Spring 2015

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The Warrior-King and the Shield-Maiden: The Reconstruction and Evolution of the Warrior Identity from Medieval Literature to Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings

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Defended March 12, 2015

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Abstract

It is unquestionable that the modern fantasy genre builds heavily upon medieval literature. Many works in the genre are medieval quest adventures, where the central hero battles evil with the fate of their world at stake. This is largely due to the influence of medieval scholar and novelist JRR Tolkien, whose work is regarded as the beginning of the modern fantasy genre. In order to explore the fantasy genre, this study will look at the construction of the warrior identity in medieval literature and analyze how Tolkien has reconstructed and evolved the warrior identity. Through two medieval texts, the Old English epic Beowulf and the Icelandic Saga of the Volsungs, this study analyzes two medieval warrior identities, the warrior-king and the shield-maiden, to compare Tolkien’s medieval sources with his epic, The Lord of the Rings. The warrior-king Beowulf is compared with Tolkien’s character Aragorn in order to examine the prototypic male warrior. Beowulf is the ultimate warrior-king, yet his story ends with his death in battle and his entire dynasty crumbling. Aragorn is modeled on Beowulf, but is also evolved in a way that makes him more of a leader and thereby stabilizes the identity. The shield-maiden role is portrayed in medieval literature through Grendel’s mother in Beowulf and Brynhild in The Saga of the Volsungs; it is reconstructed and evolved in Tolkien through the noblewoman and shield-maiden Eowyn. The shield-maiden identity is one of malleability and often serves as an exception to the order of the fantasy world, therein creating a space for dual identities. Ultimately, this study aims to describe how the warrior is constructed in medieval literature and then evolved in Tolkien’s fiction, thereby showing how fantasy creates a malleable space for the reconstruction and exploration of identities.
Introduction

In JRR Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy Stories,” he describes how fairy stories and fantasy are not so much about the marvelous and the magical, but are in fact about man in the perilous realm. He describes how this perilous realm is a space of unquestionable magic, where people go on adventures (Tolkien “On Fairy Stories” 16). It is not about simply creating a sense of marvel, but about exploring human nature through imagined settings. Although Tolkien is more or less describing the fantasy literature of fairies and man’s role in it before Tolkien’s fiction galvanized the genre, this idea applies generally to both the medieval texts he was studying and the fiction he was creating out of this knowledge. Much of Tolkien’s scholarship was on medieval texts that featured warriors navigating adventures and battling evil in the perilous realm. The warrior’s battles against evil allow him to rise to greatness, but many tales end with the fall of the warrior. Such a fall is an inevitable, yet pessimistic, quality of the traditional, untempered warrior due to hubris, mortality, and the ultimately untenable state of the warrior’s existence. In addition to his scholarship on medieval texts, Tolkien is the author of *The Lord of the Rings* and is regarded as the beginning of the modern fantasy genre. His epic creates a new universe and mythical space that explores the revitalization and renegotiation of the medieval warrior ethos. There has not been much scholarship directly applying the work on medieval warriors to Tolkien’s revision of the medieval warriors. In order to explore and understand the fantasy genre and the place of the warrior within it, a study of medieval literature as a direct literary antecedent to Tolkien’s fiction is necessary and useful. Books such as Stuart D. Lee and Elizabeth Solopova’s *The Keys of Middle Earth* and Jane Chance’s *Tolkien’s Art* provide briefer, shallower analyses about Tolkien’s warriors and their literary antecedents, but do not go into sufficient depth to analyze the way that Tolkien created specific characters to rework the medieval warriors’ identity. My
thesis aims to bridge the gap between the body of scholarship on medieval warrior texts with scholarship on Tolkien’s fictional creations in order to study the ways that Tolkien rewrites the medieval warrior identity.

I focus on two specific medieval warrior identities, the warrior-king and the shield-maiden, as they are written in two medieval texts, Beowulf and The Saga of the Volsungs, and then evolved in Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings. The two texts both provide specific and useful portraits of the issues surrounding the warrior-king and the shield-maiden’s identities, in addition to being two texts Tolkien studied and translated, thereby influencing his fiction. The warrior-king identity is the prototype for the medieval warrior. As modeled by Beowulf in his eponymous epic, the warrior-king in Beowulf is a stalwart protector of the world. Such a warrior-king is anointed both through his heroic deeds and his royal heroic lineage. Michael Drout’s research on the warrior-king in “Blood and Deeds: The Inheritance Systems in Beowulf” provides a frame of understanding for the dynamics of the warrior-king Beowulf’s role. The combination of the warrior-king’s essential traits precipitate the warrior’s rise to greatness and create a warrior-king who is supreme and unstoppable at his peak. Through his deeds as a warrior and a king, Beowulf is able to create an unstoppable empire in his lifetime, yet this collection of wealth that is characteristic of the warrior-king leads to his downfall and the downfall of the empire he creates. Beowulf’s fall is a result of the very system that allows him to rise to greatness.

The other warrior identity presented in medieval literature analyzed in this study is the shield-maiden. The shield-maiden is a woman who supplants her stereotypical female role in order to be a warrior and support the warrior-king in battle. As portrayed in Beowulf through Grendel’s mother and in The Saga of the Volsungs through Brynhild, the shield-maiden identity
is an unadulterated warrior who carries all of the positive and negative aspects of the warrior identity. Such warriors are unique in that they hold a complex identity, as both woman and warrior, male and female, human and monster. These women are often described and act as men in order to perform deeds as a masculine warrior, yet also are internally and unquestionably female. Due to their hidden identity, they often struggle to hold multiple categories in the face of societies that present a gender and identity binary. As untempered warriors, the shield-maidens in these two medieval texts exhibit the faults of the warrior that bring about both their triumphs and their downfalls. The medieval shield-maiden is fearsome, spurred by a desire for revenge, fame, blood, and glory. These characteristics bring about her downfall through either the inevitably of death in battle or through the shield-maiden’s assigned gender role. Through the texts describing warrior-kings and the shield-maidens, we can see how the warrior code exemplified by the warrior-king and the shield-maiden in its unchanged, medieval form is ultimately untenable due to the warrior’s inherent lust for power, glory, and gold. All warriors rise but also fall due to their deeds and their lifestyles. These female warriors often provide a contradiction to their texts and trouble the definition of what makes a warrior; in many ways their societies’ gender categories excluded women from being warriors. They both affirm and question the hyper-masculine society where warriors are such central aspects of the culture and they trouble the very foundation of who can be a successful warrior.

Tolkien picks up from this postlapsarian space resultant of the inevitable fall of the warrior with his creation of Middle-earth, a fantasy world, and uses the fantasy aesthetic to reconstruct the warrior identity and renegotiate it into multiple characters and symbols so that modern readers can understand and interact with medieval concepts. The Lord of the Rings begins in a state which Richard Mathews describes in Fantasy: The Liberation of the
Imagination where the heroes are already “fallen descendants of a golden age, locked in a cosmic battle on a mortal stage” (92). The fall that is resultant and inevitable in the warrior-code has already happened in Middle-earth’s universe. Therefore, the fall creates a landscape that is both a literary antecedent to Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and a literal antecedent to the Middle-earth’s history. Tolkien’s use of the fantasy aesthetic is a construction of this postlapsarian world. The fantasy aesthetic allows Tolkien a malleable space to renegotiate the simultaneous achievement and human failure of the medieval warrior through an imagined world.

Within the postlapsarian fantasy space that Tolkien creates in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien fashions Sauron’s Ring as a summation of the negative qualities of the warrior instead of creating more prototypic medieval warriors with all of their flaws. The Ring, instead of Tolkien’s heroic warriors, emanates the lust for blood, power, and glory that brought about the downfall of the warrior’s medieval literary antecedents. This creates a separation of characteristics for the warrior where the warrior can perform heroic deeds and also can avoid the lust for blood and power that precipitates the warrior’s downfall. This has the effect of mapping the warrior’s battle and dilemmas onto the entire world because the characteristics that defined the warrior and also led to their fall now affects the entire world rather than individuals. The singular fall for a singular warrior in Middle-earth is a peril that will affect the entire world should evil triumph. In addition to imperiling the world, the distillation of the negative warrior qualities also gifts Tolkien’s warriors with the ability to renegotiate their identities into a more flexible, fluid existence because the negative qualities of the traditional medieval warrior are no longer a requirement. Identity suddenly becomes something possible to construct because the negative qualities that held down the warrior identity are no longer essential.
Tolkien’s world presents a fragmentation of the warrior identity into multiple characters because the Ring is a distillation of the negative aspects of the warrior identity and Middle-earth is fashioned as a postlapsarian society, positioned after the warrior’s traditional fall. My thesis looks at two characters within Tolkien’s host of warriors, the warrior-king Aragorn and the shield-maiden Eowyn. Aragorn, as a warrior-king, provides the prototype for the warrior identity, while Eowyn’s status as a shield-maiden shows how the warrior code is being further transformed in Tolkien. The shield-maiden is a more complicated version of the warrior role; it serves to question and redefine who can be a warrior and to what extent different identities can also be warriors. Using their medieval literary antecedents as a prelapsarian point of comparison, I analyze how Tolkien rewrites the warrior-king and the shield-maiden into more fluid identities that are a both a revitalization and an evolution in Middle-earth. Aragorn leads and relies on his fellowship instead of fighting Sauron and defeating evil all on his own as Beowulf would. He assumes the role of healer and revitalizer of the broken world, helping to make it back into a healthy world. Eowyn holds a fluid dual identity as both the woman Eowyn and the warrior Dernhelm. Once the war is over and the Ring is destroyed, she willingly transforms into a nurturer of the world instead of dying in battle or going mad due to a rigid gender binary like her literary antecedents. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* presents a world where the warrior can renegotiate his or her identities through necessity and the imagination, where reality and artifice are equally important and possible. The warrior identity is recreated into an existence that is more fluid and consequently has the possibility of leading to renewal and transformation rather than an inescapable fall.

In chapter one I focus on how the warrior-king Beowulf provides a description and a portrait of the prototypic warrior-king on which Tolkien’s character Aragorn is modeled.
Michael Drout’s essay, “Blood and Deeds: The Inheritance System in *Beowulf*” describes the two necessary requirements for the warrior-king. Tolkien’s own scholarship on *Beowulf*, “*Beowulf* and the Critics,” illustrates the narrative landscape of the warrior-king’s world in *Beowulf* and is applicable to Middle-earth. The warrior-king’s world is essentially one of a cosmic drama between good and evil with the warrior-king in the center of action. The warrior-king must show through blood that he is of royal descent and through deeds that he can defeat evil and protect his people. Beowulf’s fight with Grendel shows how he is a successful warrior-king through both his actions and the way that Grendel acts as an anti-warrior and a foil to highlights Beowulf’s prowess. Middle-earth is then described with the tenets of the warrior-king in mind, where a warrior-king is not in power, so the land is in a state of decline and evil is increasingly threatening its future. To serve as a contrast for the warrior-king Aragorn and to explain why Middle-earth is in such a state of decline, I analyze Denethor, the false king, and Boromir, the failed warrior, in terms of the landscape of Middle-earth and its decline. Their failures and falseness serves to illustrate the essential role Aragorn holds as a warrior-king. He is shown to be a true and successful warrior through the contrast he has with Denethor and Boromir. Beowulf’s downfall from power is then described and used to delineate how Aragorn is an evolution of this model and identity. Aragorn is a successful and evolved warrior-king because he avoids the lust for power and gold that brings about Beowulf’s downfall. Aragorn is able to hold a more fluid role, so he can be a leader and a healer in addition to a warrior. Overall, I show how the warrior-king is constructed in medieval literature and evolved in Tolkien’s imagined fantasy world as a way to rewrite the warrior-king into a more stable role.

Once I establish a prototypic portrait of the warrior as described in both medieval literature and Tolkien’s fiction, I analyze the shield-maiden role and her medieval antecedents in
chapter two in order to show how Tolkien’s world uses fluidity of identity to rewrite the medieval warrior. Grendel’s mother from *Beowulf* and Brynhild from *The Saga of the Volsungs* provide two medieval antecedents that explain and provide a foundation for Tolkien’s shield-maiden Eowyn. Using M. Wendy Hennequin’s essay “We've Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel's Mother” to describe Grendel’s mother and the literary qualities of the shield-maiden, Grendel’s mother provides a model for the way that a female warrior is described and how she appears. Grendel’s mother holds a complex role not only as a mother but also as the agent of revenge for a kin-slaying. She is described in an ambiguous gender category, often with male pronouns. In this way, she exemplifies the way that the female warrior is ambiguously gendered, where she is both male and female. Grendel’s mother is spurred by justified Anglo-Saxon revenge, but is also destined to die in battle against Beowulf, displaying the inevitable end of most warriors. Eowyn’s dual identity as both a woman and a warrior is an evolution where she can hold multiple identity categories. Her identity as the warrior Dernhelm is imagined, yet because of the fluidity of identity allowed in a fantasy world, her imagined identity becomes as important and real as her reality. Eowyn in the form of a shield-maiden is a contradiction to the traditional male warrior, thus allowing her to defeat the seemingly invincible Witch-King of Angmar. Eowyn’s status as a contradiction to the hyper-masculine system in which warriors exist provides a view to how Tolkien is recreating the warrior identity into something that is more malleable because it allows for multiplicity of identity within individuals and roles.

Brynhild of *The Saga of the Volsungs* provides another model for the construction of the medieval shield-maiden that adds to the portrait of the shield-maiden because her gender is a major issue in her identity. She is a fierce warrior, but oversteps her place as a mortal by being too strong and unstoppable. Brynhild is relegated to return to her natural gender identity and role
as a woman. She provides readers with a depiction of the unstoppable, fearsome, and famous warrior, yet also lusts after blood, power, and glory too much, thus bringing about her downfall. Brynhild’s fall after her relegation to a rigid female role shows one path for downfall of the female warrior. Grendel’s mother dies in battle, representing the stereotypical warrior’s fall. Both fates are indicative of societies with rigid gender roles and a lack of fluidity in roles and identities because neither woman is able to use her status as a shield-maiden to fight for anything positive. Eowyn exists in a fantasy world where rigid categories are no longer a given. She is able to hold a dual identity during wartime as both a noblewoman and a warrior. Once wartime is over, Eowyn is able to transform into an agent of change and growth, thus saving herself from the fall necessitated by the warrior identity. As described by Nancy Enright in “Tolkien’s Females and the Defining of Power,” Eowyn is able to lay down her warrior status in order to nurture and help the world grow. I expand upon this argument in light of Eowyn’s multiplicity of identity, where she transforms with the world to become an agent of such change. In order to explore the ways that Tolkien creates warrior identities that are no longer fixed in their hierarchies, the warrior-king as modeled by Beowulf and rewritten in Aragorn needs to be elucidated to provide a foundation for the original construction of the warrior.

Chapter I: The Warrior-King in an Honor-Shaped World

The Old English epic Beowulf ends with the titular warrior king Beowulf dying in the arms of his only defender as his war-band cowers in fear of the dragon that was just defeated. When Beowulf dies, his entire dynasty crumbles because he does not have an adequate heir and lacks the community to continue his legacy. As champion of the Germanic warrior code of honor, Beowulf rose to greatness in his youth in pursuit of praise (lof) and positive judgment
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He kills Grendel and Grendel’s mother, supporting his right to rule because he can protect his people from any state-threatening Other. Beowulf has both a sufficient heroic genealogy and a repertoire of heroic deeds that he has accomplished, earning him a role as the champion of the Germanic warrior code’s value system in the text. However, as a lone king, Beowulf does not procreate and lacks the community needed to support him when he grows old. He is the champion of a waning belief system, existing in what Tolkien describes as a twilight age of paganism and the beginning of the domination of Christianity (Tolkien *Beowulf and the Critics* 103). As a prominent medieval scholar, Tolkien wrote on Beowulf’s narrative trajectory, in which the warrior-king rises to greatness through exemplifying the warrior code in youth and falls from grace with old age. In his own fiction, Tolkien reworked some of the problems of the warrior code in *Beowulf* to create Aragorn and Middle-earth’s sociopolitical landscape by expanding the warrior-king drama into a sociopolitical system essential to Middle-earth. As the central warrior-king of Middle-earth, but not the Ring-bearing, world-saving protagonist, Aragorn reveals how Tolkien refigures the Germanic warrior code in a fantasy world setting. In taking the center of the quest away from the Germanic warrior-king, Tolkien revitalizes and stabilizes Aragorn’s status and legacy so both his line and his legacy can be passed on. Aragorn is able to rely on his fellowship and the support it provides in addition to being able to resist the power and temptation of the Ring, therein showing how as a warrior-king, he is modeled on Beowulf yet solves some of the problems that led to Beowulf’s ultimate downfall.

Unlike Aragorn, Beowulf holds a role in the center of his narrative that elevates him to a god-like status. His world is constructed and centered around him and his heroic deeds. The warrior-king Beowulf exists in an era that Tolkien in his scholarship-changing essay on *Beowulf*, “*Beowulf and the Critics*”, describes as a twilight age of the old gods and the beginning of
Christianity. He writes how the old gods “faded and man was left to carry on his war alone” (Tolkien 103), therein becoming the new center of the action. In *Beowulf*, the only godlike figure doing the actual deciding of life and death is the very mortal Beowulf, in pursuit of *lof*, the praise and value that a warrior receives from others as a result of heroic deeds. Because the old gods are no longer the center of the universe and the new Christian god is still not the absolute center of judgment, Beowulf becomes the center and operates in pursuit of *lof*, the standard by which his legacy in life and death is judged. To become the best king and warrior, Beowulf must prove himself to be the doer of the greatest, most heroic deeds, similar to Sigurd of *The Saga of the Volsungs* when he slays Fafnir solely to become a worthy king. Beowulf’s world operates on the metaphysics of the warrior, where the grand drama of good versus evil is taken up by the warrior to fight against his evil enemies. However, the long defeat described by Tolkien in his fiction is precisely what is happening in *Beowulf*; Tolkien in his scholarship describes how “the pagan theme of man upon the earth and his war with the human world, doomed to perpetual defeat in particular, and to final defeat in general…is presented not only by a contrast in the foreground between successful youth and old age defeated…but also symbolically by the nature of the adversaries” but “death inevitable…remains in fact the really dominant idea” (Tolkien *Beowulf and the Critics* 110). What Tolkien is describing here is the unceasing fight between the mortal man on the side of good and the monstrous Other on the side of evil. The fight inevitably ends with a reminder of the mortality of men through death, even if one defeats countless monsters throughout his lifetime. While the metaphysics of Beowulf’s world places him as the central champion and the status of warrior-king by facing off against unquestionable evil, his singular role and mission is expanded in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* to involve and require multiple characters to defeat a bigger evil that threatens the safety of Middle-earth.
The integral drama in which a warrior-king faces off against evil in order to pursue safety for his people and a heroic legacy for himself is placed on a bigger, more essential scale in Middle-earth because the world and its fate depends on the warrior-king drama. This warrior-king drama is described at its core by the blood and deeds inheritance system, exemplified in *Beowulf* and then expanded and rewritten in *The Lord of the Rings*. The blood and deeds kingship and inheritance system describes the requirement to rule in *Beowulf* as a successful king. As described in Michael Drout’s article, “Blood and Deeds: The Inheritance Systems In *Beowulf*,” the blood and deeds inheritance system describes how succession worked in Anglo-Saxon society as exemplified in *Beowulf*. According to Drout, the best king is the one who not only is descended from the royal line directly but also accomplishes heroic deeds. He argues that both characteristics are essential for kingship, and the tragedy in *Beowulf* is that Wiglaf, Beowulf’s chosen heir, may fulfill the deeds requirement but he is too far removed to fulfill the blood requirement so Beowulf’s empire and legacy ends (Drout 218). Beowulf as king is a perfect model of the blood and deeds inheritance system. Beowulf’s royal pedigree, espoused at the beginning of the epic when he first arrives in Denmark to defeat Grendel, firmly establishes that he has royal blood close enough to rule in the country where he came from. However, he has yet to do a sufficient heroic deed to gain himself enough *lof* to fulfill the deeds aspect of kingship. Enter Grendel, the terrifying monster that has been ravaging the people of nearby Denmark for years. Beowulf, being both young and in possession of an unparalleled amount of strength for his world, defeats both Grendel and Grendel’s mother. In doing this, he is defending people and values in order to gain *lof*, as shown by the way that he fights his enemies with a level of respect uncharacteristic of a brutal, monstrous warrior. Beowulf’s choice to fight Grendel via hand-to-hand single combat with no armor or weaponry shows that Beowulf has
respect for Grendel by fighting on Grendel’s level, because Beowulf knows that Grendel “has no idea of the arts of war, of shield or sword-play, although he does possess a wild strength” (Heaney 681-683). Beowulf is a warrior who respects Grendel enough to treat him as an equal when he fights him, instead of arming himself and fighting Grendel alongside the band of warriors he brings with him to Hrothgar’s hall. Beowulf’s fight with Grendel shows the guidelines for a sufficient heroic deed that makes an untouchable and successful warrior-king because he has enough physical strength to fight and defeat Grendel, respects his enemy, and understands his enemy well enough to fight on his level. These characteristics are rewritten in Aragorn’s status as warrior-king because he is from the long-lost line of Númenórean kings and he uses the same strength and warrior wisdom in the battle against Sauron’s armies for Gondor and Middle-earth’s future. Aragorn’s role is to lead a whole world to defend itself rather than defending it solely by himself as Beowulf does. In contrast, Aragorn is a leader rather than a lone warrior because Beowulf’s role as sole champion is expanded in The Lord of the Rings’ many warrior-type characters.

Beowulf’s monstrous foe Grendel serves as a foil to his upstanding heroism. Tolkien briefly characterizes Grendel as “one of the troll-kind, in original conception of the offspring of the earth made of the very stone of the world, also a parody of man misinformed by hate…who bears hell with him…even as he walks in Denmark, being rejected by God” (Beowulf and the Critics 176). He is a twisted perversion of the human warrior, having the strength of the most powerful warrior yet malice towards humanity and a violent resolve to simply destroy without any relatable cunning or knowledge of war-craft and honor. The majority of the passages about Grendel are written from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator who is describing what Grendel is feeling and doing, rather than what Beowulf is feeling. Perhaps with the intent of
allowing the reader to understand Grendel, he is humanized through description and emotions. He is given a gender, referred to consistently as a “he” instead of an “it”. Grendel is also given human emotions and jealousies. Heaney translates that Grendel is “spurned and joyless” and has “demonic glee” when he sees his victims and he pictures the mayhem when he would “rip life from limb and devour them, /feed on their flesh” (Heaney 720, 730, 732-733). The entire battle scene, as its narrated before Beowulf’s retelling of his deed, is also narrated from the point of view of Grendel. The _Beowulf_-poet describes Grendel’s pain and desperation when he is finally caught, explaining how “every bone in his body/quailed and recoiled, but he could not escape” and “it was the worst trip/the terror-monger had taken to Heorot” (Heaney 752-753, 764-765). These instances where Grendel is humanized serves to both complicate and yet support the reading that Grendel is monstrous and evil. The reader sees some of what is going on inside Grendel’s head, but all that is in Grendel’s head is action and no reflection. The human ability to reflect upon one’s actions is not present in Grendel. While the reader can see in Grendel’s head, it is impossible to relate to him because he is ultimately a monster bent on mindless killing. Grendel’s simultaneously humanizing yet also monsterizing depiction demonstrates how he is an ironic inversion of Beowulf, the true heroic warrior (Johansen 197). When Grendel has to fight, he wants to flee in a most un-warrior-like manner. As argued in Johansen’s “Grendel the Brave?” article, Grendel is described as hilde-deor in his battle with Beowulf, meaning beast in battle; where the “strong contrast between this literal truth and the gross inapplicability of the compound’s usual meaning, ‘brave in battle,’ provides the crux of this irony” (197). This detail and the textual details that both humanize and monsterize Grendel show how he is acting as a foil to exhibit Beowulf’s prowess as the true heroic warrior at his peak. Beowulf is a true warrior compared to Grendel because he does not flee his battles nor fear his enemies, and he uses a
cunning knowledge of his enemies to defeat them rather than animalistic greed. Beowulf’s fight
with Grendel earns him a heroic reputation to become a successful warrior-king who can rule
through both a royal pedigree and an ability to protect his people from evil.

In a similar way, Aragorn and the political system in *The Lord of the Rings* is modeled on
the blood and deeds inheritance system from *Beowulf* and Germanic warrior culture in general.
Aragorn is high king because he has the ancient royal genealogy and has proven himself to be a
strong warrior through his actions and deeds. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* expands and
dramatizes this blood and deeds system and the evils that it fights against to the point where it is
a necessity for the existence of the world. When the line of royal succession is broken with the
fall of Isildur after he fails to destroy the ring, the entire world begins to decline when the
stewards take the place of power. The same type of evil that Beowulf defeats in order to gain
glory and a heroic reputation grows and threatens to destroy the entire world of Middle-earth. As
Sauron’s influence increases, the land itself is corrupted in addition to many of the citizens.
Beowulf’s Grendel is a fairly localized problem; he may be life-threatening to a group of people,
but he only eats one or two people at a time and does not aim to conquer and destroy. In *The
Lord of the Rings*, Sauron aims to do this and more, threatening the existence of all of Middle-
extart\[c.\]earth. It is still up to the heroic warrior king to defeat evil even though there is no warrior-king in
power to save Middle-earth in the way that Beowulf saves Hrothgar’s people. However, such a
warrior-king is not in place in Middle-earth. This duty should lie in the hands of Boromir and his
father Denethor, but they cannot because they are respective versions of the failed and false
warrior-king. Before Aragorn reinstates his line, Denethor and Boromir\(^1\) of the line of Stewards,
are the major governing body over most of Middle-earth. Boromir somewhat redeems himself as

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\(^1\) If Boromir would have lived until his father died, he too would the responsibility of looking
after Gondor and Middle-earth as the Lord of the City.
a true warrior by sacrificing himself in battle to save Merry and Pippin, but Denethor fails utterly because he lacks the sufficient royal genealogy and selfishly gives up on his people. Both characters go mad with lust for power and are a symptom indicative of the decline that has been taking place in Middle-earth with the lack of a complete warrior-king line in place to govern and shape the world. In *The Lord of the Rings*, an ineffective and insufficient warrior-king is no longer just a temporary and localized problem, Denethor and Boromir’s failures are representative of a lack that is world threatening rather than temporary. The Germanic warrior code is ingrained and essential in the health and safety of Middle-earth, and without it properly in place, the entire world declines from its previous state of greatness and decadence to one of weakness and desolation.

Denethor’s actions during his reign over Gondor in place of the high king, along with his prized son Boromir’s power-hungry and desperate attempts to be a valiant warrior trying to save Middle-earth, show how they are both failed and somewhat false aspects of the warrior-king that are corrupted by power and the evil influence of Sauron and the Ring. Denethor is a symptom of decline but perceives the potentially imminent ruin of Middle-earth, so he chooses to end his life before everything becomes ruined. Denethor’s suicide is a mark of his failure to be a proper king in the warrior-king pairing because he acts cowardly and is not willing to fight. Beowulf, as the model on which Tolkien largely bases his warrior-king construction, does not give up in the face of doom; he takes down the dragon even as the dragon kills him. Denethor in contrast is not able to uphold his duty as surrogate king because he inherently is not a true king. He is a steward and lacks the essential genealogy that Aragorn has, so he cannot and will not fight for his kingdom and world to the end. Denethor also fails distinctly because he refuses to accept the possibility for change and the reinstatement of the line for which his role was only temporarily holding. He
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says that instead of yielding his power to Aragorn, an “upstart” who is the “last of a ragged house long bereft of lordship and dignity” or seeing doom coming down upon all Middle-earth, he would rather “have naught: neither life diminished, nor love halved, nor honour abated” (Tolkien *Return of the King* 836). He thinks that he can preserve his power, dignity, and honor by taking his own life rather than see either Sauron enslave Middle-earth or see Aragorn and the ancient royal line of the Númenóreans reinstated. The irony is that he loses respect for his legacy as a leader and therefore loses all honor when he chooses to kill himself rather than face his bleak future. Denethor is an incomplete warrior-king and therefore is neither a warrior nor much of a king at all. He holds the power of a king yet lacks the courage to follow through with his responsibilities and lacks the warrior half of the pairing. With the death of his son Boromir, his warrior son, Denethor is completely broken mentally and ends his life and lordship in a most cowardly, un-warrior-king-like way that shows how he is a false and failed king.

Along with his father, the failed and false king, Boromir represents the failed warrior. Unlike his father, whose non-royal genealogy necessitates his status as a false and failed king, Boromir is a true warrior, yet he fails to uphold his virtue as a warrior due to corruption and a desire for power. When Boromir goes mad with lust for the Ring, he desires more power, to be a king instead of a warrior and a Steward’s son. He says to Frodo regarding the Ring, “It is mad not to use it, to use the power of the Enemy against him. The fearless, the ruthless, these alone will achieve victory. What could not a warrior do in this hour, a great leader? What could not Aragorn do? Or if he refuses, why not Boromir? The Ring would give me power of Command. How would I drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner!” (Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring* 414). Boromir believes that he can use the Ring to save his people, when it will only bring more corruption. Boromir essentially loses sight of the warnings from the
Council of Elrond and ignores the plan to destroy the Ring, which is the only real option. He is a failed warrior because he loses sight of the quest and lusts for power beyond what he has earned in deeds and inheritance. Boromir does somewhat redeem himself by defending Merry and Pippin to his death. However, he still is a failed warrior because he cannot uphold warrior humility, and he cannot keep his lust for power at bay as a result of the Ring’s influence. He says that Númenóreans are the truest men that will surely be able to avoid corruption from the Ring, but in saying that he has shown that he has been corrupted by the Ring’s influence. The Ring’s influence really only leads to destruction, rather than triumph, despite the power that it promises its bearer, and therefore Boromir fails to uphold warrior courage and abstain from power-lust and he becomes a failed warrior and ends up dying in battle.

Because the entire land is declining into a state of desolation, evil begins to take over and grow despite the Stewards’ efforts to keep it at bay. The evil that threatens the state in Beowulf is a smaller, more localized problem. Grendel may be unstoppably threatening the lives of an entire group of people, but he is not threatening to enslave and end the existence of an entire land as Sauron does. Grendel just wants to eat people, and he does not usually take more than one person each night. Sauron wants to enslave, kill, and constrict the existences of everyone and everything in Middle-earth. Elrond recounts how “the line of Melendil son of Anarion failed, and the Tree withered, and the blood of the Númenóreans became mingled with that of lesser men. Then the watch upon the walls of Mordor slept, and dark things crept back to Gorgoroth. And on a time evil things came forth, and they took Minis Ithil and abode in it, and they made it into a place of dread; and it is called Minas Morgul, the Tower of Sorcery” (Tolkien The Fellowship of the Ring 258). This passage makes it clear that without a strong warrior-king to defend against and keep

2 If Tolkien fashioned some kind of Valhalla for warriors who valiantly died in battle, Boromir would surely have earned himself a spot there.
watch on the evil in Middle-earth, the entire land declines from greatness, and evil threatens to take control. Both Grendel and Sauron are life-threatening, but Sauron’s influence and threat is expanded to encompass the entire world, showing how *The Lord of the Rings* is an honor-shaped world where the conflict of warrior versus monstrous Other is dramatized and expanded to encompass the fate of the entire world.

Beowulf’s strength as a warrior-king comes from his prowess in battle as a warrior-king. He functions a lone warrior his entire life and this is his downfall. Once Beowulf gains prestige and kingship through the combination of right by blood and right by deeds, he inevitably grows old and his kingdom is besieged by a wrathful dragon. The dragon and the decadence it represents is a reflection of the *lof* and the actual treasure that a Germanic warrior-king collects over his lifetime through decades of battles and pillaging journeys won. The *Beowulf*-poet writes that “The treasure had been won,/bought and sold by Beowulf’s death” (Heaney 2843-2844), therein supporting how Beowulf cannot defeat the dragon because he is the champion of that very system, and he must act alone as necessitated by his sense of honor. The text describes how “the prince of rings [Beowulf] was too proud/to line up with a large army/ against the sky plague. He had scant regard/for the dragon as a threat” (Heaney 2345-2348). The combination of these things, added with the fact that Beowulf is mortal, means that he dies in combat with the dragon, and his entire legacy falls because he did not produce any heirs and lacked community support to continue his legacy in Wiglaf. The poem recounts how, “No help or backing was to be had then/from his high-born comrades; that hand-picked troop/broke ranks and ran for their lives” (Heaney 2596-2598) during the battle with the dragon even though Wiglaf tries to lead them into battle. This is because Wiglaf, although he is Beowulf’s assigned heir, does not have close enough ties to be a warrior-king in both blood and deeds. The end of the poem describes a Geat
woman prophesying the future for her people, in which she sees “her nation invaded, /enemies upon the rampage, bodies in piles, /slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke” (Heaney 3153-3155). She is describing the end of Beowulf’s dynasty and nation with the insurgence of his many enemies after he dies. Tolkien describes in *The Lord of the Rings* how the Elves and Middle-earth are fighting the long defeat. *Beowulf* presents this precise problem, because age, fate, and an imperfect, temporary system catches up to him. He may be the greatest warrior of his time, but every era comes to an end because every warrior-king is mortal.

Aragorn’s construction as a warrior-king solves many of the problems that led to Beowulf’s death and the fall of his dynasty. Aragorn does this by valuing fellowship and relying on others, avoiding gluttony of power and wealth, and embracing feminization and healing to revitalize a war-torn world. Most of Aragorn’s heroic deeds are implied from the days that he was a ranger and went by the name Strider. We know from Gandalf’s stories that he went on a long quest to hunt down and secure Gollum, in addition to his Dunedain duties of protecting the Shire, unbeknownst to the hobbits. But as it is modeled in *Beowulf*, it takes a large-scale and well-narrated heroic deed to earn a heroic legacy great enough to become a warrior-king in both deeds and blood. Aragorn’s heroic deed happens after he looks into the Stone of Orthanc and sees exactly what he must do and who he is in Middle-earth: a king who must raise an army. During this interaction, Aragorn says that he faced Sauron and “It was a bitter struggle” but he wrenched the Stone to his own will in end and threatens Sauron because “in the very hour of his great designs the heir of Isildur and the Sword are revealed” (Tolkien *Return of the King* 763). Unlike Beowulf, who is lone warrior, Aragorn relies on the close kinship he has with fellowship. While he does say that for Gondor he has “no help to send, therefore I must go myself” (Tolkien *Return of the King* 763), although he also brings an army and his fellowship with him. Aragorn
has a strong fellowship and his ancestors left behind a strong legacy, so he is able to raise an army from the dead. Aragorn recounts the prophecy that as doom approaches. The Dead awaken for the hour is come for the oath breakers:
at the Stone of Erech they shall stand again
and hear there a horn in the hills ringing.
Whose shall the horn be? Who shall call them from the grey twilight, the forgotten people? The heir of him to whom the oath they swore.
From the North shall he come, need shall drive him:
He shall pass the Door to the Paths of the Dead. (Tolkien Return of the King 764)

Aragorn fits all of these specifications and is destined to save Middle-earth by raising an army of the oath bound dead because it is part of his essential ancestry. Isildur, Aragorn’s ancestor, doomed the Men of the Mountains to “never rest until [their] oath is fulfilled. For this war will last through years uncounted, and [they] shall be summoned once again ere the end” when they betrayed him because they had worshipped Sauron in the Dark Years (Tolkien 765). Aragorn, as the heir that is prophesied, goes into the mountain and summons the dead to battle, earning himself both a status as a heroic warrior and fully completing the deeds requirement of the blood/deeds inheritance system. He also validates his status as the one true king because only the lost king can complete this deed. In doing this, Aragorn also solves the mistakes that Beowulf makes by being a lone warrior because Aragorn instead relies on his fellowship to help him through his battles. If he were to be directly modeled on Beowulf, he would personally be going to battle Sauron to the death. However, Aragorn is a king more than a lone warrior, so he raises
an army with the help of his fellowship who willingly follow him anywhere. Tolkien describes how “Aragorn led the way, and such was the strength of his will in that hour that all the Dunedain and their horses followed him” in addition both Legolas and Gimli following Aragorn into the mountain. Aragorn is a powerful warrior, but he is also a powerful and practical king where Beowulf was not. He knows that he needs an army and the close following of a fellowship to defeat widespread evil, rather than the force of his own will alone. He is a leader in addition to a warrior, and therein has the ability to revitalize Middle-earth instead of simply save it from direct peril. He is the leader of an honor-shaped world that expands beyond the deeds of one heroic person, so he must lead a group of heroes towards victory rather than fight smaller-scale evils on his own. He is an improved model of the warrior-king, who is capable of more than just single combat battle and can revitalize the world.

In addition to proving himself worthy via both blood and deeds in one fell swoop, Aragorn is a king who does not lust after power and therein can revitalize the world once the Ring and Sauron are destroyed. Aragorn, as a reworked warrior-king, learns from similar mistakes of his ancestors. Beowulf’s life and line of succession is ended through a battle with greed and wealth, the same way that Aragorn’s ancestor Isildur is conquered by lust for the power of the Ring and fails to destroy it. Aragorn rejects the lust for power and the Ring even when offered it because he says that “It does not belong to either of us… [Aragorn or Frodo]…but it has been ordained that you should hold it for a while” because it was prophesied that when “Isildur’s Bane shall waken,…the Halfling forth shall stand” (Tolkien Fellowship 259-260). Aragorn is not destined to hold the Ring because he is destined to be a warrior-king, not a Ring-bearer. His ancestor Isildur was corrupted by the Ring and he will be too if he desires to hold its power. The Ring is an agent of destruction and desolation, not renewal and rebirth and
Aragorn would have no chance of revitalizing Middle-earth if he held it. He only takes the amount of power that is his duty. This level of humility and responsibility is what allows Aragorn to succeed as a king where previous warrior-kings fail. It is also the quality that allows him to heal his people after they are wounded by the evil of the Witch-King of Angmar. It is yet another prophecy about Aragorn that “The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known” and one of Aragorn’s several names, Envinyatar, means “the Renewer” (Tolkien Return of the King 844-845). Aragorn uses the herb althelas to cure the Witch King’s victims, said to be “Life to the dying/In the king’s hand lying” when “the black breath blows/and death’s shadow grows” (Tolkien Return of the King 847). In holding a role of healer in addition to warrior and king, Aragorn embraces renewal as king instead of simply the courageous destroyer of evil. While Aragorn is still mortal and dies as does every man, he is able to hold a role of renewal in addition to his role as warrior-king and therefore can pass on his legacy successfully instead of leading to a fall in the warrior code similar to Beowulf and Sigurd.

Beginning with the pre-fantasy story of Beowulf, we can see how the blood and deeds inheritance system functions and the ways that it not only necessitates a hero’s rise to power as a warrior-king but also necessitates his fall. Beowulf is a model king because he has both royal blood and is able to prove his courage and might in battle as greater than all men and monsters by fighting Grendel and his mother. Yet Beowulf is a lone warrior and refuses to rely on others, thus allowing himself to fall in battle when his mortality ultimately catches up to him. Because he is such a stalwart lone hero, he does not have a sufficient heir and therefore his dynasty ends with him. Tolkien’s characters, Denethor the Steward and his warrior son Boromir, represent the failings of men to uphold the duties of the warrior-king. This is detrimental to Middle-earth because it is an honor-shaped world that needs a warrior-king in place to hold land-destroying
evil at bay. As shown by the role and influence that the ruling characters have in *The Lord of the Rings*, the sociopolitical circumstances of Middle-earth are an expansion and dramatization of the honor-based world represented in *Beowulf*. Without a warrior-king to save the world, Middle-earth nearly perishes under the threat of Sauron. Tolkien creates Aragorn to fit this role, but rewrites the role in a way that solves the problems that led to the downfall of Beowulf’s legacy and values. Aragorn is a valiant warrior-king, anointed from legend, deeds, and blood, but he is not a lone destructive warrior in the vein of Beowulf. Instead of having a lone warrior-king save Middle-earth, Tolkien uses a fragmentation of the lone warrior into multiple people with multiple roles, therein allowing Aragorn to act as a revitalizing king rather than simply a lone warrior. Aragorn does not have the task of destroying the Ring or even defeating the Witch-King of Angmar. Instead he is a leader and a healer who rallies the people of Middle-earth to save their world and later revitalize it once the war is over. Because Aragorn is no longer the narrative center of Middle-earth as a lone warrior-king, there is space in *The Lord of the Rings* for alternative identities to fulfill the duties of the warrior instead of and in addition to the stereotypical male warrior-king exemplified by Beowulf and Aragorn.

**Chapter II: Eowyn and the Literary Antecedents of the Shield-Maiden**

Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* features a broadening of the warrior identity from a single dominant male into a rather eclectic collection of heroes; some are Beowulfian heroes, others are more unlikely heroes. Eowyn, as an example of a more eclectic hero, is a female warrior and a major example of how Tolkien is expanding the heroic identity into multiple characters in order to explore the revitalization of the Germanic warrior code in an honor-shaped world. Eowyn is a shield-maiden and is significant in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* because
she hold the unique ability to nurture and heal in addition to destroying and conquering. The stereotypical male paradigm of the warrior, shown prominently by characters such as Boromir, is inherently unstable because the destruction leads to a destruction of the warrior himself, rather than a reintegration into society after the battles are won. They lust after strength and power, while the female characters in Tolkien’s work specifically nurture and help the world grow once it is saved. Yet Tolkien’s female character Eowyn plays an active role in her world through the entire war and its after, where she has an unlikely role as a warrior and then transforms with her world into as it changes into a space of regrowth a renewal. Tolkien’s sources provide a model and precursor for Eowyn’s existence as a shield-maiden. Two of Tolkien’s source texts, Beowulf and The Saga of the Volsungs, feature female warriors that provide a foundation for the fluidity of identity and appearance that creates the female warrior identity. Grendel’s mother of Beowulf when she is translated more literally, can be read as an analogous female warrior to Tolkien’s Eowyn. Grendel’s mother provides a relevant model for the dynamics of vengeance that both characters are motivated by in addition to a model for the rhetoric of how a female warrior is written and constructed. Grendel’s mother overtakes the traditional female role of goading but not actually fighting, by exacting vengeance herself. The Norse Saga of the Volsungs presents another model of Eowyn’s literary roots by presenting the struggle between female identity as a shield-maiden versus a wife and child-bearer. Brynhild is a warrior who achieved has a downfall when she is at the peak of her warrior ability because she oversteps her role as mortal beneath the gods. She is female and is punished as such, revealing the complex gender and identity status the shield-maiden balances. In Brynhild’s Viking society, her struggle for identity is a binary where

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Eowyn may not be drawn directly from Grendel’s mother because Tolkien most likely translated her similarly to Seamus Heaney’s “monstrous hell-bride” rather than as a fearsome woman warrior, so it is unlikely he took Grendel’s mother into account when he was creating Eowyn. Regardless, Grendel’s mother is a model for the medieval female warrior.
she must be either a shield-maiden or a wife. She chooses madness instead. Eowyn, in contrast, exists in Tolkien’s fluid re-imagining of the medieval warrior code as a woman, warrior, and wife. Eowyn can exist as all of her categories, showing how Tolkien uses the malleability of the fantasy world to create more fluid character identities. Eowyn’s character, as a warrior but also a woman, goes through a transformation that answers the question of how warriors re-integrate into society once their battles are over. She undergoes a metamorphosis along with Middle-earth as it transforms from a deteriorating, war-torn landscape back into a healthy world. Tolkien’s female characters have a larger purpose beyond the exact moment and act of heroism saving the world from immediate ruin because they help the world revitalize. Eowyn’s fluid existence and her ability to adapt as the stakes of her world change shows the extent and array of possibilities created with Tolkien’s fantasy world where traditional roles in medieval literature can be utilized and also evolved.

Revenge is a major aspect of the Germanic warrior code that links and motivates both Grendel’s mother and Eowyn as warriors in spite of their stereotypical female roles as mothers and daughters. Revenge was a mandatory element of Germanic warrior culture when a member of one’s kin was slain and in Eowyn and Grendel’s mother’s cases and it serves as a catalyst for their transformation into warriors. The corpus of Icelandic sagas has entire novel-length stories entirely concerned with the ramifications of large scale kin slayings, defined as blood feuds. Most of Njal’s Saga is about two families in a multigenerational blood feud that has spiraled out of control. However, the role of the actual revenge was nearly always enacted by men. The women were important in the process too as goads that pushed their men to action, but they never actively exacted revenge. Both Grendel’s mother and Eowyn are spurred on by the warrior’s obligation to exact revenge for kin-slayings, yet both are women and therefore exhibit
more fluid gender barrier through their actions. While Grendel’s mother is a warrior who exacts revenge, the major role given to women in Beowulf is that of the peace-maker, the woman who solves and pacifies. Grendel’s mother is an inversion of the peace-maker role attributed to women in Beowulf (Hennequin 503-504). She functions as a warrior more than a monster, even though she is the mother of a monster. Most translations impart a negative reading upon her, possibly due to the issue of her name being dependent on the monstrous Grendel and status as mother of a monster instead of her actions as a warrior and description as a warrior. Grendel’s mother in name and status is a monster because she has birthed a monster and Beowulf defeats her as a monster. However, the exact vocabulary and actions that Grendel’s mother does redefine her as a warrior more than a monster. Heaney, the primary translation used in this study, translates Grendel’s mother as a “monstrous hell-bride” (Heaney 1259) and a “hell-dam” (Heaney 1292), thus giving the reader the idea that Grendel is an evil monster similar to her son. However, Wendy Hennequin’s article, “We’ve Created a Monster: The Strange Case of Grendel’s Mother” questions this negative reading, arguing that “neither the poem nor its characters demonize her or even criticize her actions; rather, she is presented as a noble and brave opponent” (Hennequin 504). This idea is shown especially prominently in Heaney’s most flagrant description of Grendel’s mother, “monstrous hell-bride” (Heaney 1259). The more literal translation of this Old English phrase, “ides aglaecwif” is “lady fighter-woman” with the word “ides” roughly translating to a category of accomplished women that in Anglo-Saxon society referred to queens, noblewomen, female saints, and Biblical women (Hennequin 515-516). The term “aglaec” refers to the terrifying power that Grendel’s mother possesses. In addition to her description as a warrior, Hennequin describes how Grendel’s mother is referred to using masculine pronouns such as “scaeda” meaning warrior and “feorgenidlan” meaning life
enemy (509). She argues that use of the nouns “attributes masculinity to her as well and reinforces the fact that she is crossing gender lines to act as a warrior”(510). This may be attributable to the possibility that there simply were not words to describe women consistently as both female and as warrior; nevertheless, it has the effect of giving Grendel’s mother a dual identity as a warrior and a mother. Because she is such a fearsome warrior, her status essentially requires that she avenge the kin-slaying of her son by Beowulf. Through this analysis, we can see how Grendel’s mother is a fearsome woman warrior in both title and action, based off a more literal rather than interpretive translation.

Eowyn is an equally fierce female warrior and chooses the path to warrior status despite discouragement from Aragorn and the male-centric state he represents. When Eowyn wishes to go to battle, Aragorn tells her that she must stay behind with her people. She tells him, “But am I not of the House of Eorl, a shield-maiden and not a dry-nurse? I have waited on faltering feet long enough” (Tolkien 767). Eowyn says that her fear is to be relegated to a cage, where she would be forced to “stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire”(Tolkien 767). The same as Grendel’s mother, she wants to have an active role in fighting for what she cares about. She wants to break out of the cage of gender expectations and defend her world, because if the men fighting against Sauron’s armies lose, there will no longer be a house to stay behind in. The fact that Aragorn criticizes Eowyn’s wish to go to battle is an example of the shortcomings of the sociopolitical system that he represents. Aragorn is the high king of Middle-earth, destined to rule both by blood and deeds. He represents the policies and attitudes of the land, and by rejecting Eowyn’s plea to be recognized as a shield-maiden and relegating her to a stereotypical role as the woman who stays home while the men go to war, he is enforcing the male-centric world that he will rule over.
Aragorn’s discouragement is a general discouragement for women to branch out into alternative roles, and the fact that Eowyn becomes a warrior and succeeds in making an active difference in the battle for Middle-earth shows how the text is expanding the warrior’s role into one where previously excluded identities can become warriors. Eowyn’s determination to fight and no longer be a caged bird leads to a metamorphosis that is unprecedented in the overall history of Middle-earth and shows how Tolkien is rewriting the warrior by allowing a greater fluidity of identity.

When faced with Aragorn’s discouragement of her claim that she is a shield-maiden of Rohan and should fight in the battle to save Middle-earth, Eowyn first has to appear as a man to break free from the cage constructed for her due to gender. This is analogous to the way that the vocabulary used to describe Grendel’s mother as a warrior often refers to her using male pronouns. Similarly, Eowyn becomes Dernhelm, perceived as a male knight by everyone including her companion Merry. As narrated from Merry’s point of view, he even refers to her with masculine pronouns. It is not until Dernhelm reveals himself to be Eowyn in the face of the Nazgul that Merry learns of Eowyn’s true identity. Tolkien writes that “Eowyn it was, and Dernhelm also” (Tolkien *Return of the King* 823), showing that by assuming a male warrior identity, Eowyn has become both a warrior and a woman, similar to the way that Grendel’s mother is both a woman and a warrior, therein described using male and female pronouns. The gender confusion here breaks the gender cage that Eowyn fears and allows her the impetus to fight as a warrior, both female and male.

The dual identity that Eowyn assumes when she becomes both Dernhelm the warrior and Eowyn the woman comments on the nature of the fantasy genre created in result of Tolkien’s works. Eowyn the noblewoman is her real, unavoidable identity. Dernhelm is Eowyn’s imagined
male warrior identity that she projects in order to accomplish her heroic deeds in war. Because she is described as “Eowyn…and Dernhelm also” (Tolkien *Return of the King* 823) both of her selves become reality and the imagined self becomes as important as her real identity. By doing this and not staying home as Aragorn urges her to do, Eowyn is deviating from the rigid normative identity previously enforced and created from the male-centric warrior code and is able to accomplish great deeds because of it. This is one major way that Tolkien is constructing fantasy, where the imagined is as useful and has as much agency as the reality. Characters in essence are able to construct an imagined reality and follow through with it in order to accomplish the deeds that are necessary to the saving of the world. Characters such as Eowyn and Sam, as atypical versions of the warrior, are nonetheless able to become warriors through strength of will and imagination⁴. They are themselves characters with a civilian real identity, yet an imagined warrior identity that becomes a necessary reality along with their original identities.

In summary, Eowyn’s status as doubly a shield-maiden and a noblewoman shows how Tolkien is using doubleness and ambiguity in the gender, identity, and role of Grendel’s mother and evolving them into a beneficial force for saving Middle-earth.

Eowyn’s double identity allows her to exist as a contradiction to the male-centric hierarchal system that creates the Witch-King of Angmar’s influence, thus allowing her to defeat him via imaginative exception. When Eowyn assumes the mantle of the warrior code, she is essentially obligated to avenge her king when he is killed by the Witch-King of Angmar. By defeating the Witch-King of Angmar when her uncle cannot, Eowyn proves her legitimacy as a

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⁴ Sam’s double identity as a hobbit and a warrior has roots in the chivalric romance and Christian allegory, another similar tradition of medieval warrior literature that could be a topic for further study.
hero and a warrior in addition to her identity as a woman. None of the other men can defeat the Nazgul King, yet she can, showing her complete metamorphosis into one of Tolkien’s many warriors in *The Lord of the Rings*. The conversation that Eowyn has with the Witch King is indicative of this transformation and the way that Eowyn’s power comes from her subversion of archetypal masculinity. The Nazgul says to her that “No living man may hinder me,” and she tells him, “But no living man am I! You look upon a woman…You stand between me and my lord kin…living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him” (Tolkien 823). Eowyn is a woman, yet also a warrior, and so falls into Tolkien’s theme of the rejection of standard heroism and heroic figures. This appears in many other places in the text, for instance when heroes such as Boromir die, Isildur cannot destroy the Ring due to a lust for power, and a meek, unwarrior-like hobbit is the Ring-bearer instead of the heroic warrior-king Aragorn or the traditional warrior Boromir. Eowyn’s power, which allows her to be the only one who can destroy the Nazgul King, stems from this subversion, where she is both warrior and woman. She holds the warrior status that can kill foes and avenge kin, yet she also is a contradiction to standard trajectory of male heroes facing foes that consistently fails in warrior culture literature, so she has the ability to kill the Nazgul King when her uncle King Théoden cannot. The Nazgul King represents and gains power from the masculine system of power and control that Eowyn is fighting against simply by daring to fight and defeat the Nazgul King. In defining herself specifically as both a woman and as a warrior by her actions and appearance, she shows how she

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5 She also has help of Merry the hobbit in killing the Witch King. However, she does much of the work because she deals the first blow that kills the Nazgul’s steed and she deals the death blow that ultimately kills the Nazgul. The fact that she does not achieve this alone speaks to the theme that the solitary warrior in combat is an untenable model. Merry, a meek hobbit whose “slow-kindled courage of his race” has awoken (Tolkien 823), is also another example of how unlikely heroes are best equipped to save the world and defeat mighty foes because the warrior code fails with stereotypical warriors, as shown in both Tolkien’s Middle-earth and the warrior culture texts that are Tolkien’s foundation texts.
is not the male warrior that he professes invincibility against. The greed and power that the Nazgul King is given strength by is the assumption that all warriors are men and therein work within the same power structure as he does, the one where the ring and the lust for control it represents is ensconced. Eowyn is fully outside of that system because it actively excludes her despite her skills. Her very determination to fight is what sets her apart from the male-centric warrior system because she does not traditionally fit and therein she alone can defeat the Nazgul King. With Tolkien’s evolution of the female warrior in his construction of Eowyn, the role becomes an exception to the dominant masculine hierarchy, yet she is an essential participant in saving Middle-earth, where Grendel’s mother as a warrior is a part of the defeated enemy on the edges of Beowulf’s world.

In addition to the parallels Eowyn’s identity has to Grendel’s mother, her identity as a shield-maiden is also a reimagining and revitalization of the role as it is described in The Saga of the Volsungs. Gender in the warrior identity is one of the central issues in this saga, where Grendel’s mother’s gender never comes up in contention. This serves to provide some definition to how gender works at issue with the warrior identity. Brynhild, the shield-maiden of the saga, has a downfall and descent into madness when she is faced with the choice between being a wife or being a shield-maiden. The way the text describes her and the reasons for her downfall provide a defining space for Eowyn because they describe the ways that gender is an issue in the shield-maiden’s identity. The Saga of the Volsungs introduces Brynhild at the beginning of her downfall from power as a shield-maiden. Although the saga does not introduce Brynhild until after she is established as a shield-maiden and begins to lose her identity as one, we can see that she has overstepped her bounds as a warrior. Brynhild is a pure, unadulterated warrior; she does not have an obligation to lead a group of people, any kin-slayings to avenge, and she lacks the
regulating power that Christianity brought to the warrior ethos. She is fearless, powerful, and famous, yet also has an insatiable lust for blood, gold, power, and glory. She strongly embodies all positive and negative aspects of the warrior-identity. Throughout the text, Brynhild says that all she wants is “to go warring and win all kinds of fame” (74) and that she desires Sigurd because of his status as the greatest warrior and his “vast gold treasure” (83). She also has an important position in the state where she “wear[s] a helmet and ride[s] with the warrior-kings” because she “must support them” (Byock 75). This seems to be one of the major requirements for a shield-maiden, where she supports the warrior-king in battle. Brynhild’s unquenchable warrior-lust defines her as a fearsome warrior who holds a pivotal place in the warrior-kings’ army, yet also brings about her downfall because those qualities also cause her to meddle in the affairs of the gods by killing a man marked for victory by the gods. When Sigurd finds her, she says that she had killed Hjalmgunnar, an old yet great warrior, who she found out from Odin had been promised the victory over “Agnar or Audabrodir” but she had struck him down instead (Byock 67). In doing this, whether or not she knew that Hjalmgunnar was marked by Odin for victory, she is showing how she is such a powerful warrior that she cannot be controlled by the gods while she is a warrior. Brynhild’s downfall is not brought about through death in battle or a tragic failure to uphold the tenets of the warrior, but by being too powerful of a warrior. In essence, she is so successful at being a warrior that she begins to change the god’s plans for men and outsteps her mortality. In response, Odin punishes her not by bringing about her death in battle, but by cursing her not only to “never afterward have the victory” but also by decreeing that she must marry (Byock 67). Odin’s curse has a twofold effect of not only preventing Brynhild from having any victory as a shield-maiden but also relegating her to a stereotypical
female role\textsuperscript{6}. She is forced to marry, therein ending her career as a shield-maiden. Her punishment is especially different because every other instance in the saga where Odin decides to end a person’s career as a warrior or king, they die in battle. Brynhild, despite being a warrior at her peak, is punished in a way that does not honor her status through death in battle but through a stripping away of her essential identity as a warrior. Brynhild’s identity is unique in that she overachieves as a warrior, yet also is a woman and therefore is punished as such. Brynhild’s gender essentially is her tragedy, because she does not get to die in honor through battle as a male warrior would. The way that Brynhild is punished for her warrior status is both an affirmation that she is unstoppable and also an example of how her society creates male and female roles.

The world Brynhild lives in presents a binary between stereotypical female roles and masculine warrior roles. Brynhild is embodying a man’s role and identity while she is a shield-maiden. This is a reflection of the hyper-masculine society featured in this saga and other Norse mythology, where women are warriors and hold roles of and as men. Much of the literature about Brynhild and other shield-maidens has been lost, but women played masculine roles as gods, warriors, and valkyries; they often were supernatural figures that played roles in fate, especially those in battle. While it is undebatable Brynhild is female, she acts as a man when she is fighting wars and wearing armor. When Sigurd first finds Brynhild, he sees “a man lying there asleep, dressed in full armor” (Byock 67, emphasis my own). In the text, the woman’s identity is constructed as one of the wife and child-bearer, not the masculine warrior identity that Brynhild

\textsuperscript{6} One of the main motifs of the saga is the interplay between Sigurd, the ultimate male warrior-king, and of Norse society, and Brynhild, his female match in warrior prowess. One major tragedy in the saga lies in the fact that they could create a great dynasty as a couple, yet everything falls apart. This could be partially due to the fact that once married, a woman could no longer be a shield-maiden due to rigid gender binaries of the society.
has as a shield-maiden. Her world presents a binary where the two identities are mutually exclusive, a world where Brynhild pushes aside her gender in order to be a warrior. After believing she is a man due to her armor, Sigurd removes her helmet to discover that she in fact a woman. He also discovers that her armor is “so tight that seemed to have grown into her flesh,” (Byock 67) and he slices the armor off of her. The state of her armor is a reference to Brynhild’s identity as an overachieving warrior. When Sigurd slices the armor off of her, he is effectively slicing off Brynhild’s warrior identity that has grown too tight because she has gone too far. She has surpassed her gender category and has gone too far in her role as a warrior, and thus her armor has become almost her skin. When Sigurd removes her armor, what is left is her identity as a woman, which means that now she is cursed to never again be able to truly inhabit her desired identity as a warrior and now must marry. She thereby has to become the antithesis of the warrior because in the world presented in The Saga of the Volsungs, child-bearing wives cannot also be warriors. While other, fully male warriors in the saga would be punished for similar infractions by Odin via death in battle, Brynhild’s punishment is a stripping away of her warrior identity. Brynhild’s punishment through her gender is a concession that while she is a warrior, she cannot be fully masculine.

Brynhild's loss of her primary identity as a formidable god-defying warrior and subsequent relegation to the feminine role of a wife cause her to go mad, therein revealing the problem with the gender binary’s expectations for the shield-maiden. Brynhild counters Odin’s curse by saying that she vows to “marry no one who [knows] fear” (Byock 67), however she is also cursed to never again have victory. Similar to Middle-earth, the events of Brynhild’s world are structured by prophecy. Brynhild does get to marry Sigurd, the man who does not know fear, but because she is doomed to never have victory, the marriage is a trick where Sigurd is
disguised as Gunnar, a man who does know fear. As a result, Brynhild chooses madness instead of wifehood and childbearing because she can no longer be a shield-maiden. However, Brynhild does not have much of a choice other than wasting away in her bedchamber and then dying because it is impossible for her to regain her old identity as shield-maiden as she has become a wife and is barred from her identity by Odin’s decree. She chooses to end her life by stepping onto the funeral pyre with Sigurd, her chosen husband, in a move very similar to Denethor’s death. Overall, Brynhild’s identity as a shield-maiden leads to her downfall through her lust for blood and power and she is presented with the binary where she cannot be both a shield-maiden and wife, leading to her specifically female version of the warrior’s downfall. Brynhild’s fate reveals the space and dynamic that gender has in the shield-maiden identity. Her gender becomes the means for her downfall, but not the reasoning. Her status as a formidable yet inescapably female warrior provides the questions and foundation for how gender and warrior status interact in Eowyn’s identity as a noblewoman and a shield-maiden. Instead of being the means of her downfall, Eowyn uses her gender paired with her desire to fight for her world’s future as her weapon to make a positive impact upon the battle between good and evil.

The results of Grendel’s mother’s and Eowyn’s fights as female warriors shows two different trajectories for the warriors in general and comment upon what each text achieves with its conclusion. Grendel’s mother is defeated by Beowulf because it is destined for Beowulf to win the fight and reach his peak as an Anglo-Saxon warrior king. Beowulf has God and destiny

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7 Brynhild’s madness has also been read in scholarship, such as Jenny Jochens’ Old Norse Images of Women, as a response the fact that her marriage chaos makes her an oath-breaker. She is made an oath-breaker because she swore to Odin that she would marry no man who knows fear, but because she is tricked into marrying Gunnar, she breaks her oath. This oath is tied into her warrior identity because it was designed to be an impossible requirement, and if it proved possible, she would find a husband who was her match in interests and abilities. Therefore, Brynhild’s loss of her shield-maiden identity is the major factor in her madness because she loses a part of herself, embodied by the slicing off of her armor that has almost grown into her skin.
on his side, so naturally he defeats Grendel’s mother. Hrothgar, king of the Danes, is the first to say that Beowulf was sent by God to defend him and his people from Grendel; Heaney’s translation says that “Holy God…guided him here/to the West-Danes” (Heaney 381-382). The narration in the poem supports Hrothgar’s view by stating that “the Lord was weaving/a victory on His war-loom for the Weather-Geats/through the strength of one they all prevailed” (Heaney 696-698), showing that the fate of the battle was predetermined by God in Beowulf’s favor. Beowulf has to win and kill Grendel’s mother, even if she is a female warrior that matches Beowulf’s prowess and she has the obligation to avenge her son’s death. This trajectory is the standard fate of warriors, where all warriors have to die in combat if they truly are warriors. Grendel’s mother dies in combat, as does Beowulf later in his life, because that what ultimately happens to a warrior. Death by combat is the necessitated fall of the warrior’s life because all warriors are mortal so they all grow older and weaker with time.

In contrast, Eowyn is able to transform into a new being after her battles as a shield-maiden and supplant the binary where she cannot be both a wife and a shield-maiden. Eowyn’s career as a warrior ends quite differently from Grendel’s mother’s and Brynhild’s because the values of fluidity and healing are an intrinsic part of the honor-shaped world that Tolkien creates, revealing a solution for the warrior’s normally problematic reintegration into society after his/her great deeds have been accomplished. After transforming into a warrior, Eowyn is further transformed through growth and love. As described by Nancy Enright in “Tolkien’s Females and the Defining of Power,” Tolkien’s “eucatastrophe that overturns the strongest evils in the world” is the result of “female characters who lay down their power in Christ-like renunciation” (106),

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8 Norse mythology goes even farther by having warriors who die in combat go to a special version of warrior heaven called Valhalla, where they will eventually fight the last battle at Ragnarok.
where humility is the ultimate savior of the world. Essentially, the warriors that were required to fight evil and save the world from ruin have to change to become world-builders in order for the world they saved to proliferate. While it may be read that Eowyn is returning to a stereotypical female role as gentle healer, it is important to note that the entire world undergoes this transformation. Enright describes how Eowyn’s healing and transformation is “intimately linked with the healing of Middle-earth because of the destruction of the Ring” (Enright 105). After the Ring is destroyed, the world has be healed the same as Eowyn has to be healed after her fight against the evils of Sauron. The Shire is restored after being destroyed by men and has a blossoming harvest once it is rebuilt, Aragorn becomes the primary healer of the wounds inflicted by the Nazgul, and the slaves of Mordor are given the land they were enslaved on to regrow. Eowyn, congruent with Aragorn and the rest of Middle-earth, undergoes a transformation from the desire for “power and domination” intrinsic to the warrior role, to a new role where “the desire to heal and help things grow” (Enright 105) is dominant. Eowyn says that she “will be a shield-maiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy in the songs of the slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren” (Tolkien 943). Eowyn is essentially laying down the mantle of the warrior and choosing to heal and help things grow, so that world can recover from the barrenness that Sauron and the Ring have created. The exact warrior code and the lust for power that goes with it is exactly what the Ring represented and in order to recover from its destructive effects, Eowyn must become a healer and nurturer instead of a warrior. The warrior is no longer needed because warriors destroy and dominate, rather than rebuild. The war is over with the destruction of the Ring and the gluttonous desire for domination and control that is emanates, so the world must be rebuilt and regrown as Eowyn desires. In transforming from a warrior into a nurturer and healer, Eowyn is no longer a warrior,
therein revealing that the solution to how a warrior can reintegrate into society after the
domination and power intrinsic to being a warrior must be lost. Warriors can save the world from
doom and destruction, but they cannot live in the world by their original interests and standards
because the world cannot be at war forever; eventually it must be rebuilt instead of destroyed.

Eowyn’s fluid identity as both Dernhelm, the male-modeled warrior, and Eowyn, the
princess and woman, followed by her transformation into an agent of growth and a nurturer of
the world, show how overall the fantasy genre in *The Lord of the Rings* is creating new, more
fluid identities for the warrior. Eowyn’s literary antecedents, Grendel’s mother and Brynhild,
function in much more rigid categories that ultimately bring about their doom. Grendel’s mother
may be fearsome and a true warrior, yet her fate is to die in battle in her rigid category as a
sacrifice to augment Beowulf’s glory. Brynhild may have been an unstoppable shield-maiden
when she held that category, yet she could not balance her gender with her contradictory identity
as a masculine shield-maiden due to the rigid binaries in her society. Eowyn, as a literary
evolution rather than a simple refiguring, is able to hold a more fluid identity status. Tolkien’s
use of a fantasy world and his revitalization of old warrior statuses allows Eowyn to hold fluid
dual identities that work to her advantage and then allow her to further transform instead of die
with her shield-maiden identity akin to Grendel’s mother and Brynhild. Eowyn’s ability to defeat
evil stabilized by masculine ideologies comes from her very destabilization of masculine
identities. She functions as an exception to prophecies created around Middle-earth and uses this
to enact positive change. She is able to use her difference for a positive impact, when Grendel’s
mother and Brynhild were suppressed and defeated by the masculine ideological state.
Conclusion

Through an analysis of Tolkien’s revision of the warrior identity and his literary foundations for the warrior, we get a very solid picture of the nuances of the warrior identity. The comparison of Beowulf and Tolkien’s warrior-king Aragorn provides us with a view to how medieval warrior-kings functioned, how they achieved their status, and how and why they fall from greatness. Beowulf is the prototype of the medieval warrior, where he is from a direct royal lineage, he has strength and honor to defeat warriors, and he creates a dynasty that is untouchable. However, he pillaged all of his neighbors and amassed enemies along with wealth, so once he died his dynasty crumbled. Tolkien noted how this fall via mortality was a particular poignant piece of Beowulf’s status, stating how “death inevitable…[is] in fact the really dominant idea” in Beowulf (Beowulf and the Critics 110 emphasis Tolkien’s). In The Silmarillion, he describes humanity’s mortality as a gift from the elder god Iluvatar, one that lent meaning to the lives and days of humans because there was an end to life (Tolkien 316). Beowulf’s life, essentially, is made even greater because of the precipitous end to his dynasty and his life. This precipitous end also lends greater tragedy to Beowulf’s downfall because everything he achieved also has a precipitous end.

With Aragorn, we see how Tolkien uses Beowulf as a model for the warrior-king, but also evolves Aragorn’s identity in order to create an improved model of kingship. Aragorn is a king similar to Beowulf where he is anointed through blood to rule because he is the last of the ancient line of Númenórean kings, and he has the perquisite deeds to be a strong warrior-king. Aragorn, however, is a king that leads instead of fighting alone as Beowulf does, and he creates a strong community of warriors around him so that his dynasty and nation will not topple with his death. Aragorn’s model of improved warrior-kingship reveals how the modern fantasy genre is
able to rebuild ideas in a malleable space. Tolkien constructs Middle-earth around Aragorn, where his deeds and his existence are almost entirely created and supported out of prophecy. His participation as a warrior-king is intrinsically built into the framework of the landscape and culture. As shown through Aragorn, the fantasy genre is a space for the malleable evolution of the warrior-king identity where Aragorn is a leader and a healer in addition to a warrior.

The shield-maiden is a similar construction of the warrior in terms of warriors’ deeds, goals, and overt appearance. Tolkien evolves Eowyn, Middle-earth’s shield-maiden, from medieval literary antecedents of the shield-maiden in a similar way he evolves Aragorn. However, the shield-maiden has the conflicting factor of being a woman in addition to being a warrior. Gender identity creates a space where doubleness is necessary and important in the shield-maiden’s existence. Eowyn’s literary antecedents, Grendel’s mother and Brynhild, struggle with this gender identity issue and are ultimately brought down through it. With Grendel’s mother, her gender is not an overt issue because she is not a hero. Therefore her status as a female warrior is something relegated to the outskirts of her society, and she cannot contribute to her world in a positive way. Brynhild’s status as a woman and also a warrior becomes the means of her downfall, when otherwise she would have been killed in battle like the male warriors in her society. The hyper-masculinity present in her society that allowed her to be a nearly unstoppable shield-maiden is also the force that brings about her end through her femininity. These two examples of the shield-maiden still contribute much to the discussion of what constitutes a warrior. The fact that there are female warriors in medieval literature, even if they are doomed through holding that role, illuminates a potentially fascinating area of study that broadens the “aglaec” identity written about in Hennequin’s research on Grendel’s mother. It is an area of medieval literature that could shed light on the hyper-masculine societies that create
such warriors and the role that women in pre-Christian, pagan societies held. My study provides some insight into the roles that women may have held in Germanic warrior culture, but there is still more to be uncovered. It is a very large, somewhat unanswered question whether shield-maidens existed historically in an impactful way. Books such as Jenny Jochens’ *Old Norse Images of Women* can provide a historical and literary foundation to the scholarship for further study on the shield-maiden in medieval society. My research helps to elucidate the ways that the shield-maiden is interpreted both in medieval texts and modern texts, providing a new avenue of comparison by bringing more modern concepts of medieval roles into the conversation.

Eowyn is a shield-maiden but she functions comfortably in that role. Her gender is no longer a participant in her fall. She creates her doubleness as a noblewoman and a shield-maiden that effectively breaks down the hyper-masculine state, as represented by the Witch-King of Angmar. In this way, Eowyn triumphs through her dual identity because it allows her to defeat evil. She is an exception to the normative warrior and therein uses imagination and transformation as her weapons to help save her world. Frodo’s and Sam’s role in the saving of their world is similar to Eowyn’s role and is very much built upon the chivalric romance, another warrior culture tradition in medieval literature. The rise and fall of King Arthur’s court and the Christian values it is built upon provides a similarly applicable frame to analyze the hobbits in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Sam especially holds a similar level of doubleness in his identity as a meek servant and a warrior to Eowyn’s doubleness as a woman and a warrior. The doubleness in Sam’s identity is used as a means to enact positive change upon the world by defeating evil the same way that Eowyn’s status does this. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* could especially provide a point of reference for further study, with its issues regarding identity and hierarchies between Gawain, the Green Knight, and King Arthur. Further study into this avenue of
expansion could shed light upon how Tolkien uses the idea of sub-creation in *The Lord of the Rings* to show his Christian faith because of the level of sub-creation used by Sam acting in the chivalric tradition to save Frodo and Middle-earth.

Through her complex identity of doubleness as both a woman and a warrior, we can see how the shield-maiden tends to exist both in and against the traditional hierarchies of her society. Tolkien’s creations in *The Lord of the Rings* is multifaceted in this way because it both upholds hierarchies and breaks them down. Middle-earth is very hierarchical and archetypical, especially shown through Aragorn’s status as an evolved warrior-king, champion of the people and the prophesied, sanctioned chain of events. But at the same time, Middle-earth requires fluidity and imagination to break down, expand, and reinvent identities from the old archetypes and ideologies. Eowyn serves as an exception to the hierarchy that gives the Witch-King of Angmar his perceived invincibility because no man can kill him. She uses her doubleness as a woman and a warrior to her advantage and consequently breaks down hierarchical barriers that control both ideology and identity. Unlike her literary antecedents, Eowyn’s doubleness and fluidity as a shield-maiden, noblewoman, and nurturer of the world is used as a positive force in her world. Eowyn’s breakdown of hierarchal and archetypal barriers and Aragorn’s simultaneous reinforcement and reinstatement of hierarchies and archetypes seems rather contradictory, but what both are aimed towards is the cosmic triumph of good over evil. Tolkien’s world is built upon this concept, the metaphysical battle between good and evil. Both Aragorn’s reinstatement of hierarchies and Eowyn’s simultaneous destruction of hierarchies are motivated with the desire to create a positive impact upon the world. Tolkien in “On Fairy Stories” describes how fairy stories end with a eucatastrophe, where the story concludes on a positive note through a joyous ending (Tolkien 60). Aragorn’s reinterpretation of the warrior-king and his newly reinstated
kingship helps to create a sense of joy. The transformation and doubleness that are inherent in Eowyn’s existence, created out of fantasy’s ability to reinvent via the imagination, work towards a constructed and deliberate eucatastrophe. Aragorn’s evolution into more stable warrior-king rebuilds the old hierarchies and Eowyn’s evolution of the shield-maiden role and subsequent transformation with her world that serves to break down hierarchies are both engineered to create Tolkien’s sense of eucatastrophe.

This is not a perfect eucatastrophe, however, because in many ways the world of Middle-earth is irreparably changed and broken. Eowyn is never quite the same after being touched by the terrifying darkness emanated by the Witch-King of Angmar. Magic is destroyed with the Ring and the last of the elves make their final pilgrimage out of Middle-earth to Valinor. Frodo, the Ring-bearer, is irreparably broken and has to leave the world he gave his life to save. Even Frodo’s faithful servant Sam has to leave, albeit after marrying and raising children for many years in the Shire. In this way, Middle-earth and its eucatastrophe is incomplete and therein more valuable through the contrast between positive outcomes and negative outcomes. One of the major criticism for Tolkien’s work is that it is consolatory; this is largely formulated through the eucatastrophe that forms the ending of The Lord of the Rings. However, because the conclusion of the story is not a complete eucatastrophe, it is not a truly consolatory ending. Tolkien creates a more nuanced, simultaneous fall and eucatastrophe by revising the medieval warrior’s identity. Eowyn and Aragorn represent a positive change and transformation in the warrior code into a more stable state of existence. However, their transformation in order to save the world from evil is not without cost. In this way, Tolkien is not only paying homage to and surpassing the pessimistic, inevitable fall of the medieval warrior, but also avoiding relegating his creations to
shallow simplicity. Tolkien is able to bring the medieval warrior into modern literature in a way that both celebrates and offers criticism on the role.
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