

Southern New Hampshire University

Gender in Fiction:

An Autoethnographic Approach to J.R.R. Tolkien, Female Characters and Gamers

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By

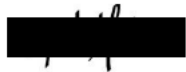
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Abstract

The thesis is an autoethnographic approach to J.R.R. Tolkien, female characters and gamers. It will focus the gender studies theory to study how female characters have changed and grown throughout history in Fantasy. J.R.R. Tolkien's work *The Lord of the Rings* are the primary source and how he had few female characters in the work. The paper will also look at how he wrote his characters and depicted them in the work. Laura Măcineanu's "Women Figures in George Macdonald's and J.R.R. Tolkien's Fantasy Writings" makes a point about Tolkien's characters "It has often been noted that women are hardly present in Tolkien's legendarium. However few they are, though, these women hold positions of power in the hierarchy of Middle-earth and easily stand out among the multitude of male characters that populate Tolkien's world" (70). Female gamers are studied in the paper to tie together how female characters were/are written and portrayed in multiple media outlets. Female avatars/toons in most games are still sexualized and female gamers a lot of times play in a toxic environment. Christopher J. Ferguson and Brad Glasgow's "Who Are GamerGate? A Descriptive Study of Individuals Involved in the GamerGate Controversy" is a look at a controversy involving the gaming world "In 2014, the GamerGate controversy erupted, focusing international attention to issues related to sexism and misogyny in gaming communities. Exactly how the controversy began remains an issue of debate" (243). The paper will be used to bridge the gap between how female characters were portrayed in early Fantasy to how times are changing and female characters are becoming the protagonists of the story. The paper will look at bridging the gap in how fiction is taught in English programs by studying female characters as an important part of Fiction.

Keywords: fantasy, gender, The Lord of the Rings, video games

Introduction

Since the early days of Fantasy writers, female characters have been damsels in distress or the love interest to the main character. Those works and most works throughout history had a patriarchal system. J.R.R. Tolkien used this system in his works. There are few female characters in his works and the fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings* were all male. Writers today are changing that idea by creating female characters who are tough and independent and the protagonists of the story. Authors like Patricia Briggs and Laurell K. Hamilton with their works have helped to change the landscape of how female characters are written and viewed by readers. The patriarchal ideology can be seen in the game development world, as most games are created by men and the companies are run by men. The objective of this paper will be to bridge the world of books and video games by showing how female characters are depicted from the viewpoint of female gamers/readers with a focus on J.R.R. Tolkien and his works.

To answer my question about Tolkien's world having few female characters, female gamers, and how female characters are portrayed in gaming, I will give the reader insight into what it is like to be a female gamer and play in Tolkien's world compared to other video games. Then I will bring in how there are few female characters in Tolkien's world and the lack of impact they have on the story except for one character. The movies will be used to show how the female characters are portrayed compared to the books and game. The idea is to give the reader or student a well-rounded look at the impact of Tolkien and his works on games and movies.

My paper will address how female characters are portrayed in Tolkien's world and in games with an autoethnographic approach as a female gamer and fantasy writer. I also plan to use the paper as a future teaching tool on the college level about female characters, how they were seen in early fantasy works, and how that is changing. I plan to create a syllabus and short lesson plan that discusses gender/gaming in Fantasy and how it has evolved throughout history

that will also incorporate the movies and the game into the lectures and discussions. My theoretical approach will be gender studies. I will analyze gender studies through the idea of the patriarchal system in Fantasy and how female characters were/are portrayed.

Impact of Female Characters in Tolkien's World

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* from the end of the 1930s through the 1940s and the book(s) were published in the 1950s. During this time, authors were changing how they wrote female characters in their stories, but they were still not the protagonists. Female characters as the protagonist have taken a long time to become more mainstream in fiction, movies, and tv shows. *The Lord of the Rings* gained a cult following not long after the books were released. Although they were still popular among readers. It wasn't until 2001 that they would become mainstream again for readers when Peter Jackson's trilogy of movies were made and released. Jackson changed a few things that happened in the book(s). One of those was a scene that involved Arwen and the fellowship in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. In the book, she was not the one who took Frodo to Rivendell, but for the movie Jackson changed it to her to introduce the love story between her and Aragorn. This allowed for one of the few females in the story to be introduced but again it was as the love interest not a powerful heroine. The scene in the book is different from what took place in the movie. Glorfindel (male) was the elf to assist Frodo and the others to Rivendell. They did encounter the riders that were after Frodo. One of the lines:

At that moment there came a roaring and a rushing: a noise of loud waters rolling many stones. Dimly Frodo saw the river below him rise, and down along its course there came a plumed cavalry of waves. White flames seemed to Frodo to flicker on their crests and

he half fancied that he saw amid the water white riders upon white horses with frothing manes. (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 209)

The scene did happen in the movie in much the same way but instead of Glorfindel at the river it was Arwen. In the movie when this scene takes place Arwen does confront the riders and says some words in Elvish that brings the waves across to deny the riders passage across the river. This does allow for her to be presented as a female with some power. It was after seeing the movies I read the books again and became a fan of Tolkien and his works for the second time. As I read the books again, I thought about my first impression of reading them in high school and how I loved them back then and wanted to become a Fantasy writer.

In *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* Arwen is further described by Tolkien in comparison to another female character Luthien (character from the story of Beren and Luthien):

Arwen is not a ‘re-incarnation’ of Luthien (that in the view of this mythical history would be impossible, since Luthien had died like a mortal and left the world of time) but a descendant very like her in looks, character, and fate. When she weds Aragorn (whose love-story elsewhere recounted is not here central and only occasionally referred to) she ‘makes the choice of Luthien’, so the grief at her parting from Elrond is specifically poignant. (193)

Luthien was an elf like Arwen and chose a mortal life to be with Beren because of her love for him. Arwen chose to live a mortal life against her father’s wishes. This again shows how female characters were portrayed in stories like *The Lord of the Rings*.

Nancy Enright’s article was a particularly interesting one to read. She discusses that there are few female characters in the books. She brings up a good point:

The general lack of a female presence in battle scenes (with the important exception of Eowyn's contest with the Nazgul) or even among the members of the Fellowship does not imply that female power and presence are unimportant. On the contrary, Tolkien's female characters epitomize his critique of traditional, masculine and worldly power, offering an alternative that can be summed up as the choice of love over pride, reflective of the Christ-like inversion of power rooted in Scripture, and ultimately more powerful than any domination by use of force. (93)

Her statement is powerful because it brings up how although there are very few female characters in *The Lord of the Rings* those characters do have some power. They aren't portrayed as powerful they are considered maidens who should stand by and let the men do the fighting.

Melissa Hatcher discusses the woman's role in *The Lord of the Rings*. One of the points about the woman's role in the story is "While a number of critics have accused Tolkien of subsuming his female characters in a sea of powerful men, one heroine, Éowyn, the White Lady of Rohan, is given a full character arc in the novel. After being rejected by Lord Aragorn, Éowyn searches for meaning in life, choosing to follow her brother, Éomer, to fight in the War of the Ring" (43). Éowyn is not the only female character mentioned in the story. There are two other female characters in the story Arwen and Galadriel. Both are elves and Galadriel is the more powerful of the two they do not have full character arcs like Éowyn does. Arwen's story is tied to Aragorn and the outcome of the war. She chooses a mortal life to be with him but she does nothing other than being portrayed as a love interest. Éowyn, after getting hurt in the battle, chooses a safer path in life but proves to herself and to others that women could fight and handle themselves if they had to.

John Miller looks at gender in Tolkien's world in his article "Mapping Gender in Middle-earth." His article was of interest because of his discussion of gender in Middle-earth. He states:

While Tolkien has been criticized for his apparent discomfort with or lack of interest in female characters, the very paucity of important female roles in the books helps draw the reader's attention to the different ways of being masculine suggested by the characteristics of the different "races" of Middle-earth. Race thus becomes a way of inscribing gender. (136)

He gives readers and students insight into the fact that there are few female characters in the story and how impactful that lack is when studying Tolkien's world. The lack of powerful female characters is not only seen in Tolkien's world but other fantasy worlds, games, and movies.

In literature, there is the idea that the protagonist must be a man and that women are to be the love interests. In Tolkien's world there are few female characters throughout the entire world of Middle-earth. The fellowship consists of men. Every encounter it's always the men. The women that are encountered are a love interest. Galadriel was a female elf. She was powerful within the story but in *The Lord of the Rings* her power is shown one time while talking with Frodo. Arwen was an elf and the love interest of Aragorn. Éowyn was a mortal woman of Rohan. She was the only one to have a complete character arc within the story from the moment she was introduced to the reader. In *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Tolkien says this about Éowyn "But I will say no more, nor defend the theme of mistaken love seen in Eowyn and her first love for Aragorn" (161). A reader or movie watcher can see this theme in her words and interactions with Aragorn. It is a one-sided love on her part. He loves Arwen. She does something later in the story that separates her from other female characters of the time. Éowyn disguises herself as a soldier and fights in a major battle. Costabile notes "Loyalty, and sacrifice: this is what, I argue,

creates the shieldmaiden, the invincible woman who defeats Death itself, at least if we believe the Witch King claiming he is Death” (362). The passage in the book shows that she is so much more than a love interest to a male character. She fights to protect her family and friends. She is loyal and goes into the battle knowing she might die but is willing to sacrifice herself to make sure others are safe.

As with most Fantasy stories the hero is always a man who rides off to battle or a quest. The women stay behind waiting for them to return. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is no different. Felicity Gilbert notes:

Similarly, *The Lord of the Rings*, as noted by a plethora of critics, contains many of the same rigid gender roles; not just in relation to men, but also women. While there is a notable absence of a female presence in the novels, there is but a small cadre of women who are granted entry into the androcentric sphere of the battlegrounds. The women of Middle-earth, adhering to their social positions, are situated safely far away from any fighting that occurs. Arwen, while heroicized and constructed with much more depth in Peter Jackson’s film adaptation, is kept out of sight in the original text and Galadriel remains similarly “peripheral to the action and we learn little of her history and relationships” (Rawls 99). This too is a salient reflection of traditional patriarchal society of Tolkien’s time, with the character of Eowyn being the main exception. (324)

Gilbert’s assessment is true of the characters of the story. The reader doesn’t get the history or relationships of the other two female characters like they do with Éowyn. Her story was kind of unique to the plot. After being introduced to her the reader follows her character arc from falling for Aragorn to killing the Witch King to her relationship and eventual marriage to Faramir. In

this respect, she is the only female character to fight in a battle against evil. Arwen and Galadriel are out of harm's way and protected.

As a reader and writer sometimes a thought surfaces about the fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings*. That thought is what direction would the quest have taken if there had been a female in the group. Thinking about some of the interactions and scenes that took place along the trek across Middle-earth how would it have changed if a female had participated. For example, would her being there been seen as a burden. If she could fight and defend herself, would she have the same respect as her male counterparts. Given the time the story is set in and how women were depicted she would have been an exception to the rule like Éowyn was.

Female characters who defied the normal position women had in the early days of fiction were treated poorly for the way they acted. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the female characters were treated with respect but still has ones who needed to be protected. Fredrick and McBride note:

Even a figure such as Arwen Evenstar has a major impact on the Ring trilogy while only rarely appearing within it (a fact which Peter Jackson sought to remedy in his film versions of the novel). Tolkien was himself aware of this criticism of his books, as seen in a 1955 letter to the Houghton Mifflin Company: "The only criticism that annoyed me was one that it 'contained no religion' (and 'no Women', but that does not matter, and is not true anyway)" (*Letters* 220). (32)

Arwen, Galadriel, Éowyn, and the few other female characters do have an impact in the story but not like Éowyn who fights in the battle at Minas Tirith alongside her brother and uncle. She was disguised as a male soldier while doing this. She hid her identity so she wouldn't be left behind. Éowyn was a character who wanted to be taken seriously as a female who could defend herself and those around her.

Filipeczak notes ““Éowyn’s unique status is stressed in Tolkien’s narrative. Unlike Luthien from *Silmarillion*, or Aragorn’s beloved Arwen, or powerful Galadriel, Éowyn is a mere mortal, who achieves the impossible with the help of small but determined Meriadoc, who deals the first blow to the Nazgûl” (411). The scene in the book that helps to set Éowyn from the other female characters is her confrontation with the Ringwraith (Witch King) “Then Merry heard of all sounds in that hour the strangest. It seemed that Denhelm laughed, and the clear voice was like the ring of steel. ‘But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund’s daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him” (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 823). The Ringwraith had in the beginning of the confrontation with her that no man could kill him. She then admitted she was no man and killed him. Doing this was part of what made her unique to the story. She had something to prove to herself and others around her. Although she did disguise herself to do it and rode to the battle without her brother and uncle knowing she was among the soldiers.

Măcineanu notes “It has often been noted that women are hardly present in Tolkien’s legendarium. However few they are, though, these women hold positions of power in the hierarchy of Middle-earth and easily stand out among the multitude of male characters that populate Tolkien’s world” (70). This is true of the female characters within the story. Galadriel is a powerful female elf among her people. Arwen holds some power and becomes Queen when she marries Aragorn. Éowyn holds some power as well but not in the way Galadriel and Arwen are powerful. She is a mortal who kills the Ringwraith (Witch King) in a battle protecting her King who is her uncle as well. Măcineanu also notes “Besides these supportive, nourishing, action-inspiring figures, there are those of the Wise Woman and the Shieldmaiden or Female

Warrior, who actually plan and perform the action” (71). The author was discussing the idea of the female figures depicted in stories like *The Lord of the Rings*. The Wise Woman would be Galadriel because she has lived many, many years as an elf. She can see what might happen if certain things come to pass in the world of Middle-earth. The Shieldmaiden or Female Warrior would be Éowyn.

Éowyn is a character when first introduced isn't named until her uncle calls her by name in front of the others. Johnson notes “Éowyn receives a description of the kind usually reserved for leaders. Her character is strong and her perception is keen, so that it appears she may not be just a simple flat character reserved for background scenes and set decoration” (121). Her character at first is just another female among the men until they learn more about her. The grief she feels and what she had been through in her life shapes who she is. She had lost her parents at a young age. Her uncle took her and her brother in and raised them. Her cousin dies after receiving wounds in a battle. In the battle she fought in her uncle is slain before her eyes. She is injured and almost dies after slaying the Witch King. She survives and finds comfort and a sort of peace with Faramir. There is a theme that stands out with the female and male characters like Arwen, Éowyn, Faramir, Aragorn and Frodo. They all lost their mothers when they were young children. In the case of Aragorn, Frodo and Éowyn they lost their fathers as well when they were young. The loss of a parent at a young age does help to shape a person and who they become later in life.

Smith notes “Raised in the company of great warriors, in a society that has taught her to glorify the battle-arts, Éowyn, lady of Rohan, seems an unlikely choice as a participant in *The Lord of the Rings*' single romantic storyline. Noble, cold, and stern, she desires to find death, not to renew life; she searches for glory, not healing” (161). This is true of her when the reader is

first introduced to her and her storyline moves forward. She does have feelings for Aragorn and he tells he could never love her like she wants because he loves another. This does hurt her but she still cares for him. Toward the end of her storyline, she meets Faramir while she is healing from her injuries. They grow close and eventual marry. She settles into her role as wife and healer to her people.

The role of female characters in *The Lord of the Rings* although not the protagonists of the story are as important as their male counterparts. They each bring something to the story that otherwise wouldn't be there. They are unique when it comes to most Fantasy because they do yield power unlike most female characters. As a writer those characters do inspire in some way the female characters that have been created since the release of *The Lord of the Rings*. Today, a female character like Éowyn would be written as the protagonist of the story instead of someone who needs to be saved and protected. Éowyn is a character that as a writer and fan of Tolkien's work can be related to on so many levels. She is someone who wants to be loved and be in love with that special someone but she is also a fighter and independent. She doesn't want to be held back by what is deemed to be the rule of society for women.

Arwen is relatable to fans in the girl meets boy and falls in love with boy way. Females want to find that one boy that makes them believe in love at first sight. Females also want to be independent and not told what to do. Arwen at one point does what her father wants her to do. She sets out to leave Middle-earth but changes her mind and takes the mortal path to be with Aragorn because she loves him. Galadriel is the powerful one of the trio of females. She is Arwen's grandmother and oversees one of the three rings given to the Elves. We don't know much about her or Arwen other than the few times they are mentioned in the story or appendices at the end of the book.

The Lord of the Rings had an impact on me as a reader and writer since I read it for the first time in high school. After reading it, I knew I wanted to write Fantasy and create female characters that were powerful and the protagonist. Also, the female character does not have to be the protagonist to be powerful and be equal to their male counterparts in the story being told. Authors today are closing the gap of how female characters are portrayed in stories and giving female readers characters that they can relate to.

Video Games, Female Gamers and Characters

Several games have been created throughout the years based on or set in Middle-earth. One such game is *The Lord of the Rings Online* (LOTRO). *The Lord of the Rings Online* is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) played on a pc or laptop. Helen Young discusses Tolkien and digital gaming “The influence of Tolkien’s world on gaming, especially fantasy-role-playing, has been widely recognized and discussed (e.g. Tresca 2011), but the impact of gaming and gamers on ‘Tolkien’ has not” (2). Her article gives the reader insight into the impact that Tolkien’s world has had on gaming since the 1970s. She mentions *The Lord of the Rings Online*. This game is one as a female gamer I know well. I have been playing the game for eight years. Female gamers are treated with a little more respect playing this game than they are in other games. In other games, there can be a toxic environment created by male gamers toward female gamers. This type of environment has not been seen a lot in LOTRO. Outside of the game environment there has been toxicity toward female gamers who write or stream about games they play.

Emma Vossen’s article “There and Back Again: Tolkien, Gamers, and the Remediation of Exclusion through Fantasy Media” was the article that began the idea of discussing female characters, gamers, and Tolkien. She discusses Tolkien’s world and video games. She states

“Like women in LOTR, female characters in video games are few and far between. When they do appear, they are generally portrayed as love interests to impress or obstacles to be conquered. This underrepresentation is no surprise given that so many games take place in fantasy settings, and that the fantasy genre was built on a text with a deficit of women” (40). This is a true statement of the books and of video games. In most video games the female character is barely dressed. Tompkins and Martins note:

Women in games are depicted in ways that map onto gender tropes, often in the representational fashion that presents women as sexual objects for a heterosexual male viewer—that is, their portrayal is coded for her to be looked at by the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989). In the 1990s, female characters were portrayed as damsels in distress, frequently depicted as subordinate to male characters, and sexualized (Dietz, 1998). More than a decade after Dietz (1998) seminal analysis, female game characters remained underrepresented and significantly more likely to be depicted partially nude, having an unrealistic body image, and wearing clothing inappropriate to their role in the gameworld (Williams et al., 2009; Downs & Smith, 2010; Lynch et al., 2016). (3)

This type of depiction of female characters in video games leads to a toxic environment for female gamers. In LOTRO the female characters/toons that female players can choose to play as are fully dressed and have armor and gear like their male counterparts.

When analyzing the game industry Gamergate was a controversy that began in 2014 when a group of males began to harass female players and video game journalists. Ferguson and Glasgow note “In 2014, the GamerGate controversy erupted, focusing international attention to issues related to sexism and misogyny in gaming communities. Exactly how the controversy began remains an issue of debate” (243). The harassment was all over social media. As a gamer

you couldn't miss the tweets or posts depending on what platform you were on. As a female gamer I thought about giving up gaming so I wouldn't be harassed. I realized that if I did then that group of males that were attacking female gamers and journalists would win. I wasn't going to let them drive me away from something I love to do. Ferguson and Glasgow also note:

These issues ultimately converged around 2014 related to harsh, threatening harassment campaigns launched against women in games journalism, the gaming industry, or game criticism. Several high-profile women such as game developer Zoe Quinn (publicly accused by an ex-boyfriend of cheating on him, an accusation that later morphed into wider accusations that she had traded sex for a positive game review) and game critic and feminist Anita Sarkeesian were particularly subject to violent threats, doxing, and other forms of harassment (Lewis, 2014). Although several high-profile women were targets of harassment, the harassment was not limited to a few. Even some academics came under sometimes paranoid conspiracy theories (Chess & Shaw, 2015). As a consequence, the GamerGate identity and even simply gamer identity often came to be equated with toxicity, misogyny, and antisocial behavior generally, particularly in games journalism (Alexander, 2014; Golding, 2014). (243)

The authors pointed out what Gamergate was all about. It created an even more toxic environment for female players, journalists and didn't stop there before it subsided. Playing The Lord of the Rings Online for the last seven to eight years has been a great experience. The players on there tend to work together and sometimes there are issues but nothing as toxic as has been encountered in other games.

Massanari notes "The second, #Gamergate (GG), ostensibly a hashtag "movement" spawned by individuals who purported to be frustrated by a perceived lack of ethics within

gaming journalism became a campaign of systematic harassment of female and minority game developers, journalists, and critics and their allies” (330). Her article discusses how Reddit.com “provides fertile ground for these kinds of toxic spaces to emerge” (330). She uses Gamergate as an example of how Reddit and its setup creates a platform for the type of toxicity that Gamergate created. Reddit is not a platform that as a writer or player that I have visited because of the type of environment that it has created at different points. Reddit is a site that the geek and nerd population use. Massanari points out “So to discuss geek and nerd culture is to discuss masculinity—in particular, white male masculinity. Like other gender expressions, geek masculinity is both liminal and performative” (332). This point although dealing with a social media platform and an issue like Gamergate does support what has been seen in Fantasy for many, many years. The females are objects and can’t defend themselves. They have no place fighting in a battle in a work of fiction or playing video games. Today, writers are creating female characters that are the heroine and games are being developed by women.

When analyzing the role gender plays in video games. It is much the same way. Looking at some games out there the female avatar/toon is half dressed and doesn’t have the armor a male avatar/toon would have in the game. In The Lord of the Rings Online females being treated as objects and having next to no clothing doesn’t exist. The female avatars/toons are fully clothed and protected by armor like the male counterparts. Dimitri Williams, et al. notes “For example, Dietz (1998) examined violence and gender stereotyping in her content analysis of 33 popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis videogames. She found that the most common portrayal for female characters was the complete absence of females. In fact, there were no female characters in more than 40 percent of the games that she sampled. Heintz-Knowles et al. (2001) also examined violence and gender stereotyping in their study of 70 video games. The results revealed that of

the 874 characters coded, 73 percent were male and 12 percent were female. When females did appear, they were likely to be seen in secondary roles” (817). This percentage shows what it was like in games and how females a lot of times if they wanted to play had to use a male avatar/toon to play because in a lot of games the female characters were not represented. Female character representation in video games has begun to change and has a long way to go but it is happening.

In the game, I have only encountered a couple of times the mentality from another player that females shouldn't be players or that my avatar/toon shouldn't be at the level it is because my role is a secondary one. Several of my avatars/toons can back up the other players in my kinship without having someone else treat me as a secondary character. One of the toons can do what is called being a tank in the game. A tank in the game is someone who can survive a lot of damage, takes aggro from enemies, and protects their allies and kinship members. Aggro is a mechanism used in MMORPGs, by which mobs (enemies controlled by the system) prioritize which characters to attack. For example, as a tank for my kinship I would be the one that those in-game controlled enemies would attack while the kin members attacked them from behind. An in-game example would be a quest where we have to team up to kill a group of Orcs, I would gain the attention of those Orcs while the other members spread out behind the mob to attack them.

In the game development world today, things are beginning to change with how female players, game developers, and writers are being treated and represented. More game development companies today are owned or ran by women. Most companies are still owned by men. A controversy although not like Gamergate is bringing the issues of how females are treated back into the spotlight. Activision Blizzard is being sued over sexual discrimination and sexual harassment allegations of female employees. As a player, it has not happened to me or anyone I know in game. As a player, The Lord of the Rings Online has made an impact on the

fiction writing I do in how the female characters I create are portrayed. Playing the game has been in some ways therapeutic when I've had a bad day. I can log into the game and run around Middle-earth on quests and help the kinship I belong to. One must question how much longer the toxic environment that are in some video games and companies will go on.

Helen Lewis sums up the gaming environment, gamergate and female players in one of the best ways possible. She states:

This months-long social-media fiesta of harassment (of women in games) and hand-wringing (over the future direction of the medium) had its roots in one fundamental fact: men used to dominate gaming, back when gaming meant big console titles that demanded hours of continuous attention. But gaming has changed. (130).

As I read her article, I wondered about the impact something like gamergate had on me as a female player and what the environment is like in some of the games I play. It had me thinking about the interactions I have had with fellow male players. For the most part the interactions have been good. The few not so nice interactions were because I was too competitive when playing a game and the males that were playing didn't like it. They didn't get violent or anything like that. It was mostly name-calling and instead of stooping to their level I just kept playing and ignored them. Another time the male players in the game kept swooping in and making the kill on the opponent before I could and they did while my character/toon was right there in front of them battling the opponent.

This type of interaction and atmosphere has taught me that most of the time it is better to just walk away from the confrontation because they are doing it to get a reaction from the other person. Sometimes it's not so easy to walk away from the confrontation. When reading about Gamergate it made me wonder why males seem to think it is okay to harass the female players

the way they did. As I began work on this project, I realized it has a lot to do with our history and how there is the double standard when it comes to gender. There is the one for the men and that is that they take care of everything and that includes taking care of the women. Then there is the standard that women can't take care of themselves or do the same things as men which includes playing video games.

Literary Theory

Gender studies and a story like *The Lord of the Rings* allows for analysis of the characters in different ways like the mother figure, the warrior, the love interest, the power, their gender and even race. All these ideas play a part in shaping the female characters that are in Middle-earth. Lobelia Sackville-Baggins who is Bilbo's and Frodo's cousin although mentioned in the story doesn't have a character arc is a mean spiteful hobbit. She is not a typical hobbit. Hobbits are usually a peaceful, nice people and do welcome friends from outside the Shire to their homes. Lobelia is distrustful of everyone including other Hobbits. She is always trying to steal things from Bag End. She wants Bag End for herself and will stop at nothing to get it. Of course, we have looked at the other female characters Arwen, Galadriel, and especially Éowyn. They each have an impact on readers in their own way. Female readers have their favorite characters among them. Who doesn't want to be an Elf or a mere mortal female saving the day and killing one of the bad guys in the story? Each of those characters have something about them that readers can relate to whether it's falling in love with someone who loves another person or fighting to protect their family and friends.

There is a scene in the book *The Fellowship of the Ring* and it is also in the movie. The scene is a dialogue between Frodo and Galadriel. In this scene, we get to see just how powerful

Galadriel is. Frodo offers to give her the one ring and she resists taking it from him. The passage that I found interesting out of this scene was:

She lifted up her hand and from the ring that she wore there issued a great light that illumined her alone and left all else dark. She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful. Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunken; a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad.

‘I pass the test,’ she said. ‘I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel.’
(Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 356-57)

This passage or part of the scene caught my attention as a reader and a movie watcher because it shows that although Galadriel is a female elf, she is also very powerful in her own way. J.R.R. Tolkien states “In the ‘Mirror of Galadriel’, I381, it appears that Galadriel conceived herself as capable of wielding the Ring and supplanting the Dark Lord” (*Letters* 332). This statement by Tolkien is meaningful because it gives the reader insight into how he saw Galadriel as a character. Another statement by Tolkien notes that “Galadriel’s rejection of the temptation was founded upon previous thought and resolve” (332). This idea shows us that she is strong in her choice and resolve to resist the most powerful weapon in Middle-earth. She understands what the consequences would be if she had chosen to take the Ring from Frodo.

Éowyn is the only one in the story that receives a full character/story arc out of the three. Tolkien describes her in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* in such a great way “Though not a ‘dry nurse’ in temper, she was also not really a soldier or ‘amazon’, but like many brave women was capable of great military gallantry at a crisis” (323). She is introduced in the movie standing at

the top of the steps of Edoras when Aragorn, Gandalf, Legolas, and Gimli arrive to see King Théoden. In the book, we are introduced to her in much the same way. She is described in the book as “Grave and thoughtful was her glance, as she looked on the king with cool pity in her eyes. Very fair was her face, and her long hair was like a river of gold. Slender and tall she was in her white robe girt with silver; but strong she seemed and stern as steel, a daughter of kings” (Tolkien, *The Two Towers* 504). This description gives the reader an idea of her importance within the story. She does play an important later in the story. Her part in the story is two-fold. She is the love interest and a warrior. She loves Aragorn but he doesn’t love her. She does eventually find another to love and fights alongside the male soldiers. A passage in *The Return of the King* that supports what Tolkien said about her in *The Letters of J.R.R Tolkien*. It is a conversation between she and Aragorn. He tells her that her duty is to her people because she wants to ride out with them to battle. Her response is ‘Too often have I heard of duty,’ she cried. ‘But am I not of the House of Eorl, a shieldmaiden and not a dry-nurse? I have waited on faltering feet long enough. Since they falter no longer, it seems, may I not now spend my life as I will?’ (767). This line supports what Tolkien said about her. She was so much more than a mere female to be taken care and sit on the sidelines while the men went off to war. She wanted to fight for her home the same way they did. Another line that was important about her was ‘Shall I always be chosen?’ she said bitterly. ‘Shall I always be left behind when the Riders depart, to mind the house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return?’ (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 767). Her mindset about wanting to be more than just the woman that takes care of the home was unique of female characters at the time *The Lord of the Rings* was written. I say unique because women of the era that Tolkien chose to set Middle-earth in didn’t fight in wars or have a say in anything even politics. They ran the house and took care of the men. She

could be seen as being a little rebellious and different because she was going against the normal standards for women. She didn't want to be sheltered. She wanted independence and to do what she wanted even if it meant fighting in a battle beside male soldiers/warriors to protect her homeland and her people.

More must be done in the gaming world for females to be properly represented especially as players. Avatars/toons should be representative of what most female players want and in most they are not. A lot of female avatars/toons in games are sexualized and seen as secondary characters. As a player in the past, I have stopped playing a game because I couldn't see myself being represented in game by an avatar/toon that was half dressed and sexualized. In The Lord of the Rings Online the avatars/toons that I create represent how I want to be seen in game by other players which is having an avatar/toon that has on clothes, has armor, and can help in the fight when needed.

Kishonna L. Gray, Bertan Buyukozturk and Zachary G. Hill discuss how female gamers and characters are viewed in their article about Gamergate. They state

Miller and Summers (2007) found that video games gender characters not only in terms of appearance ("females were portrayed as sexier and more attractive compared to males" and "were also likely to be wearing more revealing clothing than males") but also in terms of playability as male characters were more often playable compared to female characters (p. 139). They also found that males were often given "more weapons and abilities than females" who were often relegated to supplemental, less active, and often less important positions (p.139). These are problematic representations as they simplify female characters, ridding them of their agency and power, reducing them to decorations or supplements to the important, male characters. (3)

Gamergate helped to uncover the toxic environment female gamers and journalists were dealing with. Although Gamergate has long been over the environment still exists. In July 2021, the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing filed a lawsuit against Activision Blizzard a game development company. The lawsuit was filed based on allegations of discrimination and harassment of female employees. This lawsuit and Gamergate are two prime examples of the toxic environment that female gamers, journalists, and those that work at game development companies deal with. As a female gamer I feel safe playing the games I do. I stay away from games that I know have a toxic gaming environment in them. The thing that Gamergate and the lawsuit have taught me is that even if you don't see the harassment going on that doesn't mean it's not happening to other female players around you.

Pedagogy

The idea of teaching a class about how female characters are or have been depicted is something interesting. It hasn't really been done in classrooms. Yes, as students we read the stories and analyze the characters through a lens like gender studies but there has not been a class that focused on just female characters. The impact of those female characters and how the depiction of those characters have changed over time. To study an author like Tolkien along with authors today like J.K. Rowling, Patricia Briggs, and Laurell K. Hamilton. Analyzing how the female characters have become the ones to save the day instead of being the damsel in distress or just the love interest. A class like this would help to bridge the gap in education especially in higher education English programs.

The class I would propose to create would be for a 10-week term. It would include reading *The Wife of Bath's Tale* from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and other tales. I took an online class about Tolkien several years ago and saw the benefit of a

class about an author like him. The class involved several aspects of a multimodal teaching method. We studied the books and some other tales along with watching scenes from the movies and playing *The Lord of the Rings Online*. This was the first time I played the game. I found this to be beneficial because it engaged the students and created a collaborative atmosphere.

I would use a method like this to teach the history and impact of Tolkien and his world on fiction especially Fantasy fiction. To focus on someone like Tolkien would help to show other academics that Fantasy and the history of female characters needs to be taught right along with other literature to compare how the genre has changed. How authors write female characters now. Teaching a class that is author and genre specific would be beneficial to an English and Composition program.

Conclusion

In the end, Tolkien's impact on Fantasy and modern culture like video games and movies has been enormous. *The Lord of the Rings* became a cult classic so to speak and the popularity of the books began again in the early 2000s because of Peter Jackson's movie trilogy. No one really gave any thought to why there were so few female characters in the movies. Arwen was the love interest, Galadriel the powerful lady elf that people feared, and then there was Éowyn. She had the most complete character arc. She was shown as a warrior as well as a possible love interest. Today, readers want female characters who are the protagonist and not just the love interest.

Using the autoethnographic approach to analyze the impact his work has had on me as a reader and writer was an interesting path to go down. I had always analyzed works and authors and wrote papers that were straight literary theory approaches. Although I did use the gender studies theory in the paper the autoethnographic idea made the most impact. Understanding the impact, he had on Fantasy and popular culture was an interesting undertaking. At the beginning

of the project, I wasn't sure exactly what path I would take to write the paper. Once I sat down and made an outline, I realized I wanted to look at the female characters and female gamers because I play The Lord of the Rings Online.

There are very few classes taught about Tolkien and his impact on fiction and popular culture. I would love to be a teacher that helps to bridge the gap of teaching a class on Tolkien and his work especially a gender studies style class. We would study the female characters and how they are portrayed in Tolkien's work compared to fiction in modern society where female characters are becoming the protagonists of the work and not the damsel in distress. There would be discussions of the male characters of his work and their impact as well. Authors like Tolkien made a significant impact on fiction and should be taught along with other authors like Hemingway, Faulkner, Bronte, and Woolf.

My target conference is a conference called Mythmoot for submission of the paper. The reason I chose Mythmoot is because it is held every year and it's all about Tolkien and his works. The theme does change each year and other papers are allowed to be submitted as long as it ties to Tolkien and the theme for that year in some way. I have attended some of the conference online in the past and believe my paper would be welcome to the conference or one of the smaller regional moot conferences that are held throughout the year. My audience is among those who attend the conference each year. The conference is run by an online university called Signum University. The university has a Tolkien Studies program among other English and Literature programs.

When I finished the project new questions emerged from the initial question of the autoethnographic approach to Tolkien's work, female gamers and female characters. One such question is why did he create a work with so few female characters? As I researched more of his

background, I gained an understanding of this question initially but it would be interesting to go further with more research about this. Another question is how would the story have been different if a female had been part of the fellowship? This was something I became interested in after talking with my mentor early in the term. It was a question/suggestion she posed to me when I was trying to narrow down the topic idea. A third idea or question that presented itself is about the gender studies theory. I focused on the female characters of the story for the project but I would like to explore in the future another gender studies project comparing the male and female characters of *The Lord of the Rings*. Another idea that emerged is do a future project on Tolkien and linguistics. I would explore his background in linguistics and the languages in *The Lord of the Rings*. His language creation has always been something I have been interested in exploring.

What suggestions could I make to other researchers interested in this topic? There are many, many suggestions I could make. One suggestion would be to research all of Tolkien's work not just *The Lord of the Rings* when studying his depiction of female characters. There are female characters in *The Silmarillion* and in *The Hobbit*, I believe there are only one or two. In other words, don't limit yourself to just one of his works. Another suggestion would be to pick just one female character to study and analyze. Although there are several female characters in *The Lord of the Rings* focusing on one will support your idea or topic. I primarily focused on Éowyn because she was the one of the three that was given a full character/story arc. A final thought/suggestion is to pick what aspect of his work you are passionate about and want to learn more about when doing your research because so many new ideas might emerge. Write them down for future projects.

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