the coherent masculinity of armies and soldier-identities and simultaneously threatens that coherence. The construction of the male warrior is dependent upon the immediate visual recognition of the gender difference of women, and therefore women’s separation from the masculine sphere of war. Barbara Ehrenreich and Klaus Theweleit have both emphasized the necessity of externalizing, often through visual signification, of the feminine in the construction of the male warrior.  

If women are able to “pass as” (read “perform” as well as whilst also being indistinguishable from) men, then the primacy of a masculine identity is undermined. Gender camouflage thus simultaneously upholds and threatens the gender order – if women are invisible it is possible to deny their presence, but the possibility for them to blend in with men in uniform further highlights the artificiality of the lines demarcating gendered spheres of war. Therefore, in order to maintain the potency of the masculine warrior, femininity needs to be clearly signified but only outside the soldier corps. The externalisation of the feminine from the masculine integrity of warrior identity may be achieved in a number of ways. For example, this separation is achieved through the simple device of dividing home and battle fronts which we see through the departure of Arwen parallelling the arrival of the Elves for the battle at Helm’s Deep. The presence of women of Rohan in the caves complicates this, as home and battlefront are not easily separated in a siege situation. However, despite the peril of their situation the women are visually, visibly, and physically separated from the battle above, even if this is to Éowyn’s chagrin. Another means of externalising women, as we have already seen, is their exclusion and excision from mainstream histories and war stories, or the isolation of the female warrior. In this instance, it is the visibility of the women of Rohan that provides the necessary signification of externalised femininity.
However, this notion is complicated in Jackson’s text in a number of ways. For example, on the way to Helm’s Deep a conversation takes place between Éowyn and the dwarf Gimli. This conversation draws on material from Tolkien’s appendices where the view that there are no women dwarves is corrected. There are not many and, as Gimli points out to Éowyn, they are so similar in appearance to the men that other races have doubted their existence, believing instead that dwarves somehow “spring out of holes in the ground”. This statement on the gendering of dwarves is interesting when the question of gender camouflage is considered. What it reveals, despite the gender confusion, is the way in which the masculine is still considered the norm against which femininity must be defined and clearly identified. There is also no indication that despite their close physical resemblance to dwarf-men, dwarf-women take up arms. Dwarves reinforce the idea that the destabilising of the masculine warrior that is provoked by the invisible presence of women, is one reason to assume that unless otherwise indicated, there were no Elvish women present among the defenders of Helm’s Deep.

Jackson introduces further blurring of gender identities in the director’s commentary of The Two Towers. In looking at the scene in which we see Saruman’s growing army of Orcs, Peter Jackson states that there were “lady-orcs” present, i.e., there were women costumed as Orcs as well as men. Tolkien’s original text provides no indication of female Orcs, and their initial biological (if you can call it that) origin is largely put down (in both written and cinematic texts) to the torturing and perversion of Elves by Sauron. Jackson’s commentary adds another layer to the gender camouflage in his text. When examined in conjunction with Gimli’s comment on Dwarf-women, the presence of “Lady Orcs” opens up the issue of cross-dressing so important to the outcome of the Battle of Pelennor Fields. Gender identity in this cinematic text is therefore demonstrated to be much more fluid than the rigid demarcation of the warrior as purely masculine. However, unless the camouflage is openly revealed, whether in the dialogue, visual demarcation, or director’s
commentary, the illusion of seamless masculinity is maintained and emphasized by the externalized presence of women in other roles, clothing and geographic locations.

Éowyn has the most consistent presence of all the female characters in *LotR*. We first encounter her nursing King Theoden, who is under the spell of Saruman and his henchman the poisonous Gríma Wormtongue, and grieving for her cousin Theodred. In fact, it is a conversation with Wormtongue that provides the first insights into Éowyn’s character. He knows that she is ‘alone’; her isolation from the men of her house is apparent. More telling, and perhaps not intended by Wormtongue in his assessment, is her separation from other women. Wormtongue, simultaneously taunting and seductive, knows what Éowyn “has spoken to the darkness … when all your life seems to shrink, the walls of your bower closing in about you”. Her isolation as a woman of rank in a culture that places supreme value on the deeds of warriors is emphasized in this conversation with Wormtongue who views her as his prize, his future property. This conversation is then mirrored in the interchange between Aragorn and Éowyn as the people of Rohan evacuate their city. Éowyn, practising with a sword when she thinks she is unobserved, displays that she has “some skill with the blade”.

Éowyn: “The women of this country learned long ago, those without swords can still die upon them. I fear neither death nor pain.”
Aragorn: “What do you fear my lady?”
Éowyn: “A cage. To stay behind bars until use and old age accept them, and all chance of valour has gone beyond recall or desire.”
Aragorn: “You are a daughter of Kings. A Shieldmaiden of Rohan. I do not think that will be your fate.”

This speech, in some ways, belies the isolation indicated by Wormtongue in his assessment of Éowyn as alone. Éowyn speaks of the women of her
country and their capacity to defend themselves, and Aragorn names her “a Shieldmaiden of Rohan”. However, images we have of Éowyn deny the spoken assertions of the collective capacity of the women of Rohan and the existence of a tradition of the female warrior. Éowyn cannot participate in her world as the men do, but she is also denied the company of and connection to other women.38

Éowyn’s isolation stems in part from her rank – she is the only woman of her class evident at Edoras. There are other women visible at both Dunharrow and Helm’s Deep, but they are not of noble birth and are depicted quite differently to Éowyn. In some ways her isolation is not as evident in the cinematic text, as in the printed text, because of the presence of these other women.39 However, they also serve to underscore Éowyn’s difference and serve the purpose of being visibly defended by their menfolk. Where Éowyn chafes to fight, she is forced to take women, children and supplies to the caves of Helm’s Deep. While old men and boys are sent to the armoury, strong young women are sent to cower underground, Éowyn is the only woman we see protesting at this situation, the rest huddle in fear. Regardless of whether her protest relates to the situation that generally relegates women to the background, or to her own individual position within this scenario, it is Éowyn’s isolation that is enunciated. Yet if, as Éowyn has stated, the women of Rohan “learned long ago, those without swords can still die upon them”, a valuable resource has been underestimated and wasted. While Legolas, Aragorn and Gimli express doubt regarding the use of very old, and very young, men in this battle, there is no evidence on-screen that their courage fails them. Indeed, Aragorn has a conversation with a boy of about fourteen whose courage is bolstered, and who upon donning armour and feeling his sword carries himself more like a soldier than a scared adolescent. The boy is transformed into a soldier, and therefore takes on the role and identity of a man, through his costuming and his involvement in battle. The presence of the women in the caves requires an assumption that none of them are disguised by armour or weaponry, in the same way that their presence eliminates the possibility of Elvish
women taking up arms. The representations we see, whether by accident or design, undermine the traditions we hear of.

Perhaps, with regard to Éowyn, the title of “Shieldmaiden” and the training that goes with it, are only reserved for women of the King’s family. This would explain her as the only woman we see who has any proficiency with, or desire to wield a sword, compounding her separation from the other women of Rohan. In fact, in the extended DVD edition of *The Two Towers*, on the journey to Helm’s Deep Éowyn is shown to be different from the other women in a much more mundane way, but one which goes to the heart of femininity as a construct which includes some behaviours and precludes others. As the travellers stop for a brief respite Éowyn and Aragorn once more converse and in this conversation Éowyn discovers that the man to whom she is so drawn is 200 years old. Aragorn makes a discovery of his own, that the woman so comfortable with a sword cannot make a stew that is edible. Although this, too, is probably a reflection of her social rank, it further serves to differentiate Éowyn from other women, and other norms and skills often valued in women. The existence of a tradition of ‘shieldmaidens’, has the potential to break through narratives that do not allow continuity of wartime experience for women. It would also be an effective counter to the construction of the female warrior as an oxymoron, and somehow not real women. However, this tradition is never illuminated either in the films or in the books or appendices. Éowyn is the only shieldmaiden we ever see, or hear of, and it is not in this guise that she finds the valour she seeks.

Éowyn accompanies the Rohirrim to the encampment before the battle at Pelennor Fields, sword hidden beneath her saddle blanket. Her fate, and that of Merry, are intertwined and the attitudes the men hold toward Merry are reflections of those they may hold towards Éowyn – traditions of shieldmaidens notwithstanding. As Merry goes off to the smithy to get his sword sharpened, Éomer (Éowyn’s brother) jests that in the coming battle it is not Merry’s heart that he doubts “but the length of his arm”.

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Éomer’s joke goes to the heart of many arguments for why women have been (officially) kept out of combat roles in western tradition. It has been inferred by many military historians, theorists, and soldiers themselves that women, being physically different, are not built for combat, their bodies have been characterized as too small and too frail to withstand the rigours of war. The extended DVD version of *Return of the King* further emphasises this strictly gendered demarcation when Éomer adds:

“You know as little of war as that Hobbit. When the fear takes him, and the blood and the screams and the horror of battle take hold, do you think he would stand and fight? He would flee, and he would be right to do so. War is the province of men, Éowyn.”

There is no need for Éomer to aim his jibes at his sister, as none of the men seem to feel that it is even possible she should want to be a part of the war to save their homes and way of life. They assume they have the right to go into battle, and that Éowyn needs to stay behind, to provide them with food, beds, supplies, and a reason for fighting. In order to participate in the events that will shape the future of the world in which she lives, Éowyn cannot appear as a maiden – shield or otherwise – she must disguise herself as a man.

In donning the armour and weaponry of the Rohirrim, Éowyn reveals the fluidity of gender as a performance, and the necessity for difference in order to defeat an enemy of great power. Éowyn uses Merry as a navigator on her horse, in order to avoid and bring down an Oliphaunt on the battle field. In this way they combine their strengths and skills to compensate for lack of physical stature. Unlike the written text, Merry is aware of Éowyn’s identity from the moment she sweeps him up onto her horse, and along with the cinematic audience he participates in her performance as warrior. The crucial twist to the cinematic (and written) texts, is the *Macbeth*-like riddle whereby no man can kill the Witch King. Éowyn reveals herself to be “no man” and thrusts her sword into the fight.
the helmet of the Ringwraith. It is the very instability of Éowyn’s identity as both woman and warrior that allows her to destroy the indestructible. And while camouflaging her gender allowed her to get to the point whereby she could prove her strength, skill and worth, it was in revealing it that her ultimate heroic deed took place. Éowyn was transformed into a soldier through the disguise afforded her by her armour (and the long hair of the Rohirrim), but in a twist that defies many traditional boys’ own narratives, was transformed from a soldier into a hero by lifting the veil on her femininity.

Peter Jackson’s *LotR* film cycle has utilized many of the traditional tropes of femininity and the warrior despite the changes that have been outlined here. Arwen’s sword play and the removal of Aragorn’s “stay at home” speech to Éowyn cannot mitigate the general absence of women from Middle-earth’s peoples, nor pierce the isolation of the female warrior. While women are more visible generally in Peter Jackson’s text, they often serve to underscore the difference of the main female characters, where the heroic actions of the male lead characters draw connections to the rest of the men on-screen, be they men, Elves, Dwarves, or Hobbits.

Tolkien’s work, and Jackson’s adaption, are important stories about unlikely heroes. Aragorn, tall and kingly, leads impressive battles, but it is Samwise Gamgee who safeguards the ringbearer Frodo, Merry who wounds the Witch-King, and Éowyn who ultimately kills him. Galadriel’s words to Frodo, that “even the smallest person in the world can change the course of the future” resonate throughout the story and carry an important message in a context where popular opinion on going to war has been ignored, and the male warrior hero is once again ascendant in contemporary politics and cinema. However, the masculinity of the “smallest person” provides a continuity between Hobbits and the heroes of other characters, and while Merry’s armour acts as a partial disguise his stature is a clear indicator of his identity. Éowyn, on the other hand, is a maiden shielded from the gaze of the men
around her by her disguise. In order to gain the recognition she craves, she must also hide and be unrecognizable. While the revelation of her identity leads to the destruction of her enemy, her ultimate role as woman and wife are not disrupted by her disguise or its discarding. That Éowyn is cast as an unlikely hero is a part of her lot as a woman in a world dominated by men (of whatever race). The cinematic release of *The Return of the King* gives no indication that anyone other than Merry is aware of Éowyn’s act of heroism, so crucial to winning at Pelennor Fields. While Jackson’s film provides no more than a hint at Éowyn’s final acceptance of her feminine role as Faramir’s bride, which possibly locates her less firmly as prize than Arwen, she is firmly sidelined in the scenes of Aragorn’s coronation. Éowyn’s presence in the cheering crowd depicts her acceptance of her feminine role, and the outcome which obfuscates the importance of her actions in favour of the pageantry of the performance of Aragorn as king. With the return of the king, and the aversion of the crisis posed by Sauron and his minions, the women of Middle-earth from Arwen to Éowyn to Samwise’s love Rosie Cotton, visibly return to their roles as prize. When the Shieldmaiden forgoes her sword and accepts her role as wife, she shields the integrity of the masculine warrior narrative, and becomes a part of the discourse that denies her presence as an individual or as a part of an ongoing tradition of feminine heroism.

**Notes**

1 This article was completed with the financial assistance of the New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women (Auckland Branch). I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Jenny Campbell for her close reading.


3 Margaret and Patrice Higgonet (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and Two World Wars*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1987. This collection was one of the first to explicitly deal with the home front as a gendered construct.

5 Even works that seek to problematize how ‘natural’ it is for men to go to war often fall into this trap. For example see David L. Grossman’s *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Back Bay Books, New York, 1996.

6 This can be seen cinematically in texts like *Gallipoli*, Peter Weir (Dir), Australian Film Commission, 1981, where women are only represented as the daughters of station owners, or prostitutes. Within the canon of Vietnam War cinema Vietnamese women are often portrayed as a threat to soldiers as they did not play by the rules and were often soldiers themselves, and were therefore singled out for particularly brutal treatment which was often sexual. See, for example, *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick dir., Warner Bros, 1987).

7 For an analysis that deals with the tensions between group and individual masculine soldier identities see D.H. Morgan, “Theater of War: Combat, the Military, and Masculinities”, in H.Brod & M. Kaufman (eds), *Theorizing Masculinities*, Sage, Thousand Oaks CA, 1994, pp. 165-182.


9 This transformation is not limited to Eowyn. Merry also camouflages himself in this battle and the two bring about the prophesied downfall of the Ringwraith.


12 P.J. Hogan (dir.), *Peter Pan*, Universal Studios, 2003.


17 For example, the war in Afghanistan has been described in terms of ‘rescuing’ Afghani women from the terrors of the Taliban regime – which is not untrue, but is also not the entire story, and it took an act of terrorism on U.S. soil for the United States to attempt this ‘rescue’. Rescuing ‘womenandchildren’ (as Cynthia Enloe so expressively runs the terms together) gives the war a chivalric sheen, and disguises motives, civilian deaths for the greater good, and tardiness of action. See E.S. Rosenberg, “Rescuing Women and Children”, *Journal of American History*, v.89, No 2, 2002, pp.456-65. For an application of ‘just war’ theory (dating back to St. Augustine) to the War on Terror, which justifies the conflict in part through the discussion of the oppression of women by fundamentalist regimes see Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War on Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*, Basic Books, New York, 2003.

This can be seen in stories from legends of Joan of Arc, through to Molly Pitcher of the American Revolutionary Wars, to contemporary cinematic constructions like Mulan, G.I.Jane, and Courage Under Fire. For a discussion of these tendencies, with particular reference to Molly Pitcher see Linda Grant de Pauw, Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War From Prehistory to the Present, University of Oklahoma Press, Normal, 1998.


Cathy Akers-Jordan concurs with Rosebury in seeing Jackson’s treatment of Arwen as one of strengthening her role in the main body of the text, rather than just as backstory in the appendices, and aptly states that in conflating the actions of other characters, including Gandalf and Glorfindel, with Arwen in The Fellowship of the Ring, “Jackson makes the logical assumption that she is just as brave, wise and capable in battle as a male Elf. One only has to look at The Silmarillion to see that female Elves ... are equal to the male counterparts in wisdom, and Jackson apparently assumes they are also equal in strength and martial ability.” Cathy Akers-Jordan, “Fairy Princess or Tragic Heroine? The metamorphosis of Arwen Undomiel in Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings Films”, in Janet Brennan Croft (ed), Tolkien on Film: Essays on Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings, The Mythopoeic Press, Altadena California, 2004, p.198.

As discussed below, this portrayal of strength and capacity is diluted by other devices later in the film.


Although it must be noted that this thesis, written in 1976, is also a product of the time in which it was written and that this will therefore influence the conclusions reached by its author.

It is worth noting that in the extras available on the Two Towers DVD, an abandoned scene does in fact depict Arwen fighting alongside Aragorn, and another depicts Éowyn, dressed as a girl, fighting an Orc at Helm’s Deep. The abandonment of these scenes avoids disrupting the seamlessness of the masculine warrior tradition.

Leo, Women in the Fictional Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien, p.104, footnote 5. While this appeared in a footnote it is an important point relevant to the changes Jackson made in The Two Towers.

The departure of the elves is portrayed as a mixed company of elvish men and women, but the overall feel to the scene in The Two Towers, and its reprise in The Return of the King where Arwen changes her mind and decides to stay in Middle-earth, is that Elvish women make up the majority of those leaving at that time.


In fact, in the print text, Tolkien does physically separate home and battlefronts with the women of Rohan left behind at Dunharrow while the men go off to fight. Tolkien, The Two Towers, p.512. It is necessary to designate the women of Rohan separately from the Rohirrim who are the male warriors.

Indeed, Éowyn seeks to prove she is not like other women, and wishes to deny the trappings of her femininity, and her feminine role, in order to seek valour and what she considers more meaningful pursuits.
“Dis was the daughter of Thráin II. She is the only dwarf-woman named in these histories. It was said by Gimli that there are few dwarf-women, probably no more than a third of the whole people. They seldom walk abroad except at great need. They are in voice and appearance, and in garb if they go out on a journey, so like dwarf-men that the eyes and ears of other peoples cannot tell them apart. This has given rise to the foolish opinion among Men that there are no dwarf-women, and that the Dwarves ‘grow out of stone.’” J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, Appendices, p.1053. Andrea Hanslip discusses the general ‘absences’ of women from the populations of Middle-earth from Hobbits, to Dwarves, to Orcs, to Ents in ‘An Uncharted Land: Female Characters in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and Related Writings’, Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Calgary, Department of English, 1993.

33 Gimli to Éowyn, *The Two Towers*.

34 It is unclear how Orcs propagated themselves after this initial perversion took place. The creation of a race of ruthless warriors through torture and perversion bears a frightening resemblance to the methods by which soldiers are created out of men, and the separation of soldiers from civilians. A number of theorists have commented on the fact that it is not natural or innate for men to kill one another and that this must be inculcated by breaking men down and then rebuilding them as soldiers (an aspect of transformation) – and some of the rituals that are entailed in a ‘boot camp’ environment are brutal. See David Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Back Bay Books, New York, 1996. See also Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites*, p.9.

35 Although this is not as obvious in the films where Jackson has done his best to provide continuities for both Arwen and Galadriel throughout all three.

36 Wormtongue to Éowyn, *The Two Towers*.

37 Aragorn to Éowyn, *The Two Towers*.

38 It is worth noting that in Tolkien’s version it is Éowyn who calls herself a shieldmaiden – not Aragorn, and that in the printed text we only ever really meet one woman from each place. The separation of the female characters of Middle Earth from other women remains textually complete between the written and the cinematic texts.

39 The women of Rohan are only mentioned in the context of Éowyn being forced to stay behind with them in the books.


41 And like Merry, the physical differences mean that equipment and uniforms have rarely been designed with women in mind, further hindering their performance. For a discussion on this see M.C. Devilbiss, “Gender Integration and Unit Deployment: A Study of G.I. Jo”, *Armed Forces and Society*, Summer 1985, v. 11, No. 4, pp.523-552. Devilbiss also makes the important point that physical standards are normalised according to the masculine physique and the tests required.
to meet these standards to not take into account the capacity for women to perform better at
different kinds of tests in different conditions. Eleanor Hancock makes a similar point in her
article “Women as Killers and killing women: the implications of ‘gender-neutral’ armed forces”,
in M. Evans & A. Ryan (eds), The Human Face of Warfare: Killing, Fear and Chaos in Battle,
Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 2000, pp.159-176. What this point underscores is the way
in which men are treated as the norm and therefore as ‘ungendered’, against which women must
be compared as other.
42 What does set the film apart from the book with regards to Éowyn though, is that Theoden asks
her to rule in his stead. He does not mention Éomer taking his place after the battle, but instead
infers the mantle of leadership would be capably held by Éowyn. In the book this role is one of
care giving, not ruling – again an indication of the traditions of wartime narrative that see women
take on the roles of men throughout a crisis, only to be asked to step back when the men return.
43 In the written text a warrior previously unknown to Merry sweeps him up and calls himself
“Dernhelm”. Merry’s role, therefore, is to bear witness to the Éowyn’s unmasking and her act of
heroism.
44 Just as in Peter Pan, a text that appears to be about masculinity and the desire young boys have
for heroism, the pantomime versions always had a woman dressed as the “betwixt and between”
Peter. As Marjorie Garber has pointed out, this is actually important because the only way a boy
will never grow up to be a man is if he is actually a woman. Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests:
Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety, Penguin Books, 1993, p.168. This subversive element has
been removed from the film that forms a part of the canon surrounding the cinematic LotR, and
Peter Pan is played by a very boyish boy.
46 Peter Jackson, Fellowship of the Ring.
47 For example see Matthew Hannah, “Manhood and “the war on Terrorism””,
www.peoplesgeography.org/ Manhood%20and%20War%20on%20Terrorism.htm, Accessed