

Odsjek za anglistiku  
Filozofski fakultet  
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**DIPLOMSKI RAD**

**Representation of Women in J.R.R. Tolkien's and G.R.R. Martin's Epic Fantasy**

(Smjer: Književno-kulturološki: engleska književnost i kultura)

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Ak. godina: 2014/2015

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## **List of Abbreviation**

S - Silmarillion

UT – Unfinished Tales

LOTR – Lord of the Rings

GOT – Game of Thrones

COK – Clash of Kings

SOS – Storm of Swords

DWD – Dance with Dragons

## 1. Introduction

This paper will discuss various ways in which female characters are represented in contemporary epic fantasy, focusing particularly on J.R.R Tolkien and George R.R. Martin's works. According to Clute & Grant epic fantasy is “a long narrative poem which tells long tales, often incorporating a mixture of legend, myth and folk history, and featuring heroes whose acts have a significance transcending their own individual happiness or woe” (319). It will be argued that both writers use medieval literary tropes and subvert them in their own unique ways. More specifically, Tolkien uses them in order to recreate a mythological medieval story proper and that Martin uses the tropes in order to subvert them. Thus, Tolkien uses his characters as a means to an end, i.e. for him the telling of the story is the primary objective whereas Martin produces more fleshed-out characters and focuses on their relationships and lives, with the story itself being driven by them. This is further indicated by the narrator who is, as Chatman defines it, covert and authoritative, as well as omniscient, with a lot of narration and little dialogue. (212) On the other hand, in Martin, the characters are the focalizers of the story which means that the narrator is autodiegetic or homodiegetic, or in other words, the narrator's knowledge is limited to the character's knowledge (213).

This paper will, however, focus only on the female characters in both writers and the ways in which they are represented – from their appearance to the roles they play in the narrative. Firstly, it will discuss women who occupy more traditional roles, namely those of queens and romantic interests, and the ways in which those differ in the works of the two authors. Cersei Lannister, Daenerys Targaryen, (from Martin's *A Game of Thrones*, *A Storm of Swords*, *A Feast for Crows* and *A Dance with Dragons*) as well as Galadriel and Melian (from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Unfinished Tales*) will be used as main examples in this section, regarding especially their relationships to power, agency, male characters, and personal desires. This is followed by showing how female characters that occupy, or try to occupy, traditionally masculine roles are presented. This topic in particular will differ greatly between Martin and Tolkien and the characters discussed here, namely Brienne and Eowyn (from Martin's *A Feast for Crows*, *A Storm of Swords* and *A Clash of Kings* and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, respectively), while similar in many ways, will point to the questioning, and re-establishing the patriarchal world-view, respectively. Even though women are allowed to have power and influence in Martin's and Tolkien's work discussed here, in Tolkien's works that power and influence is allowed as long as they are using it in accordance to their position – a queen may have power, but only insofar as she supports the king's rule.

Thirdly, the section regarding a quest narrative will draw a comparison between Lúthien's quest in *The Silmarillion* and Arya's quest in *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, most notably in *A Storm*

*of Swords* and *A Clash of Kings*. Both female characters participate in the traditionally male quest to save a love interest and avenge their father. The different ways in which female heroism and nobility is presented by the two authors will be compared, and their efforts with the traditional medieval quest narratives will be discussed.

Finally, the focus will be on Sansa Stark (appearing in *A Game of Thrones* and *A Clash of Kings*) and the ways in which she is the point of greatest subversion of medieval tropes and expectations. As it will be argued, she is a character who acts according to the principles of a typical female character in a medieval story, with all the expectations and restriction that go along with it, and fails to reach any results in a world which should, by all accounts, reward her obedient behaviour. It should be noted, however, that she changes throughout the novels, mainly by becoming disillusioned by the society she finds herself in, which is why she begins to use the behaviour expected of her as a weapon to navigate and survive the world she finds herself in. Finally Sansa will be compared to Erendis, appearing in Tolkien's *Unfinished Tales*, who is likewise shown as using the rules of the given medieval society in order to gain power over her lord/husband, but fails and the strict rules of medieval romances prove to be unbreakable for her.

## 2. Women and Power

Tolkien's works, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* and *The Unfinished Tales* in particular, are characterized, among other things, by a certain lack of female characters. Donovan notes that “many readers have considered the paucity of female characters in J. R. R. Tolkien’s trilogy not only a disappointment but also a serious flaw in his work”(106) and that some critics have claimed that “Tolkien’s presentation of women represents a 'paternalism if not patriarchy [that is] unmissable” (127). In contrast, attempting to justify Tolkien’s portrayals of women, scholars like Crowe insist 'he was only reflecting his sources and his times”(106). However, while it is true that there is a noticeable lack of female characters, and especially those with agency who participate in the plot actively, it would be wrong to conclude that none of the women affect the plot in a major way. They are connected to both power and influence, and manipulate the course of the narrative by acting as repositories of knowledge. Drout claims that “while Tolkien has fewer female than male characters, and most of the females seem to be relegated to the home, these women are extremely powerful figures that play prominent roles in his novels. They are either equal, or superior, to the men in their lives”(711). To continue in the same vein, Donovan also notes that “the extraordinary strength of women characters in the trilogy [*The Lord of the Rings*] can be explained, however, within a context of specific relevance to Tolkien’s background – that of the medieval Germanic heroic literatures that played such a crucial role in Tolkien’s personal and professional consciousness”(107) and claims that “Tolkien’s Middle-earth fiction reflects 'dependence upon medieval developments of the motif and narrative type that preserves and highlights aspects of the tradition and at the same time extends them”(108). Tolkien uses medieval literary modes and characters in order to create a contemporary “version” of a medieval romance. He writes in the genre of epic fantasy, which is a combination of the fairytale, the epic and the medieval romance.

According to Frye, “the hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us are natural to him, and (...) violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established” (33). Discussing romance as a mode, Frye divides it into: “two main forms: a secular form dealing with chivalry and knight-errantry and a religious form devoted to legends of saints”(34) and in the case where “the religion is theological, and insists on a sharp division between divine and human natures, romance becomes more clearly isolated, as it does in the legends of Christian chivalry and sanctity”(35). Brown may be used to expand on this by his noting that

Medieval romance in general, and Arthurian romance in particular, I suggested, developed as a narrative system in which history and fantasy collided and

merged, each into the other, without apology, at the precise junctures where both history and fantasy could be mined to best advantage – producing a genre in which historical traumas, crises and pressures could safely be brought into discussion and explored in a medium in which pleasure, not anxiety, was paramount. (257)

Both Frye and Brown comment on the medieval author's connection between marvellous, or supernatural, and historical elements with heroes going on noble quests, in order to discuss pressing social issues of their time. Tolkien does almost the same thing, by using the above modes in order to create a mythology for England (Drout 69). However, he also employs the mode of the epic, which Frye defines as “the more artificial, or thematic kind, didactic poetry and prose, encyclopaedic compilations of myth, folklore, and legend (...) are fictional, the arrangement of them and the motive for collecting them is thematic” (54). Tolkien has an explicit purpose which is to create a mythology for England, and his writing serves to fulfil it.

Discussing medieval romance in particular, Brown uses the example of Malory's *The Death of King Arthur* to note that

English romance of the early fourteenth century, illustrates the investment such [popular] tales had in episodic narrative comprised of ‘highlights’ interspersed with more detailed moments of spectacular, quick-paced action. (...) There is no room for meditative speeches ventriloquizing the internal wrangling of characters with their consciences, or for long exegetical passages on the part of the narrator. The action is quick and dirty (349).

He continues by illustrating the conventions of the genre, regarding especially its continuous appeal to modern audiences by combining the then “popular and elite that fuelled the genre (...) Alliterative romances, for example, frequently exploit this dialectic, (...) at once bridging and deepening the gap between high and low”(345) as well as claiming that “the reciprocity of high and low that marks romance in medieval England arose from and depended upon an analogous range of shifting experiences and expectations”(347). In other words, it was the combination of low, popular culture with the high, more elite one that made the medieval romance popular in its time. In the case of epic fantasy, as used by Tolkien, the elements combined are those of the fairytale, indicated by the types of characters, as introduced by Propp, the epic, and the medieval romance proper. All of the above elements primarily concern male heroes/protagonists and the situation is somewhat different with female characters. Namely, the relationship between women and power, especially magical power, in epic fantasy has traditionally been interpreted in two ways: women

who used their power for their own purposes and those who used it exclusively to help others. The first usually occupied the position of villains in medieval romance narratives, while the latter assumed a more positive position. This may be associated with the fairytale because all characters, male and female, adopt certain roles and fulfil them more or less according to the conventions of a typical fairytale.

According to Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, characters perform certain functions, such as the princess and her father, the hero, villain, donor, false hero, dispatcher, and helper, but he also notes that one character may simultaneously occupy more than one position (80). In Tolkien's writing, a character may seem one thing and in fact be another, because the precise identity of the characters is not always immediately revealed. In Galadriel's case especially, she is an exiled princess, a donor, a helper, and a dispatcher. In other words, she uses her power in order to help the Fellowship, she gives them gifts and prophetic advice, and at the same time, prior to the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, she uses her power for her own ends in order to create a kingdom and disobey the Valar/gods. Propp notes that "the will of the personages, their intentions, cannot be considered as an essential motif for their definition. The important thing is not what they want to do, nor how they feel, but their deeds as such, evaluated and defined from the viewpoint of their meaning for (...) the course of the action" (81). That is to say that whether or not a character is considered positive or negative depends on his/her relationship to the hero. The same can be seen in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and *The Unfinished Tales* where, especially the female characters, are initially presented through their relationship with men, and only later are their own desires and plans revealed. Still, those who desire power for themselves are most often characterized as villains, and those using it to assist others, namely the hero and his quest, are considered positive characters.

There were exceptions to this rule, such as queens and noble ladies, who only had political power in theory and were rarely shown as making any greater decisions regarding the future of their kingdoms, people etc. In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and *The Unfinished Tales*, as well as in Martin's published *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, only female characters of noble birth could have power, political or supernatural.

Tolkien, for instance, almost exclusively writes about female characters of nobility, both Elvish and human, most prominent of which would be Galadriel, the Elven-queen of Lorien. She has been compared to many other literary, especially medieval, characters, but most often with Morgan le Fay. Downey notes Galadriel's:

associations with Morgan le Fay as characterized in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, noting the importance of both women's authority-in-absence (...)

Lakowski relates Galadriel to other fairy-queen figures in medieval works such as Sir Orfeo, as well as Titania in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* ('Perilously Fair'). (Downey)

The notion of a powerful and mysterious queen also draws from *The Death of King Arthur* where Galadriel may be compared to the Lady of the Lake. Both characters are described as beautiful, possessing magical powers and living away from the world. However, they participate in the narrative by influencing things from afar, either by their own agency or as a name behind other character's motivations. For instance, in *King Arthur*, the titular character has been betrayed by Morgan le Fay and is fighting a losing battle when “The Lady of the Lake was looking on, and it was a grief to her that such a knight as Arthur should be slain. So at the next stroke, she caused Excalibur to fly from the hand (...) and Arthur leaping forth seized it” (Cox and Jones, 103). Arthur remains unaware of the Lady's involvement, even though it is precisely she that determined the outcome of the battle and, consequently, saved his life.

In a similar vein, Galadriel, in *The Lord of the Rings*, is a distant being of whom few of the main characters know much about. The way she is introduced is reminiscent of the way the Lady of the Lake is represented in *The Death of King Arthur*. Initially, the Lady is presented as a positive character by Merlin and offers Arthur help in the form of an enchanted sword and a scabbard. However, later in the story, Balin, one of the knights of King Arthur, identifies her as “the untriest lady living, and by enchantment and sorcery she hath been the destroyer of many good knights” (Malory, 56, 65). This is echoed in Tolkien in the ways in which Galadriel is referred to by various characters:

Faramir cautions that 'If Men have dealings with the Mistress of Magic who dwells in the Golden Wood, then they may look for strange things to follow' (...) Eomer calls Galadriel the Lady of the Golden Wood (...) Galadriel epitomizes a figure (...) startlingly pure, and yet tainted with suspicion because she is both authoritative and elusive. (Downey)

Much like the Lady of the Lake, Galadriel is perceived differently by different characters, but unlike in the medieval narrative, her power is apparent even before she herself appears in the text. “I feel as though I were *inside* a song, if you take my meaning (...) You feel the power of the Lady of the Galadhrim” (Tolkien LOTR, 351, emphasis in the original). She is introduced before there is any mention of the Lord of the realm, heavily implying that she is the one who has political and magical power, thereby differing greatly from the usual representation of queens in medieval romances, which tend to emphasize “a wife's subservience to her husband (...) She will humble

herself towards him, in deed and word and by curtsying; she will obey without complaint” (Barnhouse, 86). Galadriel, however, openly contradicts her husband, but only in an indirect way, such as warning him to reconsider his words to the Fellowship by referring to him in the third person: “He would be rash indeed that he said that thing, said Galadriel gravely” (Tolkien LOTR 356). In this scene she is not only showing her disagreement with his ideas, but it also becomes clear to the reader that Galadriel is the wiser of the two, especially when her husband later retracts his words, further proving that Galadriel is not represented in a typically medieval manner. “I did not know that your plight was so evil (...) forget my harsh words” (356).

However, as Carter notes in her comparison of Galadriel and Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, “on first entry to their respective tales, then, both Morgan and Galadriel are overshadowed by partners who are more promising according to the (actually rather strict) narrative rules that promote males as more active than females” (Carter). Despite her having more power and wisdom, Galadriel is still embedded in a traditional female role, as a support to her lord and king and as someone who does not actively participate in the events depicted in the course of *The Lord of the Rings*. Her involvement, moreover, is most clearly noted when she herself is absent from the narrative. She gives the Fellowship various prophetic gifts which will later affect not only their lives, but also the narrative itself. In a further similarity to the Lady of the Lake, her gift to Aragorn is “a sheath that had been made to fit his sword. (...) The blade that is drawn from this sheath shall not be stained or broken even in defeat” (Tolkien LOTR, 374) while Arthur is given a scabbard that “wiles ye have it upon you, ye shall never lose no blood” (Malory, 57).

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel is best described as “the lady of the lacuna” (Carter) because her agency is visible only covertly, when she is influencing and directing things from the background, offering ambiguous advice, or subtly manifesting power. Despite this, she is arguably the most powerful woman in Middle-earth at that time, stating that she can overpower and resist even Sauron: “I perceive the Dark Lord and know his mind (...) he gropes ever to see me and my thought. But still the door is closed” (Tolkien LOTR, 365).

Furthermore, her having more power than her husband influences her physical appearance. She is described as a startlingly beautiful Elvish lady, due mostly to the fact that female beauty and power are inseparably linked together in Tolkien's narratives, particularly regarding any character coming from a noble origin. Interestingly enough, what is continuously, and most prominently, emphasized regarding her outward appearance are her less feminine qualities. She is “no less tall than the Lord” (Tolkien LOTR, 354), “her voice was clear and musical, but deeper than woman's wont” (355) and “tall and white and fair she walked (...) she stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measure, and beautiful beyond enduring.” (366) Female power is thus linked with beauty and masculinity, allowing the lady to be the more powerful partner. In other words, she is the tallest

and most beautiful in her greatest moment of triumph, when she resists the power of the One ring. Immediately following this, she “was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad” (Tolkien, 366). In losing her power, the very moment she proclaims that she “will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel” (366), she becomes completely feminine; she is now no longer an imposing figure, but a slender, beautiful, and vulnerable woman.

This is further exemplified in *The Unfinished Tales* where Galadriel shows more active agency and is described as “tall beyond measure even of the women of the Noldor, she was strong of body, mind, and will (...) even among the Eldar she was accounted beautiful” (Tolkien UT, 269). The masculine quality of height yet again takes absolute precedence over any other physical quality she possesses, perhaps in a way excusing her immense power and influence over men in the narrative. This arguably establishes her noble origin, because of all the Elves in *The Lord of the Rings*, she is the last Noldor alive and, consequently, of the highest level of nobility. Even her original names “Nerwen (man-maiden) (...) and Artanis (noble woman)” (298) signal the way in which she is different from the traditional representations of female characters. But, in order to be more firmly placed within the confines of a traditional narrative, “the name she chose to be her Sindarin name was Galadriel for it was the most beautiful of names, and had been given to her by her lover” (298).

Another important facet of her character is present only in *The Unfinished Tales* and *The Silmarillion*, and that is her pride. In Tolkien's works, there is no greater sin than the sin of pride and Galadriel is one of the few characters who manage to redeem themselves from it. She decides to join the rebellion led by her family and leave Valinor, against what is essentially the will of the gods, becoming an exile and falling under a terrible curse known as the Doom of Mandos. She does not, however, participate in the atrocities committed by her kin, namely the killing of other Elves, she “fought fiercely against Feanor in defense of her mother's kin” (Tolkien 297). Alongside pride, as stated in *The Silmarillion*, and later echoed in *The Unfinished Tales* as well, but absent from her first appearance in *The Lord of the Rings*, is her desire for power. In *The Silmarillion*, she is “the only woman of the Noldor to stand that day tall and valiant (...) for she yearned to see the wide unguarded lands and to rule there a realm at her own will” (Tolkien S 89) to later, in *The Unfinished Tales*, become “proud, strong, and self-willed (...) she had dreams of far lands and dominions that might be her own to order as she would without tutelage” (Tolkien UT 299).

Galadriel's descriptions only become more detailed, creating a character that definitively occupies the “lady of the lacuna” (Carter) position in *The Lord of the Rings*, but exercises her own agency in the preceding novels. Unlike her medieval counterpart Morgana's, Galadriel's representation, while still firmly embedded in the modes of medieval narrative tradition and coloured by Christian motifs, acts as a subversion of sorts because she explicitly wants power and is

not framed as a villain. Drout notes that “Tolkien’s depiction of women was influenced by several factors, most significantly his personal views on the roles and affinities of males and females, as influenced by his middle-class, Victorian, Roman Catholic upbringing, and the roles of women in the texts upon which his works were modelled”(710) referring to medieval romances such as *The Death of King Arthur*. In other words, a woman wanting to become the “king” and ruler of the land is not presented in a necessarily negative light. Contrasted with another queen, Melian, the subversion becomes more apparent.

Melian, a Maia, is equal to Gandalf in power and wisdom, but unlike him, she remains a largely passive character, absent as an active agent. She appears in the form of an Elf, and is mainly characterized as the wife of Thingol, a prideful Elvish king. In stark contrast to the way Galadriel is introduced, “there were none more beautiful than Melian, nor more wise, nor more skilled in song of enchantment. (...) she was a Maia of great power and wisdom; but for the love of [Thingol] (...) she became bound by the chain and trammels of the flesh of Arda” (Tolkien S 55, 281). Yet again the notions of beauty and power are connected, but the absence of any masculine qualities in her appearance signals her more subservient nature as a character. Not much is otherwise known of Melian and, accordingly, more so than Galadriel, fulfils the role of the “lady of the lacuna” (Carter), because she is not an active participant in any of the stories, preferring to keep her influence firmly on the side of her husband. Tolkien often describes her as whispering to Thingol, who usually disregards her advice, saying nothing, or perceiving truths much in the same way as Galadriel, but never really acting upon her knowledge. (Tolkien S 194) Furthermore, she is never shown as having a desire for power or rule, but maintains a strictly defensive position – her most notable use of magic being the so called Girdle of Melian, a magical barrier protecting her realm. (195)

Both of these characters, while subverting their traditionally assigned roles in a medieval romance, are still firmly embedded in its strict narrative type. The same cannot be said of Martin's female characters, especially regarding the notion of the “lady of the lacuna.” (Carter) This is mostly due to the different style of narration. In Tolkien's narration controlled by the omniscient heterodiegetic narrator, the plot takes precedence over the characters and, following the epic narrative tradition, all emotions and thoughts are clearly divided into good and bad. That is to say that no thought or word represented in Tolkien's writing is superfluous and the characters are used as devices to drive the plot forwards. This is especially true of the female characters that, though few and far between, never present obstacles to the man's journey/quest, but offer their advice and help, in the forms of gifts or prophecy, is of crucial importance. But it is nevertheless the man who must complete the journey and make the biggest decision.

In Martin, the situation is quite different. He subverts the form of medieval romance by using its framework and tropes, i.e. castles, quests, dragons etc., and then giving his characters a

very different and modern characterization. As Lowder notes:

on the level of narrative strategy, Martin employs historical and literary allusions and resonances, along with a deceptively open use of genre conventions, to help form reader expectations (...) Take them too much on face value, though, and you're in for a shock, particularly if your experience with fantasy is dominated by the widely known, consolatory works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, where the rightful king is the one who ends up on the throne because the world is, in the end, rational and moral (13).

The “consolatory works of J.R.R. Tolkien” refer to his adoption of the medieval tradition in which the good prevails over evil and the world order is re-established in the end. Martin's subversion, however, is primarily located within his characters, as is exemplified by his style of narration. The characters themselves are focalizers of the story and there is no omniscient narrative voice leading the reader through the story. This point of subversion is most prominent in his female characters because their desires, wishes and ambitions are usually the ones least explored in medieval literature. In other words, according to Antonsson and Garcia Jr., a woman is content with the place allocated to her in the narrative and if she is not, she is shown to be a villain, to have transgressed. This is true in Tolkien as well, but not so in Martin because he does not rely so much on medieval and epic traditions, but rather on more contemporary notions of fantasy making his novels seem more brutal and realistic (16).

Galadriel's desire for power, which is a point of subversion in Tolkien, is recognizable in Martin's Daenerys Targaryen and Cersei Lannister. Both were born into a lineage of kings and have a strong desire for power. In an interesting similarity to Tolkien's approach, Martin also uses the physical appearances of his characters to show their motivations and desires. However, while Galadriel's beauty and more masculine qualities excuse her desire to rule, Daenerys is described as having “long, silver-pale hair (...) it shone like molten silver, while the old woman anointed her with the spiceflower perfume of the Dothraki plains (...) the gown, a deep plum silk to bring out the violet in her eyes” (Martin GOT 23, 24). Her femininity is stressed repeatedly, mostly by emphasizing the clothes she wears, her eyes and her hair, leaving the impression of innocence and vulnerability.

This, however, is shown to be a performance of femininity in a world where she is not initially allowed anything else, and once free of the oppressive influence of the men in her life, her brother and her husband, she begins to make independent decisions and take advantage of the way she is perceived. The relationship between men and women in Martin's novels is more “realistic”, that is, it does not fall under the more medieval notion of “They love with a patient love, they

respect each other, and neither has *maistrye*, or superiority, over the other” (Barnhouse 85, emphasis in the original). This is an idealistic view of male-female relationships, and, especially in medieval literature, a good female character is one subservient to and helping the man. As previously mentioned, this is somewhat different in Tolkien, but in Martin it is non-existent due mostly to the fact that Tolkien writes from a deeply Christian, or more accurately Catholic position, as previously mentioned, and Martin does not. Women are, therefore, given a much wider breadth of characterization and motivations in Martin's novels. At the very beginning of *A Game of Thrones*, with Daenerys, this precise issue is addressed: “Dany listened to the talk in the streets, and she heard these things, but she knew better than to question her brother when he wove his webs of dream” (21). Similarly to the Galadriel - Celeborn relationship, Daenerys is the wiser sibling, but unlike Galadriel, she does not have the power to challenge her brother openly. It also puts into perspective the medieval romance situations in which a woman stays by her husband's side, even though she knows it is not “right”.

Furthermore, another echoing of medieval notions in Martin's novels is the element of gift-giving, present in both Tolkien and Malory as well. Martin's Daenerys begins her rule by giving weapons, a sword and a bow, to those willing to follow her. (Martin GOT 550) Unlike Galadriel and the Lady of the Lake, however, her gifts are not given to the men in order for them to go on a quest/personal journey, but because she wants to inspire loyalty in them. Following the death of her husband khal Drogo, his army is ready to disband and leave Daenerys, signifying the end of her political significance. However, she refuses to be left behind and, as she is preparing to enter her husband's funeral pyre, from which she will later emerge with three dragons, she says: “You shall have the great arakh that was my bride gift, with hilt and blade chased in gold. And you too I name my ko, and ask that you live and die as blood of my blood, riding at my side to keep me safe from harm” (550). Martin's characters are all given very modern characterizations, and Daenerys is no exception. While she is proud and wilful, much like Galadriel, she is also strong and powerful, but in different ways. When confronted with an egotistical slaver from whom she wants to buy a slave army, Daenerys betrays him by pretending to exchange her dragon for all the slave soldiers, only to eventually kill him as punishment for his crimes: “Dany swept the lash down as hard as she could across the slaver’s face. Kraznys screamed and staggered back, the blood running red down his cheeks into his perfumed beard. The harpy’s fingers had tom his features half to pieces with one slash, but she did not pause to contemplate the ruin” (Martin SOS 263). While Galadriel influences events from the background and exerts her influence mainly by giving prophetic advice, gifts, and banishing evil, she is never cruel nor does she participate in deceit of any kind. Her power is more subtle, contained mainly in her knowledge and ability to withstand the temptations of evil. Daenerys, on the other hand, uses her power very directly and does not operate in the background.

She is in charge of an army and actively participates in the wars connect to her. She does not give prophetic advice, or advice of any kind, but occupies the position of a conquering war-lord. She is also often connected to violence and aggression, whereas Galadriel presents peace and wisdom.

What represents a clear nexus between Tolkien's Galadriel and Martin's Daenerys is that they both represent parts of an old, dying world. Both women are the last of their people, and neither can have any more offspring to reinvigorate their respective family trees. Their physical appearances are striking and markedly different from those of other women, and they enjoy a privileged position in the narratives: Galadriel being among the wisest and oldest in Middle-earth and Daenerys having three dragons. Returning to the "lady of the lacuna" (Carter) characterization, it does not really exist in Martin's novels because women are given a voice through their focalization of narration. Daenerys would be the character that comes closest to this because, unlike all other female rulers in the novels, she is the only one set apart, both geographically and politically. As far as most of the other characters are concerned, she is a legend, a rumour and her power/influence is discussed and felt only in her absence, or by characters that have little to no political power. Daenerys herself is, of course, aware of her own plans, thoughts and feelings, but the other characters, especially those most powerful in Westeros, one of the four known continents in Martin's novels and the place where the majority of the plot takes place, are, for the most part, unaware of her existence. It is not until *A Storm of Swords* that any other main characters even seriously consider her a threat and it is not until the final published novel in the series, *A Dance with Dragons*, that she has exerted influence, albeit unknowingly, even in the Seven kingdoms. Looking at Carter's description of Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain*, "Morgan remains a stranger: as such, she can be blamed as agent so that the males can bond more effectively. Then we hear nothing more about her" (Carter), Daenerys only fulfils this role partially. She does not necessarily "work the gap" (Carter) but she definitely acts as a motivating force for characters that have not interacted with her. In the subversion of this particular trope, Daenerys functions as a simultaneously active and passive character because, while she definitely pursues her own ambitions, there are events she is influencing that she herself is not aware of. In the city Volantis, a place which Daenerys does not count on as a possible ally, the readers are introduced to an old slave widow who tells Tyrion, one of the main characters, how the slaves are waiting for Daenerys, who has become known as a liberator of slaves, and are prepared to fight for her. "You want to be gone from here before the tigers come. Should you reach your queen (...) tell her we are waiting. Tell her to come soon" (Martin DWD 305).

But what is perhaps most interesting in the case of Daenerys, and in all of Martin's female characters as well, is that there is no punishment for any of their actions. Daenerys is "allowed" to become a warlord and start conquering "with fire and blood" and at no time is she condemned for

any of her actions. This is mostly due to the characters themselves being the focalizers, but it also serves to create a different perspective of epic fantasy, where the clear distinctions between good and evil still exist, but the characters are allowed to operate in a moral “grey area”. This is best exemplified by Cersei Lannister, one of the most controversial characters in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. She is also a point of tension in the novels, especially when it comes to conforming to traditional gender roles because she is simultaneously defined by and aware of her need to conform. According to Frankel, “Cersei, who dresses in elaborate silken gowns, goes on and on about how she should have been born a man, and seduces various men around her (...) [she] firmly believes that 'a woman's weapon is between her legs'” (72, 75). Cersei is painfully aware of the limits imposed upon her because of her gender and, although she serves mainly as an antagonist in the story and does not have a narrative voice until *A Feast for Crows*, she is given prominence by her refusal to obey the medieval hierarchy of power. However, she is still firmly placed within the confines of her femininity and is shown to be unable to meet the requirements for successfully fulfilling the masculine role of the ruler/king. But, she does emphasize the unfairness of the traditional gender roles and brings attention to the limits imposed on women.

As Frankel continues, “medieval women had few options, and Martin's women take full advantage of their world as warriors, healers, mothers, and more. (...) Queen Cersei (...) had to learn how to cope in a world where [she] doesn't have most of the advantages in terms of gaining power” (76). Cersei is the very antithesis of the “lady of the lacuna” in that she refuses to be removed from the political scene, she refuses to exert her influence anonymously and from the proverbial backstage. Unlike Daenerys, she does not have magical dragons or a mysterious lineage, she has already given birth to sons and, as far as medieval politics are concerned, she has done her duty. As her uncle says, she is expected to “take [herself] back to Casterly Rock. For half a heartbeat, Cersei could only stare at him. 'I am the regent.' -You were. Your father did not intend you to continue in that role. He told me of his plans to take you back to the Rock and find a new husband for you” (Martin SOS 1187). The woman's political power is thus defined through her husband. This particular element is true in the epic fantasy of both writers. Namely, Galadriel becomes the ruler of Lorien through her union with Celeborn, Daenerys is expected to marry in order to continue ruling Mereen, and Cersei is a pawn used by her male relatives to gain and shift political power. The only difference being that in Martin, this division of power is repeatedly addressed as unfair and biased, whereas in Tolkien it is not questioned and is accepted as a given rule.

### 3. Warrior Women

Another way in which female characters are represented in the two authors is as warriors. Women who have political or magical power, as is discussed above, are politically strong and have armies under their command, but do not themselves participate in combat. Éowyn in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and Brienne in Martin's *A Feast for Crows*, *A Storm of Swords* and *A Clash of Kings*, are the two most notable female warriors, and the ways in which they are represented differs in everything except their connection to the medieval concept of chivalry. Dyer defines chivalry as “a standard for behaviour, often professed to originate in the codes of medieval knighthood, that requires self-abrogation and self-sacrifice from a privileged man in defense of the powerless and disadvantaged, who are typically- even characteristically, women” (341). The problem of female warriors, or knights, becomes apparent immediately since its very definition implies a completely masculine position, firmly framing women in the position of a “damsel in distress” with a male hero coming to save them.

This is greatly subverted in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, especially through Brienne. Interestingly enough, of all the different and numerous female characters in Martin's novels, Brienne is the one to cause the most tension. Her usurping traditionally the most masculine position available, that of a knight/warrior, and then being superior to other men, is an almost unforgivable act. However, it is only unforgivable in the eyes of the other characters, but not through the narrative itself, unlike Éowyn who is narratively condemned for her desire to be a warrior.

To begin with Brienne, she is first introduced through the eyes of other characters and only later gets her own voice, i.e. point of view in the books. She is immediately described as ugly, possessing unfeminine qualities, “the hair beneath the visor was a squirrel's nest of dirty straw, and her face...(…) her features were broad and coarse, her teeth prominent and crooked, her mouth too wide” (Martin COK 215). Her ugliness is a character trait that will remain with her throughout all the novelistic series. Like the opposite of Galadriel, Brienne has to renounce her femininity in order to successfully occupy the masculine space. This is most visible through the eyes of other characters, namely Catelyn, who embodies the traditional view of gender roles. Brienne is first presented through Catelyn's point of view, which must be taken into consideration because Catelyn herself asks ironically: “Is there any creature on earth as unfortunate as an ugly woman” (215)? Therefore the first impression of Brienne given to the readers is coloured by a focalizer who is firmly embedded in the patriarchal world order, and is motivated by pity for the woman who cannot fulfil her role in society – marry, have children, and secure political ties between different Houses.

Brienne herself, in later novels, is most prominently characterized as motivated by her wish to be a knight. When she wins a tournament hosted by the pretender king Renly, she may ask

for anything as her prize and she chooses “a place among your Rainbow Guard. I would be one of your seven, and pledge my life to yours, to go where you go, ride at your side, and keep you safe from all hurt and harm” (215). She is a warrior first, despite Catelyn's insistence on a more romantic motivation, i.e. Brienne's unrequited affection for the pretender king Renly. Of all the characters, male and female, Brienne embodies the most medieval concept of knighthood. As Dowling notes, “the heart of the ancient chivalry lay in the voluntary submission of strength to weakness, the emblem of such submission being the knight's service to his lady” (112). In this case, a knight's service to *her* lady, because Brienne eventually pledges loyalty to Catelyn and, unlike other Martin's characters, remains true to it. She is shown as a “true knight”, helping the weak and following through with her promises, much like a knight from a medieval romance might do. This becomes even more apparent when Brienne is presented through her interactions with Jaime, who is actually the Knight of the Kingsguard and is familiar with both the literary/romantic version of what a knight should be, and the reality of the knights (all men) around him. He recognizes Brienne as a warrior by giving her “a sword so fine [that it] must bear a name. It would please me if you would call this one Oathkeeper,” (Martin SOS 684) which creates a narrative space in which she can operate with slightly more freedom, go on quests, and save the Stark daughters. He, effectively, makes her a knight by giving her the sword, and grants legitimacy to her prowess in combat. As Vaught comments, she “is Jaime's 'morality pet,' a living embodiment of the noble knight Jaime should have been” (67). In other words, Brienne's knighthood is thus justified, firmly establishing her as a kind of a role-model for an ideal knight. The tension contained in her relationship with Jamie may be understood in terms of, according to Dyer, “men asserting that they and others like them (of their class, their nation, their race, and so on) are especially qualified or inclined to protect women (...) What is intriguing nonetheless is how troubled, convoluted, and contradictory the fictional working-through of these claims can be” (341).

Hence, Brienne is the prototypical model of a knight in every aspect save her gender, which strongly subverts the patriarchal and masculine medieval culture because she is shown as superior to other knights, and as someone who blatantly rejects the social position allocated to her. According to Spector, “she is a woman who moves through the world, having taken for herself most of the attributes of male power” (106) as well as “adopting the trappings of masculine power even though it makes her a pariah and the butt of jokes. Her power is blunted both by her own self-loathing and the approbation of the culture around her” (110). Going back to the rejection of femininity, something both she and Éowyn have in common, Brienne is always shown as aware of what society expects of her, and aware of how it sees her, especially regarding her physical appearance. The problem of gender is made particularly visible by putting traditional notions of masculinity and femininity to the forefront, and constantly questioning them. As the narrator claims,

“for a woman, she was huge. Freakish was the word she had heard all her life. She was broad in the shoulder and broader in the hips. (...) Her chest was more muscle than bosom. (...) She did not need to be reminded of any of that” (Martin FFC 48). Furthermore, Brienne is narratively not a lady to the extent that every time she interacts with the traditionally feminine side of the medieval culture, be it wearing a dress, dancing or romance, she is shown as awkward, out of her element and somehow “wrong” (Martin SOS 675). In other words, her complete rejection of femininity, going as far as preferring to be referred to as *ser*, is necessary for her to be a successful warrior/knight.

In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, a similar situation may be recognized in the character of Éowyn who, as Giovanni notes, “defies her male relatives and rides to battle with her male comrades anyway. In fact, she is the one who deals the mortal blow to Sauron's most powerful minion, the Witch-King of Angmar” (12). Unlike Brienne however, Éowyn is described as fair and noble, with all the epithets usually ascribed to women. She is openly against the established social order, where men fight and women wait helpless, and is one of the very few voices raised against the patriarchal order in Tolkien. Even though her position calls for a review of traditional gender roles, she is still claiming loudly that “your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your place is in the house. But when the men have died in battle, you have the leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more” (Tolkien LOTR 662). She is still framed as an unhappy and rather naive woman, unjustly attacking and questioning the wisdom of her lords/elders, mostly Aragorn's.

In stark contrast to the way Brienne is represented, Éowyn is greatly defined by her femininity, and “cold beauty”, making Faramir think “that her loveliness amid her grief would pierce his heart” (809) and the first thing prince Imrahil sees is “her beauty, though her face was pale and cold” (712). Physical appearance is the most dominant and often the only feature other characters focus on in regard to both women. Brienne cannot escape her ugliness any more than Éowyn can shun her beauty and tragedy. Even after killing the Witch-king, in the context of her being a war hero, Éowyn is not hailed as one who overcame great obstacles, nor is the position of women in society, especially women warriors, ever put into question. The only reaction given in the text is Aragorn's “Alas! For she was pitted against a foe beyond the strength of her mind or body” (731). The implication of that statement being that her gender is what makes her inadequate in battle, stressing her womanhood as a sign of weakness, despite the fact that she defeated one of the greatest evils in the story.

Unlike both Galadriel and Brienne, however, Éowyn is not shown as having any traditionally masculine qualities, and must therefore adopt a different identity, become Dernhelm, when she becomes a warrior. She adopts this masculine identity when she joins the host of Rohan in order to save the city of Minas Tirith, in one of the most important battles in *The Lord of the Rings* where the forces of Sauron are repelled and his second in command, the Witch-king, is killed. But

even then, she is described as “less in weight than many men, though lithe and well-knit in frame” (Tolkien LOTR 679). Even in her masculine guise she is not allowed size, strength or power usually given to men. Furthermore, this serves to immediately alert the reader that Dernhelm is somehow different from other men, that he is, to borrow Brienne's description, somehow “freakish”. As McBride remarks:

For Eowyn to play the role of warrior, she must complicate her life in a variety of ways. She must directly disobey a command of her father figure and king, and perhaps endanger her people by leaving them leaderless. She must give up her identity as princess, becoming instead Dernhelm. She must don men's attire, thus not appearing as a female warrior, but simply as a warrior. And in renouncing herself in these ways, she must cut herself off from her companions and loved ones, and accept a fell mood of utter despair. (McBride)

Unlike Martin's use of a female knight, Tolkien uses Éowyn in order to re-establish the traditional social order, which is inherently patriarchal and strict in its rules. The question of religion and the sin of pride are also implicated in Éowyn's character, because she is only allowed to question the narrative social order in the first place because she is prideful, sad, and angry. She cannot be a model hero, like Aragorn for example, because she fears “to stay behind bars, until old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire” (Tolkien LOTR 663). Her desire for personal glory, as opposed to the desire for the glory of the realm or, in Aragorn's case, reclaiming a title, condemns her as prideful. By the virtue of her gender, she is not allowed to be a warrior, even though her killing of the Witch-king of Angmar with the help of Merry, one of the hobbits from the Fellowship, is among the greatest feats of the whole battle, she is also not hailed as a hero. McBride notes that “the story of Éowyn becomes one of renunciation of her role as warrior” (McBride), which becomes apparent once she is placed within the Houses of Healing and her exclamation that “I cannot lie in sloth, idle, caged. I looked for death in battle. But I have not died, and battle still goes on” (Tolkien LOTR, 809) is met with pity from Faramir, who is both a gentle man and an experienced warrior, and in front of whom Éowyn feels that “though her words were proud, her heart faltered and for the first time she doubted herself. [He] might think her merely wayward, like a child” (809).

Her healing, both physical and mental, is also led by Faramir, who will later become her husband, and, according to McBride, it comes from “accepting the role her civilization demands from her as a woman: to be a beautiful, helpful, and cheerful companion to a man, essentially the same role she played as niece to the King of Rohan.” (McBride) Except, now that she is healed, she is happy in it, which “is a victory, not only for Faramir, but also for Middle-earth's civilization; an

unruly impulse to transcend prescribed gender roles has been successfully thwarted.” (McBride) Éowyn has thus been successfully “tamed” and brought back to the comforting and traditional societal norms, emphasized further in the text by the fact that she is a Shieldmaiden from Rohan, a more primitive and rural society, and he is a Steward of Gondor, the more urban place where most, if not all, of the knowledge of men is kept. (Tolkien LOTR 808) In other words, Éowyn is saved/healed only when she fully accepts and rejoices at the position the society has placed her in.

To draw a further comparison between the two women warriors, Éowyn can never be a successful warrior because the narrative simply refuses to accept it. Her desire to “usurp” the masculine position and fight in a war is framed as the action of a deeply unhappy, even wounded, woman who can only find fulfilment in marriage and the domestic sphere. Her heroic actions are never mentioned again, the narrative glosses over them, and the whole “incident” is presented as an exception to the rule, a mistake that is remedied once the traditional social order is firmly restored. According to McBride “Tolkien's depictions of females in combat suggest women simply are not suited for the task of warfare. Both their natures and their thought processes prevent them from fighting effectively” (McBride). Brienne, on the other hand, represents the exact opposite of this claim. Martin uses this character to subvert the notion of war and combat as merely masculine domains, and proceeds to show that her gender is not an obstacle, it is not even an issue when it comes to physical fighting itself, even though her womanhood is addressed repeatedly in different social situations. Moreover, Brienne's unhappiness stems from her trying to conform to the traditional social order, and she is only shown as happy when she is recognized as a knight. Following her days as a warrior, Éowyn, on the other hand, resumes the traditional, patriarchal role of a woman in medieval society, and finally finds happiness, through the healing given by her romantic partner. Brienne is likewise “healed” by her romantic interest, except that he removes her from the traditionally feminine sphere and legitimizes her place in the masculine world of warriors. Her love remains unrequited, but when she becomes the Knight of the Rainbow guard “Brienne of Tarth did not look unfortunate. Her smile lit up her face, and her voice was strong and proud” (Martin COK 215). Both female characters are shown entering the masculine sphere and the difference lies in the ways in which they interact with it. In Éowyn's case, she wants to be a warrior out of pride and personal tragedy and is ultimately healed by re-entering the domestic, feminine sphere and settling down with an appropriate husband. Brienne, on the contrary, is shown as unsatisfied by her social position, and as constantly breaking out of its confines. She wants to be a knight because she wants to do good, and she is not offered a romantic “happy end”. Her love remains unrequited, but she prioritizes knighthood over romantic attachments.

#### 4. Women and the Quest Narrative

Alongside warrior women, the medieval trope of going on a quest is also subverted. In both authors, women participate in quests in various ways, the most traditionally medieval of which would be Brienne's quest to save the Stark daughters. As Schultz argues, “the traditional quest involves a long journey and 'a precious Object and/or Person to be found and possessed or married' (...), the 'precious Object' is usually the hero's self, i.e., the hero's search is for his identity” (324) or, as Propp asserts

these tales [folk tales] proceed from a certain situation of insufficiency or lack, and it is this that leads to quests (...) a tale, while omitting villainy, very often begins directly with a lack: Iván desires to have a magic sabre (...) Iván sets out on a quest. The same may be said about the abduction of a bride as about the simple lack of a bride. In the first instance a certain act is given, the result of which creates an insufficiency and provokes a quest; in the second instance a ready-made insufficiency is presented, which also provokes a quest (20).

Brienne, in a very straightforward way, is given the task/quest of finding her “precious Person,” of retrieving that which is lacking/lost, and bringing Sansa back to safety while, simultaneously, becoming more true to herself and her identity as a knight. As is typical of quests, there is a reward promised upon the quest's completion but, because of the nature of Brienne's quest, that reward is the safety of Sansa Stark and the acclaim she will receive as a knight. However, this is not the point of the greatest subversion of the quest narrative because, as has been stated previously, Brienne is a character that almost completely complies with the traditional position of a knight, the only exception being her gender. The two characters that subvert this particular gender construct the most are Arya, in Martin, and Lúthien in Tolkien.

Lúthien is the character echoed in most of Tolkien's work, because she is “the most beautiful of all the children of Illuvatar” (Tolkien S 193) and because she possesses magical powers: “the song of Lúthien released the bonds of winter, and the frozen waters spoke, and flowers sprang from the cold earth where her feet had passed” (193). She is also shown as a morally strong and deeply honourable character, refusing to obey her father when he acts in pride rather than prudence, and choosing to do the right thing despite all odds being against her. Her physical appearance, her beauty, is, narratively, her biggest legacy – that and her decision to die for love. Benvenuto notes that she is “the protagonist of that old mainstay of poetry and legend, a doomed love affair between two apparently incompatible people (...) she is probably the single most important character in the fabric of Tolkien's mythology: her presence hovers in *The Lord of the*

*Rings*”(42). But Lúthien also participates in a traditionally medieval quest when her father orders Beren, her lover, to obtain a magical stone, a Silmaril, from the crown of Morgoth, the proverbial devil/fallen god, and the greatest evil in all of Tolkien's works. Much like Brienne in Martin, Beren accepts this with the full expectation of returning and reclaiming his prize/lover or dying in the attempt. This, as Lacy notes, is typical of medieval romances since “quests also constitute tests of those who undertake them: tests of their dedication, of their prowess, of their moral and personal fitness to succeed (...) quests (...) are invariably tests (...) [which] involve the knight's accomplishment or attempted accomplishment of something in particular” (116).

This time, however, Tolkien subverts the traditional quest protocol by making Lúthien actively participate in the quest itself, as opposed to simply waiting for the hero's return. Next to Éowyn, Lúthien is the character with the most agency, taking part in battles and various councils. She defies her father, though never directly. She “was silent, and from that hour she sang not again in Doriath” (Tolkien S 197) but when she sensed that her lover was in danger she “perceiving that no help would come from any other on earth, resolved to fly from Doriath and come herself to him” (201). She even escapes the prison her father puts her in, in order to prevent her helping Beren, but never in an openly aggressive way. While Éowyn fights using swords and shields, therefore forsaking her femininity, Lúthien never once reaches for a “man's” weapon. She possesses certain magical powers, contained in her hair and songs, and a magical cloak. What is most interesting, perhaps, is that her accentuated feminine qualities become necessary for the successful completion of the quest. Namely, her magic is contained in her hair, voice and clothes. She “escaped from the house of Hirilorn; for she put forth her arts of enchantment, and caused her hair to grow to great length, and of it she wove a dark robe that wrapped her beauty like a shadow, and it was laden with a spell of sleep” (202). She uses this magic to escape from various dangerous situations, including imprisonment, and to rescue her lover from the proverbial devil, Morgoth.

In a remarkable twist, she becomes a more active participant of the quest, and Beren spends most of the time hiding, imprisoned, or unconscious. More particularly, she sings “a song of great power” (205) and manages to overthrow Sauron almost single-handedly. She challenges him in front of his fortress, alone, except for the help of her animal companion Huan, and their united power, a combination of her magic, i.e. her singing, and Huan's strength, ultimately defeat Sauron. “Then Lúthien took the mastery of the isle and all that was there (...) and declared her power (...) But Beren came not (...) and Lúthien found him in mourning (...) so deep was his anguish that he lay still, and did not hear her feet” (206). As Benvenuto notes,

Lúthien is presented in the style of myth or fairy tale, with a strong emphasis on her looks and mesmerizing presence (...) Lúthien is evidently superior to Beren;

she could even be said to possess many of the characteristics of a divine or semidivine being: superhuman beauty, immortality, magical powers (41).

This correlation between beauty and power is typical of Tolkien, especially when it comes to women and power, and Lúthien, being the most fair, is naturally among the most powerful. Unlike Éowyn, however, Lúthien is not shown as being prideful or as overstepping her social role because, as is repeatedly stressed in *The Silmarillion*, her one desire is to be with her lover in a traditionally domestic and romantic sphere, as opposed to wishing to fight or obtain personal glory.

Despite her greater power and ability, she only ever appears as an assistant to the man, following him on his quest, and offering help and advice. She resists Beren as well, when he tries to separate himself from her, thereby openly resisting the traditional sources of patriarchal power and influence. Namely, Beren decides that the quest is too dangerous for her and is afraid that she might be killed, so he leaves her for her own safety, but she finds him and refuses to leave. After he tries to leave her for the second time, she returns again and challenges him by saying: “You must choose, Beren, between these two: to relinquish the quest and your oath and seek a life of wandering upon the face of the earth; or to hold to your word and challenge the power of darkness upon its throne. But on either side I shall go with you” (Tolkien S 208). Here she is rejecting the traditional protocols of the medieval quest not only by removing herself as a reward, but also by placing herself in a surprisingly modern position of an equal partner in marriage. Michel notes that, in Tolkien's view, “the tradition of romantic, chivalric love can be ennobling, its danger is that, having started as an artificial game of courting, it would finally turn into the enjoyment of love for its own sake” whereas it should be “women as they are, as companions in shipwreck, not guiding stars” (66). The intersection of love and adventure is undeniable in this case, especially since romance is presented as the motivation and aim of the entire quest. But instead of a single knight proving himself on the quest/battlefield, Tolkien creates a space in which the two lovers together decide to overcome all obstacles and collect the promised prize together, or, in other words, to claim it for themselves. Thingol, Lúthien's father, cannot give her hand away when the quest is over because she has robbed him of this power and decided to remain with Beren regardless of the quest's outcome. Despite her father explicitly giving the quest to Beren, in order to test his worthiness for his marriage to Lúthien, she proceeds to actively participate in deciding her own future. In other words, she refuses to be a pawn used by men, only there to “spark the romantic interest of a major male character” (Michel 55) or be used as a political tool by her father/king. Dyer notes that quests and the whole concept of giving quests to knights/warriors almost always “entail monopolizing the defense of women in order to serve men's interests” (341). Thingol wants a Silmaril, one of the only three magical perfect jewels made long ago in Valinor, Tolkien's equivalent of heaven, and

implicated in a curse which says that anyone who desires one of them for selfish reasons will be destroyed. Thingol's desire for the Silmaril is thus immediately indicative of his selfish and prideful desire, as well as additionally emphasizing his being wrong about separating Beren and Lúthien. Furthermore, he is willing to use his daughter as a kind of bartering chip in order to obtain the jewel, but Lúthien actively resists that.

Lúthien's silent rebellion only happens by omission, however, by her substituting parental for romantic love. She is narratively allowed to participate in Beren's quest mainly because she does not seek personal glory, and her desire for a romantic relationship is seen as preordained – she and Beren are “meant” to be together, and her father is seen as prideful and his opinion as wrong. Lúthien is thus featured in Tolkien's works as a great romantic hero since she succeeds in marrying Beren, and has the courage to choose death for love, as opposed to an eternity of separation. But the actual most heroic moment in the quest comes when she and Beren challenge Morgoth, the fallen god, and Lúthien

was not daunted by his eyes; and she named her own name (...) then suddenly she eluded his sight, and out of the shadows began a song of such surpassing loveliness, and such blinding power, that he listened perforce (...) All his court were cast in slumber, and all the fires faded and were quenched (...) Then Lúthien catching up her winged robe sprang into the air, and (...) cast her cloak before his eyes (...) he fell, like a hill sliding in avalanche, and hurled like thunder from his throne lay prone upon the floors of hell (Tolkien S 212-213).

She thwarts the greatest evil in Tolkien in the name of love, using no weapons other than her voice and clothes, and yet this story re-emerges in Tolkien, especially in *The Lord of the Rings*, as a predominantly romantic tale of sacrifices made in the name of love. Even once the quest is done and the Silmaril delivered, it is the beauty of the love-story and the pity for the heartbreak that moves the Valar/gods to give them a chance for a second life – and not the fact that they, or better said almost Lúthien herself, severely threatened and overpowered one of their own who has turned evil. For Lúthien, the quest becomes a kind of exercise in agency where she is allowed to reject her father's patriarchal authority in order to become the wife of another man. She does not remain a passive observer of events, only to be given as a prize to the winner, but proceeds to employ agency and to actively steer the course of the quest for her preferred outcome. It is interesting to note that the quest itself cannot be wholly disposed of; elopement is not an option, and the medieval convention must be respected. Also, once they return and the quest is completed, Thingol has no choice but to respect his own promise.

The convention of the quest combined with the notion of female agency, becomes most

obvious in the character Arya, from *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. She is not given a quest by any king/knight, nor does she join an already existing quest as an assistant/helper, but she gives the quest to herself, so to speak, and proceeds to do everything in her power in order to complete it. Unlike Brienne who is motivated by her own sense of justice and honour, and Lúthien, motivated by romantic love, Arya has only one purpose – to avenge her dead family members. This is impossible in Tolkien, especially for a positive female character, because it completely steps out of the medieval norms for women. Even in Martin this is somewhat rare because she is a child, and the only other character motivated as strongly by revenge is Oberyn Martell, who is a seasoned warrior and political figure. (Martin SOS 360)

A quest motivated by revenge is often present in the medieval tradition itself, but the subversion inherent in Arya's character is that there are virtually no male characters implicated in it. She wants to kill her enemies herself, as opposed to having a noble knight do it for her. To contrast, in Malory, for example, a typical revenge-quest proceeds thus: “Sir Uwayne bore himself as a good knight, for he avenged the Lady of the Rock against those who had robbed her of her heritage, and restored to her all her lands” (Cox and Jones 109) and even, going back to the Lady of the Lake who demands “the head of the knight (...) for he slew my brother” (Malory 64). Hence Malory is deeply rooted in the conventions of the epic, where bloodshed and revenge is the usual procedure when someone's pride has been besmirched. If a woman who belongs to the human race is unfairly treated, her only possibility of revenge is in finding a knight/warrior to do the deed for her. Elvish and other supernatural women can avenge themselves, even participate in quests, like Lúthien. Arya, a human child, somewhat falls within this trope when she saves an assassin who then says “This girl took three that were his. This girl must give three in their places. Speak the names, and a man will do the rest” (Martin COK 289). As opposed to a Lady giving a quest to a knight, Arya, who is technically a lady, though still very much a child, saves an assassin who now promises to murder three people of her choice. The assassin, Jaqen H'ghar, is not “behaving nobly”, in the sense of the medieval romance, even though he is keeping with his own specific code of conduct. That is, he is neither interested nor obligated to help her reclaim her heritage or avenge her father – he is only interested in paying his debt.

Jaqen's relationship with Arya may be compared to Catelyn giving Brienne the task of finding/avenging her children, and Brienne's dedication to her quest may be likened to, as Morgan notes, “Gawain's courage and fidelity to his word in performing his part of the bargain are flawless, or at any rate as nearly flawless as it is possible in this imperfect world to be” (271). Martin's medieval world is more imperfect than its traditional counterpart, but the meaning remains the same – Brienne approaches her quest with all the dedication and sense of justice she has, like a good knight, and is truly motivated by her desire to help a noble lady who has been wronged. Jaqen

H'ghar, the assassin Arya saved, has no such noble pretensions, and once his debt is paid he leaves, leaving only "a coin of great value (...) if the day comes when you would find me again, give that coin to any man from Braavos, and say these words to him - *valar morghulis*" (Martin COK 428 emphasis in the original). This coin will later prove to be a gateway to Arya's learning how to become an assassin and, consequently, enabling her to complete her own quest. Jaqen offers her a way to use her own agency, as opposed to influencing others to do things for her, and, once her training has begun "Each night before sleep, she murmured her prayer into her pillow. 'Ser Gregor,' it went. 'Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei.' She would have whispered the names of the Freys of the Crossing too, if she had known them. One day I'll know, she told herself, and then I'll kill them all" (Martin FFC 248). She desires to have enough power to do her own avenging, as opposed to finding a worthy knight to do it for her. However, as Spector notes, this is not without its cost: "When she ends up in Braavos in the House of Black and White, she is required to sacrifice all remaining vestiges of Arya Stark in order to gain abilities that will help her get revenge. She gives up her name, her family, and her possessions, only cheating a bit to keep her beloved sword" (105). Like all the characters discussed previously, in order for her to occupy traditionally a more masculine role, she must give up on aspects of her femininity or, in Arya's case, her identity. She cannot remain traditionally feminine and embody this type of role, and as is clear from the beginning, Arya "is bored by all things considered 'womanly.' She doesn't give a fig for sewing, music, or being pretty; she'd rather shoot arrows, learn how to fight with a sword, and play-fight" (Spector 104). Martin presents her as preferring more masculine activities and rejecting the facets of femininity, somehow allowing for her later characterization as an unforgiving assassin. In a way, her early preference for traditionally masculine activities foreshadows both her quest to avenge her family, and her training as a warrior and assassin.

However, she is not punished or hindered in her quest, and the only obstacles she encounters are more to do with the general plot of the story than with punishing her for her behaviour. Spector continues that her actions reveal that "her willingness to throw off her gender demonstrates her understanding of the workings of power in her world. She can do things as a boy that would be denied her as a girl" (105). Despite her rejection of femininity, she is still aware of her gender and all it entails for a medieval society. In other words, it is easier for her to get what she wants and to travel safer if she pretends to be a boy. Both she and Brienne reject their femininity, in a way, in order to participate in quests and fulfil their desires. Only by adopting more masculine attributes are they allowed to participate actively in the world. The situation is somewhat different when it comes to Lúthien because she remains completely and emphatically feminine throughout her quest, with constant emphasis placed on her ethereal beauty, as well as her magically imbued hair and voice. But her desire, unlike Arya's and Brienne's, is to find completion in a domestic

setting with her lover, and not to defeat a great evil or help save/obtain a famous jewel. All obstacles she encounters on the way are thus framed as obstacles to a happy marriage and love, and are ultimately incidental and unimportant to her as a character. She is singularly motivated by her love for Beren and, unlike another of Tolkien's active women, Éowyn, this “fight for love” is seen as an acceptable goal for a female character, even if it means going against medieval conventions of a quest.

## 5. Sansa Stark and the Lady in the Tower

Sansa is the point of the greatest subversion in Martin's novels because she is the quintessential medieval lady; she operates and exists in the world as if it were a medieval romance proper, filled with noble knights and fair maidens, where villains are easily recognizable and disposed of. As Cole notes, “the role of court lady that (...) Sansa so readily accepts” (55) is placed in an immediate contrast with her sister Arya's more tomboyish worldview, making Sansa appear, according to Vaught, “immature, selfish, and far too easily influenced by fantasies of wealth and ideal love. She has difficulty separating fantasy from reality, and her loyalty to those who love her is never absolute but rather is buffeted by the strength of the personalities around her” (65). While her behaviour is never judged, as is the case with Tolkien's Éowyn and Erendis, Sansa's decisions, mostly involving pleasing Joffrey and Cersei, are framed as naïve and childish. This is mostly due to the fact that she continually operates as though she were a character in a typical medieval romance.

However, as the story progresses, she becomes growingly disillusioned with this view because she is, for the most part, arguably the least productive character. She is helpless against the obstacles placed in front of her because she adopts the position of a typical medieval woman, the proverbial “lady in the tower.” Brett defines the notion as coming “from the courtly literature of the High Middle Ages. A young and beautiful noble lady is depicted gazing out of a window at knights riding forth to a tournament; she exists as a source of inspiration for the chivalric warriors, as a motivating force, but rarely has a personality of her own” (309). Essentially, this is Sansa's initial presentation in the books, with the exception that she has a voice of her own, her own focalized chapter, from the first book, *A Game of Thrones*, making her personality and her personal wishes prominent.

Medieval tropes are seemingly respected at first, when King Robert immediately states “I have a son. You have a daughter. My Joff and your Sansa shall join our houses, (...) This offer did surprise him. 'Sansa is only eleven.' Robert waved an impatient hand. 'Old enough for betrothal” (Martin GOT 34). Sansa is used as a political pawn without really being aware of it, and is even excited at the prospect. She grew up with the full expectation of marrying a prince and, once other characters, most notably Arya and Ned, notice that Joffrey is not the noble prince/knight she thinks he is, she is mocked and chided for her preferences. The issue of Sansa's naïve judgment of character reflects the medieval world in which women were brought up to rely on men. This becomes prominent when, immediately after Ned, a figure of patriarchal and fatherly protection, is killed “Joffrey reveals himself to be a sexual sadist. Sansa is stripped and beaten by Joffrey's bodyguards. Having his men perpetrate the abuse technically absolves him from direct blame for

hitting her, but it also makes the knights complicit in the assault” (Rosenberg 25). Not only is Sansa unsuccessful as a courtly lady, but the knights she placed her hope in are not the kind of knights she expected. There is almost a culture-clash inherent in her character, a meeting of courtly medieval romance and the “real,” or the “more realistic” world. Morgan notes that “beautiful ladies are drawn to the presence of great knights and by the same token such knights must learn to accustom themselves to the company of beautiful ladies” (266), which is completely subverted in Martin when the only knights, in the loosest sense of the term, to take pity on Sansa are Ser Dontos, a drunken Fool at the court, who is later revealed as being manipulated by Littlefinger, and the Hound, her former abuser loyal to Joffrey.

The relationship between the Hound and Sansa is especially telling of the subversion of this particular trope, because, while she is still the embodiment of a courtly lady, he is a knight in title only. But in her world, there are strict rules that must be followed:

She made herself look at that face now, really look. It was only courteous, and a lady must never forget her courtesies. The scars are not the worst part, nor even the way his mouth twitches. It’s his eyes. She had never seen eyes so full of anger. “I... I should have come to you after,” she said haltingly. “To thank you, for... for saving me... you were so brave (Martin COK 468).

She approaches him as a proper lady should, in order to mask her real emotional trauma at seeing him. Spector notes that “Sansa has been completely co-opted by Westeros’s patriarchal culture, and it is only later, with her father’s unjust execution and the ripping away of all her royal privileges, that she begins to see the truth behind the myth” (104). In this way, Sansa begins to utilize her femininity for subverting all social conventions she has been taught to comply with. Having been raised to believe in medieval romances, she is aware of the way others perceive her and starts to use society's own prejudices and assumptions against it. Frankel notes that “this emphasizes that the feminine role *is* a performance; women in society must become the characters men expect. (...) Sansa masks her true emotions before everyone. Both {Sansa and Ygritte} are hyper-aware of their roles as love interests” (73). In other words, Sansa becomes acutely aware of the role she is meant to play and proceeds to do her best to take advantage of it. She turns the courtly lady trope against itself, because everyone else only sees the caricature of who she is, which gives her the liberty to exercise agency and try to manipulate things her way. In this respect Frankel remarks that “the idea seems to be this: It is understandable that women would want to be men, for everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position. What is not understandable (...) is why a woman might flaunt her femininity, produce herself as an excess of femininity” (72).

Compared to Arya's position, that is her rejection of femininity and immersion in the traditionally masculine position in order to try and get power/vengeance, Sansa's explicit adherence to the traditionally feminine position becomes extremely prominent. However, both sisters do ultimately find themselves having more control of their lives/fate than before. Sansa is slower to achieve results, but her emphasis on femininity and seeming acceptance of traditional gender roles allows her to obtain, or learn how to obtain, political power otherwise denied to characters of her station. Vaught states that Sansa comes "under the tutelage of Petyr 'Littlefinger' Baelish (...) she has taken over the duties as female head of household at the Eyrie, and that she is learning much about the type of political intrigue Baelish favors. (...) she has the potential to keep walking, if she can keep herself grounded in reality" (65).

It is important to note that there are no characters like this in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and *The Unfinished Tales*, at least none that are allowed to succeed after attempting to use patriarchy's own norms against itself. Given Tolkien's literary sources, namely the medieval romance and epic, it is not surprising that he does not really include female characters who try to dismantle the patriarchal order. Once characters make fatal mistakes, like Sansa in Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series for example, they are not allowed redemption. Returning to the sin of pride, the only punishment for it is death, for male and female characters alike, and the moral division between what is and is not prideful behaviour is very clear in Tolkien – there are no characters in the so called "grey area". A character closest to Sansa is Erendis in *The Unfinished Tales*. She is also a noble woman used up and ultimately destroyed by the strict rules of the medieval romance. In short, she is expected to wait for Aldarion, her fiancée and later husband, while he fulfils his plans and desires of travelling as well as his, albeit accidental, absence of many years. The denial of her support for his plans is, as is typical in Tolkien, reprimanded early on when Erendis' mother scolds her for not sharing her husband's love for the sea and for not being understanding and supportive of his desire to travel: "A woman must share her husband's love with his work and the fire of his spirit, or make him a thing not lovable. But I doubt you will ever understand such counsel" (Tolkien UT 236). Mother's words reflect Erendis' inability to wait for him indefinitely. This is seen as an act of pride and is therefore punished, similarly to what happens to Sansa. Her initial selfishness, her choosing Joffrey over her family, is a mistake for which she will suffer physical and mental abuse. (Martin COK 462) But she is allowed to make her mistakes and her story serves as a cautionary tale rather than a story of punishment. Spector notes that "she fills the role of the traditional princess of medieval fantasy. But in assigning her that role, Martin is making a powerful point about the dangers inherent in fantasy: how fanciful myths hide—and perpetuate—a fundamentally oppressive social structure" (104). The situation is similar with Erendis in Tolkien, with the exception that her particular situation is used as an anti-feminist stance

and as supportive of the strict patriarchal culture inherent in Tolkien's literary world.

Initially, Erendis has the support of the people, even men, and Aldarion's behaviour is seen in a negative light, but only for as long as she remains the grieving, abandoned wife. However, she leaves her husband's house and moves away from the city, taking her daughter with her. She creates a space for herself, separate from her husband and his world, projecting her anger at Aldarion onto all other men in the kingdom. This is immediately condemned and her act of protest and disobedience is framed as an act of pride: "For Erendis would have only servants in her household, and they were all women; and she sought ever to mould her daughter to her own mind, and to feed her upon her own bitterness against men. (...) Other men did not come there (...) for to men there seemed a chill in the house that put them to flight" (Tolkien UT 248). She rejects the role appointed to her and in that rejection she is punished without any possibility for redemption. She says: "Will the King have me wait upon the quays like a sailor's lass? Would that I were, but I am no longer. I have played that part to the full" (249). Until her husband's return, people are ambivalent towards her, they sometimes seemingly understand her, but when reconciliation with her husband becomes impossible, she is shunned by everyone, and consequently becomes a solitary character. Her daughter is "a child of his own, rather that of Erendis, for all her schooling" (254) and "she had looked for some penitence, that she may extend after rebuke pardon if prayed for; he had dealt with her as if she were the offender" (255). She has raised her voice loudly against the given patriarchal social order and is therefore shown as prideful and diminished. Once Aldarion definitively understands that the marriage is practically over, and Erendis realizes that the king will not take her side in the argument with her husband, she remains separate in her all-female household and does not come back to the city. This is also framed as prideful because she should have demanded what rightfully belongs to her: to be treated in a manner befitting a queen, and not hide herself away and refuse to make amends with her husband. Aldarion himself, full of pity for her, comments: "She should have demanded that a great house be prepared for her, called a Queen's escort, and come back to Armelenos with her beauty adorned (...) all the Isle of Numenor she might have bewitched to her part, and made me seem madman and churl" (264). The similarity between Sansa and Erendis' situations is made more obvious by the way they survive them. Erendis has no choice but to die alone and away from her family because the narrative does not allow for anything else. In other words, she makes a mistake and by the nature of that mistake, the "betrayal" of her husband, she is not given a chance to repent. The medieval courtly culture she has relied on has betrayed her and there is no one to speak up for her cause. Similarly, Sansa:

truly believes in the rules she has been taught about her society and her place in it (...) the world around her constantly reinforces the notion that her own

“virtues” have given rise to her privileged situation. Yet those same traits make her incapable of functioning effectively, once those dreams are crushed and reality intrudes (Spector 104).

But she is given a chance to repent, to try again, to become more adept at dealing with the world she finds herself in, now that she is more aware of its rules and dangers. This particular ability is denied to all of Tolkien's women, because while they are allowed to become aware of the patriarchal society, they cannot act against it, which is in accordance with the conventions of the medieval genre. To put it differently, once the patriarchal order has been questioned and exposed as unfair or lacking, it needs to be quickly and efficiently restored, to the satisfaction of everyone except the “aberrant” women. In Martin, the oppressive social order is constantly exposed and criticized through his female characters, and especially Sansa who represents a victim trying to survive and relearn the rules of the world. Courtly romances have failed both of these women, but only Martin's Sansa has a chance of success as a character – Erendis is doomed to fail from the moment she refuses to submit to her lord and husband, the instance of patriarchal rule. In both situations the notions of courtly romance and the unquestionable happy end in marrying the romantic interest/knight/king is subverted and shown as unsuccessful and not always desirable.

## 6. Conclusion

As the discussion has shown, Tolkien and Martin use medieval literary tropes, in connection with female characters, to produce a very different effect. Tolkien uses them to create a medieval epic for England and to re-establish the norms of the medieval literature, epic and to a certain degree, courtly romance. While there has been some subversion of them in his narratives as well, especially regarding Lúthien and Galadriel, it is never as prominent as in Martin. Martin's characters read like modern people placed in a strict medieval society and their stories serve to show different perspectives on the conventions of medieval romances, especially concerning women. Taking into account both Tolkien's reliance on medieval romance and epic, and Martin's more contemporary approach to fantasy, Martin's characters tend to be more obviously subversive of medieval literary tropes because they are given their own voices in the text, they are the focalizers of their stories, and the reader is at all times aware of their interpretations and reactions of the social positions they inhabit, or aspire to inhabit. They are allowed a wide breadth of characterization, and are not narratively predetermined to be either "good" or "bad". In Tolkien the situation is different because his narrative style is authoritative and heterodiegetic, the characters, women included, are immediately separated into positive and negative, without any real allowance of ambiguity. Furthermore, in Tolkien the reader is comfortable knowing that the strict rules of medieval literature still stand and s/he knows what to expect, whereas in Martin the medieval conventions are subverted and the reader cannot rely on them to predict or better understand the story.

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the ways in which female characters are represented in J.R.R. Tolkien and G. R. R. Martin's works, and the ways in which they subvert the conventions of medieval romance. The paper first discusses the relationship of women and power and the ways in which their appearance and narrative representation are connected to their agency in the story. This is followed by the analysis of warrior women, and the ways in which they occupy traditionally male spaces, as well as their subversion of the medieval quest narrative in which both authors remove the women from their traditional positions and make them active participants in quests. Finally, as the point of greatest subversion, the character of Sansa Stark is used to show how the rules of medieval courtly romance are both insufficient for the success of the character and, at the same time, their idealism and strict social order is questioned. The aim of this paper is to show that both authors subvert medieval literary tropes, only to produce a different effect. Tolkien uses them to create a mythology for England which is greatly embedded in the forms of medieval romance, epic and fairytale. Martin, on the other hand, uses medieval tropes in order to subvert them and create a narrative in which the reader does not know what to expect. He turns the conventions against themselves.

**Keywords:** Tolkien, Martin, medieval romance, *The Lord of the Rings*, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, female characters