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ELVEN CHORA: FEMININE SPACE AND POWER IN TOLKIEN'S THE LORD OF THE RINGS

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Abstract

The Lord of the Rings has earned Tolkien high praise as well as a reputation for misogyny due to its scarce and marginal female characters. A rather neglected aspect of Tolkien's trilogy which challenges this notion is the femininity embedded within the story and its significance in the value system of the novel. Despite depicting fewer female human characters, Tolkien has created a race which is dominantly characterized by feminine attributes: the race of the Elves. Questioning the accusations of misogyny through a feminist psychoanalytic reading, this study uses Kristeva's *chora* to recognize the Elven lands as feminine space dominated by the semiotic rather than the symbolic, and Irigaray's notion of *puissance* to unearth the celebration of feminine power in the novels' depiction of the Elves. The careful consideration of the Elves, their society and their lands demonstrate the preference for the feminine which is in contrast with the phallic.

Key words

Tolkien; *Elvan Chora*; *puissance*; *feminist psychoanalysis*

Introduction

The heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*, the saviors of Middle-earth, are men. Women, the supporters and cheerers of the leaders, seem to occupy a marginalized space, playing minor roles in the background. There is indeed a significantly shorter list of female characters depicted in this novel than male characters, and these few, it seems, do not contribute much to furthering the plot and unravelling the complications. Based on such presentation of female characters, many critics accuse Tolkien of misogyny. Yet a closer look at this epic can reveal that although female characters are subordinate to male characters, femininity is not. In the imaginary world of the novel, femininity is not confined to femaleness. In fact, we propose, the superior race of Elves reflects Tolkien's attitude toward the feminine paradigm. Immortal, brave, and glorious, the Elves reflect a perfection of the ideal of harmony and sustainability which the other occupants of Middle-earth can hardly achieve. It is then no coincidence that this selected race manifests a closer connection to femininity than to masculinity.

The notion of femininity is by no means a uniform and static notion, and the concept used in this study is not the only possible argument regarding this notion, but rather a very useful one. In challenging the phallogentrism of psychoanalysis, feminist psychoanalysis provides a glimpse into the possibilities of femininity. Working through the theories of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, we seek to provide a new reading of the novel focusing on the society of the Elves and the members of this race in order to reveal their fundamental embrace of femininity as well as to highlight the choric, feminine spaces depicted in the Elven lands. Feeding off of these elements, the study will, in the end, comment upon Tolkien's view of femininity from a novel perspective.

The Feminist Response to *the Lord of the Rings*

Since its publication, *the Lord of the Rings* has been subject to a diverse range of critical, interpretive discussions, and feminist approaches have often been employed to criticize Tolkien for his alleged underlying disregard for female characters and their inherent potentials. In Lisa Coutras' view, Tolkien not only simultaneously "idealizes and subjugates women," but also positions his female characters mainly in "the domestic sphere" where they are not allowed to move beyond the framework of traditional functions of "homemaking and reproduction" (2016: 188). Similarly, William Harrison criticizes Tolkien for his depiction of gendered spaces within his work. He declares that in *the Lord of the Rings* the reader witnesses that places such as battle fields and roads are exclusive territories of men while women are framed within domestic spaces such as a home (2013: 56). Suzzi Tordebring studies the implications of gendered spaces and emphasizes Tolkien's confinement of female characters to the domestic sphere of home. She also objects to Tolkien's "patriarchal view" and blames him for the creation of "stereotypical" female characters with "traditional" roles (2016: 47). Yakubo Innaci & Abdul Hakeem after analyzing the female characters' power, assert that, although some like Galadriel and Arwen, manifest "supremacy", still this supremacy is "controlled by manly supremacy" (2020: 3406). Likewise, after broadly and repeatedly accusing Tolkien of misogyny, Rachel Maddox concludes that "Tolkien's well-noted sexism influenced" not only his writings in general but also the depiction of his female characters such as Galadriel and Arwen (2018: 10).

On the other hand, there are a few critics who do not find Tolkien's work misogynist. Nancy Enright, for instance, states that, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien creates strong female characters that possess a higher kind of power. This power, which Enright believes to be feminine, demolishes the evil in the novel (2008: 184). Jane Chance focuses on the presentation of the masculine power, and states that Tolkien is in fact portraying a world in which "masculinity is failing" (2016: 216). Ravikumar and Chandrasekar declare that Tolkien has created characters who are both feminine and masculine, and "only by embracing both 'feminine' and 'masculine' qualities can one be a truly strong individual" (2018: 19). Melissa McCrory Hatcher, in the same vein as the present study, demonstrates that Tolkien

ien values healing, which is associated with women, and this is the power that saves Middle-earth (2007: 51–53).

There are few studies who see a relationship between the race of the Elves and the question of gender. John Miller investigates the gendering of the Elves and the place where they live. He states that both Lothlórien and Rivendell, the two Elvish lands, present an “image of female sexuality” since Lothlórien, for instance, is depicted as “an inverted delta hidden under pubic growth” (2016: 139). Melanie Rawls touches upon the femininity of some Elven characters rather briefly in her study of another of Tolkien’s works, *the Silmarillion*; suggesting, for example, that Elrond, an Elf lord, is feminine for his healing and consulting powers (1984: 8). Even though these two critics try to look into femininity in the Elven lands and characters, they leave several aspects of this notion understudied. We follow the lead of these studies, and delve into the yet unexplored aspects of the gendered depiction of the Elves, benefitting from feminist psychoanalytical theories of feminine space and non-phallic power. It is noteworthy that the Elves are not the only instance in this epic where femininity and non-phallic values are validated and elevated; this can be observed in several other spheres of this work, for instance, in the portrayal of its most striking female human, Éowyn, and even in challenging hegemonic masculinity in the depiction of some of its male heroes. As this study is part of a larger and yet expanding research regarding gender in LOTR, while the authors are fully aware of such non-conventional treatment of gender identities in details of the novel other than those related to the Elves, the scope of this study is limited to the Elven lands and characters, to provide the meticulous attention they deserve.

The Feminine Power and Space: A Genealogy

The feminist psychoanalytical theories of Kristeva and Irigaray present an interesting insight into the concept of femininity and with their help the femininity of the Elves can be explored. Though these theories were presented in the last decades of the twentieth century, and challenged by various critics, they were revived in the twenty first century through the works of various feminist theorists in different fields. Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, and Rosie Braidotti all engage with several aspects of Irigaray’s theories including those used in this study, providing a new reading of her take on sexual difference and feminine subjectivity. Kristeva’s theories also continue their intellectual existence up to this day as they play a part in the shaping of contemporary feminist psychoanalysis and linguistics. The notion of *chora* which is prominent in the present study, for instance, has influenced a variety of artist and scholars including Grosz, Kelly Oliver, and Bracha L. Ettinger.

Borrowing the word *chora* from Plato, Kristeva seeks to “put forward a ‘theory of signification’ that will take into account the formation of the subject at the intersection of ‘corporeal, linguistic and social’ forces” (Margaroni 2005: 78–79). As such, writes Maria Margaroni, the function of *chora* “is to displace the speaking subject, (re)tracing its emergence not only ‘before’ *logos* but also, in returning

to the maternal body, beyond the Phallus as the structuring principle of the symbolic order” (2005: 79). She proposes that when a child is born, before going through the abjection and the symbolic phase, s/he lives in a semiotic *chora*. To Kristeva, the semiotic *chora* roughly corresponds with the imaginary order of Lacan, where the child is one with the mother and feels no lack. Kristeva extends this concept and declares that the *chora* is a maternal space with no boundary between the child and her/his mother. “The maternal *chora*” (Kristeva 1984 [1974]: 65) is innately associated with “a feminine and maternally structured space” (Grosz 1990: 160). In the *chora*, writes Noëlle McAfee, the child is in “a realm of plenitude” (2004: 45) that is “fluid” (2004: 43). In this realm, the child does not need to speak since s/he has all that is desired without the need to ask for anything.

Kristeva adds the word “semiotic” to her coined phrase, the semiotic *chora*, in order to focus on the semiotic aspect of it, as opposed to the symbolic. The symbolic, the realm of the father, is where the child learns the rules of language and plays within its grammar and syntax. The Symbolic in a Lacanian sense is associated with masculinity, moving the child away from the imaginary (Kristeva’s *chora*) which is associated with femininity (Madsen 2000: 96). The semiotic here is used to “denote a signifying operation based on traces and marks rather than signs” (Margaroni 2005: 79). The semiotic *chora* includes music, non-linguistic sounds, facial expressions, gestures, and movements of the body that express that which lies beyond language. The word “semiotic” also refers to the rhythmical aspect of the *chora* and the fact that it “is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm” (Kristeva 1984 [1974]: 26). The baby releases her/his energy and communicates by “various intonations and gestures” and through “coos and babbles or her imitations of the rhythms of her parents’ speech” (McAfee 2004: 18), and all of these have a sense of musicality.

The imaginary order is lost in the Lacanian account of psychosexual development; in Kristeva’s theories, however, the semiotic *chora* is never lost. Although the child steps into the symbolic realm of language, this feminine aspect (the *chora*), keeps manifesting itself within the symbolic realm and disturbs its established order.

Like Kristeva, Luce Irigaray also regards the symbolic as associated with masculinity. She proposes that with learning language, one enters the domain of phallogocentric discourse, where the concept of the phallus plays a key role (1991: 96). Humans are born into language. Values in the world surrounding them are transferred to them by means of language, and they make sense of the world through language. Most importantly, language and the society construct their subjectivity. Entering the symbolic, the child learns that the phallus is the “privileged signifier” (Homer 2005: 54), which means that it is the very source of power. Whoever owns the phallus, therefore, possesses phallogocentric power. Irigaray believes that the foundation of Western civilization and knowledge is phallogocentric; “that is, meaning is structured around the presence or absence of only one organizing principle, the phallus. And because of ‘a kind of collective make-believe in the commensurability of the penis and phallus’, phallogocentrism privileges men” (Rose 1995: 762). Man is regarded as “the possessor of the valued/desired organ” (Grosz 1990: 118), which seems to denote the existence of the signifier of all value, the phallus.

Women, On the other hand, are considered as the inferior for not possessing the phallus. It is Man bestow meaning, intelligibility and order upon the world. He decides what can be deemed as the feminine and construct the traditional gender roles. Within such phallogocentric system, women are oppressed and confined to the domestic sphere of a house and defined through their set functions as house keepers and child bearers. Irigaray suggests that women should try to recover their genuine female subjectivity, discover their feminine identity, and develop their agency and autonomy, and this is not feasible in a phallogocentric space.

Through cracking the hard shell of the dominant phallic discourse, a space should be opened up to allow for a feminine kind of power. The new identity and value system should not be limited to the values and identity that have been defined and determined by the phallus. Irigaray uses different terms to describe different kinds of powers. She uses the word *pouvoir* for the power that is “associated with patriarchy” (1993: 12). This masculine power is the kind of power promoted by phallogocentrism, exercised by men and even women with phallogocentric mindsets. It is, therefore, the phallic power which privileges solidity, fixity and a vertical, hierarchical order of domination. Assimilating the framework of male subjectivity and male power, however, does not provide women with original and genuine power. Here is Irigaray’s suggestion of a different kind of power and agency; there is the *puissance* that signifies a feminine kind of power. It “is associated with women, is used for ancient female authority and tradition as well as for possible new, feminized, world order, and has positive connotations” (1993: 12). This power neither oppresses nor excludes. It defies the very exclusive nature of phallogocentric systems and celebrates difference, especially what Irigaray refers to as *sexuate* difference.

At the heart of all feminine strategies that break away with phallogocentric discourse is Irigaray’s fundamental demand for respecting *sexuate* difference. Irigaray insists upon using *sexuate* instead of sexual difference in order to avoid translation problem and to focus more on “addressing identity” rather than sexuality (Bostic 2002: 606). Thus man and woman are subject positions and not biological entities and masculinity and (lack of) femininity are discourses of gender identity. In this study, likewise, when referring to masculinity, it is its definition in phallogocentrism which is intended, being an epitome of the phallic value system, and femininity is similarly a lack of phallic values. Irigaray contends that in phallogocentric systems which prioritize the discourses supposed to be related to men, women, deprived of agency, autonomy and subjectivity because of a lack of discursive identity, are considered to be mere imitations of men, but not an imitation with the same value. Women are mirrors to men with no identity, no authority and “no definition” of their own (Irigaray 1985a: 307). Women are defined only in relation to men which results in “a refusal of female identity” (Stone 2006: 27). As a consequence, within such male-dominant and male-centered discourse, women, not possessing an identity of their own, are viewed primarily as a lesser, rather distorted and incomplete version of men. Their ‘difference’ is not acknowledged and respected. They are subjected to “the economy of the same” (Irigaray 1985b: 130). Women are always placed on the less privileged side of the hierarchies due to the fact that they lack the phallus and the phallus decides value. Since being

a man is the value and the masculine gender is the only gender, women are just inferior men. Irigaray believes that phallogocentric “culture is ‘monosexual’ – that sexual difference has never existed at the symbolic level” (Stone 2006: 27). To her, respecting sexual difference is the only cure for the domination of phallic masculinity. In challenging the sexual hierarchy of phallogocentric systems, therefore, Irigaray’s theory “situates man and woman in a horizontal relation that is irreducible” (Hill 2008: 120). In fact, suggests Irigaray, the feminine and the masculine should be reconstructed as “autonomous thresholds of becoming,” and within such proffered alternative system, the feminine “would no longer function as the repressed ground of knowledge because thought would begin from the sexual *relation* or *interval* between man and woman” (Hill 2008: 120). This space between the two is necessary for the flourishing of feminine subjectivity, not as a lesser version of masculinity but as different and equally valuable.

By breaking the balance of phallogocentric values and respecting sexual difference, *Puissance* resists the solidity and rigidity of *pouvoir*. It respects and welcomes all kinds of differences and diversities lost in phallogocentrism as the “loss of diversity is the price paid in the patriarchal model of progress which pushes inexorably towards monocultures, uniformity and homogeneity” (Mies and Shiva 2014: 164). Similar to the power of the mother or nature, *puissance* exercises a horizontal relation of power, as opposed to the vertical, hierarchal and domineering relation of phallic power. It welcomes fluidity and becoming. Feminist psychoanalysis has long associated fluidity with femininity and solidity with masculinity. These associations stem from the fact that in phallogocentric value systems men desire fixity and stability, similar to the way that they desire uniformity. Meanwhile, fluidity escapes fixation and stability. Irigaray, in her article “The Mechanics of Fluids”, considers women as fluid or “whirlwinds” that, according to phallogocentric mindset, need to “be reconfined within solid walls” (1985b: 106). She claims that women are like water that is confined within the phallogocentric rules and solidity of men. Kristeva, too, has the same opinion about fluidity. She proposes that the semiotic *chora* is highly associated with mother and her body, as “fluid” (McAfee 2004: 43).

The dominance of masculinity within a phallogocentric system relies on keeping hierarchies and boundaries intact. Fluidity, however, is transmissible and creates a “confusion of boundaries” (1985b: 106). Introducing fluidity into the use of language disturbs and breaks the phallogocentric boundaries of discourse. It is, therefore, regarded by Irigaray as a feminine strategy, a way of using language without submitting to its phallic logic which pretends to propose solid truths with single meanings. To put words in flow would be to introduce the semiotic into the symbolic. As Irigaray poetically puts, “these rivers flow into no single, definitive sea. These streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries” (1985b: 125).

Much of the literary canon of the previous centuries was shaped by phallogocentric discourse and is, therefore, characterized by an absence of difference and a proclivity for sameness, reinforcing a system in which women “can only come into being as the inverted other of the masculine subject” (Irigaray 1985b: 129). But literature as a place of innovation and criticism, can also lead the way in help-

ing people learn about difference, discover and respect it; this sexual difference needs to be revealed and honored (1991: 206). And that, we hope to show, is what Tolkien does in his depiction of the Elves.

The Feminine in the Elven World

In a phallogocentric society, men as the possessors of the phallus, hold a dominant subjectivity which initiates power and defines functions and roles for the subordinate women. As Irigaray suggests, within such a monolithic system, a “woman derives her price” from men who are supposed to have the “transcendental value: The phallus” (1985b: 188). In *The Lord of the Rings*, though most human societies are positioned and defined within phallogocentric spaces, the Elven community offers a different alternative, a kind of society which does not value phallic signifiers and respects difference. What characterizes the Elven society is not just that both male and female Elves are powerful, but more the fact that the feminine is valued alongside the masculine, and power structure itself is more inclined toward *puissance* than *pouvoir*. The society of the Elves, as such, is not defined within the dominant “phallogocentric space of self-knowledge” (Rose 1995: 766). It is, therefore, proper to start by studying the social and cultural structures of the Elven communities to understand the place of the feminine in the novel.

In *The Lord of the Rings* several Elves and Elven realms are specified. One of these lands is Lothlórien which is ruled equally by its King and Queen. Another Elven realm is Rivendell, where the wise Lord Elrond lives and guides its people. Within each realm a number of significant male and female Elves are depicted in more specific detail. Besides these Elves, there is also Legolas, of the fellowship of the Ring. Although the number of Elf characters are limited, the novel provides enough information regarding the Elves’ perception of sexual difference.

One of the very few critics who has noticed the value of the feminine in the Elven culture is Lisa Coutras, who states that the Elven society is a manifestation of the author’s “ideal” society where “gender equality” exists (2016: 206). In her study, she clarifies how the Elves, regardless of their gender, can choose any occupation that they desire. Thus, the occupations are not gender-oriented within the Elven societies. Elves of either gender can choose to be a healer or a warrior. However, the Elf who is a warrior can never be a healer unless he or she gives up her or his shield. Coutras suggests that healing, “a feminine virtue”, is the highest form of power from Tolkien’s point of view and is the power that saves Middle-earth (2016: 244). She elaborates that this feminine virtue is “upheld by the Elves, an idealized and unfallen people” (2016: 244). It can be concluded that the Elves possess both *pouvoir*, the masculine power manifested in fighting and warship, and *puissance*, the feminine power exemplified by healing; and the author values this power above fighting by considering it the saving force of Middle-earth.

It is indeed necessary not to mistake this gender equality within the Elven culture with the rejection of sexual difference. Quite contrary, this specific form of equality emphasizes the feminine as intrinsically different and thus valuable

in its own right rather than as a weaker form of the same, and thus less valuable than the masculine. Within the one-sex psychology of the phallogentric system, gender stereotyping is essentially a manifestation of the logic of the same, where one gender performs the lesser, weaker, or less intelligent form of the same thing, and as such, the subordinate gender is merely a distorted image of the central one. Where there are no stereotypes, however, there is value in what each individual chooses, whether it is associated with one gender or the other. The feminine is different from the masculine in quality, but equal in value, at times even more valuable.

One of the gender stereotypes prevalent in the phallogentric discourse, which is challenged by the Elven society, is the dress code and description of appearances. Male and female Elves do not have gender stereotypes regarding their appearance. John Miller points to the embedded femininity in the Elves' appearance in a rather general manner, stating that "elves are feminine in appearance: slender, beautiful, and resilient" (2016: 139). In a phallogentric mindset, men typically feel ashamed and humiliated if their appearance is described in a language related stereotypically to women. It can threaten their masculine sense of power and superiority. But the Elves in the novel feel no shame in having a traditionally feminine appearance. In fact, the Elves in general are described as possessing feminine attributes of beauty and grace. An example that can demonstrate this point is how the appearance a female river spirit, Goldberry, and that of a male Elf, Glorfindel are described. Goldberry's hair is described as "long yellow hair rippled down her shoulder" (2012a: 139). This description seems to establish the usual gender stereotype about the feminine beauty of long and blonde hair. Elsewhere, Glorfindel's hair is also described as "golden", flowing and "shimmering in the wind" (2012a: 236). The natural manner of verbal description employed here implicates no negative sense with regards to the characters' awareness of the gender stereotypes. Even though Glorfindel is a male Elf, there is no shame in describing him with discursively feminine attributes.

There is also another stereotypical gender cliché that men are expected to be taller than women. Being tall traditionally implies a stance of dominance and power, and within a phallogentric system, men are considered to be the stronger gender. In the Elven lands, however, the lady and the lord of Lothlórien are described as "very tall" and Lady Galadriel is "no less tall than the Lord; and they were grave and beautiful" (2012a: 399). Elísabet Stenberg points to the fact that the descriptive terms used for these two characters "are equally attributed two traditionally masculine traits (tall and grave), as well as a traditionally feminine trait (beautiful)" (2012: 15). The adjective "beautiful", which is typically a feminine attribute, is used by Tolkien in order to describe both male and female Elves. He describes two of his most majestic and powerful Elves using this term, and no damage is done to their status of grandeur and power. Such unbiased use of descriptive language in relation to the Elven appearances proves that the traditional gender stereotypes do not hold in the Elven land.

The conspicuity of the equally strong presence of femininity and masculinity in the Elven culture can provide an alternative reading of the novel, as opposed to the traditional feminist criticisms. The similarity in the appearance of the two

genders in the Elven race signifies that beauty in female Elves does not have a use value for men but an aesthetic value. Moreover, it is evident that the author employs feminine attributes for the male gender in order to highlight the significant dominance of feminine quality in this race and to show their respect for difference and their rejection of the phallogentric mentality which equates power, agency and autonomous subjectivity with the traditional attributes of masculinity (in this case, having a traditional masculine appearance) and weakness, subordination and passivity with femininity (having the feminine attributes of outward beauty and gentleness). The author presents his ideal race and society as a society in which men and women do not suffer from gender stereotypes and feminine attributes are bold and respected even when they exist in their men.

The evidence relevant to the physical description of the Elves, their respect for differences between genders, their freedom in choosing their desired vocations, and the integral value embedded within the traditionally feminine attributes point to the fact that the Elven mindset is not phallogentric and patriarchal. Such evidence, nevertheless, does not provide sufficient insight to the quality of their alternative mindset. There are other implications in Tolkien's work that can purge his work of the stigma of male-centeredness. It can be argued that the culture of the Elves is not phallogentric because it relies much more on the semiotic than the symbolic. The very space in which they live reminds one of the semiotic *chora*, a "generative space" (Margaroni 79), a bountiful space of desires, drives and feelings where one is fixated on pleasures and reveling in the very core of existence, not confined by the boundaries and restrictions.

Miller considers Lothlórien a place with "feminine power", for the fact that it is a "domestic space" that fulfils the role of the "Victorian home" where the characters retreat and rejuvenate. (2016: 147). Although this reading vouches for the feminine quality of the Elven lands, it fails to account for their significance in the landscape of the novel. Equating them with the undermined domestic sphere of the Victorian home diminishes their state of value. It can, however, be argued that the geography of the two Elven lands of Rivendell and Lothlórien manifests evident characteristics of the feminine yet powerful space of *chora*. Kristeva asserts that the *chora* possesses the semiotic quality and it is a realm of "plenitude", in which the child has everything s/he needs, for there is plenty of everything (McAfee 2004: 45). It lends itself "to utopian constructions of 'a quasi-mystical realm'" (Margaroni 2005: 79). The element of utopian plenitude is visible in these lands. These are green lands surrounded by heavy woods. There are trees and waterfalls, and the elves inhabit expansive and glorious lodgings, more like palaces, where there is abundance of natural pleasures. The characters' hunger and needs are satisfied immediately and pleasurably, just like in the *chora* where one feels unified with the surroundings and enjoys immediate gratification of desires. In Rivendell, for example, the Hobbits take pleasure "in every meal" (2012a: 307), and due to the abundance of food and drink their feeling of thirst and hunger is satisfied.

The semiotic *chora* is, as Margaroni puts it, "a maternal paradise beyond language and the Law of the Father" (2005: 91) which characterize the symbolic order. A significantly dominant attribute of the Elves that places them close to

the *chora* and on the semiotic side, as opposed to the masculine symbolic, is their singing. Music has a pivotal role in all of Tolkien's fictional world, with the author "weaving music both consciously and unconsciously throughout his entire mythology" (Lee 2022: 487). Even its myth of creation revolves around the music of the Ainur, or the Great Song, which gives shape to the material world which previously did not exist.

Music, rhythm and sounds are much more important to them than language. Like the baby cooing in the mother's embrace, they sing in harmony with the world of plenitude that embraces them. In the chapters dedicated to the Elves, one can observe that the word singing is mentioned frequently. The Elves have a peculiar desire for singing, and in most occasions the readers find them singing. The other characters which pass through their land seem to feel the urge to sing as well. For instance, in the house of Elrond, Pippin articulates that it is "impossible, somehow, to feel gloomy or depressed in this place. I feel I could sing, if I knew the right song for the occasion. I feel like singing myself," laughed Frodo" (Tolkien 2012a: 253). This semiotic quality, musicality, is so overpowering in Elrond's house that even Elrond himself sings. The Elven singing is described as mesmerizing; it "beguile time" and stand against "Men's immersion in progressive linear history" (Miller 2016: 139). When Sam meets the Elves, he declares that among all the qualities of the Elves, it is their singing that goes to his "heart" (Tolkien 2012a: 65). It is not only the Elves who sing. The whole environment seems permeated with musicality. When the fellowship enters Lothlórien, they "heard the music of the waterfall running sweetly in the shadows. Almost Frodo fancied that he could hear a voice singing, mingled with the sound of the water" (Tolkien 2012b: 380). Sam describes being in that land and interacting with the Elves like being "inside a song" (2012b: 393). It is also described that the fellowship often hears "nearby Elvish voices singing" (2012b: 403).

The Elves' singing, and the *choratic* abundance of nature in the Elven lands with their running rivers and cascading waterfalls all create a fluid atmosphere, which is often related to femininity. To Irigaray, writes Haas, femininity is intrinsically and essentially associated with "a fluidity and depth that resists identification" (1993: 155). According to Irigaray, the rhythm of "women's bodies" are like "uncontrollable rushing of the river" which destroys and ravishes "the manmade structures which lie in its path" (France 2019: 48). Femininity is fluid, like water, and resists enclosure and containment by phallogocentric structures. And water plays an important role in this novel. A close reading of the text shows that water is mentioned and emphasized in specific situations in the story. Based on the descriptions presented in the novel, water, a feminine element, is widely associated with the Elven lands. In both Lothlórien and Rivendell, the reader receives numerous descriptions of waterfalls and rivers that are streaming in these lands. Furthermore, there are Elven characters who are highly associated with water. For instance, Galadriel possesses one of the Elven rings, called *Nenya* the ring of water, and Elrond uses his power to create a flood in the river of Bruinen in order to keep away the Ringwraiths who are chasing after Frodo (Tolkien 2012a: 168). Gandalf explains, "The river of this valley is under his [Elrond's] power, and it will rise in anger when he has great need to bar the Ford" (2012a: 173). The

power mentioned here is clearly of the *puissance* type. The river is not forced by Elrond to flood, but has a power of its own, and a will of its own. That the river is outraged and helps protect Elrond and his loved ones shows the horizontal relationship between the two. The Elf is not the domineering master of the river, but a valued leader. Water is a powerful and harmonious aspect of Elven culture, which is cherished without being exploited. There are a number of significant Elven objects that function through water and draw their power from this feminine element. Important examples are Galadriel's mirror and Phial, which will be discussed in detail later.

Another significant aspect of the semiotic *chora* which can be observed in the Elves is that in this space verbal signification, or language, does not hold the same place it does in human societies. The *chora*, for Kristeva, is "a generative space where a new modality of the signifying process is produced," and this new modality is what she calls "the semiotic" (Margaroni 2005: 79) which relies on modes of meaning transmission besides the arbitrary signs of language. The Elves do not rely on the phallic symbolic for meaning making. Language is only one way of communication for them, and not the very best one. That is why their minds are not shaped by phallogentrism of language and their process of meaning making and communication is not necessarily bound by the means of the fixities and rigid rules of language. In Lothlórien, an Elf named "Haldir looked at them [the fellowship], and he seemed indeed to take the meaning of both thought and word" (Tolkien 2012a: 394). Thus, for Haldir, meaning is not transferred through words. There is no gap between the signifier and the signified; the meaning is transferred completely, and one would not be trapped in the game of the signifiers. Writing a work of fantasy, Tolkien allows his ideal race to escape the trap of linguistic signification, and as a consequence, escape the transcendental signifiers that build the phallogentric mindset.

Since the Elven society is not ruled by phallogentrism, the notion of power is indeed different from the phallic power reflected in the novel's human societies, and more obviously in the Ring of the title, Sauron's Ring or the Ring of Power. Yet this is not the only Ring in Tolkien's universe. Sauron, the lord of the Rings, initiates forging the rings of power by tricking the Elves, who already possess three Elven rings, different from the rings of power. Eighteen rings of power are somehow controlled by Sauron, and the ring of the title is the one which can "rule them all" (2012a: 55); however, Sauron never has this power with the three Elven rings. These rings are forged without Sauron, and when the Elves are informed about the one Ring of power, they take off their rings, which are later worn by their keepers only after the initial defeat of Sauron. These three Elven rings are: "Nenya the Ring of Adamant, also called the Ring of Water worn by Galadriel; Narya the Ring of Ruby, also called the Ring of Fire, given to Gandalf the Grey by Cirdan the Shipwright; and Vilya the Ring of Sapphire, also called the Ring of Air worn by Elrond" (Vaccaro 2007: 571). These rings are, as such, associated with three of the elemental forces of nature, namely, water, fire and air. And, in the *chora*, which is, as Schippers puts it, "a nourishing and maternal space" (2011: 46), one is directly and innately attuned to pure forms of natural existence. The rings signal the close affinity between the Elves and Nature which is

beyond the artificial binaries of phallocentrism. This highlights the dominance of the feminine within the realms of the Elves and their connection to the feminine form of power. The Elven rings are “not made as weapons of war or conquest” (Tolkien 2012a: 301). The Elves in Eregion who crafted the rings, Tolkien writes, “did not desire strength or domination or hoarded wealth, but understanding, making, and healing, to preserve all things unstained” (301). Consequently, the Elven rings yield *puissance* to their owners, while the Ring of power yields *pouvoir*. It can be observed that the author designs two sets of rings. One to dominate and to destroy, and the other to protect and to heal. The author associates the rings that possess healing power, *puissance*, with the feminine race of the Elves. All these non-phallic, feminine attributes are somehow summed up in a single character, Galadriel, who reflects the value of *puissance* in *The Lord of the Rings* par excellence.

Galadriel, the lady of Lothlórien, is one of the most striking and most significant female characters of the book. The reader can witness how people from patriarchal societies of the novel like Rohan and Gondor view Galadriel with fear and try to avoid her. It is not uncommon in phallogentric cultures to try to isolate and marginalize the other, especially if the other is a woman who does not fit its definition of “femininity” as a mirror of the same, “a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems” (Irigaray, 1991: 130). Patriarchal society rejects a woman who does not play by these rules. Within the dominant phallogentric systems, writes Whitford, there is a conscious attempt to “colonize the space that might become women’s” (quoted in Haas 1993: 154). Throughout history, woman who possess agency and authority were called witches and burned at stake. This situation occurs in this novel, too. Éomer, prince of Rohan, describes Galadriel as a “net-weaver” and a “sorcerer” (Tolkien 2012b: 27) and a man of Gondor calls her “perilous” (2012b: 324). Galadriel is considered to be a witch and a deceiver by the patriarchal men since she does not reflect the image of the familiar woman shaped by the phallic discourse. This is obvious for Sam. He instantly responds to the man of Gondor, telling him she might seem perilous “because she is so strong” (2012b: 324). Yet such feelings of fear and hatred are not triggered by *how* powerful she is, but by *what* power she possesses. As the example of Shelob will demonstrate, women, even powerful ones, who live within the phallogentric structure and seek phallic power—the power to dominate, to hoard gold, to defeat others—are not truly dangerous since their subjectivity does not reflect difference, but is merely “the other of the same” in Irigaray’s terminology (quoted in Haas 1993: 154) which poses no threat to the masculine definition of subjectivity. Galadriel, on the other hand, is dangerous even though her power is not aimed at defeating and winning over others. Her feminine agency is bound to the logic of the “other of the other” (Irigaray, quoted in Haas 1993: 154), not reflecting a distorted, inferior image of the masculine agency. She is dangerous precisely because her kind of power threatens the whole system, and proposes an alternative to the dominant logic of phallogentrism that fuels the masculine superiority and mastery. And this is one of the greatest ironies of phallogentric discourse, that the kind of power which is non-threatening and inclusive is the biggest threat to it.

Galadriel is the manifestation of *puissance*: she is extremely powerful but is not an oppressor. She is majestic and stunning and rules the lands with her husband, who is equally majestic and stunning. She is known for her wisdom and is the only woman in the novel who possesses one of the rings, the ring of water, and uses her ring to protect and preserve her land. She also possesses two renowned abilities that add to her non-phallic power. One of them is her healing. Galadriel is “depicted as a preserver and healer” (Hatcher 2007: 46), a profession which seeks to sustain life rather than crush it. Her other ability is talking to other characters, whenever she desires, without the use of language. When the fellowship enters Lothlórien, Galadriel holds “them with her eyes” and looks “searchingly at each of them in turn” (2012a: 401). In this part she is talking to the fellowship without using language, and she is evading the trap of signs and signifiers that reside in language. She proves that she has the ability to communicate without using the phallogocentric symbolic language.

That she can make sense of the world without using language is a sign that she has the ability to reject the phallic mindset. This is more obvious when she beckons Frodo, the bearer of the Ring of Power, to look into her mirror and reveals to him the future war and destruction, among other things. Though tempted with the prospect of the great power the Ring can bestow on her as Frodo offers it to her, Galadriel turns it down, and suggests that by doing so, she has “passed the test” (2012a: 411). In this reading, the test is the temptation of getting trapped in phallic power. She is aware that the Ring is a promise of boundless *pouvoir*. Thus she rejects the temptation of *pouvoir* and the phallogocentric desires of domination, cherishing her *puissance* that can be a saving grace for Middle-earth. The mirror itself is significant as one of the Elven objects previously mentioned which is related to the power of water. It is a basin filled with the water of a stream that runs nearby which warns Sam and Frodo about the upcoming events in order to help them. The warning is also important in preventing the destruction of Middle-earth, and thus saves many lives. Water here is a feminine force which can reveal the death-bearing nature of the phallogocentric order of power.

Another of the Elven objects related to the life-saving power of water is Galadriel’s Phial, in which “the light of Eärendil’s star—the last surviving Silmaril—glimmers amid waters from her fountain” (Fisher 2007: 507). Thus the Phial is filled with water and carries light. Frodo and Sam use this object to defend themselves against Shelob, the female demonic giant spider. Many critics have argued that Shelob is an epitome of Tolkien’s misogyny. Critics agree that the monster is clearly sexualized in its representation and many have used psychoanalysis to elaborate how the disgusting imagery describing Shelob stands for feminine sexuality or the mother (see Zoë Jaques (2013), Brenda Partridge (2008), Alison Millbank (2003), and Jane Chance (1980) for examples). Only a few of these critics have focused on the fact that the destruction of Shelob is achieved through the powers of another female character, Galadriel. Joyce Tally Lionarons, among others, finds a binary opposition between the two (2013: 5) that complicates the binary opposition between Shelob as a female and Sam and Frodo as men which is suggested by the studies that regard Shelob as the representative of female sexuality in the novel. If we remember that water is

also associated with female sexuality, and that it is Galadriel's Phial of Elven water and light that destroys the female monster, the brilliant implication of this confrontation begins to show. Here we are faced with two kinds of female characters, one belonging to the masculine land of Mordor and immersed in its phallogocentric power structure, the other belonging to the *choratic* Elven lands with their non-binary understanding of femininity. Millbank rightly suggests that the winner in the indirect confrontation between these two powerful females is Galadriel, who has previously rejected the temptation of owning the Ring of power, thus resisting its promise of absolute power (2003: 35). As Irigaray clarifies, women who play by the rules of 'the same' may be successful in gaining power in a patriarchy, but their power is never a validation of sexual difference. Their access to *pouvoir* merely reinforces the phallic mindset that gave them the power in the first place. It is only through challenging the economy of the phallus and gaining power through the development of a feminine (that is, non-phallic) subjectivity that horizontal, non-oppressive power, or *puissance*, can be gained. While Shelob's monstrous *pouvoir* is of the vertical phallic order of domination and destruction, the Phial clearly holds *puissance* which, in Tolkien's world, is more powerful and can resist being engulfed by the darkness of *pouvoir*. Thus the free feminine power of the Phial defeats the poisonous image of the female embedded in phallogocentrism. And this is the perfect example to show how Tolkien connects the Elves with femininity and feminine power, and valorizes them as a ray of hope in resisting the toxic dominance of the phallic mindset drowning the world of the novel.

Conclusion

Although much of *the Lord of the Rings* revolves around acts of violence, destruction, war and oppression, and although many of the novel's heroes are men and male creatures who have to fight the forces of darkness with military power, Tolkien's higher race of the Elves reveals the attitude of the novel toward feminine, non-phallic power structures. He shows the Elven community as a society in which femininity and masculinity do not function as stereotypical poles of a binary opposition in which one side is valued and the other is a slacking or lack of the other. In his description of the Elves, sexual difference is cherished as both feminine and masculine subjectivities are valued and respected. The Elven lands are depicted as a manifestation of the semiotic *chora*, which is plentiful and fluid and is not dominated by language. The *chora* serves as a feminine atmosphere which negates the harsh phallogocentric atmosphere that threatens to take over Middle-earth with the growing power of Sauron.

Yet the most interesting aspect of the Elven society is that it is equipped with *puissance*, the feminine, horizontal kind of power, which is manifest in Galadriel's rejection of the Ring, as *pouvoir*, the phallic kind of power. A conscious acknowledgment of the existence of feminine agency and a celebration of the triumph of the feminine form of power over the masculine can testify to Tolkien's underlying appreciation of the feminine. Beyond the surface marginalization of the female

characters in the dominantly patriarchal world of *The Lord of the Rings* lies a rather more inclusive ideology of subjectivity and agency and a non-hierarchical nexus between the genders that embraces difference and highlights the productive fluidity of the feminine artistically portrayed in the society of the Elves.

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