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**FROM GONDOR TO INYS:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN  
THE LORD OF THE RINGS AND THE PRIORY OF  
THE ORANGE TREE<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** In *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), Tolkien set the precedent for the subgenre of high fantasy by conceiving an extremely rich secondary world: Middle-earth, in a way it had never been seen. Afterwards, Samantha Shannon published her novel *The Priory of the Orange Tree* (2019), a feminist retelling of Saint George and the Dragon. In that matter, Shannon's work displayed so many similarities to Tolkien's in terms of narratological intricacy that it was called "the feminist successor of *The Lord of the Rings*" by Laura Eve on its back cover. In light of that, this paper aims to put in order a comparative analysis between

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1 Título em língua portuguesa: "De Gondor à Inys: um estudo comparativo entre *O Senhor dos anéis* e *O Priorado da laranjeira*".

*The Lord of the Rings* and *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, and attest in which aspects they converge or diverge. We studied both works' worldbuilding and how the authors similarly provoke Eucatastrophe and secondary belief (TOLKIEN, 1997). It was concluded that when it comes to inward storytelling (RITCHEA, 2013) and temporal self-reference (PARRY, 2012), both novels are profoundly alike. However, regarding in-depth female representation, Tolkien's books fall short. Yet, in *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, Shannon removed gender roles from her universe, constructing a reality where women are essentially free (BERNÁRDEZ, 2020). Thereby, we surmised that although *The Lord of the Rings* was a fantasy milestone and a masterpiece, there are still many aspects within it echoing the past. And that *The Priory of the Orange Tree* is a novel aiming for the future, as Shannon offers a world untainted by bigotry.

**Keywords:** The Lord of the Rings. The Priory of the Orange Tree. High Fantasy. Fantastic. Comparative Literature.

**Resumo:** Em *O Senhor dos Anéis* (1954), Tolkien definiu os padrões para o subgênero da alta fantasia pela elaboração de um mundo secundário extremamente rico: a Terra Média, de um modo como nunca havia sido feito. Posteriormente, Samantha Shannon publicou seu livro *O Priorado da Laranjeira* (2019), uma releitura feminista de São Jorge e o Dragão. Assim, a obra de Shannon apresentou tantas similaridades com a de Tolkien em termos de complexidade narratológica que foi chamada de "o sucessor feminista de *O Senhor dos Anéis*" por Laura Eve em sua contracapa. Em vista disso, este artigo objetiva realizar uma análise comparativa entre *O Senhor dos Anéis* e *O Priorado da Laranjeira* e atestar em que aspectos eles convergem ou divergem. Estudamos a construção de mundo de ambos os livros e como os autores similarmente provocam Eucatástrofe e crença

secundária (TOLKIEN, 1997). Foi concluído que, a respeito de narrativa interna (RITCHEA, 2013) e auto-referência temporal (PARRY, 2012), ambos os livros são imensamente semelhantes. Entretanto, no que tange à representatividade feminina aprofundada, as obras de Tolkien deixam a desejar. Não obstante, em *O Priorado da Laranjeira*, Shannon removeu papéis de gênero de seu universo, construindo uma realidade onde mulheres são essencialmente livres (BERNÁRDEZ, 2020). Portanto, constatamos que, apesar de *O Senhor dos Anéis* ser um marco na fantasia e uma obra-prima, há ainda muitos elementos que o compõem ecoando o passado. E que *O Priorado da Laranjeira* é uma obra voltada para o futuro, visto que Shannon oferece um mundo livre de intolerância.

**Palavras-chave:** O Senhor dos Anéis. O Priorado da Laranjeira. Alta Fantasia. Fantástico. Literatura Comparada.

## INTRODUCTION

Firstly published in 1954, *The Lord of the Rings* by Professor J.R.R. Tolkien is a sequel to his 1937 book *The Hobbit* and the marvelous tale of Bilbo Baggins, who was sent in a quest to retrieve an ancient dragon treasure. At the end of his adventure, Bilbo discovered how much courage he actually held within himself, and in possession of a magical ring that granted him invisibility, the hobbit inadvertently set up the context for the impending journey of his own nephew, Frodo Baggins. Contrary to his uncle, who undertook a somewhat niche task in comparison to the outside world, the younger protagonist had to leave the comfort of his home to destroy the previously mentioned ring in order to save the entirety of Middle-earth from the most horrendous doom (TOLKIEN, 2001, p. 57). Accompanied by his dearest friend, Samwise

Gamgee, Frodo met incredible and terrifying people along his path, and even though his own adventure turned out to be severely gloomier than Bilbo's, its ending had a similar moral outcome: heroism can be multifaceted. Therefore, Tolkien's masterpiece quickly became popular and was eventually consecrated as one of the most significant turning points of fantasy literature.

In consonance with what Tolkien himself named "secondary world fantasy" (1997, p. 132), *The Lord of the Rings* displayed a level of technicality and care and detail that no other fantastic literary work had ever done before him. And a great deal of that richness is driven from how meticulous Middle-earth is constructed. Rather than existing merely as a stagnant narrative device whose sole purpose starts and ends with providing a scenery for the plot, Middle-earth is almost alive. It interacts with the characters, has a mythology of its own, political complexities, languages, poetry, music and much more, showcasing as much profoundness as our primary world. Succinctly, it is like James and Mendlesohn very cleverly put: "if you turn a corner in Middle-Earth, you know that there will be more world there" (2012, p. 44). Thus, by structuring and forging a secondary world independent of the one we live in, Tolkien set the precedent for what Lloyd Alexander later appointed "high fantasy" (1971, p. 5). That is, a subgenre of the fantastic<sup>2</sup>

2 To this day, there is much discussion in the academy regarding "the fantastic", and how all the concepts related to it intertwine. A fixed widespread definition of what we call "fantastic" does not exist, as there is still quite a lot of disagreement among scholars. However, this paper will consider Freud's theories on the uncanny (or the *unheimlich*) as one of the grounds on which our interpretation stands (CESERANI, 2006, p. 20). In light of this, supported as well by Ceserani's considerations on André Jolles' definition, we understand the fantastic as the inversion of our current ordinary worldly laws, a "cultural interrogation" (CESERANI, 2006, p. 63) that forces rationality to confront its very limits and leads to feelings of fright but also allurements. Through it, many literary genres and modes exist: myth, fairytale, science fiction, horror, gothic and fantasy, to

literary mode that takes place in a completely separate and self-sufficient reality.

In that regard, among his many contributions and innovations, the father of fantasy, as Tolkien was eventually nicknamed, specifically drew inspiration from marvelous tales of the medieval times, such as *Beowulf* and *The Prose Edda* (RISDEN, 1998, p. 193), for example. For that reason, given that many characteristics seen in *The Lord of the Rings* — which will be seen in more detail in the following section — served somewhat as a mold for subsequent works of high fantasy, medievalism too became an element of influence. Therefore, most of the later literature configured as high fantasy followed that pattern, and displayed mimetic and aesthetic aspects concomitant with classic medieval themes and imagery, for instance, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996) by George R.R. Martin and *The Name of the Wind* (2007) by Patrick Rothfuss. Thereupon, on the inside of this big cauldron of stories lies *The Priory of the Orange Tree* (2019) by Samantha Shannon.

As the author herself stated, the one volume novel is a feminist retelling of the tale of Saint George and the Dragon (HAINES, 2023). The English novelist skillfully combined traits of European and Asian mythology with a plot that places women in the very center, as independent and indispensable agents for the course of the storyline. A characteristic which, curiously, one would expect that happens more often in a literary mode that freely bends all of the physical and societal rules. However, Shannon's work was

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name a few, and they all interact with the fantastic in different ways. Fantasy, or high fantasy as we are specifically studying in this paper, will be analyzed mainly through the lens of Tolkien's and Alexander's rationale.

deemed revolutionary by most communities of fantasy readers precisely because, even though it is a high fantasy deeply inspired and constructed on medievalism, it does not immediately cast women as subhumans. The book possesses three main female characters: Eadaz du Zāra uq-Nāra, Sabran Berethnet IX and Tané Miduchi, each of them representing the triad of central poles where the story takes place. Eadaz is an undercover mage born and raised in the Priory of the Orange Tree, a secret society located in the south of the Western hemisphere that is home to women who manipulate a specific type of fire magic: siden As a young mage, Eadaz was sent to the Queendom of Inys, in order to furtively protect Queen Sabran Berethnet herself from the leading antagonist of the novel: the Nameless One. A mighty beast that erupted from a volcanic mountain called Dreadmount in the shape of a black dragon, and whose sole purpose is to completely subdue and oppress humanity. A thousand years prior to the moment in which the novel is set, the Nameless One terrorized the local people of a country in the West, named Lasia, until it was defeated and restrained to Dreadmount once again.

Supposedly, according to Western religion, the one who courageously overthrew and imprisoned the dragon was Galian Berethnet, who after vanquishing the monster, instituted the Queendom of Inys and established himself as the Saint of the entirety of the world. He stated that as long as his sacred bloodline survived and remained enthroned, the Nameless One would always be confined to the volcanic chains of Dreadmount, where it rests until present day. Therefore, Queen Sabran lives up to that legacy and responsibility, and the perpetuation of the Berethnet

lineage is her most fundamental royal duty. Lastly, Tané Miduchi is actually located on the other side of the world in relation to the two already mentioned characters. She is in Seiiki, a country of the Eastern hemisphere, where, in contrast to the West that deems all draconic creatures as villains, is friendly towards water dragons. They are worshiped as deities and even participate in the politics of the East. Thence, Tané is a young adult orphaned at a very young age who wishes to become a dragon rider and is willing to do just anything to achieve her oldest and truest dream. In summary (in a few words, basically), *The Priory of the Orange Tree* features a great deal of what are considered to be classic elements of the high fantasy subgenre mainly outlined by Tolkien, but unlike many of its predecessors, Shannon's work is focused on its female characters.

In view of this, there are so many Tolkienian aspects in the 2019 novel that Laura Eve even called *The Priory of the Orange Tree* "the feminist successor of *The Lord of the Rings*" on the book's back cover (BÉRNARDEZ, 2020, p. 94). Therefore, taking all of the previous deliberations into account and considering that the ability to conjure up fantastic tales have accompanied humankind since the very first day, it is crucial to understand how it evolves and keeps up with the needs and wants of different groups that perhaps have not always been properly characterized in literature. How it might be possible for new authors to honor the past and those who set the precedent while writing inclusionary fantasy that does not unquestionably mirror the prejudices of the primary world and offers a new perspective on societal norms. Ergo, this paper aims to analyze two incredibly constructed and rich works of high fantasy: *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Priory of The Orange*

*Tree* by Samantha Shannon. In particular, a comparative study will be done in order to attest the books' similarities and differences and if Eve's assertion was indeed accurate. That will be done through the analysis of narratological and worldbuilding strategies and then, of how both authors handled their respective female characters.

### **THERE'S PROMISE IN TALES THAT ARE YET TO BE SPOKEN**

James and Medlesohn reckon that the key innovations and originalities present in *The Lord of the Rings* were structural. As it was very briefly mentioned in the previous section, instead of following the preceding tradition of quest fantasies in search of a specific symbolic Graal, as he formerly did in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien amalgamated the "particular objective pursuit" trope with the ancient epic in the 1954 novel (JAMES; MENDLESOHN, 2012, p. 48). The authors establish that connection because of the "all or nothing" factor of the book, since there is always the threat of worldwide domination circling the narrative, if Frodo and Sam should fail their mission. As a result, the reader is to a degree compelled to care and get emotionally involved with the adventure. Which is also tied to how Tolkien presents his central villain, like a representation of ultimate and irredeemable evil, a characteristic that makes the readers revisit some of their oldest recollections and urges provoked by heroic tales, that is to root for good to thrive against evil (PRY, 2003, p. 28). Pry regards this yearning as a reflection of human mind and morality, and traces the theory back to Jung's considerations on such urges as an anthropological need, primarily for understanding and resolution. And, taking into account the manner in which *The Lord of the Rings'* conflict

is settled, Pry deems the yearning thoroughly fulfilled: Sauron is ultimately defeated, Gondor is rebuilt and all heroes may finally go home. Naturally, as a great scholar and connoisseur of the fantastic himself, Tolkien was not ignorant to such concepts and in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*, he uses the word consolation for the accomplishment of this ancient human need, and names the absolute joy only a happy ending could provide “Eucatastrophe”. According to him, this eucatastrophic factor is actually the highest function of fantasy, that when done properly can touch the reader’s heart with the same intensity of, for instance, poignant grief. The Professor said: “In such stories when the sudden ‘turn’ comes we get a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart’s desire, that for a moment passes outside the frame, rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through” (TOLKIEN, 1997, p. 154).

With that in mind, when it comes to Shannon’s 2019 novel, although there is still much sorrow and tragedy and loss, which Tolkien does not consider an impediment for Eucatastrophe, the transcending joy still exists. The Nameless One is the embodiment of true malice, a result of an imbalance between the two branches of magic in the book (*siden* and *sterren*), and despite the fact that he only makes an appearance at the very end, the mere mention of his name and the threat he represents is enough to send a jolt of biting fear into the characters’ hearts. And as he is ultimately defeated, not only is the danger dissipated, but there is also the conciliation of the Western and Eastern hemispheres and people, who have been strangers to one another for so long. That ending highlights the importance of shedding our inward prejudices and of learning how to see beauty and strength in human diversity. After

all, the protagonists and heroes achieved peace and vanquished the Nameless One only because they also overcame their initial misguided notions of each other. Thus, the final act of open-mindedness and friendship reinforces too the concluding feeling of Eucatastrophe evoked by the novel. Perhaps, we ponder, maybe even more than the absolute defeat of the Nameless One. Albeit it might be satisfying or cathartic to witness the destruction of irredeemable evil, as Pry theorizes, the mutual feelings of understanding and connection that Shannon bestows upon her characters speak to Tolkien's conceptions of hope. If a secondary world of fantasy is built with the same love and attention to detail as the primary one was built by God, as Tolkien writes, everything that happens within its borders is fundamentally true. Thereby, if the people of Middle-earth or Inys or Seiki are capable of heroism and altruism, why would the humans these characters are mirrored after not be? *The Priory of the Orange Tree* deeply captures an aspect of Eucatastrophe theory that is also present in *The Lord of the Rings*: pure and genuine hope. The joy elicited by fantasy does not come only from resolved happy endings, but also from the prospect of reading and diving into these secondary worlds and seeing oneself's own potential in them. Of contemplating not what is, but what could be. That is one of the elements which bring Shannon's and Tolkien's works together, because of how both authors understand and deal with the concept of hope.

Now, moving forward, James and Mendlesohn were not the only ones who juxtaposed *The Lord of the Rings* with the epic. In fact, the constant comparison to the ancient poetic genre is not unusual among Tolkienian academics. Parry (2012) mentions

several scholars who deem Tolkien's work a ratherish modern day epic. Referencing Martin, she appoints many conventional aspects that define the genre, such as "cosmic scale, serious purpose, a setting in the distant past, the presence of heroic and supernatural characters and plots pivoting on wars or quests" (PARRY, 2012, p. 6). Aspects that, as Parry writes, Tolkien intricately embroidered into *The Lord of the Rings'* anatomic configurations, storyline and character development. And, in line with Ritchea (2013), this is one of the aspects present in Middle-earth's narratological structure which makes the whole universe so believable. More specifically, the author outlines three narratological criteria Tolkien utilizes in his process of sub-creation:

- 1) Space and temporality within the storyworld can be mapped;
  - 2) The storyworld's construction has a witness (nested frames and an implied author);
  - 3) The textual and textual reference world of the implied storyworld draws reference from, or allows readers to interact with, the actual world.
- (RITCHEA, 2013, p. 100)

Ritchea theorizes that in order to provide what Tolkien himself called "inner consistency of reality", the Professor had to acknowledge the common ground on which writer and reader stand — the primary world — and then employ our common experience with it to artificially formulate Middle-earth's mythology and history. And, although Parry and other classical scholars focus on *The Lord of the Rings'* parallels with the epic, there are many mimetic elements observable within Tolkien's secondary world that can be traced back to Norse legends, *Beowulf*, medieval and chivalric romances and much more (RITCHEA, 2013, p. 107-108).

Thus, by doing so, instead of expecting a willing suspension of disbelief from the reader, which is something that Tolkien never thought actually existed (TOLKIEN, 1997, p. 132), a fantasy author might incite secondary belief (another concept forged by Tolkien). It is a most arduous task, nevertheless, if a secondary world can establish that link with the primary one and paradoxically offer a realism within the magical boundaries of that fantastic reality, the reader might be truthfully transported to the secondary world, and while in it, be immersed in secondary belief.

And, returning to Parry, one of the tactics Tolkien applied in order to induce secondary belief was not solely emulation of factual and historical legends and folklore, but the constant allusions to Middle-earth's fictional past too. She postulates that *The Lord of the Rings'* congruence with the epic goes beyond storylike inspiration, it also encompasses diegetic functional purpose. Taking Virgil's *Aeneid* as an example, Parry explains how it portrays fantastic beasts and monsters, which provide a sense of wonder to the poem, however, the work is meant to serve as a piece of factual history and in a way, explain the origins of Roman civilization (PARRY, 2012, p. 7). Thence, Tolkien's work does not share that characteristic, since despite his implication that hobbits still exist in present day and the story he narrated could possibly have occurred in olden times, there is no certain way to pinpoint such events in actual history. Therefore, Middle-earth exists as an autonomous entity with a culture completely and absolutely crafted by Tolkien. Yet, according to Parry, it is in this dichotomy of not mirroring our authentic past but simultaneously always referencing its own made up mythology that rests one of *The Lord*

*of the Rings'* greatest correlation with the epic. Comparing the novel with *Aeneid* once more, she concludes that the connection shown in the poem with the past possesses the same functions as Tolkien's constant odes to Middle-earth's fictional days of yore.

Tolkien echoes Virgil's sense of the backdrop of history behind the events of epic, but gives the weight Virgil bestows on the origins of his own city to the history of a wholly imaginary world; a tactic perhaps entirely appropriate for an audience that no longer holds the same belief in a mythic past as did that of the ancient authors. (PARRY, 2012, p. 8)

So, in a way, by assuming the role of the ancient epic in modern society, fulfilling humanity's need and longing for a glorious, fantastic past, *The Lord of the Rings'* and by extent, Middle-earth's, extensive inward richness also defined the emerging subgenre of high fantasy. Therefore, despite the fact that some other writers might not display Tolkien's level of scrupulousness regarding their works of high fantasy, which — is important to highlight — does not constitute a demerit in any way, given that Middle-earth is the result of a lifetime endeavor, it is possible to attest that Shannon exhibits the same meticulousness in *The Priory of the Orange Tree*. The 848 page novel contains four narrators in total, each of them from a different part of the world and with a singular knowledge of their own homeland's history. Because of that, there is a profound intricacy in Shannon's secondary world's lore and past events. And even though they actually comprehend an objective factualness and essentially happened in a certain fashion, history is remembered and recounted from different perspectives and in different ways. Not only that, but there are two recurring

characters considered to be somewhat as old as time, who also speak of the past through the lens of their own personal truths. They are Nayimathun of the Deep Snows, a lacustrine (meaning she is originally from the Empire of the Twelve Lakes, in the East) dragon who is approximately a thousand years old, and Kalyba, an almost mythical figure also known as the Lady of the Woods or the Witch of Inysca, and is supposedly even older than the Nameless One.

By constantly dealing with ancient characters who at all moments influence and interact with the course of the main plot, which in essence derives from events that happened in the most distant past, Shannon obtains that sense of “if you turn a corner within the world, you know there will be more world there” that James and Mendlesohn write about (2012, p. 44). Not only that, but the author also elicits the nostalgic feeling regarding ancient history that Parry associates with the epic. Inys’ and Seiiki’s days of yore are portrayed in the same manner as the defeat of Turnus in *Aeneid* and as the prophesied return of Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* (PARRY, 2012, p. 8). Furthermore, the characters too in *The Priory of the Orange Tree* interact with their past history in similar ways as the characters in Virgil’s and Tolkien’s work. There is a deep sense of glorification of olden times and as Parry says, “(the) heroes themselves possess an awareness of and respect for this oral history and actively seek a place within it” (2012, p. 8). Queen Sabran speaks of the Grief of Ages<sup>3</sup> and its ailments with great

3 A period of time corresponding to 500 years before the moment in which the book is set, and it carries such a name because it refers to when Fýredel (a mighty white dragon and the Nameless One’s most ruthless follower) raised the Draconic army against the world, causing immeasurable tragedy.

sorrow, but also praises her ancestor, Queen Glorian the Third, who marched into battle and bravely defended her Queendom while being almost nine months pregnant (SHANNON, 2019, p. 257). Even though much pressure rests upon Sabran's shoulders, to give continuity to the Berethnet lineage and keep on protecting the world from the Nameless One's fire, she also finds strength in her foremothers and their apparently inexhaustible courage. Eadaz constantly revisits the past and origins of the Priory and, being the only one in court who knows the Queendom of Inys's biggest secret and how it was actually founded (this secret in question and its implications will be more thoroughly discussed in the next section), there is a natural longing within her for the glory of ancient times (SHANNON, 2019, p. 425). Tané, too, as she eventually succeeds in becoming a dragonrider and grows close to her assigned dragon, Nayimathun, learns about the dragons' old history and their former magnificence. About their long gone powers and adventures, triumphs and defeats, how they originally emerged from the sea, and she becomes likewise nostalgic for a past she never lived (SHANNON, 2019, p. 280).

In that specific regard, one of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Priory of the Orange Tree* most prominent similarities when it comes to diegetic ancient history is the fact that the past and present are deeply interconnected in both novels, as Shannon and Tolkien formulate a problem that comes into existence in the past but is only resolved in the present. The One Ring was forged in the year 1600 of the Second Age by Sauron, but it was only destroyed by Frodo, Sam and Gollum in the year 3019 of the Third Age. The Nameless One was imprisoned in Dreadmount in the year 2 of BCE (Before the Common

Era), but was only actually defeated and killed in the year 1005 of CE (Common Era). Therefore, by this approach, both authors create a sense of continuity and cohesion that span over centuries within their secondary worlds and deepen its fictional historical development. A characteristic that, as previously seen, mimics our primary world's own course of history and incites secondary belief.

Moreover, concerning this embroilment of characters and perspectives that Shannon features in *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, there is too a concept which James and Mendlesohn speak of and Ritchea explains in more detail, and that coincidentally *The Lord of the Rings* displays as well. It is precisely the extensive number of narrators and points of view surrounding the story, which, in accordance with James and Mendlesohn, deepens the mimetic qualities of the adventure. "Only the reader has a full grasp of the ways in which one set of adventures influences another; the protagonists can only hope and agonize" (JAMES; MENDLESOHN, 2012, p. 47). With this in mind, as there is much mystery and answered questions regarding Shannon's secondary world, this particular function of divergent perspectives that unknowingly complement each other is strongly present within the novel. Not only that, but Ritchea's considerations on diegetic narratological levels can also be observed in *The Priory of the Orange Tree*. The author states that in *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a very discernable pyramid of storytellers: Tolkien himself at its very top, and as the structure descends, there would be numerous characters distributed along it depending on their level of knowledge regarding the book's events and their roles as narrators (2013, p. 103). Ritchea writes that this kind of storytelling relation

not only quite clearly illustrates who knows what and when, but it also incites narrative tension.

In a more profound analysis of *The Lord of the Rings*, Ritchea studies the way Tolkien revisits his old works by assigning the roles of inward and implied authors to his characters. As the story itself displayed in the novel is about storytelling, given that Frodo and Sam compare their adventure through the lens of songs of old and Bilbo is determined to finish his book, for instance (RITCHEA, 2013, p. 105). However, this particular aspect of the protagonists themselves being the ones narrating their own stories is not exactly present in *The Priory of the Orange Tree*<sup>4</sup>, which nonetheless does not exclude Shannon's novel from Ritchea's notion of "gossip narrators". He states that it happens quite often in *The Lord of the Rings*, a "character that recaps or tells about another character to satisfy curiosity" (2012, p. 105), therefore allowing Tolkien to tell stories within stories, once again deepening and detailing Middle-earth's history. Ritchea takes the chapter "The Council of Elrond" in the first book of the trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, to exemplify this narratological strategy. He says:

(...) The entire chapter consists of 30 pages of characters telling stories to one another. While there is no actual action taking place on that narrative level, the reader travels both thousands of miles in Middle-earth on a secondary narrative level and thousands of years temporally through the narrative level. (RITCHEA, 2012, p. 105)

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4 Or at least it is not present in her secondary world as a broader sense just yet. Considering that Shannon recently released *A Day of Fallen Night* in 2023, a prequel to the events portrayed in her 2019 novel, and that she often alludes to a possible sequel to *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, there is the possibility of her including this specific characteristic in a future work.

Now, although *The Priory of the Orange Tree* does not specifically feature a plethora of characters who also take on the role of secondary authors, like Frodo, Sam and Bilbo do, there is still a great amount of lore that is learned because of gossip narrators. Nayimathun of the Deep Snows and Kalyba, as they were already mentioned, are extremely old characters and therefore provide a unique perspective on past events. As the plot advances and the reader learns more and more about Shannon's secondary world and its complexities, there is also an immense curiosity slowly sparked by the number of big or small unresolved issues and questions. For instance, how the magic system actually works and what is the difference between the two poles of magic (siden and sterren, as previously mentioned too), why the Priory of the Orange Tree is kept a secret from the rest of the world, why the Eastern dragons have lost some of their ancient powers, how exactly the Nameless One was incarcerated in Dreadmount, only to name a few. All of these questions are related, as we learn throughout the ending chapters, and it is through inward storytelling that Shannon walks us to the book's conclusion and elucidation of so many mysteries.

Naturally, as both characters witnessed so many past events, Nayimathun and Kalyba are very present when it comes to recounting olden times. And since they respectively are on the Eastern and Western hemispheres, there is a great portion of localized lore they narrate. To exemplify, Nayimathun was the one who explained to Tané (and to an extent, the reader) how the Eastern dragons were truthfully born: they came down in the form of a comet. And whenever it passes through the skies again, depending on its cycle, they gain full strength and therefore are

able to lay eggs and command every power they once held, like shapeshifting for example. Such strength, however, fades with time, and it can only return with another passing of the comet.

Once, many moons ago, it [the comet] left behind two celestial jewels, each infused with its power. Solid fragments of itself. With them, our ancestors could control the waves. Their presence allowed us to hold on to our strength for longer than we could before. But they have been lost for almost a thousand years. (SHANNON, 2019, p. 280)

Thereby, in the West, it is Kalyba who explains to Eadaz the difference between *siden* and *sterren*, which is naturally in congruence with Nayimathun's story on the comet. She states that *siden* is *terrene* magic and comes from the core of the world, achieved through the fruit of the three *siden* trees: the orange, the hawthorn, and the mulberry, albeit only the orange still lives. *Sterren* is its natural opposite, *sidereal* magic, or the power of stars. "When the Long-Haired Star passes, it leaves behind a silver liquid. I named it *star rot* (...) It is in *star rot* that *sterren* lives, just as it is in the fruit that *siden* lives" (SHANNON, 2019, p. 447). Through this technique, of providing various *diegetic* narratological levels by which different characters enrich the plot due to their own acquired knowledge and singular viewpoint, likewise Tolkien, Shannon builds what Ritchea calls a "profound realism" (RICHARDSON apud RITCHEA, 2013, p. 104). Her secondary world exists as an entirely self-sufficient entity, and despite the existence of so many elements which can be easily correlated with people or places or tales or cultural articles from our primary world, as there are in *The Lord of the Rings*, secondary belief is also achieved in *The Priory of the Orange Tree*.

To sum things up, there are still a considerable amount of elements and structural literary strategies that both Shannon and Tolkien utilized in their works of high fantasy in order to prompt secondary belief and, in general, broadly organize such complex secondary worlds and plots. Aspects that highlight more of the novels' similarities as well. Nevertheless, we shall turn now to one of the most significant differences perceptible when it comes to *The Lord of the Rings* in comparison to *The Priory of the Orange Tree*.

### **NO WOMAN SHOULD BE MADE TO FEAR THAT SHE WAS NOT ENOUGH**

When it comes to female representation within Tolkien's works, there is some disagreement in academia. Bogaert (2015) discusses the myriad of conflicting perspectives on the female characters of *The Lord of the Rings*: she refers to Smol, who by studying the book alongside many letters which Tolkien himself sent to his son, concludes that the Professor had a quite bio essentialist view on gender roles that was naturally reflected in his work (BOGAERT, 2015, p. 16). Green, on the other hand, deems that Tolkien considers gender an interchangeable human characteristic, and utilizes the pronoun "he" in a neutral sort of manner when describing especially the hobbits, simply in order to avoid any type of sexual conflict between his characters (BOGAERT, 2015, p. 16). However, it is awfully imperative to keep in mind that context matters in this case, and regardless of how one might interpret the novel itself or the theories orbiting it, it is also important to recognize the existence of nuance. James and Mendlesohn speak of the main event that inspired Tolkien and that set the precedent

for so much of *The Lord of the Rings'* plot: the First World War (2012, p. 49). They claim that after experiencing the horrors of war, Tolkien structured his characters while aiming to symbolize actual people and soldiers he encountered throughout his journey as an officer. For example, Merry and Pippin are supposed to represent a new and bright generation of adolescents who unfortunately lost a piece of their youth and innocence to war (JAMES; MENDLESOHN, 2012, p. 47). Therefore, the authors state that this clear mirroring effect which Tolkien synthesizes in his book is the main cause of the lack of female representation. And Éowyn, the book's most recurring female character, is meant to portray the "bitterness and mourning of the women left behind in wartime Britain and who served, unrecognized, in the First and Second World Wars" (JAMES; MENDLESOHN, 2012, p. 47). Furthermore, the authors state too that Éowyn's final act of abandoning her sword and title as shieldmaiden was Tolkien's way of claiming that war is an ugly business and no person should ever wish to take part in it.

Bogaert possesses a similar opinion regarding Éowyn, she reckons that there is a problematic aspect about her character, which is the achievement of heroism only through the disguise of a male identity, something that Marion Zimmer Bradley herself also pointed out (BOGAERT, 2012, p. 21). Nevertheless, Bogaert does not consider Éowyn's ultimate reconnection with her femininity as a symptom of weakness, but as a sign of maturation, as she (in accordance with James and Mendlesohn) understands that there is no true glory in war. Yet, despite the fact that this particular interpretation of Éowyn is quite fitting, depending on one's viewpoint on femininity as innate or not, there is still a problem

with her character rarely recognized, which is the “exception to the rule” factor. Although in Peter Jackson’s cinematic adaptation there was a slight change on some of the female characters’ specific dynamics, like Arwen being more present for example, their numbers are still exceedingly small in comparison to the number of male central characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. Throughout the trilogy, it is only Éowyn, Galadriel and Shelob who possess a bigger role and actively have an influence on the plot. Besides the all male Fellowship of the Ring, which includes Frodo, Sam, Merry, Pippin, Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli and Boromir, there are six more pivotal men who appear quite often. They are Sauron, Saruman, Gollum or Sméagol, Elrond, Théoden, Denethor and Faramir, who represent a discrepancy of sixteen central male characters in comparison to three central female characters.

And when one of them, Galadriel, owns immeasurable power which ends up being mostly implied rather than depicted, something that keeps her from the quest (BÉRNARDEZ, 2020, p. 95), and the other, Shelob, falls into the archetypal role of monstrous feminine and sneaky creature, ready to seduce men and entrap them in her web (DASSLER, 2022, p. 6), the only female character left who showcases as much agency and depth and truly takes part in the adventure as an equal in relation to the male characters is Éowyn. And although there is much significance in Tolkien’s concluding statement regarding Éowyn’s ending: everyone should aspire to find peace and genuine happiness in a domestic life rather than pursuing greatness in battle, when he does so through his only female character that at least for a moment, rejected traditional gender roles, he sends a different

kind of message, even if inadvertently. Being the single woman unsheathing a sword among an all male army, Éowyn ends up representing an exception to the rule, that is patriarchy. Even though Middle-earth is an incredibly rich and immersive secondary world with its own culture and societies, there was still the conscious decision by Tolkien's part to mirror our primary world's gender disposition. Therefore, the women of *The Lord of the Rings* are mainly marginalized as helpless housewives or caregivers, their existences often defined in relation to men and on what they can provide for them. And when Éowyn also ends up giving up on her shieldmaiden position and assumes a traditional feminine role like all other women around her, Tolkien reinforces two bio essentialist views: that all women in their souls are passive and servient, and that whenever they go against that innate essence, it is a nature aberration not usually widespread and which ends up not being ultimate (SMOL apud BOGAERT, 2015, p. 12).

Now, this interpretation is in no way meant to label Tolkien as a raging misogynist, because after all, Jane Chance in her chapter "Tolkien and the Other: Race and Gender in Middle-earth" explains how *The Lord of the Rings* displays a great deal of instances in which multiculturalism and tolerance towards marginalized groups are portrayed as ideal and as a sign of true heroism (2005, p. 180). However, when it comes to these concepts and Tolkien's handling of his female characters (or any minority), it is likewise crucial to keep in mind that timing is an indispensable factor in any *The Lord of the Rings* analysis. There is no way to ignore the fact that Tolkien was indeed a white man born in the 19th century, and that although many of his ideas and fiction may have defied

some societal norms, like any other, he is a product of his own time. And as his work set the precedent for the upsurging of high fantasy, not only diegetic narratological levels or parallels with the epic helped to characterize the genre, but the lack of female representation too. Sinykin (2023), in his article for Slate magazine, writes about how after *The Lord of the Rings* phenomenon, fantasy readers were avid for similar stories and actively asking publishers for anything or anyone resembling Tolkien and his mastery of the fantastic. As a result, one famous editor — Lester del Rey — defined specific literary elements which echoed *The Lord of the Rings* and started demanding them as prerequisites for publishing. They were: “invented worlds in which magic works. (...) A male central character who triumphed over the forces of evil (...) by innate virtue, and with the help of a tutor or tutelary spirit” (SINYKIN, 2023). Thus, a whole tradition in high fantasy was born, one that excluded women from positions of power or protagonism and usually sidelined them as one dimensional archetypal acolytes to the hero’s journey, such as the mother, or the damsel, or the seductress, for instance (BÉRNARDEZ, 2020, p. 94).

And that is why *The Priory of the Orange Tree* was deemed so avant-garde among (especially female) fantasy readers. Within Shannon’s novel, there is a tyrannical villain threatening to decimate the freedom of all peoples, different sets of protagonists who possess different objectives, but that in the end must all come together to defeat a common enemy, distinctive kinds of heroism and friendship, arduous and taut battles, political plots and secrecies, corruption and redemption, a sophisticated magic system and, to tie it all in, a most beautiful

and sophisticated prose that paints the adventure as if it were a watercolor portrait. In other words, *The Priory of the Orange Tree* exhibits an abundance of tropes and traits common to high fantasy, and that are particularly very present in *The Lord of the Rings*, which have been bringing communities of readers together for decades, but this time, there is no patriarchy. The female characters conceived by Samantha Shannon do not have to go through the process of firstly defeating misogyny and proving their worth as a woman and a human to, only then, be able to join the fight against the villain, because the women of *The Priory of the Orange Tree* were already born free. And, as Bernárdez theorizes, by removing the sexism factor, Shannon creates a space in which she can discuss any topic generally related to women's experience (including misogyny) in an extremely advanced fashion, precisely because the author herself made it quite clear that in her novel, there is no intention whatsoever to pursue historical or realistic accuracy of any kind. Therefore, while Shannon depicts Eadaz and Tané routinely and skillfully flaunting their abilities as swordswomen and warriors without restrictions, she also touches on matters such as fear of motherhood and pregnancy, sapphism, erasure of women from history, sisterhood and so many more themes connected to womanhood and that have been for so long ignored in fantasy literature. The book itself was born because Shannon wanted to give a voice to the princess of the legend of Saint George and the Dragon. And in reality, the way she subverted it is one of the most prominent feminist stances she makes throughout the whole narrative.

The story starts similarly to the original tale: a horrible dragon arose and began to terrorize the local community of Lasia, the closest country to his place of birth, until its people started sending it sheep and cattle to avoid more deaths. Yet, the beast's hunger for human flesh was insatiable, and thereby a sortition took place, by which random people were chosen as sacrifice to appease the dragon's appetite and keep it away from the city. Eventually, there came the hour when the princess herself was sorted, and in great sorrow, the king let her only daughter depart to meet her doom. While she was waiting, a gallant knight appeared and, in face with the princess and her stunning beauty, offered to slay the dragon for her if she agreed to marry him and if her subjects converted to his religion. Now, this is the moment the stories diverge: in the original tale, the princess accepted his proposal and all people of Lasia happily converted to Christianity after George heroically killed the monster (WALTER, 1995, p. 321). In *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, however, princess Cleolind wanted to kill the dragon — the Nameless One — herself as soon as it erupted from Dreadmount, but decided to wait in respect to her father's wishes and concerns. When she was finally drawn, Cleolind left determined to ultimately defeat the dragon that had oppressed her people for way too long. And when she met the knight, Galian Berethnet, and heard his insulting proposition, the princess felt disgusted and sent him away. However, as he was stubborn and blinded by ambition, Galian confronted the Nameless One anyway when it finally showed up, branding his magic sword Ascalon, certain that it would assure him victory. But the dragon was too powerful and Galian quickly injured himself, which gave

the princess the chance to pick up the sword and finally go after the dragon as the knight cowardly ran away.

She found it in a prairie, twisted around a tall orange tree, and among the flowers and bushes, Cleolind and the Nameless One dueled. But despite all of her skills and the magic within the sword, the dragon was too powerful. As she crawled towards the orange tree in order to catch her breath, Cleolind took notice of her burns and rested against it, facing the beast one last time, ready to accept her undoing. However, when the Nameless One, convinced of its victory, blew fire in the princess' direction, the tree protected her. Marveling at the miracle surrounding her, Cleolind extended her hand to pick one of the oranges, and when she ate the fruit, her body was suddenly overcome by a wave of magic that not only healed her wounds, but also gifted her the powers of a mage. Bearing a new kind of strength, the princess returned to battle and this time, pierced Ascalon deep in the Nameless One's black scales, banishing him forever from her land.

When she returned home, Cleolind handed the sword back to Galian and, once again, sent him away. The princess then gave up on her royal title, donated her wealth and, accompanied by her closest handmaidens, went to that prairie where she defeated the Nameless One and where the orange tree lived. There, the women founded The Priory of the Orange Tree, a society of mages determined to protect the world from any draconic threat that could arise from Dreadmount. Galian Berethnet, on the other hand, seething due to his wounded pride, returned to his homeland: the Isles of Inysca, where he distorted what actually happened. The knight claimed that he was the one who banished

the Nameless One and, lost in a haze of narcissism, united those territories under his self-appointed crown. Declaring himself as a Saint, Galian established the religion of the Six Virtues (the one he wanted Cleolind's subjects to convert to), inspired by the principles of knighthood, and lied that it was his sacred blood that had overpowered the mighty dragon. Finally, the new king made up the foretelling that as long as his sanctified lineage remained in power, the Nameless One would too remain caged.

The truth was eventually forgotten by the world. Whilst the Priory became secret in order to protect the magic of the orange tree, Galian's lie became history. His bloodline continued, and as only girls were born and the lineage was built exclusively of queens, the Queendom of Inys evolved. Yet, in the Priory, there was also a line of descent as the society thrived. Thus, in present time, the mages are the only ones who know the truth about how the Nameless One was defeated a thousand years ago.

Thence, although Shannon provided a creative feminist twist on the tale of Saint George and the Dragon, by making the princess the true heroine, it is interesting to notice that she also criticizes a very usual occurrence of our primary world: men usurping and appropriating women's accomplishments. Galian Berethnet did nothing but annoy Cleolind and flee in the moment of danger. And still, for a millennium, he was revered as a Saint in Inys and praised for an action he never had the ability of doing, while Cleolind was labeled as "the Damsel" in the Six Virtues religion, forgotten in the prayers of the people.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Therefore, it is interesting to use Shannon's own words to start our concluding remarks. In her website, she wrote an essay called "Damsels Undistressed" (2019) in which she explains her primary thought process when structuring the novel.

In writing *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, I was driven by a sense of obligation – a desire to answer the story that created the ripples I first encountered in a song as a little girl. A desire to re-assemble and expand on it in a way that made sense to me as a woman and a human being. I wanted to resurrect and shine a light on its lost women, whose names have all but disappeared. I wanted to make them a gift of the orange tree. I wanted to hit back at the George I met in the stories of old, and to wonder what the people of Lasia would have said about him, if only anyone had written his intervention from their perspective. And I wanted someone else to have a chance to slay the dragon. (SHANNON, 2019)

By revisiting the story of one of England's oldest saints and finally shedding light on the sole female character, who beforehand simply represented a mere prize for George, Shannon offers justice for all women who at some point were overlooked. Moreover, *The Priory of the Orange Tree* displays more than patriarchal liberation, there is too the utter erasure of structural racism and heteronormativity, which provides freedom to absolutely everyone and in all capacities. And even though *The Priory of the Orange Tree* and *The Lord of the Rings* are considerably alike, this is a specific characteristic that separates them and that asserts Shannon's novel as the trademark of XXI's century fantasy. There is a reason why

Tolkien was called the father of fantasy and his work, to this day, inspires so many young fantasy authors. *The Lord of the Rings* is a literary and a philological masterpiece, which in less than a century, was deemed a classic in English literature and then adapted into the cinematic saga with most awards ever. But as a scholar immersed in mid-20th century England, Tolkien mostly portrayed the people actually living around him: white men. And, unfortunately, until very recently, that was the norm for protagonists and heroes in high fantasy, excluding an enormous amount of people.

Thus, as the world evolves and at last those who were kept away from pens during most part of history are finally having the chance to tell their stories, high fantasy must keep up with that evolution. Because, after all, the longing for a glorious past, dragons, adventure, tragic love, magic and wonder are still very present in the human soul. Ursula le Guin said it herself: “There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories” (1993, p. 27). Just like breathing, humans cannot live without the fantastic, but at least right now, it is possible for all people to equally experience it. To envision a world untainted by prejudice, to strive to one day achieve that.

In conclusion, alongside this divergence and many others that separate the pair of novels, there are nonetheless substantial similarities between *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, in terms of both diegetic structure and narratological design. Therefore, Laura Eve can be considered indeed correct for nicknaming Samantha Shannon’s book “a feminist successor of *The Lord of the Rings*” (BERNÁRDEZ, 2020, p. 94). Not only that, but as she writes fantasy aiming to at all times broaden

her horizons more and more, and include people of all shapes, sizes and colors in her work, while at the same time exhibiting great respect for those who came before her<sup>5</sup>, Shannon writes for the future as well. And it is in this magnanimous richness and diversity of perspectives and stances, between past and future, that lies literature's greatest strength. *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Priory of the Orange Tree* may differ in some aspects, but they both superbly encapture what resides in humanity's very core: the yearning for a waking dream.

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5 See "My Feminist Call to Historical Fantasy" (SHANNON, 2019).

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