



# MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Gaslight, Gatekeep, Galadriel.  
The 'Strong Female Warrior' Trope in (Post)feminist Media.

verfasst von | submitted by

Katharina Geilersdorfer BA

angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2024

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree  
programme code as it appears on the  
student record sheet:

UA 066 870

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree  
programme as it appears on the student  
record sheet:

Masterstudium Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Achim Hermann Hölter Privatdoz. M.A.

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Dr. Achim Hermann Hölter, for his continued and unwavering support, his comments and insights, and his open ear for all my problems, big or small.

Secondly, I want to thank all my friends for their encouragements, their many hours of proof-reading, tea, and kind words.

Lastly, my thanks go to my parents, who placed a large, red book into my hands and opened my eyes to worlds hitherto unknown.

And as always, to my partner, who told me I could succeed when I myself did not believe it.

## Table of Contents

|                                                           |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Abstract Deutsch/English.....                             | 3  |
| List of Abbreviations.....                                | 4  |
| <br>                                                      |    |
| 1. Introduction.....                                      | 5  |
| 2. Considering a Definition of Fantasy.....               | 10 |
| 2.1. Criticism of Tolkien and of Fantasy.....             | 13 |
| 2.2. The Hero and the Heroine.....                        | 14 |
| 3. Tolkien's Galadriel.....                               | 16 |
| 3.1. Galadriel in Primary Sources.....                    | 16 |
| 3.2. Allegories of Galadriel.....                         | 18 |
| 3.3. Changes in Character.....                            | 21 |
| 4. What is the Strong Female Warrior?.....                | 23 |
| 4.1. The Image of the Strong Female Warrior.....          | 23 |
| 4.2. The Question of Representation.....                  | 27 |
| 4.3. Postmodern Feminism and the Modern Strong Woman..... | 32 |
| 4.4. The Male Gaze.....                                   | 35 |
| 5. The Rings of Power.....                                | 39 |
| 5.1. Brief Summary.....                                   | 39 |
| 5.2. Galadriel's Connections.....                         | 41 |
| 5.3. Galadriel as a Physical Warrior.....                 | 45 |
| 5.4. Galadriel's Sexualisation.....                       | 47 |
| 5.5. The Problems of Timeline and Character.....          | 50 |
| 5.6. Subversion?.....                                     | 52 |
| 6. Conclusion.....                                        | 53 |
| <br>                                                      |    |
| Bibliography.....                                         | 56 |
| List of Figures.....                                      | 61 |

## Abstract Deutsch

Von ihren Wurzeln in der Fantasy-Literatur bis hin zum kontemporären Marvel-Zeitalter hat der Typus der Starken Kriegerin in ihren stereotypen Darstellungen, Subversion, und Kritik an und gegen feministische Medien fortgedauert. Die Starke Kriegerin definiert sich durch ihre Mehrdeutigkeit und ihre Liminalität. Ikonisch wird sie als außergewöhnliche Kämpferin dargestellt, und ist so seit Jahren ein strittiger Typus in der Literatur. Sie wird maskulin, feminin, oder ganz ohne Geschlecht dargestellt, sie ist klug, gewalttätig, und mitfühlend, und in ihrer wichtigsten Rolle eine Waffe in feministischen und postfeministischen Debatten. *Die Ringe der Macht*, das von Amazon produzierte spin-off des *Herrn der Ringe*, verleiht seinem Hauptcharakter Galadriel viele der zur Starken Kriegerin gehörenden Attribute. Als einsame Schwertkämpferin ist sie zwischen den Idealen von Subversion und Veränderung, welche weiblichen Charakteren die Macht verleihen, in ‚maskuline‘ Räume vorzudringen und ihre Unabhängigkeit zu etablieren, und der auf monetären Gewinn ausgelegten Vermarktung gefangen, welche Publicity und generelle Anerkennung als höher ansieht, als echte Veränderung.

Zwischen Tolkien, Fantasy, und der Starken Kriegerin gelegen, ist Galadriel in *Die Ringe der Macht* so ambivalent wie der Typus selbst: sie ist sowohl feministisch als auch postfeministisch, und sowohl den Strukturen und Konventionen des Genres, aus welchem sie stammt, unterworfen, sowie den Idealen eines modernen Publikums.

## Abstract English

From her roots in fantasy literature to the contemporary Marvel age, the Strong Female Warrior has persisted in her stereotypes, subversions, and critique as and against feminist media. The Strong Female Warrior is defined by her ambiguity and liminal character. Iconically portrayed as an exceptional fighter, she has been a point of contention for many years. She has been masculinized, feminized, and de-sexed entirely, she is smart, violent, and caring, and, above all, she is a weapon used in feminist and postfeminist debates. *The Rings of Power*, Amazon's *Lord of the Rings* spin-off, has attributed its main character Galadriel with many of the characteristics of the Strong Female Warrior. A lonely sword-woman, she is caught between the ideals of subversion and actual change, which grant a female character the power to transgress into 'male' spaces and establish herself as an independent person, and the monetary gains of postfeminist marketability, which ranks publicity and acceptance higher than actual change.

Situated in between Tolkien, fantasy, and the Strong Female Warrior, Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* is as ambivalent as the trope itself: she is both feminist and postfeminist, beholden to the structures and conventions of the genre from which she hails and the ideals of the modern audience.

## List of Abbreviations

|             |                                 |
|-------------|---------------------------------|
| FR          | Fellowship of the Ring          |
| RK          | Return of the King              |
| S           | The Silmarillion                |
| Nature      | The Nature of Middle-earth      |
| Nachrichten | Nachrichten aus Mittelerde      |
| OFS         | On Fairy-Stories                |
| Letters     | The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien |

## 1. Introduction

The postfeminist Strong Female Warrior is an almost entirely marketable concept that seemingly advances feminist goals of strength and independence, but in reality only uses these traits to further the popularity of this character with both men and women in a patriarchal and heteronormative economy.

Postfeminism, or popular feminism, is built on the assumption that all of feminism's main goals have been achieved, and need thus no longer be fought for. Postfeminism suggests a 'more complex relationship between culture, politics, and feminism' (Negra/Tasker 2007, p. 1) than has thus been taken into account, in an attempt at evading the resistances that have historically been levelled against it. Cultural marketability stands at the forefront of the postfeminist agenda, and the Strong Female Warrior is an excellent tool to promote its aims. A theoretically empowered woman can be made acceptable to audiences who wish for just enough agency as to feel strong, but not so much as to genuinely subvert the system.

The fighting woman always takes up a position of ambivalence. In the debate between feminists and postfeminists, she is the ultimate construct upon which differing views and opinions clash and mingle. Schubart (2007) posits that, '[r]ather than choos[ing] a "correct" position we must open ourselves up to another position: in-between.' (p. 7). This in-between is the crucial point of exploration: here, genuine subversion of heteronormative audience expectations can be achieved. It is important to remember that the female warrior always exists between freedom and trauma, between her status as sex-symbol and independent woman, between lonely hero and love-seeking sweetheart.

The genre of fantasy, on the other hand, has, at first glance, little to offer in the ways of ambivalence. The dichotomy of good and evil lies at the base of fantasy's inception, but the genre is not so black and white as it may seem. Its rich history, and its popularity, which has gained rapidly since the middle of the last century, has, to many, only one large influence, and one blueprint: J. R. R. Tolkien. Seen by many as the master of fantasy, his novels and their adaptations have inspired countless other novels, movies, series, games, and entire generations (Mathews 2011, p. 83).

The popularity of fantasy stems largely from the duality that is inherent in the genre: it presents at once richly complex worlds, intricate and imaginative lands, but can, in effect, be distilled to a certain formula of plot and characters. To some, this reliability is exactly what makes fantasy enjoyable, others have criticised the genre for its repetitive tropes and array of

stock characters. Fantasy, some say, is best left to children and the masses. But even Tolkien himself has argued that fantasy is a highly complex genre that has deserved to be looked at further for a long time: 'I think the so-called 'fairy story' one of the highest forms of literature and quite erroneously associated with children (as such).' (Letters #165, p. 220) And to some extent, it has. 'Readers of fantasy have a certain freedom which is denied to readers within the pale. [...] We may find a continuity in literature that is denied to those who must draw lines and enforce standards.', says Brian Attebery (1992, p. ix), and summarises why fantasy was the natural inception point for the Strong Female Warrior as an ambivalent figure.

Tolkien especially has gotten a relatively large amount of attention, partly also because he was not only an author, but a professor and critic as well. But, although he is certainly one of the founders of modern fantasy, the novels, movies and TV shows (both inspired by his work or entirely original) that have since been released deserve critical attention just as much as *The Lord of the Rings* does.

In more recent years, the fantasy genre has diversified and infiltrated and merged with other genres, so that it is now difficult to apply the umbrella-term 'fantasy' to anything, without being in fear of overgeneralising. Science fiction, action or superhero movies, *Disney*, or Young Adult novels all overlap with the fantasy genre, and are closely related to it. Although it is such a widespread genre, it has sometimes been neglected in academia, as it has often been termed 'unserious' or 'childish'. Ursula K. Le Guin argues that 'as a writer of science fiction, fantasy, children's books, and young adult – four fictional modes categorized by both publishers and academics as genres, and thereby, by the simple designation, excluded from serious criticism and consideration as literature' (p. 18), these forms of fiction go largely unexplored in an academic context. However, it is of immense importance to include those texts, not to mention movies or TV shows, not only because they are now extremely widespread, but also because they are the future of literature and media consumption in general. If reflection on this genre, or these genres, is neglected, we might as well neglect an entire generation's worldview.

The streaming-only TV series *The Rings of Power*, released in 2022 by Amazon Studios, takes the viewer back an unspecified amount of time from the well-known material of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Showrunners J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay decided to take up two of the biggest events in Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, the Forging of the Great Rings, and the Fall of Númenor. To create a continuous storyline, and to incorporate a familiar, though not yet well-explored character, they installed Galadriel as the main character. In do-

ing so, they deviated from Tolkien's source material and inscribed her with traits and skills worthy of a fantastical warrior. Choosing Galadriel as a main character for the show had a number of benefits: she is not a leading figure of any of Tolkien's work, thus leaving room for the imagination of the showrunners, she has a reason to get involved in all of the major conflicts that appear in the show, and lastly, she is a female character. Having a female lead in any fantasy medium attracts attention, both from the fans who recognise that integrating more women into a historically male space is an important step towards diversification, but also from critics and advertisers who now have commercial reason to praise this show: feminism is a commodity, and strong women sell.

However, the portrayal of Galadriel has not been without controversy. Thus, analysing it through the lens of both the history of the fantasy genre and the lens of postfeminism will address the failure of the show to genuinely subvert this Strong Female Warrior.

The first part of the paper will consist of an overview of the fantasy genre itself – its provenance, its influence, and its most important features. Definition of the genre and a historical overview provide the context needed to proceed. A subsection will deal with the 'hero'-concept, and especially the strong, sword-wielding hero and heroine of the fantasy genre, the predecessor of the Strong Female Warrior. Attebery (1992), Hume (1984), and Jackson (1981) form the basis of this concept and build a solid ground upon which further sections will expand. It is important to investigate the roots of the hero type, who has, especially in fantasy, been rather male-dominated, and to further look at female heroes who have taken on this role.

From here will follow a necessary overview of Tolkien's imagining of Galadriel. This section establishes the way her character changed with Tolkien's edits and re-imaginings over the course of many years. It also shows the complexity that is imbued in most of his characters and the historical influences that can be seen in Galadriel. In Tolkien's writings and in works by Burns (2005) and Lakowski (2007) her ever-changing role from proud queen to repentant advisor is stark and telling of Tolkien's wishes for her character.

Next, the trope of the Strong Female Warrior will be discussed from a historical and current standpoint. From the first fighting women in the fantasy genre to the postfeminist warrior, the ambiguity, subversion, and stereotyping of this particular character are examined. Fredrick and McBride (2007), Inness (1999), and Tolmie (2006) add important insight to this relatively new subject of study, and impress the necessity of representation on modern audiences.



To add to this, the question turns to the concept of ‘corporate feminism’ and ‘postfeminism’ in general. Taking into account especially Angela McRobbies’ (2004, 2009) texts, as well as writings by Banet-Wiser (2018), Negra and Tasker (2007), and Banet-Wiser, Gill and Rottenberg (2019), postfeminism is considered in relation to feminism and capitalism in a heteronormative society. The Strong Female Warrior plays an exceptionally important role here, being the perfect example of a marketable figure that encompasses all the ideals of postfeminism.

To end the section, a note is made on the concept of the male gaze (Mulvey 1999), and how it often lies at the heart of the Strong Female Character. Instead of empowering through granting her emancipated action, she is often still marketed as visually pleasing to audiences, both male and female.

The next section deals with the Amazon Studios series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* in detail. With the established theoretical background of the previous sections, an introduction will first be made into the history of the series itself. After considering interviews with the screenwriters and producers, the expectations of the intended viewership, and finally, the actual feedback the show received, several salient features of the Strong Female Warrior are brought into contact with Galadriel, framing the whole show as the context. It is important to note here that, as this paper solely deals with Galadriel, the criticism regarding the ethnicity of some of the actors, which was a point of contention online, will not be taken into account.

Having established the background of the series, the next part concerns itself with the connections that Galadriel forms in the series, and how they all include men. Of particular interest is the fact that her motivation stems not from an intrinsic heroic instinct, but from a need for revenge for her brother’s murder.

Galadriel as both a physical warrior and a sexual character are discussed next. She is presented as clad in armour, thereby removing her from the objectification of a purely sexualised gaze, but also appears as a beautiful woman with flowing hair who swings a sword, playing into the appeal of the postfeminist warrior. Furthermore, Galadriel appears as an unmarried woman in the series, with her husband Celeborn apparently having been ‘lost’ during a war (‘The Eye.’ 30:20), opening her up for the in-series romance with Halbrand/Sauron. Sexual availability, and thus perceived freedom of choice, even if the only viable choice is romance, is a defining feature of the Strong Female Warrior.

Lastly, the disjointed perception of Galadriel’s characterisation in the series is explained by the extensive changes in the timeline that had apparently been made by the showrunners.

In an effort to present Galadriel as a flawed character, J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay chose to imbue her with stubborn, proud, and almost petulant traits that clash awkwardly with their simultaneous establishment of Galadriel as a wise, experienced fighter and almost mythologised figure amongst other Elves. Although reasons for these changes are discussed in this paper, this leads to a bizarre feeling of parody, an effect that certainly was not intended.

To round off this paper, the question of genuine subversion is picked up again. Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* is a postfeminist warrior woman, but she does not question the heteronormative system in which the character appears. However, Galadriel has the potential for true subversion, although it is never fully realised in the show. In her, the contested forces of marketability and relatability are apparent. It will be discussed how she could have been an impactful character, and not merely another Strong Female Warrior in a long line of similar ones.

## 2. Considering a Definition of Fantasy

In a work that deals mainly with the genre of fantasy, it will be of great use to have a proper definition of the word itself. However, this is where the first problem arises. ‘Fantasy’ is a notoriously difficult term to describe, and attempts at classifying it have been numerous and wide-ranging. First, attention must be paid to the difference between ‘fantastical’ literature and ‘fantasy’ literature (although some theorists have used the words, if not the concepts, interchangeably; see Tolkien *OFS*, though he does not use it in a Todorovian sense; Jackson 1981). The ‘fantastic’, as Tzvetan Todorov writes, needs to make the reader question whether natural or supernatural forces are to blame for the events in the text, and should also not legitimise allegoric or poetic interpretations of a text (Todorov 2013, pp. 43-44). The concept of ‘fantasy’ in Tolkien, however, is accepted unquestioningly by the reader or the viewer. They know that the events they are experiencing are not ‘real’, but they accept without hesitation that they are ‘real’ within the story they are consuming.

How, then, can fantasy be defined? Brian Attebery introduces two helpful concepts: fantasy as formula and mode, and fantasy as a set of fuzzy boundaries. The first deals with the contemporary, often predictable formula of the genre; it is geared towards a specific audience, and depends on easily recognisable tropes (Attebery 1992, p. 2), often taken from the ‘inventory of traditional narratives’ (p. 8), although the predictable formula can be expanded in creative and entertaining ways (ibid.). The mode of fantasy, according to Attebery, who cites Hume and Frye, is only superficially opposed to the mode of mimesis. He claims that, in fact, fantasy ‘depends on mimesis for its effectiveness’ (p. 4). The second means of categorisation that Attebery introduces initially stems from Lakoff and Johnson, and uses the fuzzy-set-model. Generally, this presupposes that certain terms (word-classes, concepts, etc.) fall not into boxes that have clear-cut walls, but rather possess ‘fuzzy’, meaning unclear, boundaries. They are described rather by their prototypical centre than their definite limits (p. 12). Fantasy can then be seen as exactly such a fuzzy set; it bleeds into fiction and science fiction, takes, expands and works with a variety of tropes and characters. Attebery establishes Tolkien’s *The Lord of The Rings* as the centre of this fuzzy set, as he and others have seen Tolkien’s work as quintessentially fantasy (p. 14; see also Curry 1998; Mendlesohn 1984; Jackson 1981; Mathews 2011 on Tolkien as the most influential and standard fantasy writer).

Mendlesohn and James (2009) define three further approaches to fantasy, which may help to define the genre better. They differentiate fantasy as merely the presence of the ‘impossible and unexplainable’ (p. 3) from the genre’s roots in historical fiction and offer as a

third approach the theories of academics (like Kathryn Hume, Tzvetan Todorov, or Rosemary Jackson) who concern themselves with academically describing the makings of a fantasy novel.

Tolkien himself has written on the concept of fantasy: '[...] I require a word which shall embrace both the Sub-Creative Art in itself and a quality of strangeness and wonder in the Expression, derived from the Image: a quality essential to fairy-story.' (*OFS*, p. 23), and goes on to say: 'Fantasy [...] is [...] not a lower, but a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent.' (*ibid.*). Tolkien therefore elevates fantasy as an art form of 'arresting strangeness' (*ibid.*), and counters the arguments that fantasy is not 'real', 'artistic' literature, an argument that even nowadays is not completely settled. Patrick Curry settles Tolkien firmly among 'myth' and argues that his critics have not 'once set foot in Middle-earth' (Curry 1998, p. 132), and adds that the fantasy genre has almost completely been 'marginalized in elite literary discourse' (p. 142).

'Fantasy' is thus established as a literary genre that emerged with Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, has at its base a core of easily recognisable tropes (a quest, a fight of Good versus Evil, stock characters like the Hero, the Damsel, or the Villain), takes place in a world where at least some form of 'magic' (i. e. something that would not be naturally and/or technologically possible in our reality) exists, and has influenced countless sub-genres like contemporary fantasy, Young Adult fiction, or the superhero genre.

But how did fantasy come to be established as a genre? Tolmie (2006) sees the roots of the modern fantasy novel in Middle English romances (p. 146), and indeed, this can, for the purpose of the Central European novel (and later the North American novel), be extrapolated to the general genre of European medieval romances. Jackson (1981) notes that Tolkien, Lewis or Le Guin's stories all make use of 'moral and religious allegories, parables and fables' (p. 9), and that their stories belong less to a Todorovian sense of 'fantastic' and more in the realm of 'religious longing and nostalgia' (*ibid.*) commonly found in romance literature. Meanwhile, Mendlesohn and James (2009) situate the emergence of the modern fantasy novel as a literary genre around the eighteenth century (p. 6), in part as a 'response to the Enlightenment' (p. 3). They also acknowledge that written fiction is far older than medieval romances, going back to *Gilgamesh* and Homer (p. 7), and that 'myth, legend and saga provide many of the components of modern fantasy' (p. 9). The Arthurian romance tradition in particular, mixed with a rising interest in fairy tales, the formulaic ease of structure and the subversion of the Gothic in the nineteenth century all merged together to form the basis of twentieth-century fantasy (cf.

Mendlesohn and James 2009). However, the term ‘fantasy’ and the genre itself did not enter mainstream popularity until Tolkien and his stories (Falconer in Lee 2014, p. 303; Fimi in Lee 2014, p. 335).

Generally, it is posed that it has always been a genre of restriction as it pertains to structure, type of character, or setting. This stands in opposition to the richly imaginative productivity that emerged from the evolution of the fantasy genre (Attebery 1992, p. 10).

Among the many sub-genres of fantasy, one of its most popular forms is ‘high fantasy’, sometimes also called sword-and-sorcery (Attebery 1992, p. 9), the type that describes stories like the ‘prototypical’ *Lord of the Rings*-esque novels. Sometimes, however, other sub-genres, such as science fiction, contemporary fantasy or superhero movies will be dealt with, as they have ‘close historical and conventional ties to fantasy’ (Attebery 1992, p. 13), as well as the action-genre in particular. Here, this genre mostly applies to the discussion of movies and TV shows, because, as O’Brien (2012) puts it: ‘The action movie works best when it is acting, in action, active, in progress – when its heroes are being tested and when the audience can see and understand why they are being tested.’ (p. 3). Thus, action-literature is hard to define, with the movie genre being so closely tied to visible action and movement (O’Brien 2012, pp. 8-9). Though, certain aspects of the action cinema can also be applied to the literature discussed here, especially fantasy literature. O’Brien (2012) describes it as ‘a cinema of will’ and its heroes as wanting ‘to change the world, transcending the moral limits of a society that has failed its heroes.’ (p. 1). Rather than constituting its own genre, however, ‘action’ in literature should rather be called a mode of different genres. There might be action elements in fantasy, or mystery, or science fiction. Thus, much of the base elements of what nowadays is considered fantasy coincides with the base elements of its predecessors: knights and kings and chivalry, princesses and mythical beasts and hordes of gold. Often, the rules that govern fantasy worlds are based upon feudal structures and cast men and women in rigid societal and gender roles. However, owing to the particular freedom that the genre possesses, imagination can be (and sometimes is) let loose. Fantasy gives the one who imagines it the chance to subvert expectations or conventions.

*The Rings of Power*, as a series that draws from the Appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* (Hollywood, Aug. 12 2022), is, by default, steeped in the genre of fantasy, and the most quintessential fantasy at that. During the course of this paper, it will be discussed how it fits into the genre, what conventions it takes on, and what effect this has on a viewership that, in

most cases, is intimately familiar with the source material. The question of how (and if) it subverts fantasy expectations will also be discussed, as well as the task of bringing Tolkien's characters into a 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

## 2.1. Criticism of Tolkien and of Fantasy

Tolkien can quite rightly be called the master of fantasy, being the one so principally thought of when mentioning the genre, with him specifically being influenced by not only Norse mythology, but Old and Middle English as well (Burns 2005, p. 5). Being a philologist and a professor, he was well-read, and thus, broadly influenced, by the Romance tradition, Spenser, Milton, and *Beowulf* among others (Burns 2005, p. 5; cf. Lee 2014). However, as his works are so widely considered to lie at the centre of the fantasy genre, they have naturally been intensely scrutinised: much has been examined in his works, and it is important to look closely on the criticism of his female characters. Melissa McCrory Hatcher (1997) points out the lack of women in *The Lord of the Rings*, and their (seemingly) stereotypical positions (pp. 43-44). But she also sheds light on the complexity of these (few) female characters, especially Éowyn, whom she calls a 'complete individual, one who Tolkien chooses to enact his mission of peace.' (p. 53). Marjorie Burns adds that Tolkien did not only create complex women, but the very concept of the 'feminine' is always present and explicitly marks his best and most important characters, be they women or men (pp. 130-131).

This is, of course, not to dismiss the very valid criticism of the way Tolkien paints the role of women. As Attebery (1992) points out, this is due to, in part, the performative nature of the genre itself, as fantasy's 'willingness to return to the narrative structures of the past can entail as well an unquestioning acceptance of its social structures.' (p. 87), including gender structures. Roberts (in Lee 2014) adds that '[j]udging Tolkien according to a set of ideological criteria he himself would not have recognized runs the risk of more than anachronism; it tends to be actively distorting.' (p. 475), but he also admits that Tolkien's characterisation of women cannot be 'redeemed for modern readers' (ibid.). As established, Tolkien has been the blueprint for an entire genre for decades now, and has often been blamed for fantasy's entire lack of women or the stereotypical representation of their character. However, as will be shown, many have simply not seen the complexity of his female characters, and how the ideals of femininity (as Burns pointed out) penetrate his entire universe. Nonetheless, it is deeply understandable why many have advocated for better representation of women in fantasy and adja-

cent genres. As Tasker and Steenberg (in Gjelsvik 2016) point out: ‘What the fantasy genre permits is the pre-emptive negation of questions about the limits of women’s physicality.’ (p. 173).

## 2.2. The Hero and the Heroine

When discussing the Strong Female Warrior, one also needs to discuss her predecessor, the simple hero. ‘Simple’ here means not ‘simple-minded’ or ‘humble’, but rather ‘common’, the most restrictive, commonplace version of the word. Commonly speaking, the hero (or the heroine) is the main character of a story, who has overwhelmingly good traits that allow the reader or viewer to root for him or her, and who generally saves the day. That is not to say that every main character must be a hero, or that every hero must be a main character. Heroes may even have dark sides, or take decisions that do not agree with the morals and values of the reader or viewer. But generally, it can be agreed that the hero as the lead of a story is one of the most popular ways to draft a story. Joseph Campbell defines the hero as ‘the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms.’ (Campbell 1968, pp. 19-20). Additionally, and with regard to Tolkien, the hero often undergoes a quest, and therefore constitutes an active, rather than a passive part of the story.

The hero therefore transcends what is normally possible, he or she is not counted amid the mere mortals. They usually have a feature that sets them apart from others, that validates their difference, be it a godly parentage, enormous strength, brilliant beauty, a clever mind, magical powers, or a kind heart. The hero usually possesses one or more of these qualities, and is lauded for them.

The male hero of a classical fantasy story is often characterised by his ability to swing a sword, and be clever, because, as Inness (1999) points out: ‘we worship it [toughness, note] because of its association with success and strength.’ (p. 14) and goes on to say that ‘the connection between masculinity and toughness helps to support the stereotypical idea that men are the only truly capable leaders.’ (p. 15). This then establishes a connection between physical strength and the mental strength required to be a leader. If being physically strong and tough are stereotypically male features, that then must mean that the roles which require one to be tough (such as the sword fighter, or the leader of a quest) must also require one to be male. This connection is so ingrained in all sectors of society that it becomes naturalised, ef-

fectively barring women from these positions (Inness 1999, pp. 17-18). In *The Lord of the Rings*, a multiplicity of heroes appear, ranging from a hero on a quest (Frodo) to the king who fights for his people (Aragorn).

But what happens when women do take over these roles? What happens when they take up the sword or the gun or the pen, and cast themselves as leaders? In more conservative media, women are seen as social creatures (Ingalls 2020, p. 85), possessing extensive friendship circles and being in charge of homesteading and childrearing. Women are rarely seen operating alone, which is exactly what characterises the male hero. This trait alone marks women as opposed to heroes, who leave the security of their communities to fight on the outside. As the hero evolves into the Strong Female Warrior, so too does the female character venture from the heteronormative path. Often, the Strong Female Warrior chooses solitude, or, if not that, then the company of men over women. Why she does that, and what implications the Strong Female Warrior has, will be discussed and further examination will show how this new empowerment has evolved, and how it can go wrong.



### 3. Tolkien's Galadriel

Blonde, tall, and powerful, Tolkien's very own *Faerie Queene* Galadriel is known to most by Cate Blanchett's portrayal in *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy (dir. Peter Jackson, 2001-2003). There, she appears ethereally beautiful and wise beyond any means. This characterisation is almost entirely founded on the source material that can be found in the actual *Lord of the Rings* novels, and thus represents the version of Galadriel most commonly attributed to the character. However, in his many works and re-writings of notes and story ideas, Tolkien added much to her character, and even produced multiple versions of the same events. It is therefore important to unravel the manifold characterisations of Galadriel as Tolkien had written about her, before going on to evaluate what *The Rings of Power* adapted for its purpose.

#### 3.1. Galadriel in Primary Sources

Tolkien first introduced Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), her character being very much like the Blanchett-movie-version painted above: "Very tall they [Celeborn and Galadriel, note] were, and the Lady no less tall than the Lord; and they were grave and beautiful. [...] no sign of age was upon them, unless it were in the depths of their eyes; for these were keen as lances in the starlight, and yet profound, the wells of deep memory." (FR p. 461). It is important to note that, even though *The Lord of the Rings* was published as Tolkien's second work (after *The Hobbit*), and much of his notes and stories were only made public posthumously, in the timeline of Middle-earth, *The Lord of the Rings* forms the conclusion of all adventures. Therefore, the characterisation of Galadriel as it is presented in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is presumably how Tolkien had wanted her to be perceived at the end. She is a wise, ancient elf, who has spent many years in Middle-earth, and who only at the very end returns to Valinor and her homeland.

To now understand her story and her character, one must look to the future (in our time) and to the past (in Middle-earth time). Christopher Tolkien published *The Silmarillion* in 1977, where Galadriel's origins and more details about her character could be found. This basic story never changes over time, although a comparison of Tolkien's notes and letter shows that he changed and added details into the story, which revise Galadriel's character rather significantly. First note is made of her when Fëanor convinces the Noldor to leave Valinor and sail to

Middle-earth, thus setting off the chain reaction that would lead to the Doom of the Noldor and the War of the Silmaril. Galadriel is mentioned almost as an aside, but she stands out as the lone woman among the princes, and special note is made of her desire to rule her own kingdom in Middle-earth (*S*, p. 89). Nothing is said of her during the Kinslaying of Alqualondë, which has been interpreted as silent acquiescence on Galadriel's part (cf. Lakowski 2007, p. 93), especially as she also tried to conceal her involvement from Melian (*S*, p. 146). In the Index of *The Silmarillion*, Galadriel is explicitly called "one of the leaders of the Noldorin rebellion against the Valar" (*S*, p. 398), which marks her position in this work rather clearly. In 1980, Christopher Tolkien released the *Unfinished Tales* (here: *Nachrichten aus Mittelerde*), a compilation of his father's notes and unfinished texts, among which were a few short passages about Galadriel and Celeborn. He highlights a passage from *The Road Goes Ever On* (published 1967), that paints Galadriel's decision to stay in Middle-earth, even after the Ban of the Valar had been lifted, as caused by excessive pride (cf. *S*, p. 306, which only states that she "was not willing to forsake" her dwelling). The element of pride, as well as the Ban of the Valar, were clearly a later addition by Tolkien, and not yet a part of Galadriel's story when *The Lord of the Rings* was written (cf. *Nachrichten*, p. 368). In both of Galadriel's songs in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, she references the loss of home, and that no ship would come for her, but it is never specified why she feels so certain that she cannot return to the Undying Lands (*FR*, p. 485 and p. 492). It is widely accepted that at this point, Tolkien had not yet introduced the idea of a Ban on the Noldor, nor her prideful choice to remain in Middle-earth. Only towards the end of his life did he write in a 1967 letter of a ban, and called Galadriel a 'chief actor of the rebellion' (*Letters* #297, p. 386). Christopher Tolkien then presents late notes by his father, written well after *The Road Goes Ever On* (but undated), one note even being one of his last pieces before his death, in which Galadriel is now characterised as smart (but not yet wise), athletic, strong, beautiful, and blessed with the gift of reading in the hearts of others (*Nachrichten*, pp. 369-370). Her role in the Kinslaying has here evolved from a mere bystander to an active fighter against Fëanor (*Nachrichten*, pp. 370 and p. 372), and even the time of her arrival in Middle-earth is carefully separated from Fëanor's (*ibid.*). In one of his last letters, he fully reinstates Galadriel as 'unstained' (*Letters* #353, p. 431), absolving her of any guilty part in the revolution; it is evident that Tolkien did not agree with his previous writing, and planned to revise the character of Galadriel fully. It is only in the *Unfinished Tales* that Tolkien really characterises Galadriel, and paints her as a powerful, proud, strong, and wise elf. He also situates her as one of Sauron's biggest adversaries, as she is no less powerful than him and is not fooled by his niceties (*Nachrichten*, p. 380).

### 3.2. Allegories of Galadriel

Tolkien's notable dislike for allegory has not prevented many scholars from reading his works, especially *The Lord of the Rings*, as allegories. His characters, likewise, have been treated this way, and some of the allegorical readings of Galadriel will be presented below.

Starting with Catholic allegory, as Tolkien was of this faith, Downey (2011) theorises that Galadriel fits in with the type of medieval 'celestial ladies', like Dante's Beatrice, or the pearl-maiden from the similarly named Middle English poem (p. 103). As she points out, all three women function as a guide-figure for a confused protagonist (p. 106) and the settings in which they are presented are distinctly dream-like and akin to earthly paradises (p. 107), much like Galadriel guides the Fellowship after Gandalf's death and Lothlórien seems to be a dream- or fairy-realm, beautiful and safe.

In a 1953 letter to Robert Murray, Tolkien confirms that the character of Galadriel had somewhat been influenced by the Virgin Mary, as, generally, *The Lord of the Rings* was a Catholic work (*Letters* #142, p.172). However, he states in a later letter, dated to 1971, that, while the blueprint for Galadriel was the Virgin Mary, Galadriel was a 'penitent' (*Letters* #320, p. 407), and emphasised her pride in turning down the Valar's pardon, a decidedly more Eve-like trait (Lakowski 2007, p. 96, 98). However, Mary and Galadriel actually share very little traits. Mary in Catholic art is mostly portrayed in combination with baby Jesus, and the closest traits that connect Galadriel and Mary are possibly their purity (Mary's immaculate conception and Galadriel's connection to radiance, cf. Maher in Chance 2003) as well as in later Christian art the motifs of 'sedes sapientiae', the Seat of Wisdom, as well as the image of the Madonna of Mercy (Butzkamm 2001, pp. 134-135), as Galadriel is both wise and grants the Fellowship protection. Although Tolkien, as cited above, connects the two women on multiple occasions, Galadriel really has more in common with Downey's celestial ladies. Downey (2011) also points out that the similarities between Galadriel and Mary 'can only go so far' (p. 111), and that she is rather more 'Mary-like' (ibid.) than actually Mary. Indeed, the motif of pride and penitence is not one typically associated with Mary (Maher in Chance 2003, p. 225), and associating Galadriel with Mary based on very common traits found in medieval women (e. g. granting protection, being called 'queen', the will to do good; all traits that Maher (in Chance 2003) associates with both Mary and Galadriel) is a rather frail ground to tread upon.

Apart from Catholic allegories, there have been further interpretations of the inspiration behind Galadriel, and the evolution of her character, and those seem to hold firmer ground. The most significant is definitely that of the Celtic Goddess, or, at least, the English Fairy Queen. Tolkien, himself a professor of English Literature, and a well-versed reader of all things Middle English, wrote in his letters that he desired his works to be close to myth and fairy-story, and to be entirely dedicated to England (*Letters* #131, p. 144). However, he outright rejected the notion of Celtic and ‘faerie’ elements in his stories, confessing he had a distaste for both of them (and, indeed, Christian mythology, a fact which he later seemed to rescind (*Letters* #142, p. 172; *Letters* #131, p. 144; *Letters* #19, p. 26)). Even though Tolkien himself wrote so strongly against readers’ suggestions that those elements featured in his works, it cannot be denied that they do, and, in the case of Galadriel, are especially pronounced. Marjorie Burns points out that there is no singular Celtic goddess she is comparable to, but rather is an amalgamation of multiple figures of Celtic womanhood, who, at times, display a variety of traits that sometimes contradict, much like Galadriel (Burns 2005, pp. 107-108). She compares Galadriel to the Morrígan (among others), and highlights their ‘sorceress’ character, as Galadriel and Lothlórien in *The Lord of the Rings* are surrounded by rumours and whispers; Boromir calls it a ‘perilous land’ (*FR*, p. 440), and its remoteness and seclusion from the rest of Middle-earth evoke an otherworldly, Celtic aura, although Lyman-Thomas (in Lee 2014) points out that Tolkien ‘is making it clear that Lothlórien isn’t a reflection of the nineteenth-century Celtic stereotype’ (p. 281). Even so, Lothlórien is a mythical spot on the map, where ‘ancient things still lived on in the waking world’ (*FR*, p. 455). Galadriel, as the Lady of Lothlórien, is as much part of the mystery as her country. She even has a bit of a ‘demonic side’ (Burns 2005, p. 108), which is revealed when Frodo offers her the Ring and she is tempted for a moment, ‘seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful.’ (*FR*, p. 476).

Burns also draws parallels between Galadriel and the very prevalent figure of the Middle English Fairy Queen. She especially highlights the intersection with the Arthurian legends and Morgan le Fay, and notes that, ignoring the ‘less pleasing traits’, there is much comparison between the two figures (Burns 2005, p. 112): above all, beauty, power and magical ability, but also the ties to a mysterious, secluded place, and the association with mythical healing powers and strength (pp. 112-113). Carter (2007) also finds that Galadriel and Morgan both have their dark sides, and are seen by others as potentially dangerous as well as extremely powerful (pp. 72-73). She adds that both figures’ abilities are ‘never fully revealed but [...]

implied.’ (p. 73), but that, ultimately, all that is dark about Morgan is light and good in Galadriel (p. 74).

Apart from Morgan le Fay, Tolkien was sure to have read Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. The implied, but never absolutely shown, power that Carter referenced can also be seen in Gloriana, the conspicuously absent queen (Wilson-Okamura 2009, pp. 63-64). Spenser, of course, introduced Gloriana as ‘the type both for ‘glory’ in general and for Elizabeth as its particular embodiment’ (King 1990, p. 110), but he also integrated Belpheobe as a venerated, but ultimately flawed version of the queen. Gloriana is the infallible monarch, much like Galadriel is the wise and powerful lady of her realm; but Belpheobe carries the ‘dark’ sides of the queen within her (Wilson-Okamura 2009, p. 68). Likewise, Galadriel also capable of evil, and is tempted by power and the One Ring, but decides to stay true to herself. In tracing Galadriel’s roots in a Spenserean tradition, she is necessarily ascribed with attributes that Spenser grants to his female rulers: justice, valor, wisdom, and an exceptionality that elevates her above all other women (Phillips 1942, p. 230). Both Galadriel and the righteous rulers in *The Faerie Queene* are singular because of their gender. While Galadriel, although she was described as being of ‘Amazon disposition’ (*Letters* #348, p. 428), was never explicitly a warrior, the image of the warrior woman is explicit in Spenser. Phillips (1942) points out that Spenser ‘nevertheless agreed that some women are equipped, [...] with the physical strength and courage necessary for successful leadership in war’ (p. 224). The caveat here, of course, is that Spenser’s warrior women are all chaste and virtuous. While Galadriel as a venerated ruler is present in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Galadriel the warrior would only come to pass with *The Rings of Power*.

Galadriel, Morgan and the Morrígan are all enchantresses, but while the latter two are also inextricably tied up with seduction, this seems to evade Galadriel entirely. Although some have seen that traditional fertility and fecundity role in her being the grandmother of Arwen (who, of course, reinstated the line of Gondor by becoming Aragorn’s queen) and her gift of fertile earth to Sam in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Burns 2005, p. 111), the connection is rather weak, and as a whole overpowered by the combination of Galadriel’s connection to celestial ladies as well as powerful fairy and magic women characters.

### 3.3. Changes in Character

The evolution of Galadriel's character is one of the most fascinating in Tolkien history, mainly because it spans many decades, and changed so drastically over time. Galadriel started out as a powerful Elven queen, who possesses the wisdom and restraint to resist the One Ring. At this point, she is close in characterisation to the Virgin Mary, pure and worshipped, and she clearly stands against temptation (Maher in Chance 2003, p. 230). Over the course of Tolkien's notes, another Galadriel emerges, one who is proud and decided, but still firmly on the side of the Light, as her constant struggle against Sauron proves. However, it is clear to see that Tolkien realised that in *The Silmarillion*, his situating Galadriel so close to Fëanor's rebellion would also cast her in a negative and decidedly un-Mary-like light, and it is obvious that he sought to rectify that fact in his many notes. Galadriel's pride in turning down the offer of amnesty and the possibility of return to the Undying Lands is softened to her wishing to remain in Middle-earth as personal penitence (Lakowski 2007, p. 95). In effect, there seem to exist two Galadriels, the very early, as well as the very late, version, who is marked by wisdom, spirituality and a certain sadness, and the version connecting these two, who is characterised by pride and the desire to rule, and altogether more active (Lakowski 2007, p. 99). This is represented also by her physical appearance: in *The Silmarillion* as well as Tolkien's notes on her youth, she is described as athletic, strong and smart (*Nachrichten*, p. 369; *Letters* #348, p. 428), while in *The Lord of the Rings*, she is still tall, but infinitely more ethereal, humble, almost fragile with sadness and longing (*FR*, p. 461, 468, 492).

This timeline of changes shows clearly that Tolkien was not satisfied with the 'middle' part of Galadriel's character, and that he much preferred the ethereal, pure, and almost holy figure found in *The Lord of the Rings* and his last notes. Most of modern Tolkien criticism is levelled against his female characters, especially concerning their little representation and their stereotypical characteristics. In his most popular works, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, there are only three women overall who have any larger role, and of those, only one (and one partially) have an actual impact on the story. Where Arwen in *The Lord of the Rings* fills out the stereotypical passive role of the lover waiting for their spouse's return from the war, and Éowyn fulfils the role of the actual warrior (though not without caveat, cf. McCrory 2007, Fredrick and McBride 2007), Galadriel is slotted into an in-between role. She does not directly further the plot or take up arms, but she is an integral part in strengthening the party

and giving them a new purpose to their journey. Her gifts prove invaluable against later struggles. She embodies some of the qualities Tolkien most treasured in his characters: preservation of peace and healing of spirit (McCrary 2007, p. 46), but overall, does not play an *active* role in *The Lord of the Rings*. Fredrick and McBride (2007) point out that Galadriel ‘would certainly be a powerful combat adversary’ (p. 33), but that, in contrast to Éowyn, she does not need to outwardly become a man to be a leader, instead focusing her fight inwards, a mental and magical struggle rather than a physical fight (p. 33 and p. 35). This was certainly a deliberate contrast to the warrior-character of Éowyn, and even though Tolkien gave Galadriel a more active role in later notes, especially in her fight against Fëanor, it is never explicitly stated if that fight was a mental or a physical one. Certainly, this is open to readers’ interpretation, depending on their influence by Tolkien’s works. Some might argue that Galadriel, being described as tall and athletic (*Letters* #348, p. 428; *Nachrichten*, p. 369) would have been perfectly capable of picking up a sword and joining the fight in the Kinslaying, others might prefer to read it as a mental struggle, much like the one she displays when tempted with the Ring, or in her continuous efforts to disrupt the evil plans of Sauron (*Nachrichten*, pp. 380-381).

Certainly, criticism of Tolkien’s female characters is important, and, especially looking at it with a modern lens, warranted. There *are* considerably little women in his works, although those that do exist, especially in *The Silmarillion*, carry an important and active part. Still, it is not unreasonable to wish for more female representation (and more varied representation!) in modern adaptations of Tolkien’s works. In the case of Galadriel, and largely due to the many changes to her character, it would have been entirely possible to reflect on some or indeed all of them, if only the principles of Tolkien’s most beloved characters would be kept in mind: a longing for peace, an appreciation of the small things in life, a loving companionship. Those are the key components that make his heroes noteworthy and beloved, and they could (and should) have been integrated in any interpretation of Galadriel. As has been shown, Galadriel is an extremely complex character, drawing her origins from Celtic, medieval, Germanic and Catholic literature, thus giving anybody willing to spend some time with her history plenty of material to work with.

However, *The Rings of Power* chose to forgo these characteristics, choosing instead to focus on making her a stereotypical warrior woman. The next chapters deal with this trope and the implications as well as the impact this choice had on viewers.

## 4. Who is the Strong Female Warrior?

This chapter deals with the origin, development and purpose of the character trope ‘Strong Female Warrior’. It details the emergence of the trope in historical fiction and the imagery of ‘the woman with a sword’. From then, its way has led to fantasy novels, as well as contemporary uses in movies and TV series. Among the most pressing questions answered in this chapter is the definition of what it means to be ‘strong’ as a woman – and the difficulty in determining that fact. Strength is not only measured physically, but emotionally as well, and the Strong Female Warrior often combines the two types. It will also be discussed why it is deemed so important to have women fill the space of the stereotypically male warrior, and why physical toughness is deemed a sign of mental toughness. However, the danger in commodifying and stereotyping this trope, and why it is so prone to be either loved or hated when used in modern media, will also be uncovered. The Strong Female Warrior is a highly complex and complicated trope, transgressive at times, and always caught between the ideals of feminism and the commodity-values of postfeminism.

### 4.1. The Image of the Strong Female Warrior

With recurrence to the previously mentioned history of fantasy, the image of the Strong Female Warrior in fantasy media, both literal and figurative, is discussed. First, an iconographic comparison will be made: images produced during different centuries, but all depicting women with swords or warrior women are discussed and placed in contrast. Next, especial regard is given to the action mode of fantasy, especially action movies. Many sub-genres of fantasy will be discussed here (such as high fantasy, or contemporary fantasy, which includes the superhero genre), as well as certain elements of science fiction, to ultimately discern what the image of the Strong Female Warrior is shaped by.

The literal image of the Strong Female Warrior has contributed as much to its iconicity as the characteristics attributed to her. This is no recent development, indeed, many iconic depictions of weapon-wielding women date back to the Romantic period and before. According to Panofsky (1972), an iconographical interpretation consists of three stages (pp. 5-7). First, pre-iconography, which concerns itself with the mere description of the image; if applied to the three images below, the objects that reoccur are a type of weapon, usually a sword, and ar-



mour. The characters are all female, wear no helmet to obscure their features, and have a contemplative or proud expression. Next, the ‘conventional subject matter’ makes the viewer realise that fig. 1 represents Joan of Arc and fig. 2 represents Britomart by combining motifs and themes, such as Joan of Arc’s flag. For Galadriel in fig. 3, the interpreter has no motifs or themes to place her as Galadriel, however, they can still connect her to the larger type of ‘warrior woman’. In the last step, Panofsky (1972) describes the ‘intrinsic meaning or content’ making. In this example, ‘woman with sword/weapon’ and ‘historic or literary warrior woman’, viewed in a Christian context, evokes similarities to the biblical figure of Judith, and thus tells the viewer that the woman on the picture is likely virtuous, just, and strong (p. 13). Additionally, the stories of Joan of Arc and Britomart are evoked, who share these traits with Judith. All together, the compiled interpretation and inscription of virtue, honor, and strength is loaded onto any image of a woman in armour, wielding a sword. These images have in fact been so ingrained in our perception of armed women that they constitute the prototype of the Strong Female Warrior. The image of Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* is just a continuation of the iconic warrior woman.



**Fig. 1: Joan of Arc**



**Fig. 2: Britomart**



**Fig. 3: Galadriel**

A figure so ingrained in history, so iconic as the warrior woman, can pass on valuable information about the trope itself: what all of these figures have in common is their exceptionality. They stand out simply for the fact that they are women in contexts that women do not normally appear; that is their appeal. This uniqueness spans from the very early warrior women to the very latest, and it has not lost its allure over time.

The purpose of the literary development that produced the Strong Female Warrior was to give women more agency outside of the typical positions they found themselves cast in (Cocca 2016, p. 1). A typical role for a woman was either the virginal damsel in distress, the loving mother and wife, or the ruthless, emotionless villain (Andris and Frederick 2007, p. 6). Those tropes encompassed the underlying gender-structures that cast women as loving, emotional,

passive and beautiful (Cocca 2016, p. 4; Jones 2022, p. 1). The position of the villain often showed women who had strayed from the socially acceptable paths and reversed all that was labelled as 'good' and 'feminine' by a patriarchal society. These 'aspirational' qualities of neoliberal feminism, which are playing into the favour of a heteronormative society, 'maintain a discourse of reproduction and care work' (Rottenberg in Banet-Weiser 2019, p. 8). These qualities, then, are lauded and celebrated, while constituting women as 'individual enterprises' (ibid.), ensuring that the majority of the workload remains their responsibility and encompasses most things domestic. Thus, neoliberal feminism in patriarchal systems works to ensure that women are construed as both liberated workforce and ultimate housewife. This concept is important in regards to the concept of the Strong Female Warrior, because it signifies what standards women are held to in a capitalist, neo-liberal society, and what norms are reinstated by the application of this particular trope.

The new strong warrior woman strove to break out of these confines, and to establish women as equal to men; equal in strength and agency and purpose. The warrior woman did not need a man to save her: she simply picked up a sword and fought for herself (Tolmie 2006, p. 146). Agency, then, means an often physical struggle against patriarchal structures, and a metaphorical and literal breaking of chains. Jessica Yates states that a classic woman warrior is concerned with her sense of identity and purpose, rather than self-transformation or a potential love-interest (Yates 2000, p. 14). These, as will be shown, are a popular, and more recent addition.

Especially in early fantasy and the beginnings of the employment of this trope, achieving agency involved mirroring precisely the masculine power structures the female characters fought against. As early fantasy mainly mirrored a pseudo-medieval standard, this included dressing up in men's clothing, speaking their mind, being educated, physical tests of strength, and a dislike for 'weak' women, who could or would not leave their homes or did not express the urge to fight. So rather than negating patriarchal power structures, the way that the strong female character was (and indeed still is) portrayed as, was by assuming a stereotypically 'male' exterior and demeanour. Yvonne Tasker and Lindsay Steenberg point out that, when strong, violent women emerged in the action and superhero-movies of the 1990s, this emulating of a 'male' exterior was felt to be 'disconcerting' and left many to question the characters' heterosexuality (Tasker and Steenberg in Gjelsvik 2016, p. 173). This 'concern' was alleviated around the 2000s, with the emergence of the 'action babe', a more feminised version of the 'sexless' warrior woman of early fantasy (ibid.). She was still allowed to be violent, but was now increasingly sexualised to fit into a heteronormative narrative.

With the emergence from a historical romance into a fantasy genre, the female character is allowed to be 'forceful and decisive' (Tolmie 2006, p. 146), but she always exists in a 'power structure oriented towards the systematic disenfranchisement of women' (ibid.). To portray a woman who is different, who is extraordinary, she needs a backdrop of the ordinary; women who do not escape their fates, who do not pick up a sword, women to whom she can paint a contrast (cf. Tolmie 2006, p. 146; Andris and Frederick 2007, p. 7)). She is 'not like other girls' (an 'anomalous figure', according to Tasker and Steenberg in Gjelsvik 2016, p. 171), but she depends on them to showcase her difference. The Strong Female Warrior embodies the classical hero figure partly by standing alone, by being cast, or casting herself, out from the society of other women. She prefers to be alone, and, in combination with the stereotyped spheres ('inside' for women, 'outside' for men), the ones she encounters in the sphere she chooses are primarily men. As such, the Strong Female Warrior begins to resent other women who do not cross the boundaries that she herself has crossed. Ultimately, the strong fantasy heroine does not reverse or overtly attack the patriarchal system, she just rises above it and creates her own rules. Tolmie (2006) emphasises that these heroines 'excel within the system' (p. 148), indeed, that they are dependent on it.

The hero of a story is someone who has been extraordinary from childhood (cf. Campbell 1968). If the Strong Female Warrior is now just a continuation of the hero-trope, it stands to reason that her backstory, whether that be her childhood or just the formative time that passed before the story proper began, should be equally as unique. What is noticeable in the Strong Female Warrior trope, however, is the occurrence of not only an extraordinary backstory, but often a violent or traumatic one (Tasker and Steenberg in Gjelsvik 2016, p. 174; Tolmie 2006, p. 148). The 'need' for horrible backstories is in line with the extraordinariness that encompasses the whole female warrior trope (Bennett 2023, p. 148). Since, in a patriarchal fantasy system, a woman cannot usually be born to greatness, she must achieve it by being great. She must face the darkest adversities and still choose to actively fight: death, abuse, threats of rape and sexual assault; these are the dangers facing the fantasy heroine (Tolmie 2006, p. 148). She must have lived through some of it to make her remarkable, not only showing physical, but also mental strength. The patriarchal power structure that she seeks to break out of will also try to pull her down again, and she will face threats and dangers specifically levelled against women, to try and remind her of her place (Inness 1999, p. 13). But she keeps fighting regardless, not against the system, but against her place in it. The fantasy heroine is doubly tough-

ned: mentally, because of what has happened (and is indeed still happening) to her, and physically, because she assumes the looks and characteristics of a male.

## 4.2. The Question of Representation

The trope of the Strong Female Warrior has, as has been shown previously, at its core the wish for an autonomous female character, one who is able to escape the confines of the patriarchal power systems. However, as has also been made clear, she often finds herself unable to act outside of those systems, and rather emulates typically ‘male’ characteristics while relying on the horrific abuse that can happen to women who try to escape an oppressive society to set those women apart from ‘weak’ female roles. As such, it is easy to perceive how this trope has been subject to stereotyping and commodification, especially in the movie industry. Thus, the particular want that brought this trope into existence, namely the want for an independent woman who would no longer be subject to the whims of men, is disregarded entirely, and the ‘girlboss’ is born. As Catherine Rottenberg (in Banet-Weiser 2019) states, ‘[t]his kind of hyper-individualising neoliberal feminism, which construes women not only as entrepreneurial subjects but also as individual enterprises’ (p. 8) has done nothing to shed light onto actual problems that women face, and done everything to diffuse feminism’s goals in favour of rendering it palatable to a main-stream audience (ibid.).

The question of the female warrior must include the question of representation: how women are represented in the fantasy-, science fiction-, and superhero-genre, why such representation is important, but also how it may be used to render representation palatable, thereby negating the effects it might have had. Carolyn Cocco (2016) stresses the importance of representation in media. Having a fictional character who outwardly resembles the viewer can have a positive impact on self-esteem and can forge a more intimate connection between the two (Cocco 2016, p. 3). Women are chronically underrepresented, especially in the superhero- and fantasy-genre (Cocco 2016, p. 4), and when they do appear, they tend to be put into stereotypical roles: femme fatale, damsel in distress, the loyal spouse who waits until the male hero returns from his quest. A woman outside of those confines is always contested: she is seen either as ‘a harbinger of ass-kicking feminism or as yet another example of how excessive violence has taken hold of every facet of popular culture.’ (Brown 2011, p. 10). Even then, she has to be

thin, white, and conventionally beautiful, and (typically) engage in some form of (sexual) relationship with the hero (cf. Cocca 2016).

Underrepresentation of women in media does not necessarily mean the lack of female figures. And conversely, representation, especially meaningful representation, does not entail simply putting more female characters into a story. Rather, it is important to remove them from their stereotypical and gender-normed confines, and ‘increase [...] their diversity, depth, and quality’ (Cocca 2016, p. 6). True representation means for women to be able to tell their own stories and challenge the patriarchal system in which they find themselves.

The evolution of the Strong Female Warrior is largely due to a wish of better and less stereotypical representation, a chance for women to escape their predefined roles of damsel or femme fatale. However, the difficulty lies in challenging the confines of the patriarchy, which often proves almost impossible. The fantasy heroine is likely to instead simply emulate ‘male’ characteristics, as well as a ‘male’ look, which can quickly become stereotypical on its own: she is now stereotypically ‘male’ instead of ‘female’, although, as Stein (2009) points out: ‘Emulating the most stereotypical and extreme version of masculinity does not offer women a genuine solution to female oppression.’ (p. 173). Often, this masculine behaviour causes unease with a heteronormative audience, and women become a ‘troubling presence’ (Tasker and Steenberg in Gjelsvik 2016, p. 173). This need not be a detrimental thing altogether: by displaying and examining these violently masculine women, we begin to question why they make us feel uneasy, and how our view of women has been influenced by a patriarchal system. However, this is also where their influence ends. They do not make us question further what women *could* be, only in which ways they may resemble men. This violent, masculine warrior woman had her heyday in the late 80s, 90s and early 2000s, following in the ‘desexed’ footsteps of the fantasy heroine, but preceding and overlapping with the ‘action babe’ of the later 90s and 2000s. Appearing foremost in action and science fiction movies (historically the domain of masculinity, cf. Andris and Frederick 2007, p. 6), she displayed all the traits that constitute the male action hero. Ellen Ripley (*Alien*, 1979, 1986, 1992, 1997), G. I. Jane (*G. I. Jane*, 1997) and even Sarah Connor (*The Terminator*, 1984, 1991, 2003) have none of the glamour of contemporary marvel women, and all the grit, dirt and despair of their male counterparts. Their lack of concern with their looks, their will to violence, and their lack of fixed romantic relationship as the focal point in their lives cause unease with a viewership that has been trained to believe that these are the core values of women. Even more disconcerting is their ‘butch’ appearance, and the ‘threat’ of lesbian connotations within the stereotypically

male action sphere (Inness 1999, p. 23; Brown 2011, p. 25). They reveal to the audience that everything they thought made up a woman can be washed away, leaving them with a woman character that does not neatly fit into the boxes created by heteronormative values.

The ‘action babe’ of the nineties and early 2000s was the response to these ‘disconcertingly’ masculine women and slowly strove to edge them out of the mainstream. Introducing a version of the woman warrior almost entirely geared towards a male gaze. Catwoman (*Batman Returns*, 1992), or Barbara Kopetski (*Barb Wire*, 1996) swiftly return the soothingly sexy action babe to the audience’s accustomed tastes. Schubart (2007) rightfully points out that the sexy action babe contains the first ‘connotations of capitalist economy’ (p. 26) in her outfits, and that ‘she is not perceived as a “person”, but as a male fantasy’ (ibid.).

The superhero-genre, which is in many ways a continuation of the ‘traditional’ fantasy-genre, faces its own challenges, especially in the last decades; the buying of physical comics declined, and the online as well as the movie market exploded (Cocca 2016, p. 13). Traditionally, women in this genre were portrayed as weaker, and, above all, sexualised. Scantily clad, even though they were fighting, they implemented almost inhuman standards of visual pleasure to the reader (Bennett 2023, p. 139). However, with changing audiences and a broader viewer spectrum, thanks to the huge success of the Marvel-movies, there has been a push for (physically) stronger, more involved, and less sexualised characters (cf. Cocca 2016, p. 14). Such female characters bear a huge potential: they could challenge the male-dominated genre and portray women as fighters and heroes, without regard for their looks. This then could potentially subvert an entire system of media, and create a real chance for character equality. But, as Brown (2011) points out: ‘The action heroine has also become a much-debated figure among cultural, media, and gender critics because she both problematizes and reinforces some of the most basic tenets of film studies and gender portrayal.’ (p. 11). The fighting female superhero can bridge the gap between the violent warrior woman and the action babe; her trump being that she can build on the trials and tribulations of her predecessors. She gives women the agency and character that the action babe had been missing, but she also knows to carefully weave in enough femininity as not to produce the unsettling effects of the late 90s violent warriors. Her huge potential also comes with great danger, as will be discussed shortly.

Thus, female action heroines, even though they might be portrayed as superhumanly capable, still have to fit into the conventions of a society that constitutes them as weaker, more feminine and less dangerous than men. They have to be fit, strong, and physically flawless; toned and ready to fight, but not bulging with muscle (Andris and Frederick 2007, p. 12); the

violent warrior of 80s and 90s action movies had already shown that this caused too much unease. In short, they have to be appealing to the male gaze and not outwardly portray the feats they are capable of. They have to look healthy, but one must always be able to forget that they are fighters in any scene where they are not directly engaged in combat. They must be rendered palatable to a (generally) male audience, and they must never challenge or threaten the patriarchal values. If she rises too far, if she ‘aspires to transcend the normal condition of women, to have the same powers and capacity for action as men (do)’, she ‘is presented as a freakish monster’ (Stein 2009, pp. 188-189).

Visibility plays a key part here. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) defines this visibility as ‘being accessible to a large, popular audience’ (p. 10), and places (popular) feminism in such an ‘economy of visibility’ (ibid.). However, visibility alone does not guarantee a release from patriarchal confines, especially ‘in a media context in which most circuits of visibility are driven by profit, competition, and consumers’ (p. 11). As these types of superhero or fantasy movies are largely geared towards a mainstream audience, even the type of feminism they employ has to be mainstream. As Cocca (2016) points out: ‘Representations of female superheroes are affected by the ways in which they are produced for maximum relevance, and therefore maximum profit[...]’ (p. 2). This concept of popular feminism will be covered at a latter point, for now, it suffices to say that the popular feminism often employed in the media discussed here does not challenge dominant ways of thinking so much as it consents to being feminist within the confines of heteronormativity and the male gaze (Banet-Weiser 2018, p.16).

This ‘corporate feminism’, in which the (white, middle-class) female character is theoretically empowered, but in actuality faces many of the same drawbacks as before, emerges especially in an economy that is based on visibility and circulation (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 18). It builds on the societal feeling that through feminism, gender equality has been achieved, and it is thus not necessary anymore to engage in meaningful feminist conversation (Banet-Weiser 2019, p. 9). The continual claim that women in the media are hypersexualised and stereotyped has, at this point, been repeated so often, that a corporate feminist perspective can drown it out in a cacophony of positive, uplifting messages; this feminism encourages its consumer to disregard all the ways in which female characters still experience drawbacks, and it encourages the consumer to only think about the ways in which they have been (supposedly) liberated. This new corporate feminism can flourish mostly in a neoliberal capitalist context where women who face systemic disadvantages are not considered part of the conversation (Banet-Weiser

2018, p. 18). In an economy that is based on the rapid gain of viewership, ‘followings’, ‘likes’, ‘shares’, and platforms that express feminist views can be created and established in an instant. However, this has led some to criticise this popular or corporate feminism, stating that in order to gain a rapid following, such feminist platforms must accommodate a moderate feminist view, must fit into an already existing system, instead of radically questioning it. Lots of media in the superhero or fantasy genre accommodates this corporate feminism, by granting women a piece of the power of men (notably, the power to fight and, sometimes, to be rude), but never exclusively *all* the powers of men: ‘The Byronic heroine does not define any constructive solution to male oppression of women’, Stein (2009) points out. She continues: ‘she does, however, allow the audience a vicarious *experience* [italics mine] of empowerment, a fantasy whereby the possession of a gun gives one absolute control over even the most hostile environment.’ (p. 180). It is exactly this experience that constitutes corporate feminism; where only ever a cheap copy is possible, never the real thing. Corporate feminism is much more palatable to a broad viewership and thus in the interest of those who stand to gain a profit from producing such media. Brown (2011) notices the ‘contradictory nature’ of warrior women, and traces this back to the ‘commercial imperatives of contemporary media forms’ (p. 11). In a medium such as the fantasy or superhero genre, the audience has hitherto been strongly skewed towards the male side; for action heroines to now appeal to both the historically male fanbase and an increasingly diverse reader- and/or viewership, she has to be ‘tough and sexual, violent but desirable, [...] both a heroic subject and [...] a sexual object.’ (p. 12). Violence caused by women, as well as a masculine, tough appearance, often cause ‘unease, horror and threat’ among the audience, and, in order to still market these women to a large, profitable audience, ‘extraordinary lengths’ have to be gone to explain their violent deeds and to situate them in an acceptable socio-economic context (Andris and Frederick 2007, p. 10).



### 4.3. Postmodern Feminism and the Modern Strong Woman

While corporate feminism has been discussed, there is yet another form of feminism that is integral to the emergence of the Strong Female Warrior, its popularity, and its marketability. This is, of course, postmodern feminism as it has been discussed by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (2007), Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg (2019) and others. Postfeminism takes the aims of second-wave feminism, such as gender equality, for granted, but centres its focus on making women a ‘spectacle of excessive femininity’ (McRobbie 2009, p. 66), granting them not change itself, but a superficial, aestheticized version of such. For those reasons, many have seen postfeminism as a negative force, a step back from the actual achievements of second-wave feminism towards a culture of ‘girl power’, convention, conforming, and corporate power.

Simply speaking, postfeminist culture is based on the belief that gender equality has been achieved (through second-wave feminism), and that women are free to do and choose as they want. They can choose to work, or stay at home, they can choose to have children, or stay child free. Postfeminism essentially refers to ‘an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined’, simply by engaging with feminism in such a way as to make it ‘seem redundant’ (McRobbie 2004, p. 255; cf. McRobbie 2009; Banet-Weiser 2018; Negra and Tasker 2007; Banet-Weiser et al. 2019). Naturally, a concept such as this cannot be simply described in one sentence, and carries with itself a host of nuances and debates.

Rosalind Gill speaks of a postfeminist ‘sensibility’, a ‘circulating set of ideas, images and meanings’ (Banet-Weiser et al. 2019, p. 5), and draws attention to the way that postfeminism emphasises women’s bodies as ‘their source of value’ (ibid.). She and others mark that in this sensibility, women are told they simply need to be confident and decided in their way of life, and there will be no obstacles to their success (Banet-Weiser et al. 2019, p. 6; Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 19), which makes it, by definition, a universally inaccessible issue. It is thus open only to an affluent middle and upper class, and does not address the gap between social differences (Negra and Tasker 2007, p. 2). Postfeminism thus incorporates elements of feminism, but denotes actual feminist theory as outdated and distasteful (McRobbie 2009, p. 1). Just as the Strong Female Warrior is made acceptable to modern media consumers by only conveying the most stereotypical and heteronormative images of what it means to be a warrior (and it is indeed a product of postfeminist media consumption itself!), feminism itself is incor-

porated into the dominant discourse of institutional life, and emerges much changed. It is rather instrumentalised in order to sell a specific image to a capitalist society, instead of inspiring any actual change (Mc Robbie 2009, pp. 2-3). The postfeminist action heroine can be physically powerful, but any genuine change or subversion of images of women or systems of power always evaporates under the guise of ‘girl power’ and the desirable, glamorous looks that are on display (Bennett 2023, p. 140). McRobbie (2004) describes the position of women in a postfeminist society as a ‘double entanglement’, meaning that it makes ‘neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life’ (p. 255) accessible by simultaneously providing a ‘process of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations’ (p. 256). Feminism is thus given a kind of false life, both enacted and denied.

Moving on from the basic definition of postfeminism, the Strong Female Warrior is one of the most evident sites of struggle between feminism and postfeminism, between actual change and corporate gain. Is there any actual power in so-called ‘powerful’ female characters, and where does it come from?

In popular media of the recent decades, the term ‘strong woman’ has not only been attributed to women who possess great physical strength, but also to those exhibiting great mental capabilities of resistance, intelligence, and force. Additionally, as Inness (1999) points out, ‘toughness is often associated with women’s sexuality’ (p. 55). This emphasises that for female characters, ‘strength’ is usually not just *physical*, as Brown (2011) explains: ‘[...] the hard-as-nails action heroine is only one of the more visible variants of the tough girl type’ (p. 41). It is *emotional*, as Jones (2022) notes when discussing recent Marvel heroines: ‘[...] WandaVision [...] takes this grief and shows us that this is not weakness, but rather raw, unbridled, intensely powerful strength.’ (p. 198). It is *mental* toughness, as Inness (1999) reiterates: ‘[...] the dream that the lone woman can take on the massed powers of our collective society’ (p. 23). Female strength is manifold, and precariously balanced between different types of toughness.

When examining these types, a few interesting notes become apparent. Since the standard of physical strength continues to be largely set by men, the Strong Female Warrior must therefore be capable of defeating a man in combat, be that hand-to-hand or weapons based. However, since women are less likely to be able to physically overpower men, (unless they possess some sort of divine or supernatural strength, like Wonder Woman, or great physical advantage, like Brienne of Tarth from the HBO TV show *Game of Thrones*) they have to cir-

cumvent the problem of their lesser strength and more delicate build. Their strength lies partly in the cleverness they possess, and the creative ways they find to overcome their enemies (Andris and Frederick 2007, p. 10).

A contributing factor to this much more cerebrally based strength is the fact that this allows for women to still maintain an acceptably ‘female’ figure, which upholds the standard of artificial femininity (Cocca 2021, p. 44). Strong women that look strong (i. e. muscled and/or dressed in masculine clothes) expose the social construct of femininity as what it is: a code of appearance, rather than a natural state of being (Inness 1999, p. 21), thus creating unease and disturbance within an audience that has hitherto never been sensitised to such a construct. As such, the combination of mental and physical strength, largely stemming from a traumatic backstory or the need to ‘escape’ from a restrictive heteronormative order, has been established as one of the defining features of the Strong Female Warrior.

Ingalls (2020), having analysed teen-fantasy novels (by male and female authors) that feature a female lead, has found that, generally, female authors were more likely to create female characters or leads that did not readily engage in combat. In contrast, male authors were more likely to create ‘true’ warrior characters (p. 82). As a reason, she states that, subconsciously, this decision might be influenced by evolutionary forces that should make males evolve to be more physically aggressive, while females of a species tend to avoid physical force in order to stay healthy for potential offspring (p. 80). However, this might also be due to the aforementioned influence of postfeminism: female authors might implicitly be biased towards creating less physically strong leads, because they themselves have been influenced to equal women with femininity, rather than with physical strength. Inness (1999) points out that often, tough women are only strong ‘in order to protect their children and families, [...] thus, their toughness does not call into question gender roles.’ (p. 20). Ingalls (2020) also gives as another reason the tendency for female-authored heroes to have a stronger network of friends and family, while male-authored heroes tend to portray their hero as a loner (p. 85). This again supports the notion that, to be strong, a woman has to be removed from her ‘natural’ sphere of friends, family and the home, and instead be placed outside of it, where she can ‘take a leadership role in times of adversity’ (Inness 1999, p. 26). It is then no wonder that, when movies or TV shows are created by men, the female fighters they show tend to be portrayed as ‘alone, not easily accepting help or making friends.’ (Andris and Frederick 2007, p. 8). Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* also assumes this quality of the lonesome leader, situating her as a tough authority figure.

#### 4.4. The Male Gaze

The subject of the Strong Female Warrior cannot be concluded without at least a superficial treatment of the concept of the male gaze; the two are inextricably tied together. In previous passages, much use has been made of the term, yet it has, until now, not been further defined or put in a critical context. It is, however, crucial to the role of women in modern media, and how they have been marketed and portrayed to an increasingly diverse audience, and the emergence of a 'female gaze' has been much discussed.

The term 'male gaze' was first coined by Laura Mulvey (1975, in: Thornham 1999) in her work on narrative cinema, and it describes the act of looking in a way that constitutes the man as the looker (the subject) and the woman as the object of his gaze (p. 60), based on a general active/male and passive/female divide. This looking is layered, as the spectator simultaneously consists of the male actor, the camera, and the watcher of the movie (p. 63). The goal of the male gaze is to gain scopophilic pleasure (ibid.) by denoting women as a mere 'thing to be looked at' and not an active part of a narrative; women are thus 'simultaneously looked at and displayed' (p. 62). It is precisely this exposure to the objectified woman that, as Judith Mayne claims, has taught women 'to be objects of spectacle' (Citron et al. 1999, p. 115), stressing the evident claim that the male gaze is entirely artificial, yet ever-present, and thus is naturalised. By this naturalisation, the male gaze is then constituted as the norm, and a potential 'female gaze' or 'neutral gaze' is othered. The classic male gaze is fixed upon women's bodies, and the features that, at particular periods in time, are considered pleasurable to look at. It matters less what women say than how they look, and the camera will focus on skintight dresses, exposed cleavages, or high-heeled shoes more than on dialogue, making objects out of living things (Andris and Frederick 2007, p. 12).

To take this into the realm of the Strong Female Warrior, Andris and Frederick (2007) have looked at the particular spectacle that is created when a fight is happening (in general), and when a woman is fighting (in particular). The body is on display here, and the 'spectacle becomes a narrative device' (p. 11), from which the viewer can gain significant visual pleasure. As the warrior woman is already a complex and contrasting figure, so have some also seen this spectacle of the body in action scenes as disempowering, as constituting her as a Mulvey-an object to be objectified; others have rather seen the rising popularity of warrior women as a sign of empowerment, and of women's choice and confidence in their own bodies (p. 12). As

the fighting woman is herself such a transgressive character, both statements can be true simultaneously, and both can be subject to criticism at the same time.

In the wake of a wave of protest against Mulvey's essay, which designates the woman as a mere passive spectacle and works on the presumption that '[a]s a woman going into the movie theater, you are faced with a context that is coded wholly for your invisibility' (Citron et al. 1999, p. 116), the need for change has been voiced. As Andris and Frederick (2007) state: 'The female, non-heterosexual and non-eroticising gazes and desires are, inevitably, unexplored and overlooked.' (p. 12). It is thus of grave importance to bring this 'female gaze' to the front, and to re-imagine not only the gaze of the camera, but the gaze of the reader as well. To make an already complicated matter worse, Anna Marie Taylor notes that, if the gaze of women on women is accepted, the question of how this gaze has been formed by decades of filming conventions: is an authentic female gaze even possible, or has women's gaze been 'determined in advance elsewhere?' (Citron et al. 1999, p. 117). The complication with the female gaze lies in its emergence and answer to a male gaze, but in this concept, women's voices have been excluded, making it thus hard to speak of a history in which their individual experiences have not been validated or acknowledged (cf. Citron et al. 1999, pp. 118-119).

Some have suggested that the concept of a female gaze would solely mean a total reversal of subject and object, thereby rendering the female gaze as harmful and objectifying as the male gaze (cf. Benson-Allott 2017). Others have stated that simply putting women in positions of power usually occupied by men, and having them act out stereotypically male scripts does nothing to diffuse the gaze itself (Stein 2009, p. 173). So simply switching the male to a female gaze without questioning the power dynamics behind the two cannot be the answer to a truly 'female gaze' in cinema. B. Ruby Rich points out that it is the 'strategy of dominant culture to coopt dissent' (Citron et al. 1999, p. 121) and that it is easier to find justifications for it instead of completely turning away from it. These justifications, such as simply switching the female object of the male gaze for a male object, in fact become more oppressive; if one really wanted to reinforce a subcultural resistance in film and TV, then the focus should lie on the spectator, and especially the validation of the woman as spectator (ibid.).

If women are acknowledged as valid spectators, what could be the objective of a female gaze? A simple answer would be that it should portray women and men the same way, and not objectify one or the other. Additionally, a female gaze should work towards giving an authentic

look to a female character, without reducing her to her body; this does not mean that women's bodies should be non-visible, on the contrary. Visibility is of the utmost importance; but the framing of women and especially women warriors must be done in a way that also acknowledges them as active, thinking, non-stereotypical subjects. Caetlin Benson-Allott points out that a true female gaze always designates an intersectional gaze, and that, if a female gaze truly denotes social equality, the focus must not only be on feminist television, but also on destabilizing 'television's historic neglect of black women' (Benson-Allott 2017, p. 66), which can (and must) be expanded to include women of all races, classes and sexualities. Just as postfeminism excludes and makes invisible any women that are not deemed marketable (i. e. non-white, non-affluent, non-attractive), so must a truly female gaze include a broad view on womanhood. Benson-Allott adds that even the term 'female gaze' necessarily needs shared social and cultural experiences, and can thus not rightly be called 'female' (and all-encompassing) if it eliminates groups of women based on race or sexuality (p. 69). B. Ruby Rich refers to Gilles Deleuze when she highlights the importance of history versus the individual voice, stating that it is imperative to 'reconcile one's own voice with the voice of history' (Citron et al. 1999, p. 119). The female gaze not only needs to criticise the way women have historically been portrayed, but also leave room for individual experiences and voices in the future.

As such, media that includes the trope of the Strong Female Warrior must be regarded through the lens of the gaze. Often, fighting women are sexualised, put on display, singled out; through a male gaze, they are a spectacle that both entertains and disturbs. A systematic overhaul of this gaze is necessary to create a true female warrior moving forward, a character who is not mocked or sexualised, but who is presented as a true, authentic version of woman.

To conclude, it is essential to remember that the Strong Female Warrior is an immensely complex and contradictory character. Her history is rich with the wish of escaping the standardised and repetitive tropes of fantasy: the wish for women to claim their own place as active and important subjects who can fight and fend for themselves. However, often this independence comes with the inability to leave an established patriarchal and heteronormative system which necessitates women to merely emulate men and their roles. As this path is inherently narrow, it is thus only open to a few women who are willing to take on the confines of male characters, thus excluding and in fact looking down on other women who cannot or will not sacrifice their identity wholesale. From the beginnings of the Strong Female Warrior as an unsettlingly masculine mirror-image to the evolution of the 'girl power' crying action babe, the question of marketability has often played a large role. Corporate feminism has taken the ideals of the

independent, strong woman, and stripped her of her deeply transgressive implications. Freshly aestheticized as an ass-kicking erotic spectacle, the Strong Female Warrior now presents a stereotyped image of what the warrior woman could have been. Excluding all but the marketable type of woman (white, affluent, beautiful), this image has actively invited the male gaze to look upon these new warriors as strong and desirable, constituting them as violent, but not dangerous to a patriarchal system. That the entire genre of fantasy, and particularly the mode of action, is prone to being stereotyped has helped the postfeminist image of the Strong Female Warrior.

Thus, the image of the woman warrior is constantly in opposition to herself. She is both a transgressive figure and a one-dimensional object. She embodies the possibility of empowerment and the danger of misusing it in a capitalist system. She is both the extreme woman, one who makes the viewer or reader who has been conditioned by a heteronormative society feel deeply uncomfortable, and the focus of visual pleasure.

Just as fantasy as a genre is highly complex and multi-faceted, so is the Strong Female Warrior a contested, problematic, but ultimately fascinating figure worthy of study.

## 5. *The Rings of Power*

Now that the groundwork has been laid, this chapter will implement all the theoretical knowledge discussed previously into the reality of the TV show *Rings of Power*. After a brief overview on the show's history and its story, the focus will be on the scenes where Galadriel is explicitly present. Those are analysed on the basis of the characteristics of the Strong Female Warrior, and are evaluated as to the extent that these characteristics are present in the show. Additionally, the knowledge about Galadriel as Tolkien's character will be integrated, to determine whether any of her original character traits have survived.

### 5.1. Brief Summary

Released on September 1, 2022, *The Rings of Power* is an Amazon Prime series that consists of (as yet) one season with eight episodes. Based on the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*, showrunners J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay strove to depict the events surrounding the forging of the great Rings, as well as the Fall of Númenor, and put Galadriel in the main role. It is important to mention that the show was made in consultation with the Tolkien Estate, from which they had to buy the rights; reportedly costing hundreds of millions of dollars (*Hollywood*, Oct. 5, 2022). After its launch, Amazon came forward with their data: the show had been watched by 25 million viewers globally during the first 24 hours that the first two episodes premiered. They did not, however, define how they measured a view, nor provide data from previous series to compare *Rings* to (*Variety*, Sep. 3, 2022).

The reception of the series had been mixed from the start, even before the first episodes had been released. Especially the choices to cast people of Colour in major roles caused outrage among the more right-wing of Tolkien-lovers (*Hollywood*, Oct. 5, 2022), leading to the disparaging ratings on review sites such as *Rotten Tomatoes* or *Metacritic*, where the first season is currently sitting at a score of 83% from critics, but only 38% from audiences (*Tomatoes*, Mar. 6, 2024) as well as a 'generally unfavourable' user score of 3/10 (*Metacritic*, Apr. 18, 2024). However, Amazon's tactic of attributing negative reviews solely to a racist part of the audience also erases any attempts at genuine criticism.

Since the focus is on Galadriel, much that the series touches, and as such could be criticised on, will not be discussed here. As a preface, it is necessary to point out two things: first, that the showrunners seem not to have had a clear timeline in mind, and do indeed mix up var-



ious events that happened in *The Silmarillion* and the belief that all adaptations, modernised or not, are bad, and therefore, should not be attempted, is not held. The creative liberty that is inevitably taken with any adaptation can be a very enriching experience; however, *The Rings of Power*, even though it claims to be deeply connected to and rooted in Tolkien's works (*Hollywood*, Aug. 12, 2022), falls short on various occasions.

Briefly summarised, the series centres around Galadriel and her search for Sauron, who, at this point, is believed to have been vanquished. She is offered passage back to Valinor by Gil-Galad as a reward for her deeds (what exactly those are is never explained). She ultimately decides she is not worthy, and jumps from the ship headed back to the Undying Lands, whereupon she is picked up by a fisherman and smith called Halbrand. Galadriel finds out that he is descended from the Kings of the Southland, and is determined to help him get his kingdom back; this would also aid her goal of finding and defeating Sauron. After a storm, they are taken on by Numenórean sailors, and brought to Númenor. There, Galadriel manages to convince the Queen-Regent Míriel to sail an army to Middle-earth to free the Southlands from an invasion of Orcs, thereby reinstating Halbrand as king. Together with the Regent, Captain Elendil and his son Isildur, they manage to free a village of an onslaught of Orcs (this ties into another character's storyline, which shall not be discussed here), but are ultimately affected by the outbreak of a nearby volcano. Much harmed, the Numenóreans leave Middle-earth again with the promise of returning, and Galadriel takes a wounded Halbrand to Eregion, where Celebrimbor and Elrond are about to forge the three Elven Rings. Halbrand provides integral insight as to the forging, but is then discovered by Galadriel to have been Sauron in disguise all along. He tempts her with power, which she refuses, and he flees before the Rings are finished.

This very short summary sketches out the journey undertaken by Galadriel, as well as some of the problematics of her character that will be discussed in the following sections. First, her lack of motivation pertaining to her own person: her primary motivations are to avenge her brother Finrod and support Halbrand in reclaiming his throne, but she seems to not have any clear goals that do not build on another character. This problem will be discussed in regards to postfeminism's 'lifeplan' agenda, as well as the hollowing out of women's goals and aspirations in connection to men's (cf. McRobbie 2004).

Secondly, her martial and stubborn character: in the series, Galadriel is a difficult, prickly and contrary character who takes an active part in physical fights, all characteristic of the Strong Female Warrior (Brown 2011, p. 11). Problems mainly arise when the canonical

background is taken into consideration: Galadriel is supposed to be a wise character, having lived many centuries and established her own realm; yet little of this is visible in the show, and what ancient wisdom shimmers through is presented in a largely patronising manner. Knowledge about the Strong Female Warrior is revisited, and the depth of Galadriel's character in the show is questioned.

Thirdly, the decision to remove her husband Celeborn from the story establishes her as a partially desirable character, and her relationship with Halbrand is definitely tinged with romantic implications. This follows the blueprint of the Strong Female Warrior, and the narrow path the trope cleaves between female desirability and the need for independence (cf. Brown 2011).

And lastly, Galadriel follows both the stereotypical path of the hero and the Strong Female Warrior by being portrayed as a lone fighter (Andris and Frederick 2007, p. 8), left by her company, and with very few friends and little ability to gain new ones. She is marked as special, both mentally and physically, and does not seem to fit into the community of other elves, largely due to her stubborn desire to hunt Sauron.

## 5.2. Galadriel's Connections

The series begins with a flashback into Galadriel's childhood, something that Tolkien has never discussed. Of course, creative liberty is expected (and necessary), and the show writers needed to somehow guide the viewer into assuming that Galadriel is an exceptional child, and will thus grow up an exceptional woman (cf. Campbell 1968, p. 319; the childhood of a hero 'is shown to have been a pageant of marvels'). This 'coming of age' is usually portrayed through a series of rituals that the (boy) hero has to undertake in order to be considered fully adult. Brian Attebery (1992) cites Van Gennep when he lists the basic three-step process: 'separation of the candidate from the community, a period of ordeals and instruction, and reincorporation into the community under a new identity' (p. 90) of the transition from childhood to adulthood. In the very short scene of child-Galadriel that the audience is shown, it becomes clear that she is following this exact hero-in-the-making path: by showing her being bullied by the fellow elf-children, she is separated from them and their community. Throughout the entirety of the show, Galadriel is not yet re-integrated into the society of Elves, thus extending the period of liminality that she is experiencing. She is, as Victor Turner (2009) noted, 'neither here nor there, [...] betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by

law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (p. 95). Galadriel's liminal state is marked by the resistance she shows towards not only her king, but the Valar themselves. She refuses to comply with Gil-Galad's command to stop hunting Sauron, and she leaves the ship before it can reach Aman ("A Shadow of the Past." 58:17); this prolongs her liminal state, indicating that her journey is not yet at an end. Galadriel refuses to abide by any 'hierarchies and standing norms' and questions 'authority in any form' (Thomassen 2014, p. 1); although she refuses other peoples' authority, she tries to establish herself as an authoritative figure ("Adar." 11:45). Even at the very end of the season, Galadriel has not been fully re-integrated into Elvish society. The 'period of ordeals' (Attebery 1992, p. 90) has historically been a male state of being, with men being the ones to undergo these transformative experiences, while women went from child to adult by getting married. For Galadriel to follow this 'male' model means that she assumes a period of time that typically does not get ascribed to women. Attebery (1992) criticises a wholeheartedly imitated 'male initiation story with a female protagonist' as 'inadequate [...] if the writer wishes to connect with women's actual experience in our culture.' (p. 91). Combined with Galadriel's status as a Strong Female Warrior, she appears as an in-between figure, not quite female in her experiences, but not quite male in her appearance. Liminality and the Strong Female Warrior are inextricably linked; being a warrior woman is an unstable state that causes unease, that is seen as abnormal (Phillips 2017, p. 8). Galadriel's beginnings in the show thus serve multiple purposes: they establish her as a 'special' child, they preface the motivation that will fuel her through the course of the series, and they situate her in a male (hero) context, rather than a female one.

Loneliness is one of the leitmotifs of Galadriel's character. Having no established friends apart from Elrond, she is rather an outcast from her own society. Friendship and love, however, play an important part in the Tolkienian heroes in whose footsteps she treads. Juričková (2014) points out that their success depends on mutual trust (p. 33), which Galadriel shows very little of. Lúthien, Beren, and Huan; Túrin and Beleg; the entire Fellowship; Bilbo and the Dwarves; all examples of deep friend- and companionship, which their quests would have failed without. Even characters who used to walk alone are stronger in a group: 'His [Aragorn's] sacrifice [...] is [...] a giving up of *how he might act* were he an *independent* warrior' (Nikakis 2007, p. 87). Alone, none of them would survive.

In *The Rings of Power*, Galadriel is nonetheless established as a lonely child and a lonely adult. Out of the two people she trusts, one, Finrod, has died, and the other, Elrond, wants her to return to Aman. During the course of the series, Galadriel forges only one new

friendship: a reluctant-allies-to-teasing-friends alliance with Halbrand. Both Tolmie (2006, p. 146) and Tasker and Steenberg (in Gjelsvik 2016, p. 172) point out that the ‘lonely hero’ is a common trope to indicate the exceptionality of a woman. She is thereby set apart from other women, who do not share her remarkably qualities, and can thus only engage with those who are her equals: in fantasy, that often means men. Stein (2009) poses that ‘[t]he female action-adventure hero aspires to transcend the normal condition of women, to have the same powers and capacity for action as men.’ (pp. 188-189). Her disconnect from the society in which she moves establishes her as ‘rebellious, ambitious, narcissistic, individualistic, and ultimately self-destructive’ (Stein 2009, p. 171).

Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* is only put into a friendly or loving relationship with three people: Finrod, her brother, Elrond, and Halbrand. None of these are women. Female friendships in the series (apart from the two Hobbit-girls) are almost non-existent, but Galadriel seems to actively resist them. While in Tolkien’s work, interactions between women are rare (Burns 2005, p. 129), ‘the fantasy genre permits [...] the pre-emptive negation of questions about the limits of women’s physicality’ (Tasker and Steenberg in Gjelsvik 2016, p. 173), and, arguably, their emotions.

Galadriel stands out because she has a strong moral compass, is stubborn, and does not care for the opinions of others. The choices that she has made and is still making push her to the very fringes of society; she is seen as somewhat troublesome, and maybe even pitied, because her quest for vengeance seems rather futile. She is what Tolmie (2006) and Tasker and Steenberg (in Gjelsvik 2016) call an ‘exceptional woman’, one who, by violating the gendered standards of the society she moves in, is extraordinary because other women are not (pp. 176-177). The extraordinary woman can only be so unique because she stands out against a backdrop of silent, acquiescent women who are not exceptional, thereby implicitly shaming this silent mass for not breaking out of confines and societal norms like the Strong Female Warrior does. While no such silent mass of ‘ordinary’ women is shown directly in *The Rings of Power*, they still implicitly exist. The concept of the submissive woman unable to break free from the system must still be there for the viewer to have something to contrast Galadriel against. As such, she is herself still trapped in ‘a surprisingly enduring reference point for stories about female warriors and heroines in fantasy fiction’ (Tasker and Steenberg in Gjelsvik 2016, p. 176).

As a narrative technique, both Tasker and Steenberg (2016) and Stein (2009) have pointed out that the viewers’ attention rests more naturally on a stand-out character, especially

an exceptional fighter who ‘must define his or her own moral code and battle society’s impersonal and corrupt institutions’ (Stein 2009, p. 172); however, simply following the stereotyped paths of the Strong Female Warrior ‘does not offer women a genuine solution to female oppression’ (p. 173).

Although Galadriel is presented as an exceptional character and woman, the reasoning behind her actions, and her entire drive throughout the series has two main origins: Finrod, her brother, and Halbrand. It is strongly implied that she chose the life of a warrior to avenge her brother’s death: ‘His vow [Finrod’s vow to destroy Sauron, note] became mine. And so, we hunted [...] Sauron’ (“A Shadow of the Past.” 07:32). Galadriel is the only one still actively trying to destroy Sauron, while the rest of the Elves seem to think he has vanished or died. Her mission is not her own, it is ‘acted-upon’ (Tolmie 2006, p. 146). She leaves an ordinary Elvish life, alienating herself from her kin, following a destiny that makes her special, but, ultimately, did not originate from her own path, but her brother’s. This lack of agency continues as Galadriel urges Halbrand to fight back against the Orcish armies in Middle-earth, as she (falsely) believes him to be the long-lost King of the Southlands. She perceives that this would be a great victory against the evil in Middle-earth, and a strike against Sauron. However, she strives not to fight for herself, but for Halbrand and, ultimately, her brother. This is unusual, as Brown (2011) points out: ‘[...] the modern action heroine [...] commands the narrative and controls her destiny, makes her own decisions, and fights her own battles.’ (p. 11). The decided lack of Galadriel controlling her own destiny is palpable, and even more noticeable is the fact that her goals are seemingly shaped by men. She is consumed by another person’s legacy. Galadriel admits that she ‘cannot stop’ hunting for Sauron (“Partings.” 49:20), because she is full of the darkness caused by the loss of her brother. She goes on to say that even other Elves have found concern in her feverish, stubborn drive: ‘[...] they [her company, note] could no longer distinguish me from the evil I was fighting.’ (“Partings.” 50:10). What little agency she has is dominated by two male characters, thus diminishing her path as an individual.

Part of what makes Tolkien’s version of Galadriel so interesting is the fact that she has her own aims and ambitions. She wants to establish her own kingdom in Middle-earth (*Na-chrichten*, p. 370), and she follows that goal regardless of the cost. Neither the Kinslaying of Alqualonde nor the Banishment could influence her decisions the way Finrod’s vow and Halbrands supposed lineage have in the show. In all versions of Galadriel’s stories, the focus lies

on her ‘pride and self-will’ (Lakowski 2007, p. 98), not on any outside forces influencing her decisions.

The ‘lone hero’ Galadriel is someone who, as Stein (2009) mentions, ‘creates [her] own rules and [her] own moral code, and while [s]he may break the law in pursuit of [her] goals, [s]he takes responsibility for [her] actions.’ (p. 1). However, closer inspection of Galadriel’s motives shows that she neither has her own, nor knows how to create them.

### 5.3. Galadriel as a Physical Warrior

One important characteristic of the Strong Female Warrior is certainly fulfilled by Galadriel in *The Rings of Power*: she is very clearly shown as a prolific warrior, wearing armour and wielding a sword. From an extensive review of the source material, Tolkien himself had certainly never imagined Galadriel as a physical fighter; the closest he came to attributing anything warrior-like to her was his description of Galadriel as being of ‘Amazon disposition’ (*Letters* #348, p. 428). Indeed, Tolkien saw women on the battlefield as an irreconcilable thing (Fredrick and McBride 2007, p. 36). Although he created a fighting woman himself, Éowyn, his chief intent had never been to let her stay one. Marjorie Burns (2005) writes that ‘Tolkien uses a variety of techniques to soften her warrior role’ (p. 145), perhaps in order to emphasise that women’s proper place is not on the battlefield. After she had joined the Battle of Minas Tirith out of necessity, she returned to more ‘proper’, womanly goals, namely marriage and (presumably) childbirth. Her statement at having Faramir confess his love tells much: ‘I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren.’ (*RK*, p. 1264). Éowyn, though undeniably the most warrior-like of Tolkien’s female characters, ultimately casts off that role and returns to a peaceful life. That is, generally, the path of all of Tolkien’s successful heroes: they become kings and gardeners and lords living in peaceful times. Éowyn is thus equated with other heroes, although her fate, as Burns (2005) puts it, ‘helps re-establish her femininity’ and that Éowyn ‘is never publicly praised’ (p. 146), thus taking away from her journey.

Galadriel’s grit and her capability with wielding weapons are shown at multiple points during the series, but two important instances will be discussed here. The first comes towards the very beginning of the series, in the first episode. It features Galadriel and her company in

an icy cave, looking for clues as to the whereabouts of Sauron. Suddenly, they are attacked by a troll, which Galadriel, clad in armour and with flowing hair, effortlessly kills (“A Shadow of the Past.” 16:07). She is clearly shown to be the superior fighter of her company, but is not a venerated leader. Although Galadriel is allowed to wear armour for most of her fighting scenes, she is not entirely masculinised. Her hair, golden and open, leaves no doubt as to her gender.

The second instance takes place when Elendil challenges a group of his soldiers to fight Galadriel for practice, enticing them with the position of lieutenant if they were able to hit her (“Partings.” 40:00). Galadriel, clad in a dress and with open, flowing hair, takes on first one, then two soldiers, and ultimately the whole group at once. She establishes herself as a preternaturally graceful and able fighter, even giving comments and guidance during the performance. She seemingly effortlessly takes on the soldiers, always with the air of a teacher demonstrating their superiority to their students. The dancing movements, so starkly different from a brutal battle, perpetuate ‘both an investment in elegance and grace (femininity)’ (Tasker and Steenberg in Gjelsvik 2016, p. 183). Her appearance helps to set her off from the group: open hair and a dress are usually not ideal for fighting, but the Strong Female Warrior Galadriel proves that the constrictions of traditionally female outfits are no hindrance to her abilities as a fighter. The Strong Female Warrior must at all times retain an immaculate image: perfectly coiffed and with flawless skin, she represents an ideal picture of the feminine fighter (Bennett 2023, p. 140). She must not be shown to sweat, to get dirty or strain herself. She can be strong, but not ugly. Both her looks and her weapon ‘allow the audience a vicarious experience of empowerment’, as they grant her the fantasy of ‘absolute control over even the most hostile environment’ (Stein 2009, p. 180). Her exceptional capabilities in wielding weapons while looking stunningly untouchable create a situation in which woman can only prove her worth by beating men with ‘their’ weapons. She has to prove herself a mighty warrior to be taken seriously.

Galadriel also emphasises her heroic uniqueness in this scene: the hero is not a mere mortal, but in some way better or different. Galadriel is not only better than mortals, she is also better than other women, who cannot fight, or cannot fight in a dress (Tolmie 2006, p. 146). The dress itself is also of interest here: it is quite constricting at the top, almost binding her chest, emphasising a connection to male garments, and evoking a picture of male power rather than female desirability. However, this fight is completely devoid of the hypersexualised image of the fighting woman, rather, Galadriel is almost iconic in her purity and grace, unmis-

takably a woman. She is the essence of Britomart, embodying not only valour, but also ‘essential moral and intellectual virtues’ (Phillips 1942, p. 229)

More recently, Galadriel as a fighter is strongly modelled after the postmodern warrior women of the Marvel timeline. Graceful in her fighting, not physically overpowering, but rather a quick and clever fighter, she does not cause the same unease as the masculinised, violent warrior women of the late 90s. Nothing about her threatens or subverts a heteronormative assumption about fighting women, rather, she is almost glorified in the two scenes cited above.

#### 5.4. Galadriel’s Sexualisation

The connection between the male gaze and the Strong Female Warrior is an obvious one. In the age of visual entertainment, the warrior woman more often than not has been the object of such a gaze, empowered only on the surface, ever ready to be fetishized by a male spectator. Indeed, female warriors have so often been regarded by the male gaze that they seemed nigh inseparable, and to uncover this gaze has been the work of many critics. Yet *The Rings of Power* manages to keep the male gaze almost wholly away from Galadriel. Possibly, this takes its root with Tolkien’s aversion to overtly sexual content, though it is interesting how the show has managed to keep this de-sexed feeling in an age where ‘dark’ and ‘gritty’ fantasy TV shows and movies (much like *Game of Thrones*) seem inextricably linked to the oversexualisation of their female characters.

Andris and Frederick (2007) write that the singularity of a female fighter (and, it can be argued, her sexualisation) is dependent on her isolation ‘within the film’s frame and narrative’ (p. 7). Galadriel is almost constantly portrayed as a lonely character, a standout feature not only with men, but especially exceptional women. Andris and Frederick go on to say that ‘[s]he is often forced to assert herself in places that exclude other women and which, therefore, present her as an exception to the norm’ (ibid.). While *The Rings of Power* does not actively exclude women from traditionally masculine feats (at no point is Galadriel’s skill with a blade questioned), it does so implicitly. The other two important women that appear in the show (excluding the proto-Hobbit girls) are a mother, who is trying to protect her son and gets romantically entangled with an elf, and Queen Regent Míriel, who, although a woman in power, is still dependent on her aging father for that power. As Tolmie (2007) reminds the



reader: 'Strength needs weakness; extraordinary needs ordinary; the exception depends on the general condition.' (p. 146). The viewer is simply not shown another warrior woman, thus connecting Galadriel with extraordinariness and spectacle. Spectacle, as Andris and Frederick (2007) have shown, is closely linked to the concept of the male gaze and to the sexualisation of female characters in visual entertainment: 'Their bodies become the core focus of the camera, turning them into objects of an appraising gaze' (p. 12).

However, only one scene in the show ("Partings." 40:00) could conceivably be interpreted as performing spectacle on Galadriel's body. In every other moment, her body is just a vehicle for the extraordinary and spectacular moves she performs, not a sexualised agent itself. While Galadriel, as a lone warrior woman, is still 'looked at and displayed' (Mulvey in Thornham 1999, p. 62) for the gaze of the viewer, she is not portrayed in a sexualised manner. The viewer is still expected to recognise a woman in armour as a spectacle, but they are no longer expected to identify her as a sexual object.

One of the most glaring omissions of the show, and one that interplays with the image of the Strong Female Warrior and her sexualisation, or, at least, her availability as a sexual object, the most, is the issue of Galadriel and Celeborn. By the end of the Second Age, Tolkien's Galadriel would have been married to Celeborn for a long time, and would also already have given birth to her daughter Celebrían (*Nature*, p. 346). Almost no trace of this can be found in the show, and the audience is only ever given one singular piece of information about Celeborn: Galadriel speaks of having 'lost' her husband ("The Eye." 30:20), although it is never established if he indeed died or if she just lost sight of him, and has not been able to find him yet. Disregarding the fact that a lost Celeborn would change all of the following stories quite significantly, it is telling that *The Rings of Power* would decide to portray a Strong Female Warrior without ties to a husband or a child.

Warrior women who are also mothers or take on a mother-role are less frequent than non-mothers, but certainly not unheard of. George Faithful (2016) mentions *Alien*'s Ripley or *The Terminator*'s Sarah Connor as examples of different types of motherhood (p. 355), but both their journeys to becoming mothers occurred in their backstories or in the interim between two movies (p. 353, 355), ensuring that 'the warrior mother appeared ready-made on screen' (p. 355). Galadriel is denied even this: she is entirely separate from any mother- or wife-identity, with her only family being Finrod, whose vow she has taken up. In trying to avoid the stereotypical presentation of woman as 'mother' and thus, her motivations being inextricably

linked to motherhood (Tasker 1998, p. 70), *The Rings of Power* evades the topic completely. Since Galadriel has traditionally never been primarily associated with motherhood, it is understandable why the show would ignore this particular piece of her story, but, perhaps in an effort to release one of Tolkien's female characters from a position they are often shown in (i. e. wives and mothers), erasing it so completely ultimately serves to confuse a knowledgeable viewer more.

There are multiple reasons for this choice. Firstly, and most in the spirit of Tolkien, would be the lack of sexualisation for all of his female characters. Certainly, Galadriel is described as beautiful (Lakowski 2007, pp. 98-99), but never as sexually desirable, except perhaps by Fëanor, who wished for a strand of her hair, which she never granted him, thus alienating the two forever (*Nachrichten*, pp. 369-370). Sauron saw in her 'a chief obstacle' (*Nature*, p. 347), which, in the source material, is never interpreted as any sexual desire, but, with the emergence of various tropes surrounding the Strong Female Warrior (such as the popular 'enemies-to-lovers') could be skewed to this side for the sake of fan appeasement.

Brown (2011) sums it up concisely when he writes: 'The contradictory nature of action heroines is understandable given the commercial imperatives of contemporary media forms.' (p. 11). And while the audience for *The Rings of Power* is certainly not 'exclusively male', Galadriel is still portrayed as 'violent but desirable' (ibid.). This desire is not obviously sexual, but she is still an available woman, her husband having been written out of the narrative with one small line. This opens the path for Halbrand and the viewer to notice her 'as both a heroic subject and as sexual object' (ibid.). Even though Galadriel is no seductress, and her body, even though it is spectacularised, is not sexualised, she still constitutes a desirable object. In the fight scene in episode 5 ("Partings." 40:00), Halbrand's and the viewers' gazes connect as they watch Galadriel fight. She is constructed through this gaze as an object of (possibly sexual) desire, invariably focalised through a male perspective.

Perhaps speaking of Galadriel's sexualisation is not the correct term. But she undeniably evokes a sense of desire in both Halbrand and the audience. When Halbrand reveals himself to be Sauron, he openly makes advances on her, promising to make her his queen ("Alloyed." 44:35). While his desire gets bolder, Galadriel's ability to fight gets weaker. She actively becomes more powerless as Sauron, albeit in veiled terms, constructs her as a sexual object. Tasker (1998) draws attention to the heterosexual partnership often found in action movies, and the inevitability that such a pair 'will end up in an embrace' (p. 75). Usually, Tolkien tends to focus more on homosocial bonds (mainly between men), with heterosexual

teams being relatively rare. However, due to Galadriel being a woman, she, according to Tasker (1998), cannot form her own homosocial bonds due to the fact that ‘the popular American cinema has marginalised representations of female friendship, more often favouring glamorous stars seen to exist in spectacular isolation, supportive figures who exist almost exclusively in relation to the hero, or women set in competition with each other.’ (p. 139). This then only leaves the heterosexual relationship open to Galadriel. In connection with her lonely character, *The Rings of Power* chose to forego homosocial bonds, which are so important in Tolkien’s work; although she is not stereotypically sexualised, Galadriel still constitutes a desirable object, and is gazed at by Halbrand and, in effect, the viewer.

### 5.5. The Problems of Timeline and Character

Roughly set in the Second Age, but never explicitly specified, *The Rings of Power* produces one of its major problems by not adhering to an established timeline, instead throwing together various events that happened throughout *The Silmarillion*. This leads to a lack of depth, perceived by both old and new fans. Additionally, by foregoing Tolkien’s timeline of events, Galadriel is put in a sort of limbo; she seems both old and young, wise and rash.

Tolkien made a note in c. 1959 that, at the time of Exile, a ‘young and eager’ Galadriel would have been around 20 in humanised-Elf-years (*Nature*, p. 66). She would have married eight years later, settled down and given birth to Celebrían at around 30 (Valian Years), so either she would be about 191, 268, and 287 years old respectively (using a roughly 1:10 scale), or, if the scale were 1:144, that would make Galadriel 2880 years old when she came into Middle-earth, and 4320 when she became a mother (for more discussion on time-scales and time-varieties, see *Nature*). Roughly speaking, there would be a few millennia in between Galadriel’s first coming to Middle-earth and the events happening on Númenor and around the Forging of the Rings. This now creates a juxtaposition that the show does not address: viewers who know the rough timeline will expect Galadriel to be old, wise, and powerful, but the character portrayed on screen seems more stubborn and rash than anything (‘charging at every obstacle’ “The Great Wave.” 36:16; blundering her way through conversation with Míriel “Adar.” 12:31). The combination of these qualities creates a jarring disconnect, making it hard for a viewer to see her as a realistic character. She simply cannot be both thousands of years old, and display the reactions of a teenager.

What arises as a problem for *The Rings of Power* is the lack of relatability that Galadriel in her original form would have to a viewer. Downs (in Campbell 2014) mentioned a ‘perfection problem’ in his essay on Lúthien and Éowyn: he speaks of Lúthien as ‘perhaps too perfect’ (p. 67); she essentially conquers any problem that she and Beren encounter without difficulty. She escapes the confines of her gendered role, defeats Sauron and Morgoth, and even comes back from the Halls of the Dead with Beren. There is no compatible male hero in Tolkien’s works who has managed all of these feats. However, there is little to no struggle to her deeds, and she succeeds because of her innate power and goodness, not because of her grit or determination. Lúthien is a prime example of a too-perfect hero: she is a mythical figure, but largely unrelatable to the reader. Galadriel, then, had to be made relatable to the viewer. Jones (2022) remarks that, as women have historically been associated with emotion, it might be tempting to portray a Strong Female Warrior completely devoid of any feeling (p. 197). However, he continues that, in order to portray complex characters, emotion has to be used in ‘meaningful ways’ (ibid.), a statement that Cocca (2016) also makes: “‘Strong Female Character’ doesn’t have to mean “emotionless”, or “badass”, or “flawless”” (p. 220). The relatability in strong warrior women emerges from the fact that ‘no matter how many times she is knocked down, she always gets back up’ (Cocca 2021, p. 37). Audiences need to see struggle and adversity. Cocca adds that ‘confidence, resilience, personal transformation, and individualistic ‘leaning in’ [...] are at the heart of affectively appealing neoliberal feminisms’ (ibid.). Galadriel therefore can be marketable only if she faces struggle and overcomes it. However, the show, in choosing Galadriel as their main lead, needs to work with a canonically old and wise character, while simultaneously making her relatable and appealing to a general audience. Galadriel is an immensely complex character, but *The Rings of Power* does not manage to join her wisdom to an equally empathetic expression, instead creating a profoundly disjointed feeling.

## 5.6. Subversion?

Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* is, above all, a liminal figure. She fits in neither with women, nor with men, and, arguably, even with the classical Strong Female Warrior. She certainly fits Brown's (2011) image of the female warrior as 'not easily written off as "either/or"' (p. 13). Although she is definitely a postfeminist character, she presents a subversive potential, which from time to time manifests itself. Most notably, she is not readily sexualised. Her wet, white robe is neither transparent, nor form-fitting ("Adrift." 29:58), and does not draw the eye of the viewer more than any other piece of clothing. Having a female character on screen whose task is not to visually please men within the piece of media or in the audience could have been a genuinely interesting angle to explore, however, the hesitant romance between Galadriel and Halbrand re-constitutes her as a desirable, if not sexual, object. Physicality as spectacle is further advanced by marking Galadriel as a stand-out woman, set apart against an invisible group of 'weak' women, who are not shown to fight.

The choice to grant a story and an independence to a female character is commendable in itself. However, as Cocca (2016) cautions: 'We need to increase not only the number of new female characters but also their diversity, depth, and quality' (p. 6). Expanding both the number and the character traits of women shown in (particularly fantasy) movies leads to audiences being exposed to less stereotyped female characters (p. 221). While exceptional stories are generally what draws the viewers' eyes, this singularity cannot and should not be based on the exclusion of 'oppressed and abused women' (Tasker and Steenberg in Gjelsvik 2016, pp. 176-177). Sadly, *The Rings of Power* does not give an indication towards unexceptional heroines, at least not where the Elves are concerned.

Its marketability is based on the values of commodity feminism, and the struggle in media between feminist concerns about women's representation and the postfeminist celebration of consumption of women's images (cf. Negra and Tasker 2007). Galadriel thus exists 'under the guise of progress' (Coulthard in Negra and Tasker, p. 155), while remaining a static character.

## 6. Conclusion

Postfeminism is a commercially lucrative and appealing concept. A lot is gained without much actual change, bringing in economically attractive prospects while hinting only at the barest minimum of feminism.

The action and warrior woman has seen many stages of development: the emergence of independent fantasy heroines, who did not subvert patriarchal power so much as assume that power for themselves; the masculine gunslinger, whose performative masculinity caused profound unease, but who, ultimately, did not provide a genuine solution to the problem of the warrior woman; the action babe, fully realised under the male gaze, controlled in her sexuality by appearing only as the object of male lust; and finally the postfeminist boss babe, who embodied the free woman, while in actuality performing a limiting role of white, middle-class beauty norm paired with very little actual feminism.

Genuine female warrior roles are always a point of contention. They defy the masculine by being women, but to achieve this, most have to concede actual freedom. The Strong Female Warrior, therefore, cannot be presented as a single entity. She is the amalgamation of tropes and historical conventions that are perpetually at odds with each other as well as with the patriarchal system itself. The wish to create not just mentally, but physically stronger female roles in books, movies and TV shows means a struggle with what is possible to be imagined, and what is possible to be commercially successful.

Galadriel as Tolkien imagined her is a richly developed, interesting character. Taking her roots from Christianity and the Middle English Romance tradition, she is both fearsomely powerful and gracefully wise. Tolkien's uncertainty towards her actions, and his many changes over time, show that there is more to her than critics of his female characters might suggest. She certainly is not a shallow character, but she is an uncertain one. Tolkien seemed unsure of how much pride he could ascribe to his very own Virgin Mary without having her fall be irreconcilable with her role as revered fairy queen. His solution, it seems, was to gradually introduce her as a more active player in the Kinslaying, rather than a potentially guilty bystander. Her characterisation as headstrong and proud was alleviated over the years by an increasing wisdom and repentance.

The fantasy genre as such did not exist until the mid-twentieth century, but the roots of the Strong Female Warrior can be traced to proto-fantasy literature. Around Tolkien's time, and after, this trope has been strongly tied to medieval or fantastical settings, which eventually morphed into adjacent genres, such as science-fiction or superhero stories. The defining

feature of fantasy has always been its structural rigidity, which nonetheless left room for creativity and adaptability. Fighting women in fantasy evolved from the wishes and demands for strong characters; however, that usually meant a projection of masculine traits onto the female body. Necessarily, these strong women could only triumph because there were silent masses of 'weak' women against which they could contrast themselves.

Just like heroes are traditionally recognised by their extraordinary childhood, heroines must equally possess a dramatic past that sets them apart from the norm. Interestingly, it seems that for women, these experiences have to involve traumatic experiences, and a loss of some kind. Their motivation is not driven by fate or a heroic calling, as so many of their male counterparts are, but by external forces like revenge.

The early female warrior heroine presents as a spectacle by not conforming to normative expectations of womanhood. She dresses in a masculine way, acts freely and speaks her mind; she performs masculinity without subverting it. She is a liminal force, and thus constantly in danger of discovery and retaliation. The action heroine of the late twentieth century adds a profound unease in audiences to this liminal experience. Unabashedly masculine warrior women threaten heteronormative audiences by enacting scripts that female roles had not enacted before. Thus, the answer came swiftly in the form of the action babe. Almost comically female and sexy, she was still allowed to handle weapons (preferably in the shape of a phallus), but she was not here to further the plot on her own. Under the male gaze, the warrior woman was reduced to an aesthetic, but ultimately useless, 'tough' woman.

The new age of the Strong Female Warrior, as well as her commercial success, came with the desire for more involved female characters, ones that could be the weapon-wielding heroines of their own stories, but did not need to dress in masculine clothing to achieve their goals. The new woman warrior embodies everything that is popular and economically marketable. She presents a desirable, pretty, athletic shape, a beautiful, made-up face, and she keeps a connection to the white middle-class, who are her primary audience. The Strong Female Warrior, despite her ass-kicking and her one-liners, never successfully subverts the expectation of a strong woman.

The need for commercial success has largely overridden the possibility for genuine change and subversion. In a late-stage capitalist society, nothing is more useful than a character that can embody certain traits that make them appealing to large audiences, without questioning too much of the system, which would alienate a fair number of consumers. The Strong Female Warrior panders to an audience that wants to see women fight. The spectacle of the armed woman can be, to a certain extent, marketed quite well. The combination of the pleas-

ing visual external and the moderately feminist internal speech includes the side of the audience clamouring for more active roles for women, and does not exclude the readers and viewers who derive visual pleasure from a female character.

Galadriel as Tolkien wrote her presented an opportunity for the show-writers of *The Rings of Power* to take a beloved character and turn her into a strong woman fit for modern audiences. However, the show missed key points that would have constituted a genuine subversion of audience expectations concerning her person. While she is not explicitly sexualised, she is still made desirable to the audience through Halbrand's eyes. Galadriel is still a spectacle, a lone warrior devoid of homosocial bonds. Juxtaposed between wise, old Elf and stubborn warrior, she does not manage to be relatable to audiences, who are more likely to perceive her as a perpetual exception.

While Amazon Studios devoted a great deal of money into this project, their desire to appeal to a modern audience aligned itself more with stereotypes than with subversion. Particularly because the opportunity to create a truly Strong Female Warrior was so present, and because Tolkien's world left much up to exploration and expansion, the disappointment in having Galadriel be just another sword wielding warrior woman is palpable.



## Bibliography

“A Shadow of the Past.” *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, written by J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay, directed by J. A. Bayona, Amazon Studios, 2022.

“Adar.” *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, written by Jason Cahill and Justin Doble, directed by Wayne Che Yip, Amazon Studios, 2022.

“Adrift.” *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, written by Gennifer Hutchison, directed by J. A. Bayona, Amazon Studios, 2022.

“Alloyed.” *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, written by Gennifer Hutchison, J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay, directed by Wayne Che Yip, Amazon Studios, 2022.

Andris, Silke; Frederick, Ursula (Eds.). 2007. *Women Willing to Fight: The Fighting Woman in Film*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.

Attebery, Brian. 1992. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2018. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Duke University Press.

Banet-Weiser, Sarah, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg. 2019. “Post- feminism, Popular Feminism, and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation.” *Feminist Theory* 21(1): 3–24.

Bennett, Eve. 2023. “‘I Can’t Get Her to Wear a Dress for the Life of Me:’ American Telefantasy Action Heroines, Utilitarian Style and the End (or Not) of Postfeminism”. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 40 (1), 138-161.

Benson-Allott, Caetlin. 2017. “No such thing not yet: Questioning television’s female gaze”. *Film Quarterly* 71 (2), 65-71.

Breznican, Anthony and Joanna Robinson. “Amazon’s *Lord of the Rings* Series Rises: Inside *The Rings of Power*.” *Vanity Fair*, 10 Feb. 2022, [vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/02/amazon-the-rings-of-power-series-first-look](https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/02/amazon-the-rings-of-power-series-first-look). Accessed 18 April 2024.

Brown, Jeffrey A. 2011. *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. Jackson (MS): Mississippi UP.

Burns, Marjorie. 2005. *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse Mythology in Tolkien’s Middle-Earth*. Toronto: Toronto UP.

Butzkamm, Aloys. 2001. *Christliche Ikonographie: zum Verstehen mittelalterlicher Kunst*. Paderborn: Bonifatius.

Campbell, Joseph. 1968. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton UP.

Carpenter, Humphrey and Christopher Tolkien (Eds.). 2006. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. London: HarperCollins.

Carter, Susan. 2007. "Galadriel and Morgan le Fey: Tolkien's Redemption of the Lady of the Lacuna". *Mythlore* 25 (3/4), 71-89.

Citron, Michelle; Julia Lesage; Judith Mayne; B. Ruby Rich; Anna Marie Taylor, and the editors of *New German Critique*. "Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics". *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sue Thornham, Edinburgh UP, 115-121.

Cocca, Carolyn. 2016. *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

—. 2021. *Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel: Militarism and Feminism in Comics and Film*. London: Routledge.

Coulthard, Lisa. 2007. "Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminsim and Film Violence". *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker. Durham (NC): Duke University Press, 153-175.

Curry, Patrick. 1998. *Defending Middle-earth. Tolkien: Myth and Modernity*. London: Harper Collins.

Downey, Sarah. 2011. "Cordial Dislike: Reinventing the Celestial Ladies of 'Pearl' and 'Purgatorio' in Tolkien's Galadriel". *Mythlore* 29 (3/4), 101-117.

Downs, Jack M. 2014. "'Radiant and terrible': Tolkien's Heroic Women as Correctives to the Romance and Epic Traditions". *A quest of her own: essays on the female hero in modern fantasy*, edited by Lori M. Campbell, McFarland & Company, 55-75.

Faithful, George. 2016. "Survivor, Warrior, Mother, Savior: The Evolution of the Female Hero in Apocalyptic Science Fiction Film of the Late Cold War". *Implicit Religion* 19 (3), 347-370.

Falconer, Rachel. 2014. "Earlier Fantasy Fiction: Morris, Dunsany, and Lindsay". *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Stuart D. Lee. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 3033-316.

Fimi, Dimitra. 2014. "Later Fantasy Fiction: Tolkien's Legacy". *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Stuart D. Lee. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 335-349.

Fredrick, Candice and Sam McBride. 2007. "Battling the Woman Warrior: Females and Combat in Tolkien and Lewis". *Mythlore* 25 (3), 29-42.

Hibberd, James. "'Lord of the Rings' TV Writers: Show Not Just 'Vaguely Connected' to Tolkien." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 12 Aug. 2022, [hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/lord-of-the-rings-power-amazon-show-tolkien-1235198137/](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/lord-of-the-rings-power-amazon-show-tolkien-1235198137/). Accessed 18 April 2024.

—. "'The Rings of Power' Showrunners Break Silence on Backlash, Sauron and Season 2." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 5 Oct. 2022, [hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-features/the-rings-of-power-showrunners-interview-season-2-1235233124/](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-features/the-rings-of-power-showrunners-interview-season-2-1235233124/). Accessed 18 April 2024.

Hume, Kathryn. 1984. *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*. London: Methuen.

- Ingalls, Victoria. 2020. "Who Creates Warrior Women? An Investigation of the Warrior Characteristics of Fictional Female Heroes Based on the Sex of the Author". *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* 14 (1), 79-91.
- Inness, Sherrie A. 1999. *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia UP.
- Jackson, Rosemary. 1981. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen.
- Jones, Benjamin. 2022. "The Evolving Portrayal of Female Emotions in the Marvel Cinematic Universe". *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 34 (1-2), 196-202.
- Juričková, Martina. 2014. "Friendship in Tolkien's World". Mallorn: *The Journal of the Tolkien Society* 55, 32-34.
- King, John N. 1990. *Spenser's Poetry and the Reformation Tradition*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton UP.
- Lakowski, Romuald Ian. 2007. "The Fall and Repentance of Galadriel". *Mythlore* 25 (3), 91-104.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 1989. "Spike the Canon". *SFRA Newsletter* 169, 17-21.
- Lyman-Thomas, J. S. 2014. "Celtic: 'Celtic Things' and 'Things Celtic' – Identity, Language, and Mythology". *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Stuart D. Lee. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 272-285.
- Maas, Jennifer. "'The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power' Premiere Draws 25 Million Global Viewers in First Day, Amazon Says." *Variety*, 3 Sep. 2022, [variety.com/2022/tv/news/lord-of-the-rings-ratings-rings-of-power-premiere-amazon-1235359350/](https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/lord-of-the-rings-ratings-rings-of-power-premiere-amazon-1235359350/). Accessed 18 April 2024.
- Maher, Michael W. 2003. "'A land without stain': Medieval images of Mary and their use in the characterization of Galadriel". *Tolkien the Medievalist*, edited by Jane Chance, Routledge, 225-236.
- Masters, Kim. "Inside Amazon Studios: Big Swings Hampered by Confusion and Frustration." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 3 Apr. 2023, [hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/inside-amazon-studios-jen-salke-vision-shows-1235364913/](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/inside-amazon-studios-jen-salke-vision-shows-1235364913/). Accessed 18 April 2024.
- Mathews, Richard. 2011. *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*. New York (NY): Routledge.
- McCrory Hatcher, Melissa. 2007. "Finding Woman's Role in The Lord of the Rings". *Mythlore* 25 (3), 43-54.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2004. "Post-feminism and Popular Culture". *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (3), 255-264.
- . 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage.

Mendlesohn, Farah, and Edward James. 2009. *A Short History of Fantasy*. London: Middlessex UP.

*Metacritic*. "The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power – Season 1.", [metacritic.com/tv/the-lord-of-the-rings-the-rings-of-power/season-1/](https://www.metacritic.com/tv/the-lord-of-the-rings-the-rings-of-power/season-1/). Accessed 18 April 2024.

Mulvey, Laura. 1999. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sue Thornham, Edinburgh UP, 58-69.

Negra, Diane, and Yvonne Tasker. 2007. "Introduction. Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture". *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker. Durham (NC): Duke University Press, 1-25.

Nikakis, Karen Simpson. 2007. "Sacral Kingship: Aragorn as the Rightful and Sacrificial King in *The Lord of the Rings*". *Mythlore* 26 (1), 83-90.

O'Brien, Harvey. 2012. *Action Movies: The Cinema of Striking Back*. New York (NY): Columbia UP.

Panofsky, Erwin. 1972 [1939]. *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes In the Art of the Renaissance*. Boulder (CO): Westview Press.

"Partings." *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, written by Justin Doble, directed by Wayne Che Yip, Amazon Studios, 2022.

Patel, Charul. 2014. "Expelling a monstrous matriarchy: Casting Cersei Lannister as abject in *A Song of Ice and Fire*". *Journal of European Popular Culture* 5 (2), 135-147.

Phillips, James E. 1942. "The Woman Ruler in Spenser's 'Faerie Queene'". *Huntington Library Quarterly* 5 (2), 211-234.

Phillips, Leah. 2017. "Impossible Journey: The Liminality of Female Heroes". *RoundTable* 1 (1), 1-21.

Roberts, Adam. 2014. "Women". *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Stuart D. Lee. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 473-486.

*Rotten Tomatoes*. "Season 1 – The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power.", [rottentomatoes.com/tv/the\\_lord\\_of\\_the\\_rings\\_the\\_rings\\_of\\_power/s01](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/the_lord_of_the_rings_the_rings_of_power/s01). Accessed 6 March 2024.

Schubart, Rikke. 2007. *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970-2006*. Jefferson (NC): McFarland.

Stein, Atara. 2009. *The Byronic hero in film, fiction, and television*. Carbondale (IL): Southern Illinois UP.

Tasker, Yvonne. 1998. *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema*. New York (NY): Routledge.

Tasker, Yvonne, and Lindsay Steenberg. 2016. "Women Warriors from Chivalry to Vengeance". *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones and Multiple Media Engagements*, edited by Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 171-

192.

“The Great Wave.” *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, written by Stephany Folsom, J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay, directed by Wayne Che Yip, Amazon Studios, 2022.

“The Eye.” *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, written by Jason Cahill, directed by Charlotte Brändström, Amazon Studios, 2022.

Thomassen, Bjorn. *Liminality and the modern: living through the in-between*. Surrey, Ashgate, 2014.

Todorov, Tzvetan. 1973. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca (NY): Cornell UP.

Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. 1999. *The Silmarillion*. London: HarperCollins.

—. 2007. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. London: HarperCollins.

—. 2007. *The Return of the King*. London: HarperCollins.

—. 2014. *Nachrichten aus Mittelerde*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

—. 2021. *The Nature of Middle Earth*. London: HarperCollins.

—. 1939. *On Fairy-Stories*. Accessed via <https://coolcalvary.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/on-fairy-stories1.pdf>. Last accessed 17 May 2024.

Tolmie, Jane. 2006. “Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine”. *Journal of Gender Studies* 15 (2), 145-158.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New Jersey (NJ), Aldine, 2009.

“Udûn.” *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, written by Nicholas Adams, Justin Doble, J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay, directed by Charlotte Brändström, Amazon Studios, 2022.

Wilson-Okamura, David Scott. 2009. “Belpheobe and Gloriana”. *English Literary Renaissance* 39 (1), 47-73.

Yates, Jessica. 2000. “Arwen the Elf Warrior?” *Amon Hen* 165, 11-15.

## List of Figures

Lynch, Albert. *Jeanne d'Arc*. 1903. In: Figaro Illustre, accessed via [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeanne\\_d%27Arc\\_%28pr%C3%A9nom%29#/media/Fichier:Albert\\_Lynch\\_-\\_Jeanne\\_d'Arc.jpg](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeanne_d%27Arc_%28pr%C3%A9nom%29#/media/Fichier:Albert_Lynch_-_Jeanne_d'Arc.jpg). Last accessed 17 May 2024.

Crane, Walter. *Britomart*. 1900. Accessed via [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Walter\\_Crane\\_-\\_Britomart\\_%281900%29.jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Walter_Crane_-_Britomart_%281900%29.jpg). Last accessed 17 May 2024.

Grace, Matt. *Galadriel*. <https://mattgracephotography.com/RINGS-OF-POWER/1>. Last accessed 18 April 2024.