Éowyn the Unintended: 
The Caged Feminine and Gendered Space in *The Lord of the Rings* 

by 

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Abstract

As Alexandra Ganser points out, in the West, freedom of the road has tended to be a prerogative of males; this is as true in the novelistic imagination as it is in the streets. The Lord of the Rings (LotR) is a novel of the road. In it, J. R. R. Tolkien maintains a firm gendering of spaces, as Ganser theorizes. Women may not take to the road or enter the battlefield, except under male direction and supervision.

Éowyn is the exception to this rule, but one that highlights the existence of the rule. Initially, Tolkien planned Éowyn as a warrior who would ride openly as a woman, beside Aragorn, the King whom Éowyn would marry. Éowyn was planned as a heroine, who overcomes a Nazgûl by her own strength. However, this is not the Éowyn whom Tolkien wrote. Instead, she feels caged in Rohan, but is refused permission to take the road or the battlefield. To escape, she disguises herself in the visible cage of male armour and goes to war. Once there, Éowyn fights the Nazgûl, but wins only because a male defeats the spell sustaining the enemy. Éowyn is sent to the Houses of Healing (a neutral space) and is delivered from her erroneous attitude to the gendering of spaces by falling in love with Faramir (the Steward) and submitting to domesticity.

Tolkien’s treatment of Éowyn is of public significance because Tolkien rejects any notion of human progress, so that Éowyn cannot be an instance of a past norm to be overcome by social improvement. Instead, her fall into a determination to trespass on male space is of the nature of sin and her deliverance into domesticity is her redemption, her eucatastrophe. Moreover, Éowyn is a political symbol because LotR is intended as part of a mythology for England, which suggests that Tolkien is making a statement about the direction that society should take. Éowyn, therefore, is Tolkien’s demonstration of God’s will for English society: women ought to remain in domestic spaces and not go to war.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................................... iii
List of Abbreviations ...................................................................................................................... v
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................ vi

Chapter 1  Introduction: Gendered Space and The Lord of the Rings ..................... 1
  1.1 Introduction: The Lord of the Rings and Women ......................................................... 1
  1.2 LotR as a Novel of the Road ......................................................................................... 3
  1.3 Gendered Space ............................................................................................................. 12
  1.4 The Road as Gendered Space ....................................................................................... 15
  1.5 The Battlefield as Gendered Space .............................................................................. 25
  1.6 The Problematic ............................................................................................................ 28

Chapter 2  Can a Shieldmaiden Be? Caging Éowyn ............................................. 29
  2.1 Introduction: The Caging of Éowyn ............................................................................ 29
  2.2 Assembling the Cage 1: The Prehistory of the Text ................................................. 29
  2.3 Assembling the Cage 2: Edoras in the Text That Is ..................................................... 39
  2.4 From Cage to Shining Cage ........................................................................................ 44
  2.5 Taming of the Shieldmaiden ....................................................................................... 50
  2.6 Conclusion: Unnecessary Cages and Gendered Spaces ............................................ 56

Chapter 3  Tolkien’s Mythology and Gendered Spaces ........................................ 62
  3.1 Introduction: Tolkien’s Mythology and Gendered Spaces ....................................... 62
  3.2 History as Long Defeat ............................................................................................... 63
  3.3 The Eucatastrophe ...................................................................................................... 68
3.4 For Home and Country ................................................................. 79
3.5 A Novel of the Road – For Some .................................................. 82
3.6 Boundaries and Directions: Implications for Future Research .......... 85
Works Cited ....................................................................................... 88
### List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Fellowship of the Ring</em></td>
<td>FR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Two Towers</em></td>
<td>TT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Return of the King</em></td>
<td>RK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The War of the Ring</em></td>
<td>War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Treason of Isengard</em></td>
<td>Treason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sauron Defeated</em></td>
<td>Sauron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun</em></td>
<td>SG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien</em></td>
<td>Letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Leaf by Niggle”</td>
<td>LN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“On Fairy Stories”</td>
<td>FS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Smith of Wootten Major”</td>
<td>SWM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Chapter 1: Gendered Space and The Lord of the Rings

1.1 Introduction: The Lord of the Rings and Women

From the moment that J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy (LotR) was first published, the place of women in the story has been debated. Critics have attacked Tolkien for the paucity of women (Fredrick and McBride 108-114; Green 190), the limited roles they are assigned (Partridge 183-84; Stimpson 18), and for the choice to make a female of Shelob — one of the greatest monsters in the text and imaginable as a symbol of womanhood, per se (Craig 13; Partridge 187-91; Stimpson 19). A notable aspect of many critiques is their reference to Tolkien's personal history, which hinges upon male friendship and commonality of purpose, while women are held to strict domesticity and non-interference in the active realm of the male (e.g. Partridge 179-182; Fredrick and McBride 1-28; Doughan 156-159).

Defenders of Tolkien have argued that women (especially Galadriel) play more significant roles in LotR than is commonly noticed (Hanslip iii; Hopkins; Leo) and, besides, Tolkien is limited by the expectations of his genre, which is assumed to be the high romance of late medieval literature (Hanslip 105) or similarly constructed quest literature (Leo 7).

Tolkien’s biography and his stated views on women are significant and relevant. As a consequence, these matters will form part of this discussion, especially as consideration is given to Tolkien’s stated intentions for LotR (see chapter 3). However, the direction of this thesis is not primarily biographical; that work has been done, specifically in relation to views on women by Fredrick and McBride, Doughan, and others, and more generally by Shippey, Carpenter, and other biographers. Because a line drawn from biography to text is not always straight and obvious, this thesis will focus primarily on LotR itself. Attention will be given both to the text as it is generally received and to its’ formation, relying heavily upon the magnificent archive of Tolkien materials edited by Christopher Tolkien and published as The History of Middle-earth.
This thesis will also consider the religious and political implications of Tolkien’s treatment of Éowyn. Rather than approaching this question sociologically, this thesis will consider Tolkien’s own intentions for *LotR*. Tolkien’s aspirations for fantasy literature in general, as an expression of Christian good news, and for *LotR* in particular, as a part of a mythology for England, have an impact on how his treatment of women may be received.

This thesis, therefore, draws attention to the particular set of limitations that the author places upon women and the literary implications of those limits. Chapter one argues that *LotR* is best understood as a novel of the road, in which characters grow through the experience of travel. Moreover, the experience of fighting – of facing the enemy on the field of battle – is a significant part of this growth in *LotR*, because fighting is one of the conditions of using the road. The gendering of space is a defining element, because women do not move beyond the carefully constructed boundaries of their home spaces except at the conclusion of the novel, when all of the action is complete and no opportunity for their development remains. Related to this gendering of the road is a gendering of the battlefield: female characters – as female – do not participate in war. In *LotR*, women are limited in their development and range of activity by a structuring of spaces.

Éowyn – something of an exception – is the challenge to the rules that reveals them as existing and unbreakable. As will be demonstrated in chapter two, Tolkien originally planned Éowyn as a character who would break these rules, serving as shieldmaiden and suitable match for the male hero, Aragorn; however, Tolkien ultimately did not write a story with such a boundary-crossing female. Rather, *LotR* emerges as the story of caging of Éowyn: she begins, caged as a woman in a declining house, but she escapes by donning the visible cage of male armour. Revealed as being out of her place, she concludes by being placed in a new domestic space – a marriage in which she drops her warrior characteristics as the unnatural product of insufficient love and where she is, ultimately, known only for the children that she produces.

Because travel is a metaphor for development – the journey of life – in addition to being the context of significant character development, and taking the risk of entering the battlefield to confront evil
with war is an important part of growth in *LotR*, Tolkien’s other female characters all lack something of the history and richness that his male characters possess. They live more in fleeting glimpses, tableaus, and vignettes than in prolonged and developed narrative. In her disobedience, Éowyn emerges as the only fully-developed woman character. Thus, Éowyn draws attention to the limitations of Tolkien’s other female characters: Aragorn’s intended, designed to be his equal, becomes the unintended counter-example, pointing out what Tolkien does not do with females in *LotR*.

More significantly, Tolkien provides three considerations for how Éowyn should be publically received, which will be addressed in chapter three. Tolkien regards human history as a context of ongoing defeat, rather than a location of progress. Therefore, women cannot regard Éowyn as an indication of a particular social failing of Tolkien’s time period which can be overcome in the progress of history. Instead, the good news – the Christian gospel – for Éowyn is that she can be delivered from her sinful inclination to violate the gendering of space by accepting marriage and submitting to domesticity. Moreover, as an aspect of the mythology that Tolkien intends as a root of English identity, the gendering of space becomes an inescapable part of Tolkien’s vision for England. Tolkien’s vision, therefore, is not simply literary but is also religious and political, increasing the significance of his positioning of Éowyn and all of the female characters in *LotR*.

1.2 *LotR* as a Novel of the Road

The story of the road is a distinct genre – or even “transgenre” because it includes so many kinds of narratives (Campbell 279) – most noted for its role in American literature. Willie Nelson’s celebration of the travelling life states the point quite succinctly: “Like a band of gypsies we go down the highway. We’re the best of friends. Insisting that the world keep turning our way. And our way, is on the road again. Just can’t wait to get on the road again” (W. Nelson). The song is about freedom and mobility, a celebration of the road itself rather than a meditation upon some goal at the end.
However, the road novel is not solely about life on the road, in some random and pointless way. At its heart is the experience of growth and discovery, especially self-discovery, that occurs through travel and the encounter with the other. Literature of the road includes quest literature, but also incorporates nomadic and Bildungsroman stories that focus upon the transformative effect of the journey. The purpose of road literature, therefore, is less a goal than a set of changes that happens on the way. That is why the road is celebrated: its freedom allows for a kind of “becoming” that is difficult to imagine in a static setting.

Road literature picks up this emphasis upon freedom and mobility and links it to growth and personal development. The best-known example of road literature is probably Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (*OtR*). The three characteristics of *OtR* that have caught the eye of feminist scholars are shared with *LotR*: the emphasis upon freedom as a function of mobility; the critique of existing structures that emphasize mastery and domination (Tolkien’s novel focuses especially upon the destructive hegemony over the earth – cf. Dickerson and Evans); and the treatment of women as essentially static characters who may not enter the road. This thesis will focus especially on the first and third of these characteristics, attending to the priority of mobility as the context of growth and to the exclusion of female-gendered characters from this space.

Tolkien wrote road literature of multiple kinds. Although *LotR* is best known as quest literature, as in Leo’s study, it is not only that. Tolkien also composed stories, such as *Smith of Wootton Major*, which fit more readily into the Bildungsroman class. *The Hobbit*, which sets the scene for *LotR*, is more complicated: it incorporates a quest, but is really a Bildungsroman constructed by the romance of the road. Bilbo does not go of his own volition, nor is he sent by Gandalf, primarily as a service to the quest; instead, the purpose and meaning of his journey is in the growth fostered by the road itself. Thorin and company’s quest is nothing more than the barest of excuses to push Bilbo onto the path that leads from his front door. *LotR* is more difficult to categorize. Undeniably, it has goals: first, to discover what should be done about the Ring, and then to carry out the decision, which means destroying the Ring in the fires of Mt. Orodruin. However, from Frodo’s perspective, these are better understood as tasks than as his
personal quests; they do not provide Frodo’s intrinsic motivation for leaving home, and they do not adequately explain the novel’s development. Elements such as the visit to Tom Bombadil’s land, which has no strategic value whatsoever, and the battle in The Shire, which is irrelevant to the Ring story, suggest another purpose. They belong to a Bildungsroman, a story of growth for Frodo; this narrative is built around movement on the road in a way that is not entirely independent of the Ring quest but is not completely dependent on it, either.

Smith of Wootton Major, one of Tolkien’s short stories, involves travel and is helpfully enlightening about Tolkien’s road/coming-of-age/quest story ideas. It is a Bildungsroman, with little of the quest about it. Smith’s fairy-tale context and Britishness tend to obscure its classification as road literature; the story involves no cars or motorcycles and its horizons are small, both of which make it unlike most American road literature. By no accident at all, Primeau’s study of the genre is called Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway and features an immense tire track on its cover.

However, Smith has the basic elements that define road literature: it focuses upon the freedom granted by mobility; it celebrates life on the road; and it represents an escape from domestic existence. In Smith, a young boy receives a silver star in a cake baked mostly by the apprentice of the town baker, who is the King of Faery in disguise. Not really knowing why he does it, the boy slaps the star onto his forehead. He goes on to become a marvellously capable ironsmith, but on occasion he goes off on exploratory journeys into Faery, leaving wife and family behind. The trips are essentially without goal, though Smith decides that he wants to reach as deep into the other realm as he can. The roads and the things that he sees are more important than any goal. Smith dances with the Faery Queen, in a narrative moment that is definitely allegorical but is nonetheless a romantic experience outside his marriage – and his son is aware of it, though we are not told how much his wife knows. More to the point, his wife and children continually welcome Smith back, seeing the growth in wisdom and insight that occur when he travels. Indeed, on his final return, when Smith has reached the level of understanding needed to be able to part with the star, recognize the identity of the King, and name the right person to receive the star next,
Smith’s son welcomes Smith home. His wife and daughter have gone to visit his nephew – the person who will next be starred – but his son has stayed home to work in the smithy. The son realizes that his father is a much greater person as a result of his travels in Faery. Indeed, the family is happy with Smith’s continual journeying, although the son is also pleased that his father will be home so that they can work together and the son hopes to learn from his father – and not merely about ironwork. This is certainly a romance of the road, where travel, self-discovery, and personal development take priority, in an escape from the bonds of domesticity.

*The Hobbit*, the novel which precedes *LotR* and provides important geographic and plot elements for it, is a *Bildungsroman* constructed on and by the road. Moreover, Tolkien explicitly treats *The Hobbit* as a celebration of the road itself. Insofar as a quest comes into the story, it is largely peripheral to the main concerns. This is immediately evident in the motive for the journey, which is certainly not the goal implied by the quest: Bilbo has no interest in gold or jewels and he is desperately afraid of dragons and the wild. Indeed, when Bilbo wakes up on the departure morning and discovers that the dwarves have left and the whole idea seems like a dream, he is most relieved. Instead, the whole journey is a plot of Gandalf’s, to set Bilbo on the road and cause him to grow. Bilbo is deliberately forced out of his comfortable, firmly-domestic, environment. The decision does not come from him, but from the wizard: “I will go so far as to send you on this adventure. Very amusing for me, very good for you – and profitable too, very likely, if you ever get over it” (*Hobbit* 6). Gandalf finds Bilbo too much at home in his safe, little world and chooses to push him out of it.

The road serves many purposes in *The Hobbit*. It introduces Bilbo to the reality and challenge of difference. Dwarves take him onto the road. He meets trolls, elves, gigantic spiders, a changer (sometimes bear, sometimes human), orcs, eagles, men who live in the middle of a lake, a dragon, and a raven who talks. The road is the context of Bilbo’s emotional growth. He ceases to be the sort of hobbit who is discombobulated to the point of distraction by the appearance of a few unexpected guests for tea. Instead, he is able to fight giant spiders by himself, steal from elves, and remain an independent character in the middle of a complicated diplomatic and military situation with the great of the dwarves, elves, men,
and eagles – not to mention Gandalf, a powerful wizard and Bilbo’s mentor. Most importantly, the road enables Bilbo’s moral growth, taking him from his tiny village, where the challenges are tiny, through the depths of the orcs’ mountain, where he must make life or death decisions in his meeting with Gollum. The road takes Bilbo to the palace of the Wood-elven’ king, where he must survive while making decisions for the whole band of dwarves locked in the dungeon. The road takes Bilbo to the dragon’s lair, where he recovers the Arkenstone and gives it up to the elves and men, in an effort to prevent war among the free peoples of Middle-earth. Ultimately, on the road, Bilbo returns to his beloved hobbit-hole, but as a noticeably changed hobbit.

The decisive announcement of the road’s power comes very nearly at the end of the story: Bilbo crafts a poem, a hymn to the road, which will resonate through LotR. The poem bears repeating in its entirety, because it says much about Bilbo’s approach to life, after his adventures and into the beginning of LotR; moreover, Frodo will take over the song when he is launched on his own travels.

Roads go ever ever on,

   Over rock and under tree,

By caves where never sun has shone,

   By streams that never find the sea;

Over snow by winter sown,

   And through the merry flowers of June,

Over grass and over stone,

   And under mountains in the moon.

Roads go ever ever on

   Under cloud and under star,

Yet feet that wandering have gone

   Turn at last to home afar.

Eyes that fire and sword have seen
And horror in the halls of stone

Look at last on meadows green

And trees and hills they long have known.  \textit{(Hobbit 275-276)}.

The road is precisely as we have seen it: the context of encounters with the other, the unfamiliar; the means of transformation and self-discovery; the place where the world comes to be understood and judged differently. The road is also the path homeward, but home is not the same place; though Bilbo’s eyes gaze upon the “meadows green/And trees and hills they long have known,” his eyes are not the same eyes with which he last looked upon this scene. They are now “Eyes that fire and sword have seen/And horror in the halls of stone.” Gandalf’s effort at transforming Bilbo has been most successful. As the wizard points out to Bilbo, “You are not the hobbit that you were” \textit{(Hobbit 276)}.

Notably, though the poem speaks of “home,” nothing is said of the permanence of that place. There is, perhaps, a note of wistfulness and longing in the poem’s second stanza, but the transformation in Bilbo suggests that home cannot be for him what it once was. In fact, Tolkien’s publishers, finding \textit{The Hobbit} to be a roaring success, were not inclined to let Bilbo rest forever (Carpenter 243ff.). Bag End would be neither Bilbo’s final resting place, which is the Blessed Realm over the sea, nor his penultimate home, which is Rivendell. \textit{LotR} opens with Bilbo truly desiring to be on the road again. Gandalf encourages him to take care of himself, but Bilbo says, “Take care! I don’t care. Don’t you worry about me! I am as happy now as I have ever been, and that is saying a great deal. But the time has come. I am being swept off my feet at last, he added” \textit{(FR 46)}. Then he speaks a new verse of his poem:

\begin{quote}
The Road goes ever on and on

\quad Down from the door where it began.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Now far ahead the Road has gone,

\quad And I must follow, if I can,
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Pursuing it with eager feet,

\quad Until it joins some larger way
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Where many paths and errands meet.
\end{quote}
And whither then? I cannot say. \textit{(FR 47)}

Bilbo’s enthusiasm for the road has risen to new heights, losing any sense of ambiguity. Significantly, the poem gives power to the road itself: it directs, though Bilbo is certainly pleased to follow. Insofar as Bilbo is going somewhere, that somewhere is defined by the road itself, which literally – and literally – leads. The road is pursued, to ends that the road will help to order.

Bilbo’s poem is, in \textit{LotR} as in \textit{The Hobbit}, something of a hermeneutic key to the whole work. In \textit{LotR}, the quest looms much larger, as a task laid on Frodo by Gandalf, rather than an adventure given to the chosen hobbit. Nonetheless, something of the same spirit enters into the second novel, both in Frodo’s motive for making the journey and in the structure and events of the novel, as a whole. The call of the road is central to \textit{LotR} as is the growth that it brings.

Frodo’s willingness to carry the Ring on its way is born of two considerations. The first is Gandalf’s stern warning of the Ring’s power and the danger that it brings. This engages Frodo’s head, though he insists that he is “not made for perilous quests,” he knows that he “ought to leave Bag End, leave the Shire, leave everything and go away” \textit{(FR 81-82)}. The quest is something that Frodo is willing to do, but most certainly does not want to do. Frodo’s heart, on the other hand, is engaged by the wish to travel: “a great desire to follow Bilbo flamed up in his heart” \textit{(FR 82)} and “his heart was moved suddenly with a desire to see the house of Elrond Halfelven, and breathe the air of that deep valley where many of the Fair Folk still dwelt in peace” \textit{(FR 87)}. Frodo, indeed, follows Bilbo, whom he will encounter again at Elrond’s house, Rivendell.

A very short way into his journey, emphasizing the continuity of the road theme, Frodo repeats the stanza of Bilbo’s poem that Bilbo himself said just as he started. In this case, however, the poem is recited at the end of the day, so that “eager feet” are replaced with “weary feet” \textit{(FR 97)}. The road can be a source of exhaustion, in addition to being a source of cheer. With the poem’s reminder of the joy of the road, we are also warned about the power of the road. It can cast a spell on us and take us almost anywhere.
He [Bilbo] used often to say that there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary. “It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door,” he used to say. “You step into the Road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to. Do you realize that this is the very path that goes through Mirkwood, and that if you let it, it might take you to the Lonely Mountain or even further and to worse places? (FR 98)

The road has a life of its own; it is a fascinating and powerful entity that can take control of the traveller. The capitalized “Road” implies a proper noun, the name of a particular being. Importantly, this makes the road a participant in the unfolding drama, not exactly volitional but not neutral either. Rather than being the emptiness between places or events, the road is now explicitly singled-out and defined as a space which imposes its own exigencies. The road is not, therefore, simply a metaphor for life, as Shippey suggests (2003, 187-188); instead, the road is a defined and ordered space in which life develops or unfolds.

Moreover, the road is now named as a determinative space in the novel. The road gives the novel its basic structure and orientation. The progress of the story, and of Frodo himself, will be measured by his movement on the road. This is demonstrated by the maps, a fascination of Tolkien’s. Tolkien carefully laid out the entire plot progression on maps that he constructed himself and he worked very hard to make sure that the developments in the books were matched by modifications in the maps, and *vice versa*. As Flieger has shown, time was very important to Tolkien. However, time and space are inextricably linked: when Tolkien is troubled by the challenges of synchronizing Frodo’s and Sam’s journey to Mordor, on the one hand, with the travel of Gandalf and the others to Gondor, the problem is one of distance as much as it is of time (Flieger).

Complicating the situation further, while emphasizing the importance of the road more than the quest, is the nature of progress in *LotR*. Movement in the novel is not simply a straightforward march following the most obvious route. Frodo and the other travellers are continually pushed out of the direct ways by enemies, weather, and mishaps. The intriguing thing about these diversions is that they consume
much more time and are noticeably more involved than is really necessary to serve the plot of war and quest. As Treschow and Duckworth point out, other kinds of progress are important in *LotR* (179). The visit to Bombadil and Goldberry seems to be utterly pointless; it is omitted entirely from the Jackson movie (Treschow and Duckworth 176-79). However, as symbols of the natural order, unaffected by the vagaries of settlement, development, or war, Bombadil and his land are fundamentally important to the novel: they stand in precise opposition to Isengard and Mordor, the products of modern industry. They must be encountered, in both their attractive and their fearsome aspects, if Middle-earth is to be understood.

Ultimately, for Tolkien, understanding Middle-earth is the point. He was less interested in the quest, *per se* – which he could have ended much more quickly than happens in *LotR* – than in unfolding the possibilities of his world, with its peoples, languages, and geography. Moreover, the heart of this unfolding is really the Solomonic quest in search of wisdom for Frodo. Arguably, the real moment of the novel’s fulfillment is neither at Orodruin nor at Minas Tirith, but on Frodo’s doorstep. Frodo has completed his journey when Saruman is forced to honour the hobbit. “Saruman rose to his feet, and stared at Frodo. There was a strange look in his eyes of mingled wonder and respect and hatred. ‘You have grown, Halfling,’ he said. ‘Yes, you have grown very much. You are wise, and cruel. You have robbed my revenge of sweetness, and now I must go hence in bitterness, in debt to your mercy.’” (*FR* 362).

This is a Tolkien-style “road moment,” parallel to the moment toward the end of *The Hobbit*, when Gandalf notes Bilbo’s development.

On the road, Frodo has grown in vision. Like Bilbo, he has encountered difference, only on a greater scale: Frodo has met the very greatest and some of the very worst (a Balrog is among the mightiest of ancient terrors). Frodo has grown emotionally: in the early going, he is afraid of Farmer Maggot and his dogs, whereas by the end, he is able to face Shelob and travel deep into Mordor. Frodo has also grown morally: his wisdom and understanding reach very deep. From the frightened hobbit who wishes that Bilbo had slain Gollum, Frodo has become one who can live with, see through, and
incorporate in his mission, the twisted and tortured Sméagol/Gollum. This story of growth is the real story of *LotR*.

A significant sub-plot, however, is the restoration of the king in Middle-earth. His identity is worthy of our attention, because it is really about mobility. The rightful king of the land is Aragorn, who is first, foremost, and always King of the Road. His people are called Rangers, because they travel the highways and byways, ensuring the security of the peaceful farmers and villagers. Aragorn, himself, is commonly known as a traveller of dubious reliability, and is dubbed “Strider.” Moreover, when meeting Frodo and his friends at Bree, Aragorn accepts both the name and the reputation that goes with it. When Peregrin calls Aragorn by the common-use name in front of Éomer and others of rank, Aragorn is not offended. Instead, he suggests that it will be the name of his house: *Telcontar* in Quenya, an elven tongue. Even when he settles down in Gondor, to rule over all the peoples of Middle-earth, Aragorn retains the sense of the road, keeping it in his family name. This is consistent with his life. It is also consistent with his elvish heritage, for the Elves are a wandering people. Even the settled Elves of Lothlórien must take to the road at the end of *LotR*.

The road is the heart of *LotR*. In notable ways, the quest of the Ring is less important than the journey itself. The journey is life; it is the context of real growth in a temporal and spatial world. In his efforts to unfold the lives of Bilbo and Frodo, Tolkien celebrates the road. He glories in the uncertainties of the road, in the differences that it causes to meet, and in the strength and wisdom that it imparts.

However, Tolkien’s road is not for women.

1.3 Gendered Space

In the 1970’s and 1980’s, feminist theory began to identify and critique the gendering of space (Doan). Although the literature on the issue is broad and rich, the work of Doreen Massey and the writings of Henri Lefebvre are particularly important as roots for this thesis.
Lefebvre was a Marxist whose interest in urban planning caused him to become aware that space is not merely a natural thing, a given of temporal-spatial existence, but is also a social construct. As urban studies worked to become a science, its practitioners sought to dispense with politics; politics, and its practitioners, politicians, were treated as “a perturbation, a kind of irrationality” (Lefebvre 2009, 170). The focus of the discipline was toward attaining the kind of disengaged objectivity that was at the heart of the Enlightenment vision of scientific knowledge. As in Cartesian thought, space became an “absolute;” like Kant, urban planners treated it as an *a priori* category (Lefebvre 1991, 2). Lefebvre recognized that politics is an essential part of the process by which space is understood and distributed. That is because spaces are defined – given boundaries, rules, and meanings – by human beings. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre opens up the critical question: “How were transitions to be made from mathematical spaces (i.e. from the mental capacities of the human species, from logic) to nature in the first place, to practice in the second, and thence to the theory of social life – which also presumably must unfold in space?” (Lefebvre 1991, 3). He argues that space is produced; entering into the realm of production, it also enters into the economic relations that define production, serving as both product and means of production (Lefebvre 1991, 85). Space becomes a manifestation of what Gramsci calls “hegemony,” domination by a social class, by a particular order (Lefebvre 1991, 10). Space is created on the basis of its value to “commerce and exchange, or power, or productive labour, or renunciation and death,” rather than “enjoyment and rest (in the sense of non-work)” (Lefebvre 1991, 380). Very briefly, Lefebvre notes the masculinity of this vision, speaking of the “sterile space of men” and suggesting that women might be able to cause some sort of change in this ethic (Lefebvre 1991, 380). However, he does little to attend to the ways in which the production of space has a particular impact on women.

Doreen Massey has drawn attention to the ways in which the social construction of space affects gender identifications and relations. Central to much of her research is the argument that, “From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is understood” (Massey 1999, 179). The
ways in which space is constructed reflect prior assumptions about particular genders, while also enforcing existing norms; space, thereby, becomes a very literal trap, a physical means of sustaining gender norms. The meaning of “woman” has been both constructed and sustained by just this method: “limitation of women’s mobility, in terms of both identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination” and the two forms of limitation have been “crucially related” (Massey 1999, 179).

A notable part of this dynamic is the relegation of women to domestic spheres in the home, in a Western world that separates the workplace from the home space. Massey attends to the economic implications of this; these are generally important, but not immediately relevant to our discussion of LotR because Tolkien’s novel is placed in an earlier historical context, one which does not participate in this separation. Nonetheless, as biographical critics point out, Tolkien’s life was built around the very careful distinction between the domestic space (woman’s space) and the workspace, which for him was intellectual (man’s space). Tolkien imbibed C. S. Lewis’ strong theories on this subject – which ensured that the Inklings remained a male group – much more thoroughly than Lewis himself did (Fredrick and McBride 14-15). Lewis believed that friendship should be about intellectual engagement, driven by a “lofty concern for truth” to the exclusion of all personal elements; to Lewis’ mind, this meant that women – who were deemed incapable of such purely and sublimely philosophical activity – could not be included (Fredrick and McBride 14; Lewis 1960, 87-127).

Tolkien concurred with Lewis, deciding that real friendship between men and women could not happen: “In this fallen world the ‘friendship’ that should be possible between all human beings, is virtually impossible between man and woman” (Letters 48). Consequently, Tolkien largely separated his wife from his work life and insisted upon a man’s right to follow his own inclinations (such as thoughtful conversation) in spite of women’s displeasure (Fredrick and McBride 15). Though Tolkien and his wife (Edith) had some common family friends, they tended to relate to such friends quite differently (Carpenter 210-11); moreover, Edith was uncomfortable with Oxford, Lewis, and Catholicism, which contributed to her exclusion from substantial portions of Tolkien’s life (Carpenter 208-09).
In Tolkien’s eyes, the separation between Edith’s life and his own was rooted in the order of nature and, therefore, both appropriate and expected. As he wrote to his son, Michael, in 1941 (during the time in which Tolkien was writing *LotR*; see Carpenter 247ff.):

Much though modern circumstances have changed feminine circumstances, and the detail of what is considered propriety, they have not changed natural instinct. A man has a life-work, a career, (and male friends), all of which could (and do where he has any guts) survive the shipwreck of ‘love’. A young woman, even one ‘economically independent’, as they say now (it usually means economic subservience to male commercial employers instead of to a father or a family, begins to think of the ‘bottom drawer’ and dream of a home, almost at once. (*Letters* 50)

The distinction is rigid and clear. The fundamental desire of every young woman is for home and children; this is simply “natural instinct” at work. “Life-work” and a “career” are the property of men. The feminine, therefore, is specifically associated with the domestic space, which implies a certain immobility; feminine work occurs in the place in which a woman lives. The masculine, on the other hand, is associated with things that involve entry into the public space and at least the potential for mobility; a career may require a man to move, may even involve significant travel. Indeed, Tolkien himself graduated from Oxford and, after serving in the trenches in France and being invalided home, took a teaching position in Leeds and followed that with professorships at Oxford (Carpenter).

Without assuming that details of Tolkien’s life are reflected in his novel, we can note that the immobility of female characters in *LotR* ensures that they are permanently connected to the domestic space. Female characters lack the freedom of the road that might permit some sort of distinction between domestic and other activities in their lives.

1.4 The Road as Gendered Space

The road has not commonly been recognized as a gendered space, perhaps because it appears to be shared even when other tasks are not; a shopping woman uses the road as does a man on the way to the
office, while both meet assumptions that were at the heart of mid-twentieth century North America.

However, the road is, and often has been, a gendered space; this is most obviously visible in the battle for the right to drive women currently pursue in Saudi Arabia (Smith, et al 10-12) and in the ongoing efforts that women face to be able to dress as they wish and move safely on roads in North America and elsewhere (Mallick A.19). In a more complex way, “the feminization of employment” that has taken place in the West in recent decades “has redrawn the map of employment”; “some firms relocated to the suburbs to attract a female workforce that preferred to work near home…. while others employing equally large numbers of female workers located at central locations that were the hubs of public transit services, a mode of transportation used more by women than by men” (Preston and Ustundag 213). Even when men and women share the road, they may use it differently.

Drawing on the work of Massey and others, Alexandra Ganser has drawn our attention to the gender-defined character of the ways in which we imagine the road in her groundbreaking book, *Roads of Her Own: Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women’s Narratives, 1970-2000*. Ganser’s work is particularly helpful because it treats the road in narrative fiction as a gendered space. Ganser seeks to expose the "masculinized discourse of travel and the road genre", while drawing attention to the ways in which this constructs the world as belonging to men: "man's world, woman's place" (66). While literature of the road speaks of freedom and mobility, these are of a limited and specific kind: they serve males, while being “predicated upon forms of exclusion from mobility of others on the basis of difference and alterity” (16).

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1 Ganser insists that “American myths of mobility… largely reflect the historic perspective of the White (male) Anglo-Saxon Protestant,” (WASP) while noting that black slaves, Native Americans, and Japanese Americans have suffered notable limitations on their mobility (16). This thesis will not pursue the question of the racialization of space because it does not touch on the question of women in *LotR*: all women, regardless of other social identifiers, face the same gendering of space in Tolkien’s novel. Nonetheless, Ganser’s assertion about the racial limitation of myths of mobility in the United States seems to be overly sweeping. Jack Kerouac’s family was of French Canadian descent, spoke French in the home, and sent Jack to a Roman Catholic parochial school (Peterson); some of Kerouac’s characters (such as Sal Paradise) are not WASP. This example suggests that Ganser’s assumptions about the Anglo-American migrant experience may have caused her to give insufficient attention to complexities in the relationship between non-WASP immigrants and American notions of mobility. One might, for example, ask “What is the relationship between people of non-WASP ethnicities and visions of ‘upward mobility associated with the American Dream?’” (82).
At the heart of the road genre is a particular experience of freedom, as connected to mobility. This is, of course, an especially American attitude, as Ganser is aware: such classics as Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* emphasize both the American sense of movement and the masculine character of the genre. Ganser argues that “women’s literary texts rewrite the mythical ‘open road’ as a textual space in which powerful regimes of gender, cultural and social difference are destabilized” (Ganser 14). Rewriting the space transforms it into a critical context in which new narratives can be envisaged. “In women’s road stories, the American highway’s mythical, iconic status, signifying the heroic quest for freedom – reproduced time and again by the adventurous hero’s literary flight from domesticity – is questioned and challenged, rejected and revised in manifold ways” (Ganser 14).

Although it fits Ganser’s arguments about male road literature precisely, Tolkien’s *LotR* stands oddly in relation to Ganser’s thesis. Its predecessor volume, *The Hobbit*, is cast precisely as a “flight from domesticity,” a celebration of the road which initially frees Bilbo Baggins from the boundaries of home, then returns him – temporarily – to a transfigured domestic space. *LotR* picks up this theme: although the pressure of the Ring and its dangers forces Frodo Baggins to take to the road, his heart also calls him to the larger world of the road. Indeed, *LotR* presents as exactly the sort of mythical quest of the masculine kind that Ganser finds under critical attack in women’s literature: men travel, women stay at home and tend the hearth.

The oddness in Tolkien’s text emerges with Éowyn, who was originally conceived as a departure from the strict masculinity of the genre as it is often understood. Éowyn was first designed as a partner who would ride with Aragorn as his equal, intended for marriage with him; this would neatly unite domesticity and the road, placing the freedom of movement and the bonds of matrimony in parity, from the standpoint of value, and in tandem, from the perspective of place. Tolkien ultimately rejected this vision, forcing Éowyn to adopt male disguise to enter the space of the road. Instead, women are encountered in the off-the-road spaces, limiting the kinds of development that we can see in them. Tolkien takes this approach in spite of significant examples of English literature, well-known to him, in which women take to the road and bring feminine-gendered qualities with them. As we will see, C. S.
Lewis (Tolkien’s best friend, for many years) included female characters as travellers. However, we need not be so contemporary: Chaucer included travelling women, such as the Wife of Bath; she even makes rather a strong speech in favour of the freedom of women to come and go (Chaucer 150-71). That Tolkien knew *Canterbury Tales* well is beyond debate; Tolkien delivered a paper on “Chaucer as a Philologist” in 1931 (Carpenter 186; CP). Women on the road were certainly not outside Tolkien’s sphere of literary awareness.

Both *The Hobbit* and *LotR* are entirely masculine stories of the road, in precisely the mode to which Ganser draws our attention, except that Éowyn disobeys the rules. 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. The fact that she must do so in male garb is, itself, a demonstration of the limitations of the genre.

With the anomalous exception of Éowyn, only male characters (except when all the action is done and loose ends must be drawn together) enter the space of the road in either *The Hobbit* or *LotR*. In *The Hobbit*, no female characters receive explicit attention, though one can assume their presence – as when the Sackville-Bagginses are preparing to move into Bilbo’s hobbit-hole at the end of the story, so Lobelia’s attendance is implied. By contrast, *LotR* has a great many female characters, but they are all tethered in place, within the boundaries set by their home-lives. Rose Cotton stays at home; indeed, we hardly know of her existence until the end of the book. While Tom Bombadil travels the full length and width of his land, Goldberry does not move out of sight of her house. Arwen stays at Rivendell until her men-folk escort her to Minas Tirith to be married. Even Shelob, the mighty monster, functions only within her own tunnels. Lobelia, as independent-minded a female character as Tolkien creates, functions strictly within Hobbiton boundaries – shuffling only as her dwellings change. The Entwives are absent
from the story precisely because they have dared to travel, breaking the rule of the gendered road; the result is that they are banished and the Ents doomed by the failure of their species. The absoluteness of the rule against female access to the road is really quite astonishing; it runs quite contrary to daily experience and, therefore, demands attention – if not full explanation.

Undoubtedly, the novel’s dynamics would shift if women were given the freedom of the road. Women would intrude upon the journey, requiring that some be given far greater life and complexity than they tend to possess in *LotR*. Moreover, the male unity sustained by the unspoken vow of chastity would be difficult to write: if a woman were to join the travellers, then Tolkien would be forced to guard against the development of intimacy, lest the group be disturbed by unbalanced relationships or jealousy. Both of these are significant considerations, but seem inadequate to explain the development of *LotR*. With Éowyn – and, to some extent, Galadriel – Tolkien demonstrates an ability to write women as rich, developed characters, and the group can hardly be said to consist of altogether symmetrical and comfortable relationships as Tolkien has written it.

If women were permitted independent mobility in *LotR*, then Tolkien’s female characters would appear less in the forms of symbol and stereotype, more as full participants with substantial biographies. Arwen exists more as an idea than as a developed character in the novel. Although Rawls is correct to suggest that Arwen’s shadowy presence is felt in spite of her physical absence (Rawls 1985), this technique means that Arwen is known almost entirely through male responses to her. She exists as Aragorn’s love and, therefore, as part of his motivation – an idea given name and, ultimately, physical form. The existence of Arwen is important; she is a statement that Aragorn is not fighting either for simple abstractions or out of lust for power. One root of his commitment is the true love he feels for a beauty of the Halfelven race – an image of the highest. This is no mean thing to be, in Tolkien’s world. However, the fact remains that only in the final pages of the novel does she attain any real humanity, in the brief account of the bitterness at being separated from her father and disposing of her place in a ship leaving the Grey Havens. We do not meet with Arwen until after the Ringbearer has completed his task and Aragorn is set upon his throne, securely ruling; even then, she plays no active part. Within the
bounds of *LotR* proper, Arwen is an idea more than a complicated and fully-expressed woman. Indeed, the closest we come to seeing Arwen live is after the close of *LotR*, in the Appendix that describes her mourning at the loss of Aragorn, when the reality of death strikes her as a brutal psychological blow; then she moves and establishes her own space, though it is only a place in which to waste away the long, empty years at the conclusion of her life – all of which occurs after the end of *LotR*. As we shall see, in *LotR* proper, the power of Éowyn’s character throws the limited and symbolic role of Arwen into sharp relief, precisely because we travel with Éowyn, but Arwen moves only at the order of her menfolk and only when she is to be wed.

Rose Cotton, the other female love-interest, is more absent than Arwen. Though a solid personage (unlike the ethereal Arwen), Rose is almost entirely unmentioned until the final pages of *LotR*, as Nelson points out in “But Who Is Rose Cotton?” (9). Sam sighs for her once, indicating his wish to be with her, but we do not learn anything about her. Only at the end, when Frodo and Sam have returned to the Shire, do we encounter Rose. At that point, she emerges as a hobbit with whom Sam had an understanding leading to marriage. Far from pursuing Sam on his travels, Rose stays home and waits for him. At no point do we see her go beyond the most narrowly-defined of domestic spaces: the Cotton home and then, when Sam takes her to Bag End after marriage, the Baggins/Cotton home.

The most mobile of all females might be Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, but she does not move beyond Hobbiton boundaries. She attends the Birthday Party, and she moves into Bag End when Frodo sells it. We are told that she was taken off to prison by Saruman’s gang and that, when freed, she went to live with family in Hardbottle. This is all narrow domestic shift, moving from one dwelling to another, and, in any case, is the merest background to the larger narrative in *LotR*.

The challenge of Goldberry in the novel is that she is more symbol than human, a fact of nature – the changing of the seasons - anthropomorphized. This is a very difficult notion to represent and Tolkien manages it with surprising facility. At his meeting with Goldberry, Frodo is deeply taken with her beauty, captured by her enchantment, so that he utters words more courtly than we have yet heard him speak. The most powerful moment with Goldberry, however, is at the hobbits’ leavetaking from her,
when she calls them to the top of a hill to drink in the beauty of the world. This is a decisive moment of departure, because immediately afterward the hobbits will be surrounded by fog, captured by barrow-wights, and pursued by Ringwraiths. In short, this is a moment of joy in the glory of nature, a reminder that there is good in the world. Goldberry is also a statement about the right order of nature, which will continue to exist even as Frodo and Sam find themselves in places where little of that order can be found because evil has twisted or suppressed it. Bombadil’s land, even more than the Shire, stands as the antithesis of Mordor. Here, nature rules, in an honest – and, therefore, sometimes fearsome and dangerous – fashion. Unlike The Shire, which has been formed by hobbits – and, before them, people – into a rural and bucolic place, Bombadil’s land is a last outlier of the Old Forest. This is nature as formed by its maker and by the powers instilled in it. Bombadil is “Master;” he is the natural law (Treschow and Duckworth), while Goldberry is the beauty of cyclical change that stands as a backdrop to the changes that creatures, especially of sentient and voluntary kinds, make in the world. A drive to restore something of the natural order is, ultimately, one of the basic motivations that sustain Frodo and Sam; its reappearance later in Ithilien is a heartening reminder of its importance to the two of them and a sweet moment of delight and encouragement. Goldberry is, therefore, a very significant presence in the story.

The problem remains, however, that Goldberry is not presented as a full woman in _LotR_, in the sense of having complicated thoughts and emotions, hard times and joyful, the agonies of childbirth and pain, and the manifold other experiences that make up a complex human woman; Goldberry lacks biography. Instead, she is a female representation of an aspect of nature. Her beauty is that which is associated with Mother Nature, giving a logic to her portrayal in female form, but she lacks the fecundity that we associate with mothering. She is “river-daughter,” rather than bounteous mother. An important aspect of her unreality is her lack of independence. Goldberry is ruled by her husband and served by him. She is portrayed as radically immobile, so that she does not even fetch her own flowers – which grow within the bounds of Bombadil’s land. She is utterly unable to move beyond her domestic sphere, apparently limited to staying within view of the house. All of the real mobility, even within the borders
of her husband’s land, belongs to Tom himself. Partly as a consequence, we see no development in
Goldberry; she remains a static symbol.

There is an interesting parallel between Éowyn and Goldberry: both have a prior history that is at
odds with the character in *LotR*. Whereas Goldberry is static and unreal in *LotR*, she originates as an
intriguing woman, with notable spirit. In the original poem, “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil,”
Goldberry is a mischievous character who makes off with Bombadil’s feather hat, taking it with her as she
swims off to the remote part of the river where she sleeps. In the spring, however, Bombadil catches her
and holds her fast, with the implication that she would prefer to escape. All nature is disturbed: “Water-
rats went scuttering, reeds hissed, herons cried, and her heart was fluttering” (*TB* 15). Nonetheless,
Bombadil keeps Goldberry in his grip, admonishing her that no lover will be found for her in the river; he
takes Goldberry from the river to his home and forces her to marry him in a fine affair of song and dance.
The symbolism of this is not obvious. Perhaps, Goldberry does not bear the same weight of meaning in
the poem that she does in *LotR*. On the other hand, this may be the dark explanation behind Goldberry’s
immobility: perhaps the seasons must be kept both married to and imprisoned by the Master, so that the
natural order is sustained. Whatever Tolkien intends, Goldberry is notably more complex and fully-
presented as a person outside of *LotR*.

Shelob is the anti-Goldberry, a twisted, monstrous and destructive counterpoint to the
representation of the natural order that we have seen in the river-daughter, but Shelob is similarly
constrained within the bounds of a very small geographic location. Shelob never leaves her tunnels,
though we are told that – in times well past – the spider would venture out a short distance for food.
Shelob is as important as Goldberry, because Shelob also represents a boundary. At one pole, there is the
natural land of Tom Bombadil, with the barrow-wights at its edge announcing that such safety as the
world can provide ends there. At the other pole stands the land of death, Mordor, the very name of which
echoes the rape and destruction of life that defines its character. Shelob is the symbol of perversion and
destructiveness, little more than a voracious appetite on legs. She lives in a world of deepest black, a
reminder of the darkness spread by her parent, Ungoliant, who devoured the Two Trees of Valinor – the
source of light to the world, as it was first created. Her femaleness has a logic, but it is not the excessively Freudian logic that Partridge suggests. For Partridge, Shelob is the warped monster of female sexuality – a thing of fear to Tolkien, in Partridge’s mind – and must be defeated by the phallic power of Galadriel’s phial (187-91). This is an over-reading of the text which may reflect more on Partridge’s priorities than on the story, which offers no reason to assume that Shelob is a sexual figure. Instead, Shelob is female in the way that Goldberry is female, but opposed to Goldberry – nature warped rather than nature in proper order.

Shelob is a much more complete character than Goldberry. The spider is, indeed, a well-drawn monster, very effective in her hunger, fury, pain, and suffering. Her efforts to catch Frodo ring true, as do the impacts of his light and sword on her swollen and ancient body. However, Shelob is never anything more than a monster: a symbol of nature warped into active evil, destroying the creative power that is the most fundamental characteristic of nature as it ought to be. Shelob does not take to the road, does not grow even in evil – unlike Ungoliant, who has a real biography. Shelob remains tethered in place, a simple, hungry, death-dealer guarding entry into the land of death.

Galadriel is the most powerful of the female characters, bearer of one of the three elven-rings – Nenya, the Ring of Adamant – and the real centre of life in Lothlórien. The Ring is “a secret power... that holds evil from the land” (FR 443). Galadriel has the capacity to see beyond her borders, through a water-mirror, in which she sees much that Sauron does and through which she recognizes the fierce gaze of the Eye of Sauron as it scans and penetrates all over Middle-earth. Moreover, her standing is great in the larger community; she, it was, who first summoned the White Council, the Council of the Wise who sought to address the threat that Sauron posed to the peoples who rejected his rule. Galadriel gives the Nine Walkers great gifts, which aid them in their endeavours after they leave her presence. However, her power is solely defensive: it sustains Lothlórien and accomplishes nothing beyond the borders of that land. Thus, Galadriel does not cross the bounds of Lothlórien; though she takes to the river to bid the Walkers farewell, she does not join them. Her only departure from her land occurs at the very end, when the battle is done and the power of her ring has failed, and her whole people leaves Middle-earth for the
Blessed Realm across the sea. Until then, Galadriel is firmly tied within domestic boundaries and our encounter with her extends only to the time that the travellers spend in Lothlórien.

An obvious explanation for this consistent tethering of female characters to their home-space would be an assertion that road literature works in exactly the way that Tolkien writes: men travel and women stay home – or, perhaps, that Tolkien’s literary circle insisted that novels be produced in this way. A reasonable parallel might be to the Detection Club, formed around 1929-30 and active through the years in which Tolkien was writing (though with a break for World War II), which established a particular set of canons for detective fiction which were not followed slavishly, but provided helpful guidelines for understanding the novels of leading lights such as Dorothy L. Sayers (Lovesey). However, there is no equivalent to the Detection Club for road literature. Moreover, even Tolkien’s closest literary companions permitted women to travel in their books. C.S. Lewis, Tolkien’s working companion and best friend for much of their lives, incorporates female characters extensively in his children’s literature, and they travel as often and far as the males.

The White Witch is in motion for almost the entire time that we see her in the first two novels of the Narnia series, The Magician’s Nephew and The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. Some of her most vivid moments involve travel. From The Magician’s Nephew:

First came the hansom. There was no one in the driver’s seat. On the roof – not sitting, standing on the roof – swaying with perfect balance as it came at full speed round the corner with one wheel in the air – was Jadis the Queen of Queens and the Terror of Charn [the White Witch]. Her teeth were bared, her eyes shone like fire, and her long hair streamed out behind her like a comet’s tail. She flogged the horse without mercy. Its nostrils were wide and red and its sides were spotted with foam. It galloped madly up to the front door, missing the lamp-post by an inch, and then reared up on its hind legs. (93)

This is but one vigorous moment during the Witch’s outing to London, from her home in Narnia. She manages to get to London by attaching herself to a boy (Digory) and girl (Polly) who travel between worlds and end up in Narnia before returning to London. In LWW, the first traveller is a girl, Lucy, who
goes from England to Narnia. The first to meet the White Witch is, however, Lucy’s brother Edmund, whom the Witch encounters while out in her sleigh. In the course of *LWW*, females are constantly travelling: the Witch again; the sisters, Lucy and Susan; Mrs. Beaver; the Naiads and Dryads; Hags; and most probably others also, except that Lewis does not distinguish male from female with many of the creatures. *The Horse and His Boy* has a distinctly male title, but nearly half the book is concerned with a runaway princess and her mare. Lucy and Susan return to travel as part of the rebellion in *Prince Caspian*, and Lucy is a significant member of the shipboard expedition in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Jill Pole is on quest in *The Silver Chair*, facing the Queen of the Underworld who is a witch and has freedom of movement, and Jill returns to help overthrow the Calormenes and their false religion in *The Last Battle*. Every one of the Narnia books includes a female character in a lead role with the freedom of the road.

Tolkien’s approach is inconsistent with society as he writes. The 20th century was an era of increasing mobility for women, as is evident in English literature from sources as diverse as the Bloomsbury Group (e.g. Virginia Woolf’s Rachel Vinrace), the Detection Club (e.g. Sayers’ Harriet Vane and Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple), and even Arthur Ransome (whose *Swallows and Amazons* series featured girls and women in a variety of leadership roles and constant mobility). After World War I, the easy assumption of female domesticity was widely challenged. C.S. Lewis was certainly not alone in presenting females on the move. Indeed, Tolkien’s *LotR* is the literary work that is different.

1.5 *The Battlefield as Gendered Space*

Trinh Minh-ha reminds us of one of the main cultural constructions of gender that causes women to be excluded from the space of the road: the idea that the road is not a safe space, whereas the home is secure (Minh-ha 15). Minh-ha notes that the comments of a woman Haida elder point to “the naturalized image of women as guardians of tradition, keepers of home, and bearers of Language” (15). The apparent
implication of the Haida woman’s words is that women must stay at home for their own safety and that of their community.

Women are trapped… within the frontiers of their bodies and their species, and the general cliché by which they feel exiled here is the common consensus (in patriarchal societies) that streets and public places belong to men. Women are not supposed to circulate freely in these male domains, especially after dark (the time propitious to desire, ‘the drive, the unnameable’ and the unknown), for should anything happen to them to violate their physical well-being, they are immediately said to have ‘asked for it’ as they have singularly ‘exposed’ themselves by turning away from the Father’s refuge. (Minh-ha 15)

The notion that the home is a safe space, while the road is dangerous and best left to men, is an assumption that is not easily supported by evidence – given that home can be the riskiest place for a woman to be, often a dark place of violence, violation, and pain. Nonetheless, it is a common belief and one that may partly account for Tolkien’s disinclination to allow women the freedom of the road.

More decisively, this assumption of woman’s vulnerability and her own responsibility for it is grounds for Tolkien to define another gendered space: the battlefield. In much of Tolkien’s writing, and especially LotR, the freedom of the road is integrally linked with the ability to fight for it. The road is, itself, a contested space. Moreover, it leads to contested spaces: the road is often the means to reach the battlefield. In LotR, women do not fight.

Goldberry goes nowhere that a fight could happen. Arwen appears in Gondor only after the battles are finished and won. Galadriel is a slightly more complicated case, because she bears the ring that provides the power to sustain and defend Lothlórien. However, Galadriel never enters into direct battle with the enemy. Even looking into her water mirror, where she can discover the Eye of Sauron, she eludes the enemy’s gaze rather than warring with him. The first to do such battle is Aragorn, who

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2 The literature on domestic abuse of women is enormous, taking every form possible, including fiction, scholarly articles, and newspaper reports. As a priest, I can add to the collection of distressing stories. According to the 2004 Canadian General Social Survey, “One in 16 women were victims of violence on the part of a current or previous spouse/partner in the five years preceding the survey” (Laroche 17).
matches wills with Sauron through the agency of the *palantir*. Galadriel merely provides strength and wisdom; the fighting is done by (male) others. Rose Cotton plays no part in *The Battle of Bywater*, which occurs nearly on her doorstep; Rose and her mother stay home and care for Sam’s father. The closest to a warrior female in *LotR* is Shelob. However, her efforts against Frodo and Sam can only very loosely be described as “warfare.” They are, more accurately, the determined efforts of an oversized creature to trap and stun its prey, in order to feed. Shelob is an animal, an ignoble raptor, rather than an intelligent, volitional warrior.

In *LotR*, the battlefield is a context in which growth in self-understanding occurs and stature is displayed. Frodo’s struggle against the Barrow-wights, Boromir’s death in battle against the orcs, Théoden’s valour against Saruman’s hordes, Sam’s battles against Shelob and the Mordor guards, and Peregrin’s success against the Nazgûl all share these characteristics. Éowyn, in disguise and then revealing her identity, is the only female who participates in this moment, which will be discussed at greater length when we investigate Éowyn as warrior.

Undeniably, the battlefield has historically been a male domain, both in human warfare and in literature. Nonetheless, both history and fiction contain numerous examples, both ancient and contemporary to Tolkien, of women who go to war. Some literary cases deserve mention here, as an indication of the degree to which Tolkien’s exclusion of women from the battlefield is a matter of intentional choice, rather than an absolute norm in his historical context. The most obvious examples come from C.S. Lewis’ Narnia series, in which female characters fight on both good and evil sides.

Lewis’s female warriors include some of the most central characters. The White Witch and the Queen of the Underworld both fight (intriguingly, perhaps revealingly, the main villains are both female). Susan fights, using the bow and arrows received from Father Christmas, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Jill wields a sword against the green serpent that the Queen of the Underworld becomes, in *The Silver Chair*, and employs a bow in *The Last Battle*. Tolkien’s best friend had no difficulty introducing fighting women into his novels. Tolkien is the one who sets up a world in which only males enter the battlefield.
1.6 The Problematic

Tolkien has composed a novel of the road in which women may not travel, a novel of warfare in which women may not fight, a Bildungsroman in which women cannot really grow because they are forbidden the journey and the combat. Éowyn represents a sort of exception, the kind that highlights the rule. In male disguise, she eludes both the direct commandment of her king/uncle and the implicit order of LotR. She travels and fights, but both constitute problems for the novel: in both, her status as an independent woman of accomplishments is undercut. Ultimately, she is placed in a new context of domesticity, her role as shieldmaiden renounced.
Chapter 2: Can a Shieldmaiden Be? Caging Éowyn

2.1 Introduction: The Caging of Éowyn

"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." (RK 55)

The caging of Éowyn happens in two steps, resulting in two different discussions. The first step is found in Tolkien’s own history of forming the text, in the successive plans and redactions that give us the LotR that we now possess and requiring a diachronic reading. In this history, Éowyn begins as Aragorn’s intended, a woman who can ride and fight at his side, as his equal and is transformed – in uncertain stages – into the Éowyn of the final text. The second step in the caging of Éowyn occurs in the final text, where she finds herself caged at Edoras and can escape only by donning male armour – a literal cage to reflect her trapped condition. When she is discovered as female, she is placed in male care, to be freed only when she agrees to marry Faramir and be placed in an appropriately immobile domestic setting; she travels home and thence to Faramir’s new demesne, but not until the main action of the novel is completed and even then she is under male care. Only in male disguise does Éowyn gain use of the road and enter into battle in an independent manner, and she is the only one of Tolkien’s female characters who does either. This is the product of Tolkien’s own literary choice, his own development of the story into a cage for Éowyn.

2.2 Assembling the Cage 1: The Prehistory of the Text

The development of the Éowyn character is one of the most interesting stories behind the writing of LotR. Because Tolkien’s papers are not always dated and he was prone to write over old drafts, reconstructing the history is neither easily done nor absolutely reliable. Consequently, this study will follow the order laid out by Christopher Tolkien in the edited papers appearing in The Treason of Isengard and The War of the Ring. Éowyn first appears as Éomund’s or Théoden’s daughter (Tolkien has
not made up his mind); she is called “Éowyn Elfsheen,” suggesting an Elven connection, but nothing is said about her except for her daughter status (Treason 390). Later, she appears as “sister of Éomer;” she serves the high guests at the funeral feast of Háma and Theodred. Her love for Aragorn is evident. Rohan rides east to do battle at the defence of Minas Tirith, with Gandalf, Aragorn, Gimli, Legolas, Merry, and Pippin. Subsequently added to this version of the tale is a phrase that is important to this discussion: “Éowyn goes as Amazon” (Treason 437). This comment is notable for a variety of reasons. First, Tolkien clearly envisages the original Éowyn as a traveller and warrior, thereby making her an exceptional female in the context of LotR. Secondly, she is described as an “Amazon,” which suggests both that she will ride openly and that she will do so with significant power, might, and glory. Thirdly, her attraction to Aragorn is one, and likely the primary, reason for her introduction into the tale. Taken together, these pieces all suggest that Tolkien was in the process of designing a mighty warrior princess – perhaps, with Elven roots – as a suitable mate for Aragorn.

The story shifts in the next mention of this character. When Aragorn enters Théoden’s hall, the king has “two fair women” behind his chair (Treason 444-45). One of these is Idis, who is later described as Théoden’s daughter (Treason 447). “Idis” is used here as a proper name, but its root (ides) means “woman” in Old Saxon and may have overtones of high standing or great power (Clark Hall 202); in Beowulf, Grendel’s mother is an ides (Beowulf 1.1259). However, the important woman for this discussion is the other one, described by Théoden as “Eowyn sister-daughter.” Seeing her, Aragorn is so taken with her beauty that “after she was gone he stood still, looking at the dark doors and taking little heed of other things” (Treason 445). His captivation with her is complete.

Idis is an unnecessary complication to the narrative; she is soon expunged (Treason 447). At the same time, the attraction between Aragorn and Éowyn becomes mutual, as their eyes meet over the cup of wine that Éowyn proffers. In response to Théoden’s comment that the people may defend themselves in [Dunberg] Dunharrow and the survivors of the battle may also flee there, Aragorn says, “If I live, I will come, Lady Eowyn, and then maybe we will ride together.” Éowyn appears to assent, smiling and bending her head gravely (Treason 447). A note that looks to have been written at around the same time
adds, “Aragorn weds Eowyn sister of Eomer (who becomes Lord of Rohan) and becomes King of Gondor (Treason 448). The family relationships at Edoras shift in successive sets of Tolkien’s notes; originally Éowyn is the daughter of Théoden and Éomund, but she becomes – as we have seen – Théoden’s niece, the daughter of Théodwyn and Éomund and remains so in LotR.

Tolkien seems to have gone through periods of uncertainty about Éowyn’s role, even as he crafted a very strong character. At the end of Treason, Christopher Tolkien places a set of papers that reflects his father’s questions. Tolkien considers preventing Aragorn from marrying Éowyn because he is “too old and lordly and grim.” Éowyn is to be “the twin sister of Eomund, a stern amazon woman” and she probably “should die to avenge or save Theoden.” Tolkien adds “in a hasty scribble the possibility that Aragorn did indeed love Eowyn, and never wedded after her death” (Treason 448). This requires a change in the fair copy of the manuscript for “The White Rider,” which included the following message from Galadriel.

_Elfstone, Elfstone, bearer of my green stone,
_In the south under snow a green stone thou shalt see.
_Look well, Elfstone! In the shadow of the dark throne
_Then the hour is at hand that long hath awaited thee._

Christopher Tolkien notes, “The green stone in the south was borne on Theoden’s brow..., beneath his white hair, and it was Eowyn who would stand in the shadow of the dark throne within his hall” (Treason 448).

However, notes included in The War of the Ring have the story on track, which may imply that Christopher Tolkien’s placement of the notes at the end of Treason is unhelpful from the perspective of chronological order; Christopher does note that they are “undated and undatable” (Treason 448).

Alternatively, his father may have wavered on how to construct the narrative. Be that as it may, in War, Éowyn rides with Aragorn from Isengard to Minas Tirith, as Tolkien originally planned (70). Théoden rides to Dunharrow to meet with his people, after the battle at Helm’s Deep and the meeting with
Saruman. Êowyn comes forth and joins the riders. “The King rides down the valley with Êowyn and Êomund [read Êomer] on either side, Gandalf, Legolas, Aragorn beside them” (War 72).

Further details emerge as Tolkien fills out the story. On coming forth, Êowyn greets Théoden and Aragorn, or, in an alternate arrangement, Aragorn arrives ahead of Théoden and greets him in tandem with Êowyn as she presents the cup to the King (War 236). A further version has Aragorn and Êowyn greet Théoden, who is then seated for the feast and receives the cup from Éowyn, who bids him to “drink and be glad” (War 242). Immediately after, while the King is drinking, a messenger arrives from Minas Tirith with dire news of Sauron’s attack, combined with a request for ten thousand spears. “Éowyn says that women must ride now, as they did in a like evil time in the days of Brego son of [mark showing name omitted] Eorl’s son, when the wild men of the East came from the Inland Sea into the Eastemnet” (War 243). This is a particularly interesting passage, both because Êowyn proposes that the women should ride and that she is able to cite precedent. Evidently, at this point in his writing, Tolkien thinks of Middle-earth as a place where women do not usually ride forth to battle but has no firm rule against it. It has happened before and can happen again, in cases of great necessity.

What follows in Tolkien’s notes is confused, reflecting different subplot possibilities. In the first, written in ink over pencil (a habit of Tolkien’s), Aragorn requests Théoden’s permission to take a force over Scada Pass and fall on the enemy’s rear. “I will go with you in my brother’s stead,” said Êowyn [added: to King Théoden] (War 243). The implication of the request seems to be that Aragorn asks to take a subset of the assembled force on a different route, in order to attack the enemy from behind, while Théoden leads the main force to meet the front of Sauron’s forces. Êowyn declares that she will ride with Aragorn; this, however, is complicated by the added note which has Êowyn speaking to the king, which raises an ambiguity about whether she is to ride with him, separating from Aragorn, or they are all to ride together. The pronoun “you” becomes ambiguous in its antecedent, now that it may refer either to Aragorn or to Théoden. In any event, the significance of this moment for our discussion is the remarkable self-possession and freedom that Tolkien accords to Êowyn. She appears to be establishing her own path; her statement is just that, a declaration, rather than a question. She asks for no permission, yields to no
higher authority. Éowyn has something more than the freedom to travel and fight: she has the freedom to
decide her own place in the troop. This argues rank and standing, along with trust in her judgement.
Tolkien is crafting a shieldmaiden indeed, and one who is recognized as such by the highest in the
company.

Returning to “Ink text original,” the manuscript continues, “As had been promised him at
Isengard, Merry sat beside [written above: near] the king himself. On either side of the king were Éowyn
and Éomer, and Aragorn beside Éowyn “ (War 243). Tolkien has returned to the original storyline with
the leaders travelling together. Notably, Éowyn is on the king’s flank, with Aragorn at her side but in the
inferior position of being further from Théoden. Éowyn’s royal status and her right to be in the troop
continue to be recognized, and Aragorn travels in a place that defines him as Éowyn’s suitor and a great
warrior, but not as the overall leader because he rides with the Rohirrim.

The next manuscript treats of Théoden’s return from the battle at Helm’s Deep and Isengard.
Théoden arrives at Dunharrow and is met by Aragorn and “a woman with long braided hair, yet she was
clad as a warrior of the Mark, and girt with a sword” (War 246). This woman is Éowyn, who delivers a
lengthy speech of greeting that concludes with a pledge to ride with the king for battles to come. “Hail,
Lord of the Mark, may I never again be taken from your side while you live still and rule the Eorlingas.
Father you are to me since Éothain my father fell at Osgiliath far away” (War 247). An emended version
dispenses with mention of Éothain, and has the speech conclude with the group riding into Dunharrow, as
Éowyn and Éomer exchange “glad words” (War, 248). Aragorn enters into discussion with Théoden.
Aragorn has evidently followed a different route from Helm’s Deep and is able to report that Edoras is
untroubled and intact. He seems to be in charge of the assembly of warriors to march for Minas Tirith,
and reports that the total number of warriors, horsed, armed, provisioned, and ready to ride is somewhat
short of ten thousand, though the assembly includes numerous others. He also notes that the company
includes a mixture of fighters not native to Rohan, including “tall warriors from Dunland,... Woodmen
from the borders of Mirkwood,... wanderers of the empty lands,... [and] seven Rangers out of the North,
my own folk” (*War* 249). At this stage, Tolkien adds nothing further about the ride from Dunharrow to Minas Tirith.

There is an account of Éowyn on the battlefield at Minas Tirith that exists separately from all other manuscript material, a narrative that Christopher Tolkien associates “very tentatively” with the outlines that we will discuss next. However, he is quite uncertain about the dating and is inclined to regard this particular redaction as early enough to precede speculation about death (*War* 366-67). This version has Éowyn very much alive, a victorious – even transcendent – warrior. Though lengthy, the passage bears repeating in full, because it reveals how high and mighty a shieldmaiden Tolkien imagined before settling for the version presented in the published edition of *LotR*. On its great “vulture-like” aerial steed, the menacing Nazgûl descends (*War* 365).

Black robed it was, and above the robe there was a steel crown, borne by no visible head save where between crown and cloak there was a pale and deadly gleam as it were of eyes. But Théoden was not alone. One had followed him: Éowyn daughter of Éomund, and all had feared the light of her face, shunning her as night fowl turn from the day. Now she leapt from her horse and stood before the shadow; her sword was in her hand.

‘Come not between the Nazgûl and his prey,’ said a cold voice, ‘or 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.’

She stood still and did not blench. ‘I do not fear thee, Shadow,’ she said. ‘Nor him that devoureth 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 snivelling, tearing at the cloak. Soon the black cloak too lay formless and still, and a long thin wail rent the air and vanished into the distance. (War 365-66)

This is a free and glorious Éowyn, worthy to ride with the mighty of Middle-earth. In this presentation, she arrives as a woman, wearing her gender publically and wielding it as a weapon to taunt the Nazgûl. Her father is the leader in battle, but Éowyn destroys the enemy when an arrow brings Théoden down. In her victory, she is framed by the light of day, revealed as one who delivers her people from darkness. Éowyn’s right to travel and take her place on the battlefield is not in doubt. This is Éowyn’s apogee as a character.

The tale of Éowyn picks up with a new outline for Book V that gives a brief overview of how *LoTR* will end; here, we begin to see Éowyn’s decline. Leaving Dunharrow, “Théoden rides on the evening of Feb. 8. Éowyn goes with him. Gamling is left in command at Westfold. The old seneschal of Edoras in Eastfold (Dunharrow)” (War 256). Éowyn, therefore, fulfills her pledge to ride with the king, and there is no debate about her staying behind or taking any sort of home command. In this version, Aragorn is separated from the main body of the troop, but only temporarily. “Aragorn and Éomer ride to beat off orcs. They come back and rejoin main body... They ride to Minas Tirith” (War 256). Tolkien seems to be firm in his plan to kill off Éowyn and prevent the marriage with Aragorn. Théoden and Éowyn die while killing “the Nazgûl King” and Aragorn’s crowning is followed by the funeral of the two Rohirrim. Nothing is said about an alternate marriage for Aragorn.

The death of Éowyn is hardly a sure thing at this point, however. In a further outline, providing more detail on the anticipated chapters of Book V, “Théoden and Éowyn destroy Nazgûl and Théoden falls” (War 260). At this point, the result is ambiguous, with Éowyn saving Théoden and falling on his body, but with no clarity about whether she lives or dies (War 275). The next version has Éowyn dying, with “Théoden and Éowyn laid for a time in the royal tombs” (War 360).
In further drafts, the story shifts quite rapidly. Tolkien seems to have decided to trim Éowyn down to size, or, to follow our analogy, to return her to the cage that she has so thoroughly escaped. Three elements are brought into play: the activity of Meriadoc, the story of the smaller warrior, and the appearance of an alternative love-interest for Aragorn. All of these pieces have been in circulation alongside the story of Éowyn the highly-regarded knight and victorious warrior through a succession of drafts, though the story of Arwen has had little development (as is reflected in the published version, where her appearances are minimal).

Meriadoc, or Merry, as he is more commonly called, represents something of a challenge at Dunharrow. He is one person too many, in a plot that is becoming complicated because of its surplus of leading characters. Merry’s function is found in his personality; he is beloved of all, but useful to none – a situation that remains true in the final text, where he is important in Fangorn and on the battlefield in Gondor, but little more than light relief or a heavy burden to other characters in-between. Tolkien makes this point bluntly in one of the drafts that we have discussed, when Théoden arrives at Dunharrow and listens to a lengthy speech from Éowyn before entering into a conversation with Aragorn about the state of the assembled troop. In one edition, Tolkien has Aragorn and Merry share cheery greetings, before Aragorn sends the hobbit off to find Legolas and Gimli (War 246-47). In the second version, however, Tolkien has evidently decided to stress the difficulty that Merry represents. Aragorn merely flashes a brief smile at Merry before turning away to speak with Théoden, while Éowyn is deep in conversation with Éomer. “Merry jogged along behind, feeling forlorn: Aragorn had smiled at him, but he had no chance to get a word with him, or find out what had become of Legolas or Gimli, or Pippin” (War 249).

Having decided to recognize Merry as a problem in what is, after all, an army assembling for war, Tolkien now faces the particular challenge of getting the hobbit to Minas Tirith. He could not be left behind without the invention of a whole new sub-plot to get him to the reunion of the surviving travellers in Gondor (his role on the battlefield does not seem to have emerged, yet). Christopher Tolkien notes that his father “had great difficulty with the question of how Merry went to Minas Tirith” (War 346). The story of the smaller Rider, who will become Éowyn in the final text, seems to have begun as an answer to
this challenge. In the first version of the departure, Merry appears to be about to make the trip with Théoden’s agreement, riding with the king or some other warrior (War 318). During this whole scene, Merry passes by twelve of the king’s guard, one of whom, “less tall and broad than the others, glanced at the hobbit as he passed, and Merry caught the glint of clear grey eyes. He shivered a little, for it seemed to him that the face was of one that goes knowingly to death” (War 318). Christopher Tolkien thinks that this is “certainly Éowyn” (War 345); that is reasonable speculation because the king is said to have bid her farewell in the Hold (War 318). If so, then the cage is making its appearance in this manuscript, in both its physical form – Éowyn may not leave Edoras and must do so in the disguise of armour – and its emotional form – Éowyn shows signs of the psychological pain that caging brings her.

Christopher Tolkien speculates that the smaller rider came into existence precisely to aid Merry; the “Rider would be assigned to carry the hobbit” (War 345). In the next available draft, Merry still has Théoden’s permission to go, in addition to having more explicit travel arrangements: “it was arranged that he was to ride before one of the king’s guard, and it seemed that the young man whom he had noticed had claimed him, since he was lighter of build than the others, so that his steed was less burdened” (War 347). In this case, his companion is utterly silent: “never a word did his companion utter, at mounting or dismounting or on the way” (War 347). Thus, Merry has permission to travel, and an explicitly designated ride.

However, the smaller Rider cannot simply have been created for the one purpose of carrying Merry. Tolkien could, for instance, have permitted Éowyn to ride openly as the one who bears Merry and to whom his care is entrusted; this is certainly a possibility as long as the author envisaged both Éowyn and Merry as free to make the trip. More significantly, the smaller Rider differs from the others in the king’s guard in ways other than size. From the moment that Tolkien imagined this character, the author evidently intended a subplot to emerge, built around the character’s silence and apparent death-wish. The smaller Rider is explicitly identified as odd and mysterious; moreover, the mystery is emphasized to a greater degree than the carrying of Merry – especially in the earliest version, where nothing is actually said about the Rider as providing transport for the hobbit. If Christopher Tolkien is correct in his
assertion that this character is intended from the beginning to be Éowyn, as seems likely, then his father is still fascinated with Éowyn’s possibilities. However, those possibilities are going to emerge from a tortured and trapped woman who can use a sword, rather than a visibly respected shieldmaiden and leader.

The next version is much like the published text, with Merry denied permission to travel because Stybba could not make the journey and Merry would be useless in battle. He is approached by a “rider of the king’s guard whom he noticed before” and given an offer much like that in The Two Towers, which Merry accepts (War 348). The rider is named “Grimhelm” and, as in the final version, is smaller than the others in the king’s guard, though well-built (War 348). The name soon becomes “Dernhelm” (War 349-50). That the issue has come down to a final name suggests that Tolkien has committed himself to a version of the story consistent with that presented in LotR. Indeed, the main pieces are all falling into place: Aragorn takes leave of Éowyn and pursues the Paths of the Dead (War 405-06, 417-18); Éowyn and Merry share credit for killing the Nazgûl king, and both appear in the houses of healing (War 375, 390); and Arwen – originally Finduilas, a name that survives as wife of Denethor, the Steward of Gondor (RK, Appendix A 412) – emerges as the woman to marry Aragorn (War 370-86, Sauron 66-7). In one version of the story of Aragorn leaving to follow the Paths of the Dead (related twice), Éowyn weeps at his departure (War 406, 417); another version has her begging to accompany Aragorn since he is so determined (War 418). The latter edition reminds us of Éowyn’s fighting spirit, while reinforcing the new rule: Éowyn is not free to travel and fight.

A significant part of the story of the writing of The Two Towers is the crafting of Éowyn. It begins with Éowyn as a mighty warrior, a respected leader among the Rohirrim with substantial autonomy, a fit partner to wed Aragorn. Éowyn and Aragorn appear in tandem, sharing responsibilities at the assembly of the troop and riding together at the departure for Minas Tirith. Éowyn appears as a fearsome fighter, who dispatches the Nazgûl king single-handedly. She is a strong female lead, suited to match the strong male lead played by Aragorn. However, over successive revisions, Tolkien cages Éowyn. He takes away the marriage to Aragorn; contemplates Éowyn’s death; prevents her from riding
openly to Minas Tirith; and makes her into a troubled, sometimes weeping, woman who must hide her femininity in male armour while bearing Merry to Gondor. In the latest revisions, Éowyn is more striking for her emotional pain than for her ability to ride at the front of the troop and inflict physical pain on the enemy.

2.3 Assembling the Cage 2: Edoras in the Text That Is

The published text of the story reflects the development seen in the manuscript versions, though in a much richer and more fully explicated form. The transformation of Éowyn is even more significant than it seems in the draft texts. Éowyn, daughter of the orc-slain Marshal of the Mark, Éomund, and the King’s sister, Théodwyn, dwells in Edoras with King Théoden (RK, Appendix A 432). Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli arrive to find Edoras in decline. Éowyn falls in love with Aragorn or, perhaps, with his aura of power. She is the object of Gríma Wormtongue’s lust, in a reflection of her attractiveness and the degradation into which Edoras has fallen. As the Riders go to fight against Saruman, she is left in charge of the people, though she appeals desperately to Aragorn in an effort to escape the limits of Rohan and LotR expectations of womanhood.

Under the influence of Gríma, Théoden has given up both his leadership role and his strength, retreating to his darkened hall and sitting bowed and weak on his throne; Éowyn is the reward that Saruman has promised Gríma. Éowyn, a proud shieldmaiden, views Théoden with pity. In the published edition, Éowyn falls for Aragorn, rather than he for her. Éowyn is left in Edoras to care for the women and children, while all of the men ride off to do battle with Saruman’s forces.

Éowyn’s primary role in Edoras, as Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli arrive, is to care for Théoden, whom she regards with “cool pity” (TT 140). This is, of course, a suitably feminine task by Tolkien’s standards, meeting the expectations of domesticity that Tolkien regards as appropriate for women (see page 21) and remaining consistent with the gendering of space. Éowyn is not, however, most notable for this kind of femininity. Instead, Aragorn finds her “fair, fair and cold, like a morning of pale
spring that is not yet come to womanhood” \((TT\ 140)\). This is a notable description. It carries something of Tolkien’s original intention, that Éowyn should be recognized as a powerful shieldmaiden, but removes from her the passion that she bore in the draft versions. Instead, Éowyn becomes something of an adolescent – not yet a woman – and carries the unfortunate stigma of frigidity.

Suddenly, Éowyn becomes aware of Aragorn, “tall heir of kings, wise with many winters, greycloaked, hiding a power that she yet felt” \((TT\ 140)\). In a draft, Aragorn was struck with love for her and “after she was gone he stood still, looking at the dark doors and taking little heed of other things” \((Treason\ 445)\). In the published text, Tolkien picks up the image of a character being “lovestruck,” but assigns the effect to Éowyn. “For a moment still as stone she stood, then turning swiftly she was gone” \((TT\ 140)\) – a phrase notable for its Anglo-Saxon poetic scheme, evident in the use of alliteration. This is love poetry, in the Anglo-Saxon – and therefore Rohirrim – mode. This is also something else, however: gender politics. Switching the location of immobility from Aragorn to Éowyn shifts power out of the hands of Éowyn and into the hands of Aragorn. In the draft version, he falls in love with her, giving her both power over him and the opportunity to respond in mutuality. In the published version, Éowyn falls in love with Aragorn and there is no mutuality; instead, Aragorn is disturbed by her feelings for him. In a letter, Tolkien calls Éowyn’s response to Aragorn “mistaken love” \((Letters\ 161)\). When Éowyn proffers the cup of parting to Aragorn, her eyes shine; her hand trembles when it meets his. Aragorn, now in love with Arwen, finds the moment difficult; “his face now was troubled and he did not smile” \((TT\ 150)\).

Again, the power that Tolkien granted Éowyn in a draft is now handed over to a man. Éowyn is placed in the position of one who responds to power and maturity elsewhere, rather than being herself a centre of strength.

The men ride off to battle. Upon their return from Isengard and Helm’s Deep, they muster all of the available warriors to travel to Minas Tirith. Again, Éowyn is to be left behind with the women and children – this time at Dunharrow. Éowyn is frustrated at her treatment, which is based upon social expectations of a woman rather than serious consideration of her abilities as horsewoman and shieldmaiden.
The culminating moment in the story of Éowyn at Edoras comes in her parting from Aragorn. Éowyn pleads to be allowed to follow Aragorn, even though he insists upon taking the Paths of the Dead – which, to Éowyn’s mind, can lead only to death. She reveals two motivations: 1) the desire to escape and 2) love for Aragorn; the former seems to dominate, while the latter appears to be honest but unclear. Éowyn has had enough of being left at home; hers is the cry of the woman who is not truly domestic but must be domesticated in order to meet society’s expectations. She is rattling the bars of the cage in which women who may not travel or fight are trapped, if they are made – as Tolkien made Éowyn – to be warriors in a mounted and fighting people. “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” (RK 54). Aragorn insists that Éowyn must stay; Aragorn could hardly do otherwise, since he is not the head of Éowyn’s house, but he gives no indication that he would choose differently if he could. His answer focuses upon her responsibilities, “Your duty is with your house” (RK 54). Éowyn responds more bluntly yet, with a clear declaration of her own telos. “‘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?’” (RK 54).

As we have seen, Éowyn’s argument is perfectly consistent with her initial creation. Éowyn’s maker constructed her for war. From the moment of her conception in Tolkien’s mind, Éowyn was meant to take horse and ride to battle alongside the mightiest in the land, displaying her own glory and honour, and even a startling degree of independence. Yet, here she is, trapped in the land of Rohan where she must hide with the women and children. Certainly, Tolkien has freedom in relation to the characters that he develops; all of them change in the transition from original conception to their place in the final story. However, Éowyn is a particularly intriguing case because she retains her original nature and training, but in a radically reshaped – and limited – role.

Moreover, Éowyn is perfectly aware that her gender is the reason – within the context of the narrative, itself – that she is not free to ride. Aragorn’s lectures about duty, accurate and insightful as they may be, are part of an effort to miss the point. Éowyn is not deceived; she knows what is going unsaid. Aragorn reminds her, from the depths of his – very deep – well of experience, that people are not free to
neglect the duties that they are given, even when those duties are unwelcome or unsuitable. However, Éowyn names the problem sharply and in strong tones. “‘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?’” In short, why must Éowyn be the one to stay?

Again, Aragorn tries to divert an undeniable point made in a thoroughly uncomfortable conversation. He reminds Éowyn that the fight may be lost at Minas Tirith; she may be called to battle without honour in the last defence of the home (RK 55). Aragorn hints that Éowyn may be seeking glory, while refusing her duty. He, thus, comes perilously close to open insult in an effort to both silence Éowyn and push her away from the challenges that he can see coming. However, this diversion comes much too near the heart of the argument for Aragorn to escape. Defence of the home is, within the order followed in *LotR*, a domestic task that may be undertaken by a woman.

Éowyn does not miss the implication. “And she answered: ‘All your words are but to say: you are a woman and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield blade and I do not fear either pain or death’” (RK 55). Éowyn is perfectly aware of the norms regarding women and their place. As a shieldmaiden, a trained warrior prepared for the hardships – and potentially lethal consequences – of battle, she claims an exemption from the usual rule.

Unwilling and unable to be convinced but sensing that some important thing has not yet been spoken, Aragorn again shifts the direction of the conversation. He asks Éowyn for a significant self-revelation: “What do you fear, lady?” Again, Éowyn stays resolutely on topic, stating – in blunt terms – the deepest truth about herself. “‘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 and desire’” (RK 55).

Tolkien provides us with a vivid picture of what life is like for a woman whose maker has created her for horseback and war, when she is trapped by common assumptions of what a woman may do. She is caged, unable to move, unable to accomplish anything that matters to her. Here, at last, is the nub of
the issue, the image that Tolkien himself conjures up to describe what he has made of the great and mighty warrior Éowyn that he conceived in earlier drafts of the narrative. The story of the making of *LotR* is also the story of the caging of Éowyn. In an interesting twist, Éowyn seems to be aware of her own caging; she can see that her nature and training are inconsistent with the role that she is made to play.

Aragorn steps away from dangerous ground, seeking to lighten the tone by jeering at Éowyn’s efforts to turn him aside from the Paths of the Dead and return her to a sense of womanly duty. However, Aragorn is doomed to be worsted at every thrust in this impossible conversation. Aragorn reminds Éowyn that the journey southward to battle is an unnecessary danger for her and her duty is in Rohan. She has no errand to the South. Éowyn will not fence with Aragorn; instead, she once more wields blunt truths. “Neither have those others who go with thee. They go only because they would not be parted from thee – because they love thee” (*RK* 55). Aragorn’s followers take the Paths of the Dead out of commitment to him, rather than because of any personal preference. And, most wounding of all, Éowyn loves Aragorn, too.

At the moment of the company’s departure, Éowyn appears, dressed to ride and fight. She proffers the parting cup to Aragorn, and cries; her tears discomfit the observers. However, she cannot budge Aragorn. He points out that he lacks the power to free her even if he wishes to do so. Only her male guardian (and father-figure) or brother, the men whose woman she is and who hold the keys to her cage, have the right to free Éowyn. For Aragorn to take her would be an unforgivable trespass on the rights of the men of her family. Éowyn has neither rights nor freedoms, only duties. The decision about whether she may travel belongs to the men and they have refused permission. Even a shameful act of self-abasement, begging on her knees, does not free Éowyn. She has been reduced to utter abjection, a great fall from the mighty and independent warrior that Tolkien once imagined Éowyn to be.

Aragorn raises her, turns, mounts, and rides without looking back. “Only those who knew him well and were near to him saw the pain that he bore” (*RK* 56). The meaning of this pain is not altogether clear. It might be linked to Aragorn’s refusal of the love that Éowyn has both shown and expressed for him; perhaps, it is Tolkien’s effort to paint Arwen into a picture that Tolkien had prepared long before as
a joining of Aragorn and Éowyn. That is probably part of the answer. However, the greater part is likely discomfort at Éowyn’s caging and the self-abasement that Éowyn is prepared to undertake in order to free herself. Notably, the pain does not follow Éowyn’s declaration of love, which does not discombobulate Aragorn to the same degree that the earlier signals had. Instead, the hurt comes on the heels of Éowyn’s last effort to escape, and Aragorn’s necessary role in preventing Éowyn from attaining freedom. In short, Aragorn does not like the situation much more than Éowyn does.

2.4 From Cage to Shining Cage

Tolkien engineers a delivery of sorts, enabling Éowyn to escape from the bounds of Rohan and the limits set by the men who control her destiny. However, Éowyn finds freedom only by making the cage portable. She becomes Dernhelm, the smaller warrior who transports Merry to the battle at the gates of Minas Tirith. She does battle with the Nazgûl, but the ultimate victory goes to Merry – a male.

In the published version of *LotR*, Théoden announces to Merry that the hobbit must remain with the women and children in Rohan, though Merry protests at such a passive role and at the shame and loneliness that will accompany it. Éowyn, however, takes Merry to be armed – in a scene similar to that which appears in the draft text – but adds that he is to be equipped at Aragorn’s request; Éowyn mysteriously hints that Merry will need his sword: “For my heart tells me that you will need such gear ere the end” (*RK* 77).

As in the draft, Merry catches sight of the smaller knight, one “less in height and girth” than the rest (*RK* 79). This warrior offers, in whispers, to bear Merry to battle, hidden under the warrior’s cloak. Merry proffers thanks, but notes that he does not know the knight’s name. “Do you not?” said the Rider softly. “Then call me Dernhelm” (*RK* 81). The implication, of course, is that this is a pseudonym, rather than the actual name that it appears to be in the draft. More significantly, the Rider has “clear grey eyes” and “the face of one without hope who goes in search of death” (*RK* 79). These characteristics are found, in almost exactly the same words, in the draft text. In the published version, however, Tolkien has
developed a narrative to go with the hopelessness. Now, there is a reason for the extreme depression so powerfully expressed in the brief description of the warrior’s face. Éowyn and the smaller Rider have blended neatly.

In the process of fitting Éowyn into Dernhelm, Tolkien has accomplished an interesting transformation. Éowyn’s cage becomes visible. The metal of the armour and its all-encompassing, constricting nature carry Tolkien’s metaphor into concrete, physical form. Éowyn may escape the prison that Rohan is for her, but she can do so only by wearing a prison cell. This is not armour that conveys, or even reasonably permits, Éowyn’s female form. Instead, this is masculine armour, which functions to suppress her identity. The striking beauty that Tolkien has previously emphasized (TT 140) is now obscured. This need not have been the case. Éowyn’s womanhood would, presumably, have been made visible – and even celebrated – if Éowyn were to ride as an “Amazon,” (Treason 437, 448; see previous discussion on pp. 35-36). Indeed, the term “Amazon” is gender-laden: “a reflection of the self-definition of patriarchal Greek culture through a fascination with or repudiation of its opposite Other,” where the “Other” is a strictly matriarchal culture of warrior women (Parsons 55). Artistic representations of Amazons can show them as identifiably female, even in fighting trim (Blok 223-29; Blundell 8, 10, 11; “Amazons”). Quintus Smyrnaeus puts the point strongly: Penthesilea, an Amazon queen, is “clothed in godlike beauty” as she approaches Troy (1, 19). Tolkien has, therefore, made a very real shift: he seems to have moved from a fascination with Éowyn as a mighty warrior woman, who appears as a contrast to patriarchal assumptions about the capacity of women to ride and fight openly, to placing her in male armour that specifically and intentionally obscures anything about her that might hint of female identity. It is a form of “symbolic annihilation,” in which the feminine is minimized or caused to disappear from the public eye (Milkie 840). This happens both in the transition from draft to final text and in LOTR itself: the Amazon image appears only in drafts, while LOTR avoids it; in the final text, Éowyn cannot move except as a man and so must hide all that makes her woman. Éowyn must travel in masculine form.

This is a remarkable image, a powerful visual representation of oppression. In order to travel, Éowyn must surrender her identity. The reader can only guess who the small, slim warrior is; we cannot
be certain that anyone knows, although there seems to be “an understanding” between Dernhelm and the Marshal under whom she serves (RK 114). Both Dernhelm and the hobbit that she carries receive less attention than might be expected. As part of the loss of identity, Éowyn must deny her body, compressed as it is within the prison of the armour. This, of course, entails complexities around some of the practical matters of life; the intimacy of an armed troop on the road does not allow for easy obscuring of sexual nature or gender representation. The cage that she seeks to escape rides with her.

In a poignant – but subversive – act, Éowyn must change her name, travelling under the pseudonym “Dernhelm.” She has ceased to be Éowyn, which combines the Anglo-Saxon word for “delightful” or “joyous” with the word for “war-horse” (Bosworth and Toller 253, 1285). She has become Dernhelm, a name combining the word meaning “hidden” and the word for “helmet” (Bosworth, Toller 203, 527); Dernhelm’s helmet hides her identity. Instead of celebrating her skill and pleasure in mounted war, her new name reflects her secrecy. The use of the word “helm,” however, ambiguously hints at her royal blood, because a helm can also be a crown; one Anglo-Saxon text uses the word to refer to the crown of thorns worn by Jesus at his crucifixion (Bosworth, Toller 527). Helm is also the name of the greatest of Rohirric kings, Helm the Hammerhand (RK, Appendix A 425-29). “Dernhelm,” therefore, is part of Éowyn’s prison; it suppresses the identity that she daren’t wear publically. Nonetheless, Éowyn’s spirit is not broken; the armour is a symbol imposed upon her by the world that she is prepared to treat as a site of resistance. It is a location of pain and oppression that is also a proclamation that Éowyn will not submit. Inside the armour, Éowyn flouts the rules of society even as her outward appearance suggests that no rule is broken.

In the context of the journey, Éowyn gives up her voice. Éowyn communicates once with Merry, in a brief, whispered exchange. That conversation reveals her hiddenness; Merry does not know the identity of the one with whom he is speaking, though he has recently spoken with her at some length, indicating that Éowyn’s voice is not recognizable through the whisper. From that point on, she is notable for her silence. The loneliness that Tolkien plotted for Merry becomes most evident on the journey; the company in which Dernhelm and Merry ride ignore him entirely and “Dernhelm was no comfort: he
never spoke to anyone. Merry felt small, unwanted, and lonely” (RK 114). This loss of voice is a loss of sociality. More than that, Éowyn has suffered the loss of ability to affect events. As a woman, she has never really had final authority; her male guardian and brother make the major decisions. However, within the domestic sphere, Éowyn has held a place of honour as one who cares for her uncle and is trusted by the people to lead the women and children. The voice of the people of Rohan, expressed through Háma, is the means by which she is chosen to lead. This indicates trust in Éowyn’s judgement and willingness to obey her voice. Indeed, her power must be substantial for her to leave her post successfully without causing panic in Dunharrow, where the women and children are hidden. For her stratagem to remain secret, Éowyn must be able to appoint at least one other trusted leader and swear that person to silence. Within the boundaries of Rohan, her voice is great. On the road, however, having left the domestic sphere, Éowyn has no such authority; instead, she is silent.

The apparent moment of escape occurs, as might be expected, on the battlefield. There, Éowyn is able to present herself as herself. However, even there, Tolkien finds a way to undermine the accomplishments of the woman Éowyn, ensuring that the real victory over the Nazgûl goes to Merry, a male.

When the Rohirrim arrive in the Pelennor Fields, during the battle outside the gates of Gondor, a Nazgûl descends upon a flying beast and attacks Théoden’s horse. The Nazgûl wishes to reach the King of Rohan, but is intercepted by the one knight who is still close to the King: Dernhelm. Dernhelm commands the Nazgûl to depart, but the Nazgûl responds with threatening words. In the exchange, the Nazgûl announces that “No living man my hinder me” (RK 129), reflecting a prophecy made by Glorfindel, “the Witch-king would not fall by the hand of man” (RK, Appendix A 433). The Nazgûl’s introduction of the prophecy is the cue for Éowyn to be revealed.

Éowyn laughs and announces that she is not a man, but a woman. This causes the Nazgûl to pause, “as if in sudden doubt” (RK 129). Éowyn’s helm falls away and her hair is revealed, gleaming like “gold upon her shoulders” (RK 129). Her eyes are implacable, “hard and fell,” but she is crying. “A sword was in her hand, and she raised her shield against the horror of her enemy’s eyes” (RK 129).
Tolkien draws her as a thoroughly female figure – emphasizing her womanhood – in warlike stance. Although Éowyn is a woman, and therefore out of place on a battlefield, Tolkien gives her the most domestic task in warfare: she fights in defence of her fallen uncle. This is as near as Tolkien can get to Aragorn’s earlier suggestion that Éowyn might be called upon to defend her home when the men are fallen.

Just at this moment, Merry becomes fully aware of what is happening and of the need to defend Éowyn. “Pity filled his heart and great wonder… She should not die, so fair, so desperate! At least she should not die alone, unaided” (RK 129). He, the chivalrous male, must come to the maiden’s aid. Slowly, he begins to crawl into position, unheeded by the Nazgûl.

Éowyn is attacked by the Nazgûl’s mount, but she responds as a shieldmaiden. “Still she did not blench: maiden of the Rohirrim, child of kings, slender but as a steel-blade, fair yet terrible. A swift stroke she dealt, skilled and deadly” (RK 130). Éowyn performs her heroic task, slicing the head off the strange carrion beast. The concluding moment of her victory bestows on her a kind of sanctity. She appears as a saint, complete with halo. “A light fell about her, and her hair shone in the sunrise” (RK 130). To this degree, Tolkien preserves the shieldmaiden image and some of the powerful rhetoric that appeared in the manuscript version of Éowyn (War 365-66).

However, in LotR, Éowyn’s victory is partial. Indeed, hers is the lesser accomplishment, because she destroys the mount but leaves its lord unharmed. Éowyn is now injured and in danger: her shield is “shivered in many pieces” and her arm is broken (RK 130). Again, we see Éowyn on her knees, in a position of abjection before a powerful male figure. The stance is important; Tolkien appears to make intentional use of it to emphasize Éowyn’s weakness and her place as a woman. This is a tremendously vivid destruction of the mighty warrior princess.

The Nazgûl moves in for the kill. However, he is thwarted by Merry, who stabs from behind, piercing the sinew behind the knee. Although Éowyn pulls herself together for one last thrust – the final blow – striking the Nazgûl between crown and mantle, the narrator informs the reader that the true victory belongs to Merry, whose sword is the only available tool that could do this work. After contact with the
Nazgûl, Merry’s (dropped) weapon smokes, then writhes, withers, and is “consumed” (RK 133). “So passed the sword of the Barrow-downs, work of Westernesse” (RK 133). Yet, the narrator assures us that the makers, enemies of the King of Angmar – ultimately the Nazgûl just slain – would have been glad at the sword’s use and fate. “No other blade, not though mightier hands had wielded it, would have dealt that foe a wound so bitter, cleaving the undead flesh, breaking the spell that knit his unseen sinews to his will” (RK 133). The true killer of the Nazgûl, therefore, is Merry; he makes the decisive, though not the final, thrust. Êowyn’s contribution is truly valiant, but the credit belongs to a male. Thus is Êowyn reduced. Even her moment of greatness must be completed by someone who fits into the right gender category.

There is an instructive parallel with, and distinction from, Beowulf, in this fight. Beowulf sallies forth alone in his old age, unwisely and unnecessarily, to face a dragon. Beowulf’s blows are insufficient to fell the great beast, and Beowulf’s sword shatters as he buries it in the dragon’s head. His kinsman, Wiglaf, comes to Beowulf’s rescue, and stabs the dragon to such effect that the beast ceases to be really dangerous. Beowulf then stabs the dragon in the middle, using a knife, and the beast is slain. The parallels are significant: both Beowulf and Êowyn are unwise to enter the battlefield, and both require assistance from another to obtain the victory. The differences are, perhaps, more important, however. The most obvious is identity: Beowulf is a man, a king, and an experienced war-leader, while Êowyn is a woman and untried in battle. The texts also differ in their assignment of the credit for victory: Beowulf and Wiglaf explicitly share the honours (“They had felled the enemy… the pair had destroyed him,” Beowulf, Hall xxxvii, 14-15), while LotR’s narrator focuses upon the success of Merry’s sword alone in destroying the Nazgûl. Tolkien, a Beowulf scholar of note, may have found something of a model in the dragon story. However, the shift in identities introduces a kind of gender politics that is absent from Beowulf, and the change in credit assigned moves away from a joint accomplishment (Beowulf) to an asymmetric victory in which the male support is the decisive figure (LotR). If LotR is inspired by Beowulf, then the comparison emphasizes the limitations faced by Êowyn and the consequences that her transgressions bring.
Éowyn can only escape the cage that is Rohan by taking on the visible cage that is a male suit of armour. When Tolkien finally frees her to be herself, warrior and woman, he takes pains to ensure that her great moments are undercut by male power. Killing the Nazgûl’s mount leaves her on her knees, powerless before the dark captain. Her blow against the Nazgûl himself is enabled by a male figure, who turns out to be the real killer of the great enemy.

2.5 Taming of the Shieldmaiden

On the battlefield, Éowyn is out of place. She is removed to the Houses of Healing, a gender-neutral location, to recover from her injuries – and, most especially, her hopelessness. The moment of transformation that grants Éowyn desire for life comes when she falls in love with Faramir. This leads to a decision to give up the ambition to ride and fight; instead, Éowyn will enter the domestic space in Ithilien, where Faramir is to serve as lord. All that Tolkien reveals of Éowyn’s post-<i>LotR</i> history is her lineage: the name of a son and a grandson.

The discovery of Théoden’s death causes a degree of sadness, but Êomer bids the Rohirrim to move on, “<i>Mourn not overmuch! Mighty was the fallen,//meet was his ending. When his mound is raised,//women then shall weep. War now calls us!”</i> (<i>RK</i> 132). Théoden is a man and a king; death in battle is an appropriate culmination of his life. The discovery of Éowyn, apparently dead, affects Êomer rather differently, however. He is struck dumb and immobile for a moment, then a “fey mood” takes him: “‘Éowyn, Éowyn!’ he cried at last. ‘Éowyn, how come you here? What madness or devilry is this? Death, death, death! Death take us all’” (<i>RK</i> 132-33). Êowyn’s presence is not merely surprising, as discovering an unexpected male comrade might be, but is altogether inappropriate. She simply does not belong on the battlefield; her seeming death is a blow that shifts Êomer’s mood and the mood of all the Rohirrim. Now, they fight almost suicidally, riding “to ruin and the world’s ending” (<i>RK</i> 133).

As Éowyn is borne from the field by grief-filled Rohirrim, Imrahil, Prince of Dom Amroth sees her and is suitably shocked. “‘Surely, here is a woman?’ he said. ‘Have even the women of the Rohirrim
come to war in our need?” (RK 134). Having reminded everyone of Éowyn’s displacement, he points out that she still breathes; consequently, she is taken to the Houses of Healing.

Aragorn comes to heal her, but points out that the real challenge lies in her soul: Éowyn has given no evidence of a will to live. Aragorn comments that Éowyn has seemed to him to be like a flower, a lily “wrought of steel” – reflecting her strength – or touched by frost that has turned its sap to ice, so that it will die too soon – fitting Éowyn into the frigid woman stereotype (RK 162). Aragorn suggests that Éowyn has been unwell for a long time, but Éomer has only noticed the problem since the moment that Aragorn came into her life.

Gandalf names the problem, in blunt words. He points out that Éomer has “horses, and deeds of arms, and the free fields; but she, born in the body of a maid, had a spirit and courage at least the match of [Éomer’s]” (RK 162). This is a precise statement of what Tolkien has decreed for women in LotR and for Éowyn in particular: people who have female bodies may not have the joy of travel, the exultation of armed might, or the freedom of the world. Instead, Éowyn’s doom has been to care for Théoden as he falls into ignoble dotage and his halls with him. Gandalf adds that Wormtongue will have poisoned Éowyn’s mind as he poisoned her uncle’s. She would not speak the evil in the ears of those whom she loved, “But who knows what she spoke to the darkness, alone, in the bitter watches of the night, when all her life seemed shrinking, and the walls of her bower closing in about her, a hutch to trammel some wild thing in?” (RK 163). This states the problem neatly. Rohan became a cage to Éowyn, a “hutch” to hold her as society attempts to domesticate her.

Aragorn agrees with Éomer’s comment that Éowyn loves Aragorn, but insists that the love is really an act of rebellion against the bonds that have held her. “In me she loves only a shadow and a thought: a hope of glory and great deeds, and lands far from the fields of Rohan” (RK 163). Éowyn loves Aragorn (to his mind) because he represents access to the road and battlefield, the chance to ride and fight as Éowyn was made to do. Therefore, Aragorn calls upon Éomer to assist in the healing; Éowyn truly knows and loves Éomer, even as she desires what Aragorn represents.
However, as Aragorn has foretold, Éowyn’s body heals but her spirit does not. She rises to despair. Though she appreciates the honour in Théoden’s death in battle, a fate much greater than she had feared in days when “the House of Eorl was sunk in honour less than any shepherd’s cot” (RK 165), Éowyn still has no reason to live. This is a decisive moment in Éowyn’s life as a character. Tolkien has three options: 1) let her die, 2) let her ride, 3) domesticate her. Tolkien chooses the third.

Aragorn counsels the Warden of the Houses of Healing to ensure that Éowyn is kept for at least ten days, if the (male) Warden “can in any way restrain her” (RK 167). The Houses of Healing, therefore, become a cage for Éowyn; the Warden’s task is to ensure that Éowyn’s restless spirit does not prematurely take her beyond the range of medical care. The medical reasoning is unexceptionable, but the symbolism is evident: Éowyn is once again imprisoned and her life-decisions are in the hands of responsible males. Éowyn is presented as being unable to make wise, rational choices on her own behalf; she is dependent upon the direction of male authority figures, who can decide appropriately for her.

The point is not lost on Éowyn, who immediately becomes an obstreperous patient. She rises from her bed after only two days rest, over the entreaties of the Warden and the women who attend her. The Warden can tell Éowyn little of the war and is only concerned with returning her to her bed, but Éowyn’s reaction is firm. “It is not always good to be healed in body. Nor is it always evil to die in battle, even in bitter pain. Were I permitted, in this dark hour I would choose the latter” (RK 284).

When Aragorn gives directions for Éowyn’s treatment to the Warden, Gandalf immediately follows with advice on Faramir’s treatment. This brief conversation links Éowyn and Faramir, foreshadowing their sharing of the Houses of Healing when the two rise. Now that Éowyn is a challenge to the Warden, he defers to Lord Faramir – as Steward, he is the highest authority in Gondor at the time – to address her quest to be set free. Éowyn places her wish before Faramir: she has looked for death in battle and has not found it; now, “I would have you command this Warden, and bid him to let me go” (RK 285).

However, even as she makes the request, Éowyn falters, suspecting that he will “think her merely wayward, like a child that has not the firmness of mind to go on with a dull task to the end” (RK 285).
Again, the reader sees Éowyn reduced, this time with a suggestion that she is childish. This moment of self-doubt appears to be an epiphany, a revelation to Éowyn of the weakness in her own wilfulness and need for the direction of the mature males who hold her destiny in their hands. Faramir pities her and finds her lovely; he bids her stay and be patient.

Faramir’s gentleness softens Éowyn, “as though a bitter frost were yielding at the first faint presage of Spring” (RK 286). A tear flows from her eye and runs down her cheek “like a glistening rain-drop” and her “proud head droop[s] a little” (RK 286). She complains that she cannot see eastward from her room, as her voice becomes that of a “maiden young and sad” (RK 286). Here, Tolkien invokes a term that situates his story in a particular tradition of European narrative. Éowyn is now conforming to a standard image of the “maiden”: the young girl who is “in a period of transition between childhood and adulthood, between being a daughter and becoming a wife” (Sokolski 924). Théoden is gone; now Éowyn undergoes a transformation from the resentment that made sent her on the road and made her a warrior into the young woman whose future is in marriage. Tolkien is preparing Éowyn to accept Faramir’s later offer of marriage (RK 292) by draining away her defiant warrior-spirit, softening her.

Thus, Éowyn is presented as having the true virtues of a maiden: “chastity, purity, delicacy and beauty of body, modesty, humility and lacks the ‘feminine passions’” (Phillips in Sokolski 925). Sokolski notes that maidens who do not possess these qualities can be tolerated “probably because they are going through a transient phase of their lives” (925). However, she also notes that those “who resist their roles as wife and/or traditional women may lose their lives” (Sokolski 925). Éowyn has come close to losing her life but has been awarded a second chance. This time, she begins to fit the norm.

Faramir responds to Éowyn’s plea by committing to ensure that she shall be given a room that faces eastward and asks that Éowyn join him to walk and talk. He claims that his heart will be eased by spending time with her. Éowyn blushes (a maidenly gesture) and asks how she can ease his care. Faramir tells Éowyn that she is beautiful and sorrowful. He tells her that seeing her while the Sun shines would be good for him, “For you and I have both passed under the wings of the Shadow and the same hand drew us back” (RK 286). Éowyn rejects this assessment of herself, claiming that she is under the
Shadow still and she is “a shieldmaiden” whose “hand is ungentle” (RK 286-87). However, Éowyn immediately undercuts her own self-assessment: she behaves in a thoroughly maidenly and courtly fashion, by doing Faramir “a courtesy” before returning to the house (RK 287).

Faramir has fallen in love with Éowyn. He sets out to discover all that he can about her, thoroughly interrogating the Warden and Merry. Faramir and Éowyn walk together daily. Éowyn even dons a cloak made for Faramir’s mother, Finduilas of Amroth (she inherited the name “Finduilas” when Tolkien decided not to use it for Arwen). When Faramir first tries to express his love to Éowyn, speaking of the joy that he has found in the Houses of Healing, Éowyn deflects him, saying, “Let us not speak of it,” though she looks at Faramir “gravely” and her “eyes [are] kind” (RK 288).

When Éowyn is free to leave the Houses of Healing, she does not. Faramir asks her why she remains, suggesting that she may not wish to face Aragorn’s “understanding and pity” when she cannot have his love (RK 291). Alternatively, Éowyn may not wish to leave Faramir. Perhaps, both are true. Faramir declares that the pity has left him and he now loves her for herself and respects her for her own accomplishments. “The heart of Éowyn changed, or else at last she understood it. And suddenly her winter passed, and the sun shone on her” (RK 292). Éowyn no longer wishes to be queen and warrior. Faramir asks her to marry him and go to Ithilien.

Éowyn’s response, in jest that carries an important truth, speaks to her past inclinations and accomplishments. “Would you have your proud folk say of you: ‘There goes a lord who tamed a wild shieldmaiden of the North!’” (RK 292). Faramir says simply, in words that hint at the wedding service, “I would” (RK 292). By submitting in this way, Éowyn conforms to the image of the maiden that Tolkien set up earlier (RK 286). Éowyn’s willingness to marry fits a common pattern for maidenhood, distinguishing her from Brynhild, for example, who vigorously resists marriage (Sokolski 925). As the author of a poem about Brynhild (SG ), based on the ancient legends, Tolkien had immediately at hand this alternative model of maidenhood – the shieldmaiden who will not easily submit to being wed and is thoroughly unhappy when married – so that his portrayal of Éowyn shows a specific rejection of the Brynhild approach.
Intriguingly, Éowyn now refuses to leave the Houses of Healing because they have become to her “of all dwellings most blessed” (*RK* 293). She has become thoroughly reconciled to the order that Tolkien establishes for women. This whole episode certainly bears out Charles Nelson’s argument that Tolkien could write a powerful and believable romance (9-10). However, the romances must follow Tolkien’s rules and one of those rules is that romances occur where women are. Sexual feelings cannot interfere with life on the road or battlefield, because those spaces are off-limits to women.

The easiest place for romance to flourish in *LotR* is, not even a little bit coincidentally, in the Houses of Healing. This is a neutral location, male-dominated but sufficiently domestic that women can feel at home and even possess a measure of authority. Éowyn, having relinquished her desire to trespass in male domains, will now stay where she is placed until she is presented to the King and removed to her domestic space in Ithilien. Éowyn’s choice to submit to her feminine nature, defined by Tolkien’s gender assumptions, is symbolized by a refusal of mobility. Now that she is Faramir’s intended, Éowyn will be domestic.

In the concluding chapter of this thesis, Tolkien’s idea of the eucatastrophe (a term of Tolkien’s coining) will be investigated more deeply. At this stage, however, we should note that Éowyn’s completion in her love of Faramir is a perfect example of a eucatastrophe. Thought in opposition to the catastrophe that defines a tragedy, a eucatastrophe is an upward turn in the life of a character that occurs when the character is able to fulfill its telos (end, purpose). Éowyn’s sudden understanding of her own heart, caused by the inbreaking of love into her life and her willingness to forgo mobility thereafter, demonstrates Éowyn’s completion. Éowyn has become what she, as a woman, ought to be. Now, she is ready to face Aragorn – the King – on her feet, because her request that he wish her joy in marriage is an appropriate, feminine desire. Éowyn’s will now accords with her nature and, therefore, with the order of nature. Now, Éowyn can serve as peace-weaver; “thus… is the friendship of the Mark and of Gondor bound with a new bond” (*RK* 308).

The marriage is, as far as we know, a successful one. Outside *LotR* itself, we encounter notes that grant us some insight into the post-*LotR* life of Éowyn. Significantly, these notes do not speak about
Éowyn herself, except for a brief retelling of her accomplishments on the field at Minas Tirith (in *RK*, Appendix A 432-33). Instead, we hear about Éowyn’s male descendants. We encounter Elboron, the eldest, who succeeds his father (Faramir) as Prince of Ithilien and Steward of Gondor. We also know about Éowyn’s grandson, Barahir – who is actually described as “grandson of the Steward Faramir” – and who is the stated author of “The Thain’s Book,” a collected history that includes parts of *The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen* and work by Bilbo Baggins (*FR*, Prologue 20). In other words, though Éowyn’s heroic deeds are not forgotten, her place in Ithilien is domestic. Éowyn is evidently a success as Faramir’s wife: she produces a notable lineage of male descendants, including an heir and a scholar of stature as befits her husband, Faramir, the warrior who is also a man of wisdom and a lover of arts and culture. Éowyn finally settles into an appropriate role and place; she is now fully a woman, having given up travel and warfare for the feminine tasks of hearth and home.

2.6 Conclusion: Unnecessary Cages and Gendered Spaces

The gendering of spaces is one of the outstanding characteristics of *LotR*. Road and battlefield are forbidden to women, except by the leave of the men who control women’s lives (Galadriel’s departure from Middle-earth, at the story’s end, being the lone exception). Tolkien makes these limitations on travel and war startlingly clear through his use of the cage metaphor for the situation in which he locates Éowyn.

Tolkien’s caging of Éowyn invites questioning about his reasoning. Does the original Éowyn create problems for the story that the final version evidently resolves? Does the published text work neatly with the revised Éowyn? Is the role that she plays in the draft texts replaced or rendered unnecessary in the final text?

This is a fruitful line of inquiry because the final Éowyn is, at times, an oddly inconsistent character – suggesting that Tolkien’s strategy is not entirely successful. Moreover, *LotR* is visibly affected by her absence. The efforts to undermine Éowyn seem excessive; they go beyond that which is
necessary for the narrative, as in Éowyn’s self-abasement before Aragorn and Merry’s role in the killing of the Nazgûl. Moreover, literature commonly benefits from a strong female lead character. Forcing Éowyn underground leaves a hole that Arwen does not fill; Tolkien does not even make an effort to incorporate Arwen in this role, which is why Peter Jackson rewrites her for his movies. The story becomes masculine in a way that raises awkward questions about the place of sexuality and gender in *LotR*.

The strong Éowyn of the draft manuscripts is believable. In the published version, Tolkien’s treatment of Éowyn sometimes goes so far as to strain credulity, rendering the “Secondary Belief” – the commitment of the reader to the author’s world (FS 368) – difficult to sustain. This is most evident in Éowyn’s appeal to Aragorn, as he leaves to follow the Paths of the Dead. The argument, and the bitterness that it reveals, are eminently believable. However, stripping Éowyn of all dignity, making her fall on her knees before Aragorn and the whole company, seems inconsistent with the Éowyn that we have met. The Éowyn who is cold and proud, who can stand tall and match mighty warriors with her blade, is here supposed to be so emotional and distraught – so stereotypically feminine – that she falls to her knees and begs Aragorn to take her with him. The implication is that Éowyn cannot think strategically, cannot realize that Aragorn is unable to give permission without the support of Éowyn’s male guardian, or even tactically, cannot recognize that the journey has no room for a hysterical woman. Instead, Éowyn loses all control, playing the irrational female in front of those whom she most needs to convince of her warlike nature and capacities. This is a foolish assumption for Éowyn to make. More to the point, this is not Éowyn, as we know her.

The development of Éowyn in *LotR* follows an unlikely course. We meet Éowyn as a young maiden – cold, fair, and proud – who keeps her own counsel. Éowyn cares for her uncle and stays in Edoras without a public word of complaint; even her close brother, Éomer, knows nothing of her unhappiness. When the time comes for the Rohirrim to ride to war, Éowyn is resentful that she must stay behind. Then, she dresses in armour and, prepared, makes a public scene – crying, kneeling, and begging – in front of a man who cannot even give the requisite permission and who certainly is not going to accept
as a warrior a woman who behaves like a child in front of his soldiers. When this fails, Éowyn coolly engages in a secret arrangement – which must have required both extensive planning and work with others – to travel silently and incognito to Minas Tirith. Éowyn begins with a calm, controlled, self-contained, and fierce temperament, shifts to a frantic and thoughtless self-presentation (compromising all that she wishes to accomplish), and then reverts to the original way of being. This sequence is possible, certainly. However, it is less easily believed than a more consistent presentation might be and it encourages a historical and deconstructionist reading of Éowyn – such as the one that this thesis has undertaken, in which a consistently strong and clearly victorious woman emerges as underlying Tolkien’s final presentation.

The decision to require Éowyn to travel in disguise has narrative integrity. Tolkien has even equipped the text with a reason for hiding Éowyn in men’s armour: the Nazgûl cannot be slain by a man, so that allowing Éowyn to take him by surprise – a woman on the battlefield! – makes narrative sense. This presentation of Éowyn allows Tolkien to take the stance that women do not travel or enter the battlefield without male permission until all of the action is completed, while still permitting Éowyn a fighting victory. However, even this is denied her. The decisive role goes to a male. Giving Merry credit for the slaying of the Nazgûl seems to be an unnecessary, even gratuitous, insult to the warrior Éowyn.

At her most powerful, Éowyn goes down on her knees before a male and is saved by another male.

Tolkien has made a larger decision that is peculiar from the perspective of traditional narrative: he has eliminated his strong female lead character and has not really replaced her, almost as if he wishes to make a point about men running the world. Arwen is notable for her absence. Arwen’s power, such as it is, resides in not being visible: as the “shadow bride” (as Rawls names her), Arwen is able to exert influence on Aragorn and, therefore, on the whole development of LotR. This is evident at moments such as Aragorn’s vision of Arwen’s presence in Lothlórien; he is haunted by his absent bride and the expectations that his marital hopes set for him. However, as Melanie Rawls points out, the constraints that Tolkien places on Arwen do little to prepare her for life – or, more to the point, for death; Arwen’s seclusion prevents her from knowing anything about the ways in which humans prepare for death, while
she will be best known for her extravagant mourning for Aragorn and her inability to envision life after his departure (Rawls 25). Arwen’s sojourn, “the long years of waiting as a dutiful daughter and an obedient wife-to-be, remaining at home and in safety rather than daring the world and the Wild” (Rawls 25), fits the rule of female immobility precisely, while pointing to its failure in the life of another female character.

Moreover – and more pertinently for our discussion – a shadowy presence, rarely mentioned and never personally engaged in the action, is no substitute for an involved lead character. The story contains moments when Arwen’s absence is unnecessary and pointed, as if to reinforce assumptions about the limitations of women. When Elladan and Elrohir, Arwen’s brothers, along with Aragorn’s kin, arrive to join the troop headed for Minas Tirith, Halbarad bears a flag woven by Arwen. This narrative move carries forward the Anglo-Saxon notion of the woman as wif, “weaver.” However, that vision is presented in a way that suggests medieval romance, with Aragorn riding off to battle accompanied by his lady’s favour. This is awkwardly done, because any sending that the lady might have done is “off-stage,” as it were; the reader has not been informed of it. Tolkien is forced to accomplish the sending through a hint contained in a message accompanying the banner: “The days now are short. Either our hope cometh, or all hopes end. Therefore I send thee what I have made for thee. Fare well, Elfstone!” (RK 43). The note reminds us of Arwen’s existence and her relationship with Aragorn, an odd “Good-bye” that emphasizes Arwen’s absence from the story.

The scene raises more questions than it answers, though. It points out that we did not see a real parting between Aragorn and Arwen, when the Nine Walkers left Rivendell, or even any interaction between the two during Aragorn’s time there. More strongly, though, this scene emphasizes the contrast between Arwen and Éowyn. Éowyn rides and fights. Arwen stays at a distance, in her domestic space. Arwen does not ride along with her brothers, to reach Aragorn, when she could do so in perfect safety. She does not take the risk of going to war with Aragorn, nor is there any suggestion that she should. This is a moment when the refusal to allow women the road and the battlefield becomes obvious.
Arwen’s absence is even more obvious in Gondor, after the battle. When Aragorn enters the Houses of Healing to serve as healer, Arwen could have been beside him. Similarly, she could have accompanied Aragorn at his coronation and entry into the city. Instead, almost as if to emphasize Arwen’s absence from the text, Frodo and the other questers are required to wait for Arwen to arrive for the wedding. This makes Aragorn’s and Arwen’s nuptials into a kind of final main event, a culmination of the excitement in Gondor, which makes narrative sense. However, this strategy also underlines Arwen’s ladylike comportment. All of the challenging matters are dealt with in her absence; when all is peaceful, then she appears – fashionably late and carefully chaperoned by her father.

Tolkien’s writing of Arwen ensures that all of LotR’s major events other than the wedding and subsequent parting occur without a strong female lead character. Éowyn was originally imagined as that character, a woman who would be a suitable match for Aragorn – truly his intended – but Tolkien drops that plan without truly replacing Éowyn. Instead, he crushes Éowyn, almost going out of his way to compromise the heroine that he has created. Consequently, Tolkien’s narrative emerges as an object lesson about the need for a woman to remain in the domestic sphere and not ride and fight. In some important ways that renders the story weaker than it might have been.

All of this is not to suggest that LotR’s Éowyn is without power. Tolkien has written a tremendously interesting character. Although the modifications to Éowyn’s development tend to reinforce the argument that women face particular limitations in LotR, these changes also add to Éowyn’s complexity. Rather than a pure heroine, Éowyn becomes a tortured woman, driven to think deeply about herself and her world. If not for such moments as her conversation with Aragorn, the reader might not be able to see so clearly the gendering of space in LotR and the difficulties that this poses for women. This is powerful writing, that might have been missed had Tolkien simply gone ahead with the planned warrior Éowyn. Éowyn’s subversive journey to Minas Tirith, with her identity unknown even to the reader, piques the reader’s interest at least as much as an open journey could. Simply travelling as one of the Rohirrim, clearly identified, Éowyn might simply be one of the group. Hidden, she is her own subplot and engages the reader accordingly. The romance between Faramir and Éowyn, in the Houses of
Healing, demonstrates Tolkien’s ability to write a strong love-story. In other words, what Tolkien has done is not best understood as a failure. Instead, it is a notable literary accomplishment, which, nonetheless, reveals a very specific gender order in the world of *LotR*. 
Chapter 3: Tolkien’s Mythology and Gendered Spaces

3.1 Introduction: Tolkien’s Mythology and Gendered Spaces

As is common with research, the greatest challenge is not assembling the data, but deciding what it means. Tolkien moved from an original conception of *LotR*, in which Éowyn rides openly as a mighty warrior and suitable partner for Aragorn, to the published version, where Éowyn is required to stay with the women and children; she escapes this cage only by donning the visible cage of male armour and, when discovered, is closeted in the Houses of Healing where she meets Faramir and accepts the feminine end – care of the household – that is consistent with the life of female characters in *LotR*.

The task is to name the importance of this, within what we know about Tolkien’s intentions for *LotR*. The heart of the matter is that Tolkien was – and regarded himself as – a mythologist and theologian, a world creator. Therefore, we must take seriously his decision to treat women as consistently homebound, and to turn Éowyn into an illustration of this – truly an exception that proves the rule – rather than permitting her to be a true exception. Taking this as our working assumption renders inadequate any exercise in biographical criticism, such as associating this outcome with the male priority of Tolkien’s Roman Catholicism or the complexities of his relationship with C. S. Lewis – relevant as these may (unprovably) be. Instead, a more fruitful line of inquiry addresses three considerations: 1) Tolkien’s (Anglo-Saxon) vision of history as the story of decline – which permeates *LotR* and disallows an assumption of the moral superiority of the present or any notion of progress in society; 2) Tolkien’s literary theory and, especially, his notion of eucatastrophe – which asserts Divine sanction for the vision portrayed in a “fairy story” such as *LotR* while declaring that redemption is found within the narrative; and 3) Tolkien’s intention of creating a mythology for England – which grants the *LotR* narrative authority as a myth of origin. Attention to these considerations – matters that Tolkien would want taken seriously – suggests that Tolkien treats Éowyn’s mobility as a part of the decline that history brings, while
rejecting any notion that repeal of the rules regarding womanhood would constitute historical progress; Éowyn’s moment of eucatastrophe occurs when she falls in love with Faramir and is domesticated. The implication of this vision for the contemporary world is that Tolkien is invoking Divine authority to support an earthly order in which women lack mobility and the freedom to go to war; Tolkien is implying that this order is at the root of England and an integral part of the society for which he is constructing a mythology.

3.2 History as Long Defeat

In a famous letter, Tolkien spoke of history as a “long defeat” (Letters 255). One of the most consistent features of LotR is its treatment of history as decline. Throughout LotR, that which came before is regarded as superior to what is in the narrative’s present time. The point is made both by the narrator – it is a central theme of the plot – and by characters, who think that the past was greater whether it was or not.

To Tolkien’s mind, theology dictates that history, as the context of sin, cannot be expected to be anything but a losing proposition. “Actually I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect ‘history’ to be anything but a ‘long defeat’” (Letters 255). The context of this statement is a comment on Frodo’s rejection of physical violence as being able to accomplish anything of lasting value. Joseph Pearce reads this passage as reflecting upon “the sorrow at the heart of life” that Tolkien weaves into his creation account, published in The Silmarillion (Pearce 148-49). Correctly, Pearce notes that this sorrow is rooted in Melkor’s sin, his choice to act against the will of the Creator. Tolkien, therefore, writes sin into the very heart of history; consequently, history itself cannot be the source of hope, but must be always the context of disappointment and shortcoming. This is a very explicit rejection of both humanism and any doctrine of progress that is built upon humanist foundations.

Tolkien links this understanding of history explicitly to his Roman Catholicism. However, this view is not inevitably a part of Roman Catholic Christianity. Others have thought differently about
history and regarded their views as consistent with Roman Catholicism: Teilhard de Chardin’s process theology, much of it written – though not published – during Tolkien’s time, is centered on a doctrine of technological progress in history (Laudadio); though his writings were not popular with Rome, Chardin remained in the Roman Catholic Church all his life. Tolkien’s view of history is born partly of a syncretism: his integration of ancient Norse and Germanic understandings of the world with his Christianity is real and important, though not absolute (the poem and critical apparatus published as “The Homecoming of Beortnoth Beorthelm’s Son” is a critique of Anglo-Saxon notions of ofermod – the pride that can become mixed with heroism; see Bowman). Senior links the sense of loss (losian) that is very present in older Norse and Germanic literature with the predominance of this theme in all of Tolkien’s Middle-earth literature (174). As we will see, Tolkien explicitly links the Anglo-Saxon sense of history as decline to his own treatment of the Rohirrim, through the mechanism of an Anglo-Saxon poem, The Wanderer. Tolkien may also have been influenced by a kind of pessimism evident in the Zeitgeist: Rogers and Underwood note important similarities between H. Rider Haggard’s (earlier) character, Gagool, and Tolkien’s (later) character, Gollum, suggesting that Tolkien may be drawing upon Haggard (122-31). Gagool reflects late-Victorian “fears and anxieties prevalent throughout Europe” at the end of the 19th century and visible in Max Nordau’s Degeneration, published in 1895 (126). Tolkien’s experiences in the trenches of World War 1 (Carpenter 103-21) would simply have confirmed what his religion and parts of society were telling him: history is not a source of hope, but is the context of decline.

Instances demonstrating Tolkien’s philosophy of history are numerous. Perhaps the most important is the behavior of the Elves: they are leaving Middle-earth. A main theme of the story’s beginning is the Elven departure along the Road through the Shire and the context of the story’s end is the departure of Galadriel’s people from the Grey Havens. Thus, the loss of many of the Elves – especially High Elves – frames the story. This transition says something about the larger meaning of LotR: it is about the disappearance from Middle-earth (the name is merely a translation of the Anglo-Saxon for Earth, middangwarz ) of a particular kind of magic. The life-giving affinity that Elves have with all things
is vanishing, to be replaced by men, who accomplish great things by dominating the world. “The time comes of the Dominion of Men, and the Elder Kindred shall fade or depart,” as Gandalf says (RK 300). The departure is not absolute; some Elves remain, and, more decisively, there is an Elven strain in the ruling house. However, even as LotR tells the story of a particular victory, the celebration cannot be complete because it is accompanied by significant loss. Arwen, who alone of her people remains in Middle-earth, is the Evenstar; Galadriel, who is the Morning (RK 305), passes away forever.

This tremendous loss is associated with a web of other instances of decline. The great woods grow less; Fangorn seems large to Peregrin and Meriadoc but it was once “just the East End” of one wood that stretched all the way to the Mountains of Lune, an immense forest (TT 78). The Ents, trees awakened and given speech by the Elves, have lost the Entwives and there are no new Entings (TT 86-91); the battle with Saruman is likely to be the last great deed of this mighty breed. The Dwarves have lost Moria, which has become the home of evil things and is, in any case, severely damaged by battle. Moreover, Legolas’ reflection upon the decline of the Elves is extended also to the Dwarves; “The deeds of Men will outlast us, Gimli” (RK 170). Even the humans, although their role in the land grows greater, are weaker and shorter-lived. Gondor is losing its glory; as Legolas notes of Imrahil, “If Gondor has such men still in these days of fading, great must have been its glory in the days of its rising” (RK 170). Gimli’s response is to note that the good stone-work is probably the oldest; “It is ever so with the things that Men begin: there is a frost in Spring, or a blight in Summer, and they fail of their promise” (RK 170). This passage is inconclusive, because Legolas returns with a note of hope, pointing out that Men continue to “spring up in times and places unlooked-for” and points out that human deeds will outlast the Elves and Dwarves (RK 170). Gimli suggests that such deeds will “come to naught in the end but might-have-beens” and Legolas can only admit that the Elves have no answer to that question (RK 170). The decline is evident, and the only answer is that humans will continue to persevere. There will be new beginnings, but the evidence suggests that they will never be fully realized successes. No vision of progress intrudes here.

This notion of history as decline touches the Rohirrim closely. It is most evident in the state of their horses which, though great, are believed to be fallen from the high standards of their forebears.
Shadowfax, alone, gives a hint of the horses that the Rohirrim once rode. Legolas, an elf who has lived far longer than any human, declares that he has “never seen his [Shadowfax’s] like before;” Gandalf assents and confirms that no other such will appear in the future (TT 125-26). When Théoden makes a gift of Shadowfax to Gandalf, the Lord of the Rohirrim drives the point home, “It is a great gift. There is none like Shadowfax. In him one of the mighty steeds of old has returned. None such shall return again” (TT 149).

Like their horses, the people of Rohan believe themselves to be in decline. Some of this is temporary; many of the failures that so grieve Éowyn are resolved by the end of LotR. The decline brought about by Théoden’s old age and attention to Grima is reversed in the glorious battles at Helm’s Deep and Minas Tirith. Théoden dies in arms against worthy opponents and Éomer ascends to the throne with honour; the ancient friendship between Rohan and Minas Tirith is renewed and none can say that Rohan does not fulfill its duty.

However, the Rohirrim believe that their forebears attained might and grandeur superior to anything that can be accomplished in the story’s present. Tolkien brilliantly emphasizes this with a poem that Legolas describes as being “laden with the sadness of Mortal Men” (TT 130). Tolkien’s poem links the death of the great Rohirric leader, Eorl the Young – who brought the Rohirrim out of the North to Rohan – to the loss of spring, the world’s youth, and to the descent of the Rohirrim into the shadow of age and decline (TT 130-31). The poem begins with personal lament: “Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?” (TT 130). The reflection spreads out to decry the loss of spring and harvest, complaining of their passing and of the coming of night.

The poem in The Two Towers is not entirely original. It draws upon an Anglo-Saxon poem, The Wanderer, in which a man contemplates the decline of his world and, indeed, of the whole world. The man – a wanderer, or eardstapa – looks around the ruined halls of his lord and companions. The wanderer laments the passage of time and the ways in which it destroys the works of the giants of the past, and even the works of men of recent days. One who thinks wisely about these things will say, “Where has the horse gone? Where has the young warrior (rider?) gone? Where has the treasure-giver
Where have the feasting seats gone? Where are the hall-joys? Alas, the bright cup! Alas, the mailed warrior! Alas, the prince's glory! (The Wanderer 92-95). Indeed, the wanderer regards this decline as the coming of night, as in Tolkien’s poem. Moreover, the wanderer universalizes the decline applying it to the whole world: “All this earthly structure becomes futile” (The Wanderer 110).

Ultimately, the only answer is to seek help from the “Father in heaven” who is the only still point (The Wanderer 115). However, the poem does not welcome a passive waiting. Instead, it celebrates the “nobleman with [a] courageous deed to accomplish,” who keeps his promise and does not make boasts that he cannot keep; this is the one who can rely upon God (The Wanderer 111-15).

Linking the Rohirrim with The Wanderer enables Tolkien to do more than one thing. The link reinforces the relationship between history’s Anglo-Saxons and fiction’s Rohirrim. Placing the Rohirrim in the warrior sensibility of the Anglo-Saxon poem ensures that we are clear about the notion of glory predominant in Rohan: glory is the product of armed warfare, and it is inevitably transient. Even the mighty Beowulf falls eventually. Finally, the poetic linkage explains the sadness of humanity, which is rooted in the passage of time and in the decline that this brings. The echoes of The Wanderer clarify the notion of history that is at work in the entirety of LotR, and notably in the passages associated with the Rohirrim, Éowyn’s people.

Éowyn’s choice to reject both social limits and her uncle’s clear ruling is the sort of decision that leads to worldly decline. This is disobedience to the natural order, both because Éowyn is a female undertaking the kind of activity that is outside the norm for her gender in LotR and because she is deliberately acting in opposition to the words of her uncle, the ruling male in her household and her guardian. Éowyn elevates her own will above the will of appropriately designated authority. In doing so, she deserts her post, failing to do her duty to the households of Rohan – as Aragorn has trenchantly warned her. This sets in motion a process that nearly leads to Éowyn’s own death and might have led to greater tragedy.

Intriguingly, however, this very notion of history as decline is part of Éowyn’s motivation. Hopelessness – the deadly sin of despair – has gripped Éowyn because she sees no possibility of a future
that is an improvement upon the past. As a woman, she must always be doomed to domesticity. Her place is in the home, providing for the men who can ride and fight. She rides to fight and die, because death in war is preferable to life in a cage.

To Æowyn, the limits on women that prevent her from attaining glory in warfare are especially galling. Not only will Æowyn be forever trapped in the uncongenial context of the home, but she will be forgotten in history and can find no comfort in religion if she has any; certainly, Anglo-Saxon religion as seen in *The Wanderer* gives her little hope. Æowyn is a warrior by inclination and training. She has made her boast: “I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death” (*RK* 55). However, Æowyn may not keep to her boast; she can only stand by and watch the world fail and her own life rot. On *The Wanderer’s* principles, Æowyn has neither earthly nor heavenly comfort.

The implications of this philosophy of history reach beyond Æowyn and the text of *LotR*. This way of understanding the development of the world is one answer to humanism and the doctrine of progress. In *LotR*, Tolkien rejects the notion that humanity is building a better world or that earthly progress occurs. This makes the gendering of space a permanent condition of humanity. If we were to imagine a sequel to *LotR*, the rules concerning women and space would need to remain. More significantly, if we were to imagine a world built on the moral assumptions demonstrated in *LotR*, then that world would need to retain the gendering of space. Indeed, given a belief in history as defeat and decline, the consequences of violating these rules might need to become stronger, more brutal. Æowyn is not a marker in an improving world or even a hint for those whose progressive leanings need encouragement. Instead, she is a “Stop” sign.

### 3.3 The Eucatastrophe

The key to understanding this history of decline is to recognize: 1) that it is not the last word, and 2) that the situation of Æowyn and her readers is worse than it seems. Tolkien’s epistolary comment about the long defeat concludes by noting that history “contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and
movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory” (*Letters* 255). Treating history as defeat implies that all is lost, suggesting that history is pure tragedy. Tolkien did not believe that life is utterly without hope, and he composed a vision of authorship specifically in opposition to the tragic vision. Christopher Toner describes Tolkien’s vision as “tragedy baptized” (Toner 77). However, this baptism of tragedy does not save Æowyn from the gendering of space; instead, it saves her by causing her to submit to – and gladly accept – the limitations placed on women.

In “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien gives clear expression to his understanding of the role of an author of fantasy literature. The writing of fantasy literature is the act of sub-creation: the author brings into existence a secondary world – as distinct from the world of everyday, the primary world – which has its own logic, its own rules. The artistic challenge is to make the secondary world consistent and believable. There is an ontological link between the primary world and a secondary world: the author’s act of sub-creation is rooted in the divine act of creation. Consequently, fantasy literature ought to reflect the Good News – the Evangelium – by being constructed around the eucatastrophe, which is the good turn that saves the protagonist at the end of the story. This assertion gives Tolkien’s fantasy literature – and, therefore, his treatment of women in general and of Æowyn’s eucatastrophe, in particular – greater significance: *LotR* becomes a statement of the gospel for the world, an instance of divine truth.

At the root of fantasy literature is the act of sub-creation. Fantasy literature allows for the making of new things, in the image of humanity. We may bring into existence anything that we can imagine or change the natures of things that we know. “In such ‘fantasy,’ as it is called, new form is made; Faerie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator” (*FS* 336). Tolkien makes three important points here: 1) fantasy is a distinct genre of literature, 2) there is something peculiarly human about the act of writing fantasy, and 3) this human capacity is a participation in divine activity.

Fantasy is a distinct genre both by virtue of what it does and by what it does not strive to do. The creation of new worlds, “making immediately effective by the will the visions of ‘fantasy’” (*FS* 336) is an essential characteristic of fantasy literature. This is significantly different from other forms of literature, which attempt either some form of representation or “symbolic interpretation of the beauties and terrors
of the world” (FS 336). Both of these approaches to writing have a kind of naturalism about them; representational art seeks to re-present the world, so that it will be seen differently, while “nature-myth” (as in the Greek stories of the gods) tends toward allegorical interpretation of the world. By contrast, fantasy literature is built around the power of magic, the possibility of doing and being that which cannot be accomplished outside of the imagination. Fantasy literature is, therefore, exceedingly difficult to write. Obtaining what Tolkien calls “the inner consistency of reality” is rendered more challenging by the disconnection from the Primary World (FS 363); where the representationalist (such as a writer of historical fiction) has an existing framework upon which to build, a true writer of fantasy must rely upon imagination. A fantasy writer uses elements of the Primary World, but has the freedom to transmute them into something altogether new and different.

This freedom is not absolute, however. The fantasy author is still limited by the human character of the imagination. The creation bears aspects of the creator. Thus, and here we enter the theological realm (in the strictest sense – arguably, everything is in the theological realm), the elves of fantasy literature are “stained” with the stain of “fallen Man” (FS 336). From Tolkien’s perspective, fantasy participates in human sinfulness, with all of its ugly and destructive possibilities. Imagination unchained is not necessarily imagination morally improved; an increase in human might is just as much an increase in evil as it is an increase in good.

The presence of evil is not the whole story. Indeed, it is not the ending or purpose of a fairy story, in Tolkien’s account. The “Consolation of the Happy Ending” is truly decisive and seemingly ubiquitous, precisely because it is fantasy literature’s “true form” and “highest function” (FS 384). “Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it” (FS 384). Tolkien invents a name for this happy ending: the eucatastrophe. Tolkien characterizes this form of ending as a “sudden joyous ‘turn’” and insists that it is something that the fairy story does “supremely well” (FS 384). Although the eucatastrophe is consistently present in fantasy literature, it is not inevitable in the logic of any story. Were it merely a logical outgrowth, the happy ending would not fit Tolkien’s definition; there would be neither suddenness, nor joy (at least, not the joy of deliverance), nor a turn. Instead, the
eucatastrophe is – again, we use the language of theology – “a sudden and miraculous grace” that can “never... be counted on to recur” (FS 384).

Tolkien’s point is profound enough that we need to stop and hear its significance. Tolkien is arguing that fantasy literature has, in its own way and guided by its own laws, a homiletic function. Fantasy literature is an expression of Christian gospel, a reminder of the saving grace of Christ. Fantasy literature “does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe [the catastrophe of traditional Tragedy], of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (FS 384). This is a thoroughly remarkable assertion. It gives meaning to the language of sub-creation, pointing to the Christian God as the Creator of the Primary World and making the sub-creator into an agent of the divine Creator. Tolkien places us firmly in the realm of Thomistic thought (McIntosh), in which human creativity is a manifestation of secondary agency and, thereby, a means of divine grace. The task of the writer of fantasy literature is to enable the reader to experience a special kind of awareness, which is a hint that the writer is drawing on “Reality,” providing “a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth” (FS 386-87).

As I have already suggested, this makes the author into a particular sort of homilist. This does not make fantasy literature into a Sunday sermon. LotR is a long distance from being that. Indeed, LotR is notable for making no reference to Ilúvatar (God, in The Silmarillion) or formal theological or religious beliefs - an important omission, given Tolkien’s attention to the details of language and social behaviour. Instead, the fantasy novel can function as an icon: providing “a far-off gleam or echo of the evangelium in the real world” (FS 387). The fairy story is a visible means of directing the sight toward something beyond and behind the immediately physical, which too many Enlightenment thinkers confused for the really real. Indeed, Tolkien understands the entry into Faery as transformational, a means by which grace can enter into a person and fill that person with light and glory. That is precisely what happens to Smith of Wootton Major, through his journeys and his encounters with the Queen of Faery and the King of
Faery (SWM). That is also what a sacrament does, in Roman Catholic theology: it is an earthly means of participating in the heavenly.

Reading the fantasy story – and, thereby, entering Faery – provides an entry into the participation in God that Tolkien finds in writing fantasy. He addresses this theme in “Leaf by Niggle,” a short story about a painter who wants to paint a huge forest but finds himself focusing so much on individual leaves that the task goes slowly. Moreover, Niggle finds himself so occupied with attending to irritating calls upon his time created by his neighbour, Parish, that Niggle is unable to complete his painting. After his death, in a purgatorial experience of preparation for the Mountains – an image of heaven – Niggle is set to painting. In a team with Parish, Niggle completes the Tree, an image that Tolkien uses in “On Fairy Stories” for “the Tree of Tales” (332) and indeed, the whole forest. For Niggle, this after-death experience of artistry is a purgation, completion, and transformation. It comes as pure “gift” (LN 303). Niggle comes to a level of peace and love with himself, with his neighbour, and with the angelic voices that direct the process. The completed forest is named “Niggle’s Parish,” pointing out that Niggle’s work is intended to be divinely transformative for everyone within his reach (A parish is a geographic area served by one parish church or several churches in a joint parish; in England, parishes have traditionally had governmental responsibilities.). Indeed, the angelic voices find that the forest “works wonders” for some (LN 311). More significantly, Niggle’s earthly work is a hint of heaven, though less real. As a man who looks like a shepherd tells Parish, “It was only a glimpse then… but you might have caught the glimpse if you had ever thought it worth while to try” (LN 308). Tolkien imagines the after-death completion of the artist as the completion of the work, but he sees the work done on earth as a glimpse of the heavenly fulfillment. Thus, the writing of the fantasy story is a means of entering into the experience of heaven as much as Tolkien can while on earth. The story that he writes is a means of enabling others to share that experience as much as possible. Both the writing and the reading are sacramental, although I am not aware that Tolkien ever used that language in that way.

The eucatastrophe, therefore, is not simply a narrative device intended to accomplish something for a character in a story. Instead, it bears an important similarity to the dyscatastrophe in a classic
tragedy, which is designed to create an effect on the play’s audience: the experience of fear and sorrow that leads to catharsis. The eucatastrophe is intended to accomplish something different, even opposite (if emotions can be opposed), to this. The eucatastrophe should generate faith, hope and love – the theological virtues – because it is rooted in that story which Tolkien regards as the greatest of all: the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. The happy ending in a fairy-story “looks forward (or backward: the direction in this regard is unimportant) to the Great Eucatastrophe” (FS 388). The “Great Eucatastrophe” is salvation history (Heilsgeschichte), the story of human history from the perspective of God’s working, in Christian perspective. “The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy” (FS 388). The joy of the happy ending in fantasy literature is a taste of the joy of the resurrection, both anamnesis and prolepsis of God’s work in history. To Tolkien, therefore, the greatest reason for writing fantasy literature is theological: that form of literature points people toward the heart of the Christian message.

The question for us, therefore, is how Tolkien’s theological understanding of the fantasy writer’s task is related to the treatment of Éowyn in LotR. Éowyn’s eucatastrophe comes in her discovery of love with Faramir. This is, in important ways, a perfect Christian happy ending: Éowyn turns from violence and the impulse to destruction, and discovers love in another. This is a hint of divine love, seen in human love. However, Tolkien manages this moment of redemption only by arranging that it happen according to socially-defined rules, and in a way that places the rules front and centre in the experience of salvation. Éowyn is saved from a life that contravenes social expectations about the gendering of space, and is saved to a life that fits social norms about the gendering of space. The gendering of space becomes a decisive condition of salvation, placing God’s action within the bounds established by the society of LotR, rather than being an in-breaking of a God who is not controlled by social expectation. The gospel that Tolkien communicates to women through LotR is that God will come to you, but will do so as a means of ensuring that you remain in the place that men define for you.
“On Fairy Stories,” originally delivered as a lecture, was first published in a *festschrift* entitled *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, a book intended as a gift to Williams though his death intervened. The context of publication is ideal for the essay and particularly neat in its relationship to our discussion of Éowyn. Although Tolkien was not particularly friendly with Williams, both were Inklings and (for a time) shared a mutual best friend in C.S. Lewis. In other words, Tolkien certainly knew Williams’ work, a fact which has notable importance for Tolkien’s treatment of Éowyn. Williams wrote about “Romantic Theology,” the sacramental nature of human love such that it provides a means by which divine love can be discovered and known. Although human love is limited and compromised in comparison with divine, human romantic love is, nonetheless, an instance of God’s action in the world and a means by which God may be known. The human object of love is truly an object of love and the human giver of love is truly a giver of love. Through that person, God’s love is accessible because human love is of the same nature as God’s love. In *The Figure of Beatrice*, Williams discusses Beatrice, in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, as just such a sacramental object and giver of love. Beatrice leads Dante, through his love of a particular human person (Beatrice), into true divine love.

Faramir fulfills the sacramental purpose in Éowyn’s life that Beatrice performs in Dante’s. Through Faramir, Éowyn is able to discover her true self and, in doing so, to realize that she is made to love and live. The narrator’s comment, “Then the heart of Éowyn changed, or else at last she understood it. And suddenly her winter passed, and the sun shone on her” (*RK* 292), suggests that, in her love for Faramir, Éowyn has found the right path for herself. She moves from hopelessness into an awareness of both present fulfillment and possibilities of future completion. This is a moment of profound conversion, a transformation from despair and death into eternal life, which is the knowledge of God. Indeed, this moment for Éowyn is precisely that hint of encounter with Joy that Tolkien claims as the highest purpose of fantasy literature. In Éowyn, Tolkien manages what might be the purest and most exact eucatastrophe in *LotR*.

However, Tolkien has arranged matters in such a way that Éowyn’s eucatastrophe is more than an encounter with love. Something of that kind could have been arranged with Aragorn, in the match that
Tolkien originally intended, or even with Faramir in a different way. Tolkien builds Éowyn’s eucatastrophe around the gendering of space. Integral to Éowyn’s salvation is her submission to the rule of the ordering of space in LotR: women do not use the road except by male permission and under male protection, and women do not go to war. Until Éowyn is prepared to accept that rule, her life is a hopeless and destructive series of humiliations. The moment that she is willing to be tamed, to set aside her life and training as a shieldmaiden, is the moment when Éowyn can discover that joy which is the hint of the divine presence. Éowyn can only encounter God by meeting the standard expectations for a woman and, indeed, her conversion is as much to social norms as to a transcendent love. She discovers what she truly is by setting aside all that she has been and wished to be, in order to become the mother of sons in the garden-land of Ithilien. In short, for Éowyn, salvation must include domestication.

Although authors are not necessarily the best commentators on their own work, we must take seriously their expressed intentions. “On Fairy Stories” was delivered as the Andrew Lang lecture at the University of St. Andrew in Scotland in 1939 and published in 1947. Thus, it roughly bookends the composition of LotR (1937-1950; Carpenter 247-81). We can reasonably assume that “On Fairy Stories” is a statement of what Tolkien thought he was doing. He thought that he was composing an expression of evangelium, a work that might be turned, by the intervention of God’s grace, into a sacrament that would reveal something of God’s promised transformation to the world. Therefore, Tolkien’s choice to establish an integral link between Éowyn’s eucatastrophe, her taste of redemption, and her submission to the gendering of space becomes a decisive claim about how Tolkien treats Christianity in LotR. The story becomes a declaration that women are, by nature – and, therefore, as a matter of natural law – domestic. Any effort to elude the gendering of space will be met with destructive consequences. If salvation is to come, then the sinning woman must repent of her trespass and accept the spatial limitations that belong to womanhood, as such.

The word “trespass” takes on a peculiarly appropriate resonance in this context: “trespass” is the word used for sin in some renditions of the public form of orison commonly known as “the Lord’s Prayer” (“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us”). In Tolkien’s gendered
spaces, the more common meaning of trespass – to venture into forbidden space – is very precisely linked with the notion of trespass as sin. Éowyn trespasses by entering space that is governed by male prerogative; her only way of salvation is by accepting both the punishment that is continually visited upon her and the gentle reproof of Faramir’s proposal.

Also especially relevant is the word metanoia, for which “repentance” is a common translation. A metanoia is a “turning around,” a choice to face in a different direction and follow a different path. The spatial analogy between life-orientation and Tolkien’s gendering of space is precise. Éowyn must forgo the path that Tolkien calls “the Road,” with all of the implied freedom, mobility, and transformation, for the circumscribed paths of Ithilien. Éowyn’s metanoia is the choice of a different, physical, path.

LotR is not allegory, but the analogies between common Christian terms and Éowyn’s journey are sufficiently visible and precise that they hint of allegorical meaning. In the context of explaining that LotR and The Silmarillion are linked by a concern with “Fall, Mortality, and the Machine,” Tolkien comments, “I dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory – yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language” (Letters 145). So, we should not be surprised to find that Éowyn’s story has a kind of allegorical appearance. Éowyn sins by the physical act of trespassing on a space not meant for a woman. She is redeemed by choosing a different path, accepting her future in a space that can be holy for her, a woman. A trespass is resolved by a metanaoia.

Recognizing this dynamic does not prevent us from applauding the happy consequences that develop out of Éowyn’s trespass. That Tolkien brings good out of evil is neither a counter-argument against (i.e.: It does not suggest that Éowyn is not in violation of natural law.) nor a mitigation of her offence. That God can bring good out of evil is a cornerstone of most Christian ethical theory. This assertion is one reason that God’s action is deemed to be gracious rather than karmic: rather than merely facing the destructive consequences of evil actions, humans can be redeemed out of evil. Éowyn deserves to be on her knees at the feet of the Nazgûl; for her sin, Éowyn has earned death. She is, however, saved; partly by the good consequences of another morally culpable action: the hobbits wander into a wight-barrow and are blessed with treasure when Tom Bombadil rescues them; the knife that
breaks the spell maintaining the Nazgûl comes from that treasure. Êowyn contributes also, with her generosity in carrying Merry to the battlefield; this, however, is at best a morally questionable action, since it is another case of direct disobedience to her uncle.

Incidentally, this understanding of grace underlies Gandalf’s rejection of the death penalty. At the beginning of the story, Frodo is astonished that Gandalf and the Elves have permitted Gollum to live after all of his “horrible deeds” (*FT* 79). Frodo’s judgement is immature at this stage; he declares that Gollum “deserves death” (*FT* 79). Gandalf’s response is memorable: “Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement. For even the very wise cannot see all ends” (*FT* 79). Gandalf doubts that Gollum can be cured, “but there is a chance of it” and mercy must rule so that grace can intervene (*FT* 79). Moreover, Gandalf’s “heart” tells him that Gollum has a further part to play in the saga of the Ring, a part on which the fates of many may hang (*FT* 79). Grace upsets any simplistic assumption about the natural consequences of any action; room must be left for divine transformation, even of that which seems utterly lost. Note that the final act that reveals Frodo’s growth is just such an act of mercy. When Frodo meets up with Saruman at Bag End, after the Battle of Bywater, Frodo attempts to preserve Saruman’s life even though few deserve death more than the former wizard. A central part of the transformation in Frodo is his growth in understanding of, and the ability to participate in, the workings of grace.

The eucatastrophe is Tolkien’s way of expressing the doctrine of grace that we have seen: no matter how great the evil in a story, good will triumph and the protagonist will be saved. Thus, Tolkien can use his wayward woman to kill one of the most powerful of Sauron’s servants, thereby saving a great many lives. Moreover, Tolkien can take Êowyn’s inappropriate journey and place an experience of love and joy at its end. Indeed, Tolkien can make Êowyn a thoroughly sympathetic character in her misled behavior, so that we can see moments of generosity in the middle of Êowyn’s fallenness. The good consequences do not abrogate from the basic moral challenge: according to the order of *LotR*, Êowyn
should have stayed at home in Rohan. Instead, the consequences help us to see the journey as a means of curing Éowyn’s sinful desire to travel and fight; the wrong choice is made to yield good outcomes.

Though Tolkien probably would not have seen the issue in the same light as 21st-century Western Gender Studies scholars, in the present day an assertion that Tolkien’s presentation of the Christian gospel is sexist is a serious charge. On Tolkien’s behalf, we might reasonably argue that the gendering of space is merely an accident – to use the language of Aristotelian metaphysics adopted by Thomas Aquinas – of the circumstances under which Éowyn encountered divine love, rather than being essential to the experience. This suggestion would seem more plausible if Tolkien had not gone to such great lengths to ensure that the reader is clear about the nature of the sin into which Éowyn has fallen and from which she must be redeemed. Éowyn’s guilt does not consist in violence, as such, even though Tolkien is not fond of physical fighting (Letters 255); Aragorn – the paradigm of virtuous kingship – has plenty of blood on his hands, while Éowyn only participates in killing one less-than-living creature that has no blood. Moreover, Éowyn has permission to do battle, should her home be attacked. Instead, Éowyn’s sin is to violate the gender assumptions that appear to be written into the nature of Little World’s world. Éowyn’s salvation does not consist merely in finding love in another. Instead, it consists in divesting herself of her shieldmaiden identity and submitting to domesticity. The gendering of space, for Tolkien, is written into the nature of the world; by defying gendered space, Éowyn is fighting herself, the cosmic order, and the Creator of all. In this way, accepting the gendering of space becomes an aspect of salvation for women. Éowyn is the only woman in Little World who defies the gendering of space; her redemption has, as a constitutive part, submission to that gendering. In short and blunt phrasing, one of the messages of Little World is that a woman must accept domestic life if she is to participate in divine grace. Depending upon whether a character is male or female, Little World is either a novel of the road or a novel of no-road.
3.4 For Home and Country

Tolkien avowedly intended his literary creations to be public, and to have a political purpose. Behind *LotR* is Tolkien’s own deepest wish to create a mythology for England. For Tolkien, a myth is neither a lie nor a merely pleasant tale. Instead, it is “the only way that certain transcendent truths [can] be expressed in intelligible form” (Pearce xiii). To the extent that *LotR* functions as just such a myth, and does so for English people, it creates an identity – complete with understandings of social order. The link between sin and Éowyn’s resistance to the gendering of space, on the one hand, and between redemption and Éowyn’s submission to the gendering of space, on the other, implies that the gendering of space belongs at the root of English identity and may even be a divinely-sanctioned practice that is permanently valid.

Tolkien treats myths as important and valuable aspects of human life. A myth, for Tolkien, is not a lie (Pearce xiii). Instead, it must “as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary ‘real’ world” (*Letters* 144). A myth is an expression of transcendent truths that directs the understanding. Zettersen notes that the word “true” in Tolkien’s usage does not denote a simple and automatic equivalence with the real. Instead, “the word *true*, as used by Tolkien, should be given the meaning ‘characteristic, with characteristic qualities, and in this way representative of the phenomenon in question, typical, genuine, credible, real’” (Zettersten 206). Zettersten’s use of the word “phenomenon” in this context is misleading, tending to suggest that Tolkien accepts a Kantian epistemology. The word “object” might have been more helpful. Tolkien’s epistemology is more consistent with a Thomistic critical realism, which is, I think, what Zettersten is trying to suggest. For Tolkien, arrival at the truth involves a complex activity of representation and understanding. The act of imaging, which is the work of imagination, represents both the world and things that are not in the primary world to us (FS 361-62); this is precisely what the imagination does in Thomas Aquinas’ thought: it creates the phantasm, the object to be understood, in the mind (Lonergan). Art assembles the work of imagination and gives it, or seems to give
it, the inner consistency of reality (FS 362). Fantasy has the advantage of using images that are not in the primary world, giving it a special power (FS 362). The purpose of artistic activity, in this context, is to construct an explanation of the world; for Tolkien, the meaning is what matters, the meaning expressed in grasping the whole rather than focusing upon the component parts. As Gandalf says, “He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom” (FR 339). A myth, constructed in the form of fantasy, allows for the unified expression of a truth precisely because it does not need to focus on the parts of the primary world; fantasy does not share the limitations imposed on other forms of art. Fantasy is “founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it” (FS 370). Myth, in fantasy form, functions at a remove from the world, precisely so that it can explain the world; fantasy allows for escape in order to foster understanding, rather than permitting evasion (FS 375-84).

Myth, therefore, has a heuristic purpose. It is a means of enabling people to step away from the everyday, which engages us in too close an analysis of the component parts and which can allow us to be stampeded by what seems to be immediate necessity. We can step into a myth, in the language of fantasy, and, in the process, come to recognize deeper truths about our world. A secondary world becomes a context in which profound insights about the primary world can be encountered. The reader can then return to the primary world a wiser person.

Tolkien did not produce “random” mythology, which is probably oxymoronic in any case. Rather, he strove to create a mythology for England. Tolkien admits his intentions in this direction with some embarrassment. The statement comes in a letter to Milton Waldman, a prospective publisher, and is prefaced with “Do not laugh!” (Letters 144). Tolkien’s recognition of the largeness of his ambitions. The ambitions are important, however. Tolkien noted that he had once hoped to create “a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story” which he could dedicate “simply to England,” to his country (Letters 144). These legends should reflect the character of Britain and the nearer parts of Europe and possess “the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic,” while being of an elevated tone (Letters 144-45). Tolkien’s inclination to undertake this immense
work was driven by his own sense of disappointment at England’s lack of native mythology. The Arthurian cycle is the closest thing to an English legend, but it is “imperfectly naturalized” and too explicitly Christian (Letters 144). Tolkien did not drop his ambition. Instead, he found that The Hobbit gave him the opportunity to make his vision concrete and historical, linking the great Elvish legends of The Simarillion with the blended hobbit-view and human-view of LotR. The whole web of myth that Tolkien foresaw did not come into being, but he accomplished a remarkable portion of it.

Tolkien longed to express the national character of England as he understood it, in a mythology “for Englishmen” (Stenstrom in Zettersen 205). The cycle of tales was to be rooted in Christianity, but not either explicitly Christian or allegorical. The mythology presented in LotR and accompanying works was intended to give English people a deeper sense of themselves and of their place in the divine working-out of history.

Because the context is Tolkien’s understanding of the Christian gospel, the text contains both the best and worst selves that Tolkien sees in the English. We see Frodo, who moves from a childish and simple love of home, through an encounter with the highest in the land, to a place among the wisest. In contrast, we see Gollum, a hobbit whose greed drove him ever deeper into destruction, causing him to hate the light of day and ultimately meet his end in the sulphurous flames of Orodruin, the fire mountain. There is an obvious visible similarity between his fiery end and the common representation of hell. Moreover, in Gollum, we actually see the two possibilities presented, in the Sméagol/Gollum oscillation.

In Éowyn, we see two versions of womanhood: the erring woman who travels and fights and the repentant woman who marries and enters domesticity. In Tolkien’s historical context, these themes have a particular resonance. Tolkien has seen World War I and its aftermath. Women entered the workplace to an astounding degree during WWI; in a chapter aptly called “Out of the Cage?” (thereby catching both the escape and the question of post-war adjustment), Holloway points out that the number of women working in metal industries rose from 170,000 to 594,000 and women in government jobs rose from 2,000 to 225,000 (Holloway 133). After the war, women were forced out of many of these jobs, by economic shifts, gender-driven dismissal, and even by legislative fiat (Holloway 144-55); indeed,
women’s participation in the workforce was roughly the same in 1921 and 1931 as it had been in 1911 although there were some shifts in occupation, with increases in factory employment (Holloway 149).

Tolkien is writing during and after World War II (WW2). Although women were not permitted to serve in front-line combat roles (in the English military) during either war, in WW2 women performed tasks that could hardly be distinguished from battle. During the Battle of Britain – the WW2 battle that arguably was most defining for English identity – clarifying what constituted a front-line role was rather difficult. Women (such as Dorothy Sayers, a friend of C.S. Lewis’ and Charles Williams’ and noted author) served as air-raid wardens. Such people lived in the middle of combat, as did women who served in factories, air force support, and military intelligence. Moreover, the employment shift was at least as dramatic; due to conscription of women, the rise in labour force participation was substantial (Holloway 162-64). This time, when the war ended, putting the genie back in the bottle proved impossible (Holloway 179-80).

Whatever Tolkien’s intention, his treatment of Éowyn enters into this context. Tolkien’s fiction becomes a word of prophecy, a sermon that declares God’s intention for women: they are designed to remain in domestic spaces, though they may possess power there; should women forsake the domestic realm for the world of mobility, action, and violence, then they can expect to be humiliated and punished. The essential nature of women will fight against them, as will the order of the cosmos, if women do not recognize the limitations intrinsic to the created order.

3.5 A Novel of the Road – For Some

Tolkien has written a marvelous novel of the road, which leads to a great eucatastrophe – a happy ending – for all of Middle-earth and for many of its inhabitants. However, all but one of these characters is a male. In a story so long that it is ordinarily published in three books, Tolkien has sustained a nearly absolute gendering of space. Women do not travel the road or enter the battlefield. These are male prerogatives. Until the story is nearly over – when Arwen’s father transports her to Aragorn in Gondor –
or the absolute conclusion – when Galadriel and her Elves flee Middle-earth – women do not travel. Éowyn is the exception, an exception that emphasizes the existence of the rule because Tolkien uses her as a vivid illustration of the consequences that await any woman who violates the gendering of space.

Éowyn is the only female who travels on her own recognizance in the context of the story; moreover she concludes her journey on the battlefield in war. However, her choice to do these things carries with it an aura of humiliation, the consequences of sin. Although Tolkien originally planned to make her a heroine and Aragorn’s intended bride, he changed strategies in drafting the tale. Tolkien considered killing Éowyn off and making Aragorn mourn her. Then, the author chose to introduce Arwen (originally Finduilas, the name ultimately attached to Faramir’s mother) as Aragorn’s intended. This further diminished Éowyn and made her an awkward character to eliminate. Instead, she became the solution to the problem of Merry’s transport from Dunharrow to Minas Tirith.

In *LotR*, Éowyn finds her home in Rohan – especially in Edoras, where she must stay to care for her uncle – to be like a cage. She cannot be free to ride and fight, to live out her restless spirit. When war with Sauron comes, Éowyn sees her chance: now, her uncle is riding, so may she! Moreover, Éowyn is entranced with Aragorn, who rides to war. However, Rohan remains a cage: Théoden forbids her to ride, and he is her master, the male figure responsible for Éowyn. Éowyn pleads with Aragorn, to be allowed to accompany him; Éowyn abases herself before Aragorn, but is refused. Her lack of success causes Éowyn to adopt another cage: the cage of male armour that robs her of her identity and suppresses her feminity. Éowyn breaks the admonition of Deuteronomy 22:5, dressing like a man. The armour serves as a visible symbol of the caging of Éowyn’s spirit.

Éowyn reveals her female identity in what might have been a moment of triumph; Tolkien had originally imagined this moment as a great success for her. Instead, Éowyn is humiliated by falling to her knees before another male figure, the Nazgûl who was once King of Angmar. She is rescued by another male figure, Merry, whose knife breaks the spell sustaining the Ringwraith, permitting Éowyn to plunge her sword into him – as originally planned but without giving Éowyn the true victory. Éowyn is injured, humiliated, and saved by males.
The fundamental problem is that Éowyn seeks the wrong thing: she wishes to violate the gendering of spaces that is an essential aspect of *LotR*. Tolkien finds the solution by moving Éowyn to a neutral space, though one which is under male control: the Houses of Healing. There, Éowyn falls in love with Faramir and relinquishes her desire to travel and fight. Thus, she is redeemed and is able to take her rightful place in an appropriately domestic space, Ithilien, under Faramir’s lordship.

Tolkien’s treatment of Éowyn is of more than simply literary importance, as Tolkien himself believed. His rejection of any doctrine of progress means that Éowyn’s position, and that of any women who might look to her for encouragement, must always stay unchanged. The gendering of space is a permanent characteristic of the world as it is. Indeed, Tolkien’s treatment of Éowyn’s choice to grasp the opportunity to move as being sinful and bringing upon her the consequences of sin – very nearly the death, both physical and spiritual, that Romans 6:23 asserts is the wages of sin – seems designed to discourage any effort to change the world. Éowyn’s eucatastrophe, her redemption, comes not from a change in social expectations or even from some kind of special exemption for this unusual character. Instead, Éowyn’s deliverance comes through an embrace of the limitations for which women are understood to be made. This is not merely Éowyn’s discovery of freedom, because *LotR* is intended to speak a hint of the Christian gospel to the whole world. More specifically, Tolkien hopes that *LotR* can serve as a mythology, a means of access to profound Christian truths, for English people.

Tolkien’s treatment of Éowyn, in the context of *LotR*’s gendered spaces, is an important religious and political statement. Éowyn is deprived of the opportunity to grow in the ways that her creator, Tolkien, originally planned. Instead, she is caged. In her efforts to escape she is humiliated, and then caged again. Ultimately, Éowyn is freed from her spiritual agonies, but only by virtue of accepting the basic rules of the gendering of space. Éowyn discovers true happiness in domestic bliss, which is the standard expectation in *LotR*. Tolkien’s understanding of fantasy literature suggests that this is the inflexible norm for all women and the English, especially, ought to regard it as a permanent aspect of nature.
3.6 Boundaries and Directions: Implications for Future Research

This research has two important consequences for the field of Tolkien Studies; this thesis: 1) clarifies the nature of the limits that are placed upon women in *LotR*, and 2) points to these limits as publicically significant. This thesis confirms that women are limited in the scope of their activities, an argument that is consistent with the findings of Partridge, Fredrick and MacBride, and Doughan. However, rather than suggesting a generalized animus against women, as seen especially in Partridge’s Freudian analysis, Fredrick’s and MacBride’s biographical approach, and Doughan’s discussion of Tolkien’s letters, this investigation has worked specifically with *LotR* and Tolkien’s own literary theories. The result has been an explication of the way in which women are specifically and explicitly limited in the text. The social norms against women travelling and fighting have been stated by Éowyn and confirmed by Gandalf. They are consistent for all women in the text.

Moreover, conclusions about the significance of these limitations is not derived from a method – psychological, biographical, or other – that Tolkien himself would have rejected. Instead, both the religious and the political implications of Tolkien’s treatment of Éowyn in particular, and women in general, have been investigated from the perspective of Tolkien’s own statement of the meaning of fantasy literature in general and of *LotR* in particular.

This is not the same as a defence of the place of women in *LotR*, of the kind that appears in the work of apologists such as Hanslip, Hopkins, and Leo. Instead, this thesis has critically elucidated the source of Éowyn’s hopelessness in the assumed divine origin and intention – and, therefore, permanence – of the gendering of space in Middle-earth. Rather than being a kind of anger against women or a simplistic fear of them, Tolkien’s assumptions emerge as natural laws: his understanding of the nature of things. Tolkien’s own rejection of the possibility of human progress, and his presentation of the eucatastrophe for Éowyn as a submission to domesticity, suggests that *LotR* is a text that presents a fundamental commitment to the gendering of space. The intended role of *LotR* as part of a mythology for
England suggests that the gendering of space is, intentionally or not, being promoted as the appropriate
direction for English people.

The intentional limitation of this thesis to predominantly textual analysis of *LotR* and
consideration of Tolkien’s own account of the purposes of fantasy literature in general and *LotR* in
particular means that a number of significant questions have been only lightly treated. The most notable
have to do with Tolkien himself. Limited consideration has been give to Tolkien’s formally stated views
on the roles of women, though his insistence upon keeping women out of his friendships has been noted,
as has his belief that women are naturally oriented toward home and family. Connected to this, Tolkien’s
life and his relationships with spouse and female acquaintances have not been closely investigated. These
are real omissions, partly because scholars such as Fredrick and MacBride have made much of the impact
of C. S. Lewis on Tolkien’s attitude toward women and have tended to emphasize the degree to which
Tolkien insisted upon keeping his work life separate from his family life.

Such questions belong to a kind of biographical criticism which has been a significant part of the
discussion of Tolkien’s fictional treatment of women. Pointing to one or more of Tolkien’s strict Roman
Catholicism, largely masculine upbringing (after the death of his mother, when Tolkien was 12; Carpenter
49), and his close relationship with C. S. Lewis has enabled some scholars to make a case that Tolkien has
rather archaic attitudes towards both. Such an approach especially feeds Partridge’s Freudian reading, in
which Tolkien’s relationship with C. S. Lewis sets up a model for a world in which no strong female can
appear but Frodo and Sam can have a relationship that is at least homosocial and perhaps actively
homosexual (Partridge 179-87); the most important female in Partridge’s reading is Shelob, who is taken
to represent the dreadful challenge of female sexuality (187-91). Doughan uses a biographical approach
to account for Tolkien’s dislike of Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Gaudy Night*, suggesting that the “Catholic
Tolkien” was disturbed by Sayers’ frank sexuality (358). Doughan also points out that Sayers specifically
violates gendered spaces in places such as Oxford, where Tolkien had a personal interest in maintaining
boundaries (358-58) and violates Tolkien’s expectations for marriage (359). Doughan’s work, especially,
has helpful ideas for a consideration of Tolkien’s gendering of spaces; a much longer work than this
thesis could take up the question of how far Tolkien was afraid of, or offended by, contemporary representations of women and to what degree these affected his fictional treatment of women.

This thesis, however, has proceeded on the methodological assumption that a valuable way to clarify Tolkien’s message is to understand his writing, both in its development and in its published form. I have recognized and named Tolkien’s views, but my conclusions have not been decided by them. Instead, this thesis has focused upon both the collection of Éowyns seen in Tolkien’s planning process, who tend to refute arguments suggesting that Tolkien restricts female characters from taking active and aggressive roles, and the Éowyn of the final text, who reinforces that kind of argument – but in a specific and refined form. In this way, both the Éowyns who might have been and the Éowyn that is have emerged. The Éowyn of LotR is bound by Tolkien’s gendered space arrangement. Indeed, she is the example that highlights and illustrates the existence of that very arrangement, and helps the reader to see its inviolability. This is the message that Éowyn conveys.
Works Cited

Works by J.R.R. Tolkien (and Christopher Tolkien)


Movies


Secondary Works


