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Éowyn and the Biblical Tradition of a Warrior Woman

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the portrayal of Éowyn in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in the light of the biblical tradition of the warrior woman. The author focuses on the scene in which Éowyn slays the Nazgûl Lord in the battle of the Pelennor Fields with the help of Meriadoc. This event is juxtaposed against the biblical descriptions of female warriors, in particular Jael and Judith. A detailed analysis of passages from the King James Bible and the Douay-Rheims Bible, with which Tolkien was familiar, allows the reader to detect numerous affinities between his vocabulary and imagery, and their biblical antecedents. Filipczak contends that, by defending the body of the dying Théoden, Éowyn defends the whole kingdom; her action can be interpreted in the light of *The King's Two Bodies* by Ernst Kantorowicz. Her threat to the Ringraith ("I will smite you if you touch him") makes use of the verb that can be found in the descriptions of Jael and Judith in the Protestant and Catholic Bibles respectively. Furthermore, Éowyn's unique position as a mortal woman who achieves the impossible and thus fulfills the prophecy paves the way for a comparison with the Virgin Mary, whose Magnificat contains elements of "a holy-war song" which were suppressed by traditional interpretations. Consequently, the portrayal of Éowyn blends the features of Jael, Judith and Mary with allusions to St. Joan of Arc. Moreover, her act of slaying the Ringraith's fell beast reinterprets the story of St. George and the dragon. Filipczak argues that Éowyn's uniqueness is additionally emphasized because she acts out Gandalf's words from Minas Tirith and sends the Nazgûl Lord into nothingness.

Keywords: Tolkien, Éowyn, Bible, Jael, Judith.

It is a paradox shared by the Bible and *The Lord of the Rings* that when men are at a loss, it is a woman who steps in and takes the initiative by confronting and defeating the enemy whose power greatly exceeds her own. This is certainly true of several heroines in the Bible, for example Deborah and Jael from the Book of Judges, Esther and Judith (whose book is present in the Catholic, but not in Protestant canon). Each of the women achieves something remarkable that saves the Israelites. Prophetess Deborah becomes a leader of the army. Esther saves the Israelites from death due to her beauty and skill. Jael and Judith slay the enemies of their nation, which paves the way for the comparison with Éowyn who slays the Nazgûl Lord in the battle of the Pelennor Fields. The difference between the exploits of Jael and Judith, and that of Éowyn is considerable. The heroines of the biblical narrative trick their respective enemies with their behaviour suggesting either safety (Jael) or seduction (Judith). Éowyn confronts her overpowering antagonist in the battlefield; her fate seems hopeless and yet she defeats him. Still, the similarities between the two biblical heroines, often termed warrior women in criticism, and Éowyn, allow us to frame her deed in the tradition that Tolkien was inspired by.¹

The biblical heroines are introduced in the patriarchal narrative as women marked by their connection with men. Jael is described as the wife of Heber, the Kenite; Judith, the daughter of Merari, as the pious and disconsolate widow of Manasses. Éowyn is important because of her connection with the House of Eorl, her status as Eomund's daughter and Éomer's sister. Jael and Judith are concerned with their female duties. The same can be said about Tolkien's creation, Théoden's niece, who is an obedient, even if unwilling, custodian of her people in Helm's Deep, and who eventually embraces the role of a healer.

This portrait of Éowyn proves Tolkien's familiarity with the King James Bible and the Douay-Rheims Bible (Ganong 63). As a writer immersed in the English tradition and as a practicing Catholic, Tolkien knew both texts, so he must have noticed the two warrior women. His description of Éowyn is also informed by the story of Joan of Arc, as has been pointed out in Tolkien criticism (Burns 255), as well as by the legends of St. George slaying the dragon. All these elements are intertwined in the scene when Éowyn confronts the Nazgûl Lord and deals out a deadly blow, first to his fell beast and then to him. Above all, however, the biblical story of Judith must have reached Tolkien through the mediation of the

¹ I am very grateful to Professor Andrzej Wicher for his detailed and insightful comments which allowed me to make several points in this text more nuanced.

Old English poem about the heroine.² Let us unpack the biblical intertexts to show their relevance for this particular passage from *The Lord of the Rings*.

Jael (Jahel in Douay Bible) is described as the one who apparently offers shelter to Sisera. When he falls asleep in her tent, she puts a “tent nail” (tent peg) to his temple and drives it into his head by means of a hammer. Judith, who leaves the Israeli town besieged by Holofernes’ army, ventures into his camp in attractive clothes and misrepresents herself to his guards as the one who wants to lead the commander into glory by betraying the Israelite secrets. Holofernes is so taken with her flattery and beauty that he drinks himself to sleep during supper after they have been left alone. Judith begins to pray, and immediately seizes his sword, cuts off his head, which she throws into her food bag and carries back into the Israeli camp, much to the later shock of the hostile army which is immediately beaten by the Jews. Both heroines fight as women, and never use a male disguise, which was forbidden on the grounds of the ban on crossdressing in Deuteronomy.

Éowyn crossdresses like Joan of Arc in order to accompany Théoden, the rightful king of Rohan. Her disguise serves her well till the moment when she decides to reveal herself as a woman in response to the Ringwraith’s words: “No living man may hinder me! . . . no living man am I,” she replies (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 841). Then she proceeds to confront him and his fell beast as a woman, and the Nazgûl Lord is trapped in the incompleteness of Glorfindel’s famous prophecy. In contrast to *Macbeth*, where the protagonist is the only person who hears his death foretold, in *The Lord of the Rings* Glorfindel’s prophecy is widely known (Brennan Croft 215). However, in both cases the cryptic message is fully revealed when the character spoken about gets killed. In *The Lord of the Rings* the killer is not only a woman but “a chaste maiden,” this being an echo of the Old English retelling of the Book of Judith (Neville 109). Commenting on the Old English version of the biblical text, Hugh Magennis states: “Rather than minimising her difficulties in carrying out this act as a woman, the poet highlights her ostensible unsuitedness to the task, thereby magnifying her faith and achievement” (18).

The female identity of the three heroines, Jael, Judith and Éowyn, is emphasized in the texts in various ways. The Book of Judges makes Sisera ask Jael for water, but she gives him milk. This highlights her maternal and protective role by which he is deceived (Brenner-Idan 105). Her tent

² I am grateful to Professor Barbara Kowalik from the University of Warsaw for kindly pointing this out to me.

brings to mind a womb inside which Sisera loses his life, but the Israelites are reborn. Judith's deed became the subject of many European paintings. A startling interpretation by Artemisia Gentileschi, a female painter, shows Judith applying the sword to a head between the intertwined arms of the leader, which look like thighs from which the head is emerging as if in an ironic parody of childbirth (Bal). Rather than give birth to her own children, Judith will bring to the Israelites a wrapped-up head of their enemy, signifying the rebirth of their nation.

In both biblical scenes where the beautiful women confront the male enemy, the suspicion of seduction is in the air, but the biblical text keeps all the impropriety at bay, even if the scene is an ironic reversal of sexual intimacy. The Book of Judges says about Sisera: "At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down" (5:27),³ which is apparently rendered in a more accurate way by the translation "between her legs he fell, he lay," and this indicates either sex or childbirth (Brenner-Idan 103). In the Book of Judith the eunuch that opens the tent after the commotion in the camp presumes he will find Holofernes in bed with the Israelite woman, but the male body sprawling, as if exhausted, on the ground, is headless.

Éowyn is also surrounded by the attributes of the female role. Her previous identification with a cup-bearing valkyrie makes her a proper escort to men going into battle and braving the passage to the world of the ancestors. Her compassion and care for the king in whose shadow she loyally stands as if she were his own daughter is exemplary. Finally, her role of the guardian of her people results in a symbolic reversal of childbirth imagery. She leads them to Helm's Deep, as if back into the womb where they should be safe. But there is more than meets the eye. Her refusal to leave dying Théoden's body to the Nazgûl's fell beast reverses the traditional role division. "I will smite you, if you touch him" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 841), she says to the black captain, as if Théoden were a frail damsel in distress. Incidentally, in the King James Version, Jael smites Sisera, while the Douay Bible says that "the heart of Holofernes was smitten" at the sight of Judith (12:16). This anticipates his being literally smitten, so Éowyn's phrase has an intertextual ring.

What else is Éowyn defending? Her action can easily be interpreted in light of *The King's Two Bodies* by Ernst Kantorowicz, whose ideas Tolkien's book seems to uncannily anticipate. Théoden's body signifies his kingdom by extension. Its dismemberment by the unclean beast would have augured the collapse and ruin of Rohan in the conflict with Mordor.

³ Unless stated explicitly, quotations from the Bible (with the exception of The Book of Judith) come from the King James Bible.

Just like Théoden's weakness of mind prompted by Saruman's devious servant Wormtongue signified Rohan's defenselessness, so could his body have signified the defeat of the Rohirrim in the clash with the dark army. Éowyn is thus defending the whole kingdom. A self-styled guardian of the rightful king like Joan of Arc, Éowyn shields him with her own body. The shieldmaiden prevents this sacred emanation of the kingdom from being desecrated. And she does prevent the fell beast from feasting on the body, by cutting off its head.

The passage about Jael can be brought into the picture to throw light on the scene from Tolkien's work: "She put her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workmen's hammer; and with the hammer she smote Sisera, she smote off his head, when she had pierced and stricken through his temples. At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down; where he bowed, there he fell down dead" (Judges 5:26). In *The Lord of the Rings* Éowyn, whose shield arm is shattered by the Nazgûl's mace, hears her name called by Meriadoc, who had slashed the Ringwraith's sinew, thus bringing about his fall in front of her:

With her last strength she drove her sword between crown and mantle as the great shoulders bowed before her. This sword broke sparkling into many shards. The crown rolled away with a clang. Éowyn fell forward upon her fallen foe. But lo! the mantle and hauberk were empty. Shapeless they lay now on the ground, torn and tumbled. (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 842)

Like Sisera, the Nazgûl seems "bowed" before Éowyn, who smites him with her sword, piercing through the emptiness between the mantle and the crown which rolls off to indicate a symbolic decapitation of the bodiless black captain. The way she falls on him is an echo of an inversion of intimacy in the scenes involving female slayers from the Bible. The Nazgûl's clothes are a *pars pro toto*; they lay down instead of the body which was not there: "they lay on the ground torn and tumbled," bringing to mind the maimed bodies of the two biblical antagonists: Sisera and Holofernes, whose downfall is quite graphically described by the biblical writers.

The scene of Nazgûl's death restates one more motif from the Bible, namely the death of king Abimelech, "the anti-hero of the Book of Judges" (Klein 70). During a siege he laid to Thebez "a certain woman cast a piece of a millstone upon Abimelech's head, and all to brake his skull" (Judges 9: 53). The deed is mentioned in 2 Samuel 11:21 in the words that point to Tolkien's biblical inspirations: "Who smote Abimelech the son of Jerubesheth? Did not a woman cast a piece of a millstone upon him from the

wall, that he died in Thebez?” The word “smite” that was used by Éowyn in Tolkien’s novel is here combined with the uniqueness of a woman who put an end to the reign of the infamous king.

While Abimelech’s slayer remains anonymous, Jael’s and Judith’s heroic exploits give them a unique position among the Israelis. Prophetess Deborah opens her song about the victory of Israel with the words: “Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be” (Judges 5:24). Judith is called the heroine of Israel by the high priest, and she hears the words: “Blessed art thou by thy God” (13:31), a probable echo of Deborah’s song according to biblical scholars. Interestingly, the only other woman who is called blessed in the Bible is the Virgin Mary (Massyngbaerde Ford 19). It is noted that her song (Magnificat) is informed by the register that sees God as the warrior who “hath shewed might in his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart. He hath put down the mighty from their seat” (Luke 1:51). Massyngbaerde Ford contends that “Mary was a Jael-Judith figure (to her contemporaries), perhaps even a feminine zealot. The canticle that she sings bears all the marks of a holy-war song” (23). How does Éowyn come into that? Although Tolkien is never explicitly biblical in his text, his imagery is saturated with religious meaning, especially in the conflict of light and darkness in the analyzed scene.

Éowyn is repeatedly associated with sunlight or light in general. “Her bright hair gleamed with pale gold” as she took off “the helmet of secrecy” in front of the black captain, unveiling her identity (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 842). Then after she kills the Nazgûl’s fell beast, the aftermath of the event is thus focalized by Éowyn’s helper Meriadoc: “a light fell about her and her hair shone in the sunrise.” The imagery brings to mind “a woman clothed with the sun,” who in the Revelation (12:1) is about to give birth to her child but her offspring is threatened by the red dragon, and she eventually has to flee after her child has been rescued by God. The identity of the woman from the Revelation is still disputed by biblical scholars. Identified with the church of God she is also said to allude to the blessed Lady, whose unique status in the plan of salvation makes her an ideal representative of the community of the saved (Jeffrey 846). The woman is pitted against the might that by far exceeds her own, and yet justice prevails the way it did in the Book of Judges and the Book of Judith. At the same time Éowyn can be associated with the beloved from a passage in the Song of Songs that reads: “Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in array” (Douay-Rheims 6:9)? The traditional “answer” has often been Mary (Griffiths 141). The attributes connected with mariological imagery inform most descriptions of Tolkien’s warrior woman.

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. Aragorn thus comments on Éowyn in the Houses of Healing:

For she was pitted against a foe beyond the strength of her mind and body. And those who will take a weapon against such an enemy must be sterner than steel, if the very shock shall not destroy them. It was an evil doom that set her in his path. For she is a fair maiden, fairest lady of a house of queens . . . a white flower, standing proud and shapely, as a lily. . . her deeds have set her among the queens of great renown. (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 866–67)

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Aragorn's words parallel the praises sung by Deborah about Jael or Judith's celebration of God and herself in a song of praise. The lily, of course, is rich in meaning: first, through the connection with the Song of Songs; then, through the parable in which Jesus sets the lily's worth above the wisdom of Solomon. Finally, the classic motif in iconographic Mariolatry is the representation of the Virgin Mary with lilies. Besides, Éowyn becomes like the woman from Genesis, who experiences enmity towards the serpent, Satan, or, simply, foe.

Interestingly, her story also rewrites the legend of St. George and the dragon, in which the saint defeats the dragon in order to rescue an innocent princess. In *The Lord of the Rings* it is the innocent princess who defends the mighty king Théoden from the dragon-like beast. In different historical contexts St. George could be identified with a national hero defending the country from invaders, which was the case in Sweden, where the dragon sculpted in Stockholm cathedral represented Denmark defeated by Sten Sture (Scott 116). This completes my interpretation because of the political role of Éowyn. She defeats the fell beast that the ruler of Mordor gave to his servant, the Ringwraith. She also defends Rohan, by protecting the king's sacred body. Even though the king is conscious, he is not capable of action, an interesting parallel to the dauphin who was incapable of defending France in the time of Joan of Arc. Those who admired Joan referred to biblical examples to appreciate her. Thus Christine de Pizan juxtaposed her to Judith, and to Deborah (Allen 556).

Éowyn's encounter with the Nazgûl Lord follows Gandalf's encounter with him for a reason. In the book, these two moments are separated by one chapter; in the film, Jackson additionally emphasizes the similarity between the two scenes by highlighting the presence of Peregrin near Gandalf, thus

twinning the scene with the one where Éowyn is assisted by Pippin's friend, Merry. It is striking that Éowyn completes what was initiated in the scene involving Gandalf. When the Nazgûl Lord rides under the archway that "no enemy ever yet had passed" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 829) in Minas Tirith, Gandalf is the only one to endure the terror of his presence and say: "You cannot enter here . . . Go back to the abyss that is prepared for you! Go back! Fall into the nothingness that awaits you and your Master. Go!" (829). But the Nazgûl is not intimidated by these words: "from a mouth unseen there came a deadly laughter" (829). He then prepares to kill Gandalf saying: "Die now and curse in vain," but he is suddenly distracted by the crowing of a cock and the blowing of horns (829). The image is haunted by the biblical phrase "the shadows of death," a familiar expression signifying a dangerous and liminal experience in Psalm 23: "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil" (23:4). Although the phrase "the shadows of death" sounds disturbing in the context of the conflict with Mordor, the biblical ring of the intertext undercuts hopelessness, becoming a harbinger of new times for those who walk on through the shadows of death and fear no evil.

Strikingly, one of them is Éowyn; she fulfills Gandalf's words and sends the Nazgûl into nothingness. She also echoes his laughter in an ironic way: "Merry heard of all sounds in that hour the strangest. It seemed that Dernhelm laughed and the clear voice was like the ring of steel" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 841). Thus Éowyn not only parries the Nazgûl's would-have-been attack on Gandalf, but also parries his deadly laughter from the scene in Minas Tirith. In fact, the Nazgûl had used laughter as his attribute before to a startling effect: "Then the Witch-king laughed and none that heard it ever forgot the horror of that cry, but Glorfindel rode up then on his white horse, and in the midst of his laughter the Witch-king turned to flight" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1051). Unlike the Witch-king, Éowyn does not turn to flight at the sight of a powerful enemy, but proceeds to unveil herself and fight. Thus what did not happen in Minas Tirith happens in the Pelennor Fields. The Nazgûl is barred from moving further on and causing havoc, for even though the "knights of Théoden's house lay slain about the king . . . one stood there still," and she held her ground (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 840). As a result, the Witch-king was "brought to nothing," as stated in the footnote to the part of the appendix discussing the rulers of Rohan (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1070).

In the above scene Éowyn repeats Gandalf's confrontation with Balrog and then the Nazgûl Lord. Andrzej Wicher points out that one of Gandalf's roles is that of a steward, the name signifying the guardian of a narrow path, narrow bridge or passage. Nowhere is that clearer than in the

scene where Gandalf confronts Balrog in Khasad-dûm (Wicher 131). For a moment Éowyn plays the same role; significantly enough, she will later become the wife of the Steward of Gondor; hence, while still a maiden, she unwittingly acts out Faramir's mission of stewardship, the scene being a parallel to Faramir's earlier contending against the evil powers so as to prevent their incursion into Minas Tirith.

The imagery subtly establishes a connection between Gandalf and Éowyn. She is often dressed in white, a parallel to the appearance of Gandalf as the white rider: "Very fair was her face and her long hair was like a river of gold. Slender and tall she was in her white robe with silver; but strong she seemed and stern as steel, a daughter of kings" (Tolkien, *The Two Towers* 515). This is how she is first shown in Aragorn's focalization upon Gandalf's and his companions' arrival at Théoden's hall. Éowyn's radiance is subtly hinted at through the combination of whiteness, gold and silver. Interestingly, Faramir's perspective on her seems similar: "he saw her as she stood upon the walls; she was clad all in white, and gleamed in the sun" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 961). The last phrase confirms the connection with "the woman clothed with the sun" from the Revelation. This connection is not only noted but also highlighted by Faramir when he offers Éowyn his dead mother's blue mantle embroidered with silver stars. Stars figure in the line from the Apocalypse where the woman clothed with the sun is shown in "a crown of twelve stars." Faramir's reading of Éowyn follows Aragorn's recognition, for he unwittingly completes her picture with the element of silver. His perspective on the shieldmaiden also echoes the description of the beloved from the Song of Songs. Éowyn's basic characteristics remain with her till the end of the narrative when she is "trothplighted" with Faramir: "Lady of Rohan came forth, golden as the sun and white as snow" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 977).

Tolkien critics have associated Galadriel, rather than Éowyn, with Mariology (Wicher 144). Galadriel's attributes also include stars and silver (Burns 253). Besides, she was called Nerwen, i.e. man-maiden, on account of her character. Thus the portrayal of both women draws on Judith, Jael, Mary juxtaposition. Éowyn, like Jael and Judith, must go back to the female role and relinquish her unique status of a shieldmaiden. The narrative takes care of this transit soon after she falls on her dead enemy. She cannot remain with the warriors; Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth, is surprised to detect a female warrior among the fallen, but his double recognition is not only connected with her sex but also with the fact that she is alive. The male stranger sets in motion the regulatory mechanism that brings Éowyn back into the fold as a woman in need of male protection. Healed physically by Aragorn, she recovers emotionally due to Faramir,

who also finds recovery in the relationship after his own close brush with death and his devastating history as a son rejected by his father. Éowyn's plea to Aragorn to wish her happiness is the final call on her part to complete the process of emotional healing. Having received the good wish or blessing, she is ready to face her role like the heroines from the Bible who after the songs of praise go back to their homes and ostensibly disappear. Here, however, one more difference emerges. Having accepted Faramir's marriage proposal, Éowyn decides to give up her fondness for the songs of war, and she declares: "I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 965). The reader can remember a passage devoted to the burial of Théoden's horse Snowmane and the burning of the Nazgûl's fell beast: "green and long grew the grass on Snowmane's Howe, but ever black and bare was the ground where the beast was burned" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 845). Éowyn's choice is consistent with the need to rebuild the country after Mordor's invasion, heal the wounds and keep the earth's garden and memory alive.

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