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Middle-earth's Middleman: Exploring the Contradictory Positionalities of Faramir in J.R.R. Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings'

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A new character has come on the scene (I am sure I did not invent him, I did not even want him, though I like him, but there he came walking into the woods of Ithilien): Faramir, the brother of Boromir—and he is holding up the ‘catastrophe’ by a lot of stuff about the history of Gondor and Rohan [...] if he goes on much more a lot of him will have to be removed to the appendices...¹

Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is a meticulously-crafted fantasy adventure, woven together from several storylines culminating in key moments wherein the big picture crystalizes. From the formation of the Fellowship to the coronation of Aragorn to Frodo’s last journey across the sea, and the many meetings and partings in between, there are moments throughout the story that serve to remind the reader that though circumstance has spread our heroes across great distances, each individual piece—and each individual—is working in service of the larger whole. And yet, after each moment of clarity, the story seems to fracture again, the larger whole revealed to grow even more expansive, reminding us of the breadth of Tolkien’s Middle-earth imaginings.

One such window into the larger legendarium behind Frodo’s odyssey from the Shire to Mordor and back again is his encounter with Faramir in Ithilien: unexpected for Frodo and Sam, unexpected for the reader, and unexpected we have learned for even Tolkien himself. And yet, this chance meeting is evocative and informative. Faramir’s descriptive conversations bring us closer to the history of the societies of Men² and give insight into distant genealogies of already-known characters such as Aragorn, Boromir, Théoden, and Éomer, as well as giving us a portrait of the social values and moral predicaments in Middle-earth. Faramir shows us a slice of Tolkien’s bigger picture, and although he is not a character often analyzed in depth in scholarship, I argue his positioning in a liminal state, perpetually caught between several competing influences and ideas—between Old Norse and Christian literary conventions, between transgressing and conforming constructs of gender, and even between tropes and elements of fantasy and reality—helps to clarify the shape and depth of the many converging elements in Tolkien’s construction of Middle-earth. Faramir uniquely illuminates aspects of the larger story as a whole, reflecting the divergent pieces that cohabitate in Middle-earth and the breadth of analytical frameworks that can be applied to Tolkien’s storytelling.

¹ This is an excerpt of a letter J.R.R. Tolkien wrote to his son Christopher, dated 6 May 1944, while he was in the process of writing *The Lord of the Rings* (see: Tolkien 2006, 79).

² In particular, Faramir’s history lesson in *The Two Towers*, “The Window on the West” mentions the history of Men later recorded in *The Silmarillion*, from Chapter XVII “Of the Coming of Men into the West” of the “Quenta Silmarillion” through “Akallabêth” (concerning the history of Númenor).

A Hero By Comparison

Considering *The Lord of the Rings* as a whole, it is understandable that Faramir is often skipped over in analyses of plot, structure, character development, and theme. He is absent from the first half of the text, and he does not deeply or drastically alter the course of the main story (Frodo's journey), nor is he the ultimate hero of the war or of Gondor. He also does not have a distinguishable character arc: his personality and priorities remain largely unchanged from his first appearance to his last. Rather, Tolkien consistently sets Faramir up for comparison, and such observations of his difference have become his defining and inescapable characteristic. Faramir elicits frequent comparison to his family members, his king, and even the author himself. As Frodo perceives shortly after meeting Faramir, "unlike they [Boromir and Faramir] were, and yet also much akin."³ In the Appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*, in the annals of the line of stewards, Denethor and his sons are described comparatively in greater detail:

Boromir, five years the elder, beloved by his father, was like him in face and pride, but in little else. Rather he was a man after the sort of King Eärnur of old, taking no wife and delighting chiefly in arms; fearless and strong, but caring little for lore, save the tales of old battles. Faramir the younger was like him in looks but otherwise in mind. He read the hearts of men as shrewdly as his father, but what he read moved him sooner to pity than scorn. He was gentle in bearing, and a lover of lore and of music, and therefore by many in those days his courage was judged less than his brother's. But it was not so, except that he did not seek glory in danger without a purpose.⁴

Both the first and last we hear of Faramir place him in opposition to his brother, and by the same token, in opposition to expectations. Taking up this posture, scholars of Tolkien's works tend to agree that Faramir's defining characteristic is his general state of being *in contrast*. As Tom Shippey (1983) explores in *The Road to Middle-earth*, Faramir is wiser than Boromir, more patient and thoughtful than Éomer, and more hopeful in times of despair than even Samwise Gamgee. To Ben Reinhard (2020), men like Faramir and Aragorn are "lost knights," bearing the morality of classic chivalry, wrapped in the contradictory dressings of outlaws. In articles wherein Faramir is mentioned cursorily, his reasoned function is to be, for better or worse, *different from*: from his brother Boromir, from his father Denethor,

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, "The Window on the West."

⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, Appendix A (iv) Gondor and the Heirs of Anárion.

from his king Aragorn, from his future wife Éowyn (see for example: Donnelly 2007, Enright 2007, Hatcher 2007, Nelson 2002, Scull 1995).

In a rare article that treats Faramir's independent and contradictory characterizations in greater detail, Steven Brett Carter (2012) suggests that Faramir is Tolkien's attempt to re-write the classical heroic ideal for a post-World War I Europe. While other characters such as Aragorn harken back to earlier modes of heroism that prevailed unchanged and unchallenged from the Classical to the Medieval and beyond—described by Tolkien in the Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse contexts as the “unyielding will” of “Northern Courage” (Tolkien 1936) — Faramir's methods stand apart. Despite his rank and bloodline, Faramir is “in the trenches” in camouflage alongside his men, seeking survival over glory, and thus choosing careful martial strategy over theatrical displays of bravery. Mirroring the modified battle strategies of World War I necessitated by the technological advances that made humans more efficient killers over longer distances, in the character and actions of Faramir “the role of the warrior that defined heroes since the poetry of Homer is cast aside in favor of a heroic model that prefers peace and only fights when his way of life is threatened and there is no alternative” (Carter 2012, 99). And Faramir's twentieth-century tactics work well for him and his men, until Denethor orders him to resort to older warfare tactics in Osgiliath: line up and advance across an open field, at which point a third of Faramir's troops are killed before the retreat, and he comes close to death himself.

Amber Dunai (2019) relates Faramir and Denethor's contrasting battle strategy to another work, Tolkien's *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*. In this translation, commentary, and creative elaboration on the Old English commemorative poem, *The Battle of Maldon*, Tolkien addresses the concept of “ofermod”—translated by Tolkien as “overmastering pride”— as akin to aristocratic chivalry. Yet Tolkien presents its impracticality and immorality, as others must suffer the painful consequences of Beorhtnoth's rash and glorious death in battle after allowing the invading army of Vikings to cross the bridge. Dunai argues that while Denethor's assessment of Faramir's character flaws are read as accusations of “ofermod,” it is in fact Denethor's own pride that leads to near-disaster for Gondor, sending Faramir off to die in a hopeless battle as retribution for perceived betrayal or disobedience.

And indeed, Denethor's overmastering pride is so intense that it leads him down several untenable paths. Not only is he unable to win back Osgiliath vicariously through Faramir's ill-advised frontal assault, but he also rejects both Gandalf's counsels and Aragorn's legitimacy, robbing himself of two powerful would-be allies. And perhaps the clearest illustration of his pride, ultimately the doom of his willpower and sanity, is his attempts to challenge Sauron himself through the Palantír, as described by Gandalf:

In the days of his wisdom Denethor did not presume to use [the palantír], nor to challenge Sauron, knowing the limits of his own strength. But his wisdom failed; and I fear that as the peril of his realm grew he looked in the Stone and was deceived. [...] The vision of the great might of Mordor that was shown to him fed the despair of his heart until it overthrew his mind.⁵

Beorhtnoth's ill-fated story of foes advancing across a bridge bears faint echoes to Boromir's story of recent battles in Osgiliath.⁶ At the Council of Elrond, he describes: "I was in the company that held the bridge, until it was cast down behind us. Four only were saved by swimming: my brother and myself and two others. But still we fight on, holding all the west shores of Anduin."⁷ When Faramir follows his beloved brother, there is some semblance of victory, but much loss. When Faramir obeys his unhinged father, there is much loss and no trace of victory. His way of being, of thinking, of doing, stands out against the otherwise medieval-fantasy backdrop, perhaps because, as Tolkien was later willing to admit, the inspiration for this character was a bit more real than others. In a letter drafted to Michael Straight (editor, *New Republic*), Tolkien wrote: "As far as any character is 'like me' it is Faramir—except I lack what all my characters possess (let the psychoanalysts note!) *Courage*" (Tolkien 2006, 232). Faramir shares Tolkien's reverence and proclivity for history, music, and storytelling,⁸ and Tolkien's own reluctance towards violence are echoed by Faramir in his often-quoted line:

War must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all; but I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend: the city of the Men of Númenor; and I would have her loved for her memory, her ancientry, her beauty, and her present wisdom. Not feared, save as men may fear the dignity of a man, old and wise.⁹

Faramir's constant state of comparison is a result of his being *in-between*, never aligning with Tolkien's influences and inspirations that are presented more

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, "The Pyre of Denethor."

⁶ For more on Beorhtnoth's legacy in Tolkien's construction of Boromir's character flaws and redemption in relation to the themes of pride, grief, and religious absolution, see: Forest-Hill 2008.

⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Council of Elrond."

⁸ In another letter to W.H. Auden, Tolkien admits that Faramir's recurring Great Wave dream is a dream that he had experienced himself several times, and was later inherited by his son Michael (see Tolkien 2006, 213).

⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, "The Window on the West."

clearly in other characters, references, and themes. I argue that the character lives his life and makes his choices precisely because he is in many ways a middleman, and in sharing a bit of the author's soul, is perhaps the character best positioned to feel and sometimes even articulating these forces pulling him in disparate directions. A closer look at those forces illuminates not only the well-known constructs and complexities of Tolkien's story, but renders the character of Faramir as a microcosm of the inner workings of Middle-earth's world of Men and the complexities within *The Lord of the Rings* that have made the work a rich and memorable experience for readers.

Pre-Christian and Christian Literary Traditions

Scholars have frequently analyzed Tolkien's influences from Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon literature (such as the *Volsungs saga* and *Beowulf*, which he studied and translated, published posthumously) as well as his own Catholic sensibilities (for example, imagery associated with the Harrowing of Hell and Resurrection of Christ) expressed in the language, plotlines, and characters of Middle-earth (Burns 2004, Donovan 2003, DuBois and Mellor 2002, Monks 1982, Scarf 2013, Shippey 1983, Steed 2017, Wendling 2008, Wytenbroek 1988, Zimmer 2004). We can see the blending of these influences in each of his works. For example, the monotheistic authority of Eru/ Ilúvatar accompanied by the pantheon of demigods in the Valar in *The Silmarillion* (Burns 2004); in the trolls that turn to stone in sunlight¹⁰ (Crawford 2015) and the emblems of the Divine Right of Kings in *The Hobbit* (Lalbakhsh and Ghaderi 2017); and in many of the individual characters that play a key part in the story and logic of *The Lord of the Rings*.

On one hand, characters like Gandalf and Aragorn exemplify this blending rather explicitly. Gandalf is both a Christ figure and an Odin figure, emblematic of both these wanderers and teachers, associated with wisdom and leadership, known for self-sacrifice and resurrection. Aragorn resembles throughout his character arc both the Norse mythological hero Sigurd with his broken heirloom sword reforged, and the divinely ordained Christian kingship of Arthurian legend.¹¹ In both Gandalf and Aragorn, the mystical or fantastic elements of mythology are retained, but the

¹⁰ The dwarf, Alvis, in *Alvíssmál* in the Poetic Edda is tricked by Thor, who stalls for time just as Bilbo does with the trolls that capture Thorin and company, until the sun rises and turns him to stone.

¹¹ Old Norse depictions of Odin's sacrifice and adventures in *Hávamál* and *Völuspá* in the Poetic Edda, see Crawford 2015; of Sigurd's broken sword, family history, and victories in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, see Crawford 2017; for an analysis of Aragorn, Arthur, and Divine Kingship, see: Finn 2005, Flieger 2005 esp. pp. 32-44, Ford and Reid 2009.

morality of each character is softened or tapered by Tolkien's twentieth-century sensibilities and Catholic moralities (for example, unlike Odin, Gandalf does not chase and abuse women,¹² and Aragorn does not avenge every insult against him by murdering the offending party). On the other hand, there are also characters that do not benefit from Tolkien's blended approach to the Catholic and the Norse mythological, but align more closely with just one. Denethor and Boromir embody Norse ideals, presented almost as cautionary tragedies of men without the Catholic influence on their moral sensibilities. Several Norse parents feel justified in killing their disappointing children¹³ as Denethor attempts to do, and Boromir is the great tragic hero in line with great mythological warriors like Beowulf and Sigurd: beloved and unmatched in their battlefield prowess, but ultimately doomed.¹⁴

But where does this leave Faramir? Though his near-death in Osgiliath resembles self-sacrifice, his death is prevented by Aragorn's healing skills rather than his life resurrected, and thus he is not a Christ figure in the truest usage of the literary term. He is always second-in-command, to his brother Boromir or to his king Aragorn, and though Tolkien writes him as a man of morality, he is not a hero in a Norse or Arthurian conception as he lacks, for lack of a better word, ambition. He desires neither political nor martial power, instead believing and articulating to Frodo in Ithilien that he would eagerly welcome the return of the king to rightfully rule and restore and heal Gondor to its former glory, so that the people and lands might thrive again after the war is ended:

‘For myself,’ said Faramir, ‘I would see the White Tree in flower again in the courts of the kings, and the Silver Crown return, and Minas Tirith in peace: Minas Anor again as of old, full of light, high and fair.’¹⁵

He seems unconcerned with wealth or prestige, and his interest in genealogy appears a manifestation of his larger fascination with lore and history, rather than about preserving or defending his Númenorian lineage. Following Aragorn's return, Faramir reasserts his disinterest in advancing his political position and attempts to relinquish the Stewardship, and in his marriage proposal to Éowyn

¹² Odin's abuse of women is documented in the poem *Hárbarðsljóð* in the Poetic Edda.

¹³ For example, Signy murders her children in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, and Guðrun likewise kills her children with Atli/Attila as told in *The Saga of the Volsungs* and the poem *Atlakviða* in the Poetic Edda (Crawford 2015, 2017).

¹⁴ The character constructions mentioned here of Gandalf, Aragorn, Boromir, and Denethor are explored in further depth in my forthcoming book, *Tolkien's Norse Mythology*, under contract with Hackett Publishing Company, expected 2025. For other examples, see: Beebout 2018, Dunai 2019, Finn 2005, Forest-Hill 2008, Monks 1982.

¹⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, “The Window on the West.”

reaffirms his disinterest in prioritizing the propagation of his Númenorian bloodline.¹⁶

In the Norse mythological material, pride is not a sin but an expectation of masculinity, though it is ultimately tied to many a hero's fated death. In Christian theology and literature, excessive pride is not coveted or encouraged, but equally tied to doom and listed among the Seven Deadly Sins. While pride brought about the downfall of his father and contributed in no small part to the fall and redemption of his brother, pride seems to hold little sway over Faramir. Not afraid to follow others' authority, from a young age he tried (with limited success, and much to his father's disapproval) to become a disciple of Gandalf:

[...] It was these records that brought the Grey Pilgrim to us. I first saw him when I was a child, and he has been twice or thrice since then. [...] Mithrandir never spoke to us of what was to be, nor did he reveal his purposes. He got leave of Denethor, how I do not know, to look at the secrets of our treasury, and I learned a little of him, when he would teach (and that was seldom).¹⁷

And he is prepared to face whatever fate has been ordained him without regret or great anxiety: "It may be that only a few days are left ere darkness falls upon our world, and when it comes I hope to face it steadily [...],"¹⁸ risking life and limb several times for the good of Gondor, the soldiers under his command, and the ultimate success of Frodo's quest. He furthermore welcomes Aragorn without question as a righteous savior when he arrives in Minas Tirith, bringing with him the healing and victory that Faramir dared not hope for when first we met him in Ithilien: "It is long since we had any hope. The sword of Elendil, if it returns indeed, may rekindle it, but I do not think that it will do more than put off the evil day [...]"¹⁹ turns to immediate acceptance of Aragorn's thus far unclaimed kingship when the two men first meet in the Houses of Healing, followed by his great enthusiasm at Aragorn's coronation.

¹⁶ Éowyn, as an outside observer, equates Gondorian pride with Númenorian blood in "The Steward and the King" when she asks of Faramir, "And would you have your proud folk say of you: 'there goes a lord who tamed a wild shieldmaiden of the North! Was there no woman of the race of Númenor to choose?'" Faramir's love for her and rejection of this perceived construct of pride is alluded to previously in his conversation with Frodo and Sam in Ithilien in "The Window on the West," wherein he disavows Númenorian superiority: "Yet now, if the Rohirrim are grown in some ways more like to us, we too have become more like to them, and can scarce claim any longer the title of High. We are become Middle Men, of the Twilight, but with memory of other things."

¹⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, "The Window on the West."

¹⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, "The Steward and the King."

¹⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, "The Window on the West."

Faramir is, perhaps as Tolkien strove to be, the model student and teacher, leader and follower. He is motivated not by pride but by his own judgement and a calling towards service despite his rank and privileged position. While the other characters around him fit into multiple archetypes of Norse and Catholic source material, Faramir does not. He is, quite literally, caught between them: his Norse family, and his Christian saviors. Faramir's friendship with Gandalf plays no small part in his conflict with Denethor, and despite Boromir's unwavering faith in the family of Stewards, Faramir instead wishes for the king's return. He articulates these internal and external conflicts throughout the story, aware of his position as a man caught between two sets of competing influences and moral anchors.

Almost a martyr of his forward-looking faith, and almost a victim of his father's resistance to change, Faramir's position can be read as a commentary on or allusion to religious transformation or conversion, wherein he embodies the wisdom of Men at the pivotal moment where the Third Age ends and the Fourth Age begins, bringing in a new era of prosperity under Aragorn's leadership.²⁰ But perhaps more importantly, Faramir does not feel the need to choose between his reverence for history and his hope for the future. He does not try to be more like Boromir, or more like Aragorn. Faramir is content to be a man in the middle, and makes his decisions and exercises his judgement accordingly.

Defying and Inspiring Conformity: Gender Norms in the World of Men

Faramir also finds himself caught in the middle of competing feminist readings of *The Lord of the Rings*, though often assessed indirectly through his relationship with Éowyn. Both wounded in battle and misjudged by those around them, the two find healing together and agree to marry after a brief period of friendship. Tolkien described the rapidly-blossoming love between Faramir and Éowyn as antithetical to "'Courtly Love' and its pretenses" associated with persons of medieval nobility, rather a purer love borne out of stressful circumstances and mutual understanding, uncorrupted by politics and social expectation (Tolkien 2006, 324). But some readers have critiqued both the quick engagement (especially in light of Éowyn's recent affections for Aragorn), and the apparent totality of Éowyn's transformation in personality, perspective, and sense of purpose.

²⁰ This faith is ritualized in Faramir's before-dinner "grace" or Standing Silence facing west towards Númenor, which is reprised by Aragorn on the Fields of Cormallen following the destruction of the Ring and prior to his return to Minas Tirith and coronation.

Feminist readings of *The Lord of the Rings* may be briefly summarized in two trends: some scholars read the absence of women as an erasure or dismissal of their contributions to society, while others note that the impact and power of the few women included in the story is exceptional, or at least notable, compared to other authors of his time, such as his fellow Inklings. Leslie Donovan (2003) relates the women of *The Lord of the Rings* to the powerful and esteemed Valkyries in Norse Myth, while Nancy Enright (2007) argues that Tolkien's women embody love and healing, presented as the more virtuous form of heroism, rather than masculine pride and violence. Other scholars have tried to bridge these two perspectives, such as William Howard Green (1998), who suggested that the absence of women entirely in *The Hobbit* is perhaps a reflection not of Tolkien's feelings about women, but about his distaste for the manner in which men tended to act around or towards women in other adventure fiction novels of his day. Daniel Timmons (2001) seems to agree, citing Tolkien's letters to his son Michael in which he problematizes men's sexuality, describing men as the more likely transgressors or "sexual predators," rather than faulting or assigning immorality to women's sexuality.

Tolkien's biography supports the theory that his exclusion of women from many parts of his stories was not out of disrespect, but perhaps an uncritical following the literary models that he emulated, wherein women appear infrequently as adventurers, soldiers, or political actors (and when they do, they are usually associated with immorality that he would likely not wish to condone: in Arthurian legend, the incestuous temptress Morgan La Fey or the unfaithful Guinevere; or in Norse myth, the overt association of sexuality assigned to the goddess Freyja that is also connected with infidelity and incest, or the vengeful valkyrie Brunhild who is not above murdering children). Certainly a male bias is evident in his works, but Tolkien has been known to write lovingly of his mother, wife, and daughter, as well as taking a position as a tutor at two of Oxford University's colleges for women. Claims of "subtle contempt and hostility towards women,"²¹ in his work may be overstated, and underestimating his relationships with and regard for women. For example, the death of his mother when he was a child was a loss he replicated throughout Middle-earth in a manner that I would characterize as a recurring tragedy, rather than erasure. Frodo, Aragorn, Boromir and Faramir, Éomer and Éowyn likewise endure the death of their mothers at a young age (and in some cases also their fathers, if not their father-figures such as Bilbo, Théoden, and Elrond).

Feminist scholars often focus on the following quote, spoken by Éowyn to Faramir in the Houses of Healing following his proposal:

²¹ Catherine Stimpson, quoted in Green 1998 and Timmons 2001.

[...] and behold! the Shadow has departed! I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren.²²

Gendered readings of Éowyn's place in the finale of her story, and Faramir's effect on Éowyn, hinge upon this moment of transformation: that Faramir has "tamed" Éowyn, that she has forsaken her newly-achieved renown as a warrior and committed instead to become a wife, a healer, and a gardener. In other words, he has managed to transform her attitude towards traditional feminine roles from rejection and disdain, to nurturing and embracing.

Katherine Hesser (2007) provides a rather pessimistic interpretation, describing Éowyn's descent from 'a man named Dernhelm' to a 'woman that loses herself,' ultimately becoming Faramir's "possession."²³ Sara Brown (2023) analyzes Eowyn's behaviors as both Eowyn and Dernhelm and suggests they are indicative of a duality in her embodied gender identity.²⁴ Whether our reading of Éowyn sees her as a woman who is ultimately re-subjugated by her marriage, or liberated by embracing her masculine-feminine duality, I think we should consider two additional pieces of information in respect to her relationship with Faramir: the first, is that in order to believe that Éowyn's behavior and identity will change drastically, we need to take her at her word and believe that such transformation is possible. Her rejection of the warrior role to become a healer and gardener tracks with Tolkien's thematic emphases of peace over war, healing after violence, and reverence for nature (Curry 2007, Enright 2007, Fontenot 2019). But throughout many stories of Middle-earth, Tolkien has also emphasized that while we can learn and grow, human nature is difficult to change (and indeed, it seems to apply to all the races, not just the humans or world of Men). Characters like Túrin, Thorin, Boromir, and Denethor cannot easily shake their pride and preconceptions, and thus chose to ignore good advice, to their ultimate doom. Lúthien and Arwen accept the

²² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, "The Steward and the King."

²³ Hesser bases this assessment of "possession" on a line spoken by Aragorn to Éomer in *The Return of the King*, "Many Partings" upon the announcement of Éowyn and Faramir's engagement: "'No niggard are you, Éomer,' said Aragorn, 'to give to Gondor the fairest thing in your realm!'" Aragorn (while elsewhere in the story speaking of her more respectfully) in this moment semantically reduces Éowyn to an object that Éomer may give away.

²⁴ Brown's argument suggests that Éowyn's reactions to the way society treats her and ultimately her transgressions against gender norms is indicative of a "dual and equal performance of gender (2023, 10)." While feminist and queer approaches to gender and sexuality studies by scholars like Judith Butler and Michael Foucault generally theorize behavior as a separate entity from identity itself, though behavior may sometimes be a representative performance of identity, (see for example, Seidman et.al 2011, esp. pp. 9-12; Seidman 2010, esp. pp.43-49), Brown evokes descriptions of a concept akin to a nonbinary identity or gender-fluidity in Éowyn, but does not label her so outright.

fate of death because they cannot part from their mortal loves, Beren and Aragorn. For the life of them, they are all unable to change fundamental aspects of themselves and their worldviews. There are plenty of examples where characters develop, but they must find a way to do so without vastly adjusting their personalities. Legolas and Gimli overcome their distrust and racism, instead learning to accept each other in friendship without expecting or demanding modified behaviors or customs. No matter how many times Gandalf scolds Pippin, he remains curious but learns consequence. Éowyn may learn to value peace and live in prosperity, but like these other characters, it seems doubtful that her sense of self or engrained habits are in danger of being drastically and suddenly altered or replaced.

The second consideration I would add is that Faramir is not a shining portrait of the masculine ideal of Men himself,²⁵ and there is little evidence in the text itself that their relationship must be read in terms of a strict gender binary, though it is obviously possible to do so. Considering that he realized and expressed his love for her while she was still identifying as a shieldmaiden, before any promises of behavioral change were made, his attitude and feelings towards her—or his respect for her personhood—are not likely contingent upon her newfound shift in perspective, or an expectation that she must suddenly submit to a traditional gender hierarchy. And this is also where I would also like to take the analysis from an indirect assessment of Faramir through his relationship Éowyn, to a direct analysis of Faramir's own relationship to the gendered norms of his society. While he seems to inspire the idea of gendered conformity in Éowyn in theory if not guaranteed in practice, he does not wholly embody it himself, again falling somewhere in the middle of two spectrums: somewhere between embodying the behaviors and values of the masculine and feminine, and caught halfway between conformity and rejection. In both cases, the results are the same: a man who sees value in the contributions of both traditionally masculine and feminine roles, regardless of whether it is a man or woman performing them.

The masculine ideal of Gondor is made very plain by Denethor's preference for Boromir, as well as the esteem that Boromir holds above even his brother in the eyes of the people of Gondor. Beregon, the guard who Pippin befriends and ultimately relies upon to save Faramir's life when Denethor tries to burn him, describes their sibling dynamic to Pippin:

[Faramir] is bold, more bold than many deem; for in these days men are slow to believe that a captain can be wise and learned in the

²⁵ This masculine ideal seems fairly limited in Middle-earth to the world of Men. Leanna Madill (2008) points out that Elves like Celeborn and Galadriel are described collectively with traditionally masculine and feminine adjectives, and the friendship between Frodo and Sam is so contradictory to hegemonic (human) masculinity that it is often read as (hobbit) homoerotic.

scrolls of lore and song, as he is, and yet a man of hardihood and swift judgement in the field. But such is Faramir. Less reckless and eager than Boromir, but not less resolute.²⁶

In a world where the soldier-like qualities of men are glorified and prioritized, Faramir's bookish and thoughtful temperament is juxtaposed against the masculine ideals of his society, as Beregon observes with sympathy and again in comparison to his brother. Faramir's attitude towards violence is defensive rather than offensive ("I do not slay man or beast needlessly, and not gladly even when it is needed")²⁷ and his thoughtfulness is mistaken by his father as cowardice and insolence ("Your bearing is lowly in my presence, yet it is long now since you turned from your own way at my counsel").²⁸ And at points, Faramir's actions are not so different from Éowyn's begrudged feminine duties: he and his men prepare food and bedding for Frodo and Sam while they shelter in Ithilien, fulfilling these duties out of necessity—there are no women present to do it for them—but notably without complaint.

Faramir's position is again marked as middleman. While his relationship with Éowyn is the closest she comes to accepting gender expectations, he himself does not conform strictly to a gender binary or rise to the standards of traditional Gondorian masculinity. He assumes the role of military commander reluctantly, and some of his other values and habits are antithetical to Gondor's masculine ideal. The nurturing and service expectations of women that Éowyn protests in Rohan are duties that Faramir does not see as beneath him. While on the surface it may seem that Faramir has inspired Éowyn to conform to societal gendered norms, it is perhaps a more nuanced reading to suggest that they both transgress in ways that seemingly balance their relationship nonetheless: they each seek the opportunity to perform the duties that any given situation calls for, unhindered or unrestrained by traditional gender roles, both content to coexist somewhere in between the extreme bifurcations of the traditional medieval gender binary as it suits them.

Conflict Between East and West, Reality and Fantasy

From the oppressive gender expectations that Eowyn strives against to the hierarchical medieval government structures of kingship that Faramir idealizes, throughout the fantasy landscape of *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien has hidden

²⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, "Minas Tirith."

²⁷ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, "The Window on the West."

²⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, "The Siege of Gondor."

elements of reality in plain sight. The ugly truths of his fantasy world are most evident in descriptions of battle, depicting the horrors of human conflict inspired by his own experiences in the trenches of World War I. Tolkien refuses to present war in a holistically glamorous manner, and Faramir, the man who most clearly voices Tolkien's hesitant attitudes towards war to the reader, must earn those insights by enduring some of the more realistic horrors throughout the War of the Ring.

Faramir's experience of war is markedly different from other characters in that his battlefield is a liminal space between reality as read through the lens of Orientalism (after Said 1978) in human conflicts, and fantasy as read through Tolkien's own terminology of eucatastrophe.²⁹ His enemies are sometimes monstrous but at other times human, and he must work – or suffer—his way from real-world warfare to reach the ultimate fantasy resolution. Faramir's discomfort with his own part in the conflict suggests an awareness of his positionality that transcends fiction and touches our reality: as one caught between the roles of perpetrator of dehumanization and as victim of aggression, in the recasting of the Orientalist tropes that were common in older literary examples and worldviews that Tolkien emulates.³⁰

Throughout the history of Middle-earth, there is no shortage of monsters. In *The Silmarillion*, there are many servants of Morgoth that Elves and Men must battle: the great spider Ungoliant, the dragon Glaurung, the many appearances of wights and Nazgûl. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo and Thorin's company of Dwarves contend with trolls, goblins, giant spiders, and the dragon Smaug, and they even almost go to war against Men and Elves, but not each other in their disagreements. In *The Lord of the Rings*, we encounter yet more monsters: the members of the Fellowship battle the kraken-like Watcher in the Waters, orcs, and a flaming Balrog in Moria, a road they took to avoid the ghastly wolf-like Wargs howling in the woods. Éomer and the Rohirrim are accustomed to skirmishes with orcs lurking in the hills, and in Rohan they fight off Saruman's Uruk-hai at Helm's Deep, where Legolas and Gimli turn orc-slaying into a competitive game. Samwise battles the spider-monster Shelob in her tunnels to rescue Frodo, and Sauron himself has lost his physical form and any semblance of humanity, reduced to a disembodied eye. Everywhere in Middle-earth where evil has touched, there is a monster to be slain.

Rarely, but notably, do members of any race turn on each other. A great tragedy of *The Silmarillion* is the first Kinslaying, when Fëanor and the Noldor Elves that follow him attack the Teleri Elves and kill many of them to steal their ships. The repercussions of Kinslaying are vast and dire, a curse of broken trust,

²⁹ A term that Tolkien coined to describe the opposite of a catastrophe, a dramatic turn of happy events (Garbowski 2007).

³⁰ For more on Orientalism (idealized Western geography, people, and conventions versus an oversimplified and/or villainized East) in Middle-earth, see: Williams 2020.

political disarray, and justification for vengeance and further violence that follows Fëanor for the rest of his life. Though not unheard of for Elves, it is grave and unnatural to kill one of their own, and echoes throughout the subsequent ages as a shameful cautionary tale. Unlike Elves, it is entirely unheard of for hobbits to commit murder, and Frodo expressly forbids fellow hobbit-slaying in their attempt to reclaim the Shire from Saruman's ruffians after the scouring: "No hobbit has ever killed another on purpose in the Shire, and it is not to begin now. And nobody is to be killed at all, if it can be helped."³¹ Even in Rohan, though young and at times rash and impulsive, Éomer does not kill Gríma Wormtongue despite his many good reasons and opportunities for doing so, likely because he knows murder would cost him his own life as recompense—and even threatening Wormtongue is enough to get Éomer imprisoned despite his rank and stature. Only in Gondor is the killing of other Men a long-standing and normalized fact of life.

Most of the human villains and monsters in Tolkien's world share a physical attribute in common: blackness or darkness. Despite the racial diversity of Middle-earth that is more accurately described as "species," there is an overwhelming whiteness assigned to protagonists, and a blackness assigned to villains. We see this quite explicitly with Gandalf the White and the Black Riders, and with the rare exception of Saruman the White, whose whiteness is soon corrupted by Sauron's influence (Baker 2017, Rearick 2004, Richberg 2022, Stuart 2022). Tolkien's orcs have black skin and dress in black armor, their blackness is a manifestation of the unnatural evil and horror. The spiders like Ungoliant and Shelob exhibit a blackness emblematic of poison and death. Gollum has turned black with decay and corruption during the years of his life prolonged by the Ring. Even among Men, there is blackness: from the South and East, the men allied with Sauron like the Haradrim have dark skin, and are classified as "Men of Darkness" by Faramir in his history lesson to Frodo and Sam, standing in contrast to the "High" men from the North and West (Sinex 2010). While Tolkien may not have intended to invoke real-world connotations of race and Orientalism, of the far-away East and normalized West, the consistent negative characterizations of blackness and otherness in Middle-earth are difficult to ignore.

The soldiers and armies of Gondor have routinely battled these dark Men corrupted by Sauron, longer than Faramir himself has been alive. In the appendices we learn that Aragorn under the disguise of "Thorongil" battled the corsairs of Umbar, pirate men from the south, while in the service of Ecthelion, Faramir's grandfather.³² Aragorn (with the help of Legolas, Gimli, the sons of Elrond, the company of Dúnedain) fights them yet again decades later to steal their ships for his return to Minas Tirith to join the Battle of Pelennor Fields. Though fighting other Men is something that Aragorn must do on rare occasion, men like Boromir

³¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, "The Scouring of the Shire."

³² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, Appendix A (iv) "Gondor and the Heirs of Anárion."

and Faramir who have lived their entire lives in Gondor have grown up killing other Men as a matter of course. In addition to the pirates from the south attacking Gondor along the rivers, they defend against the darker skinned Men of Harad, coming from the East with their great *mûmakil* battle oliphaunts.

Faramir is caught in the middle of Tolkien's Orientalist conflict between Men on two levels. Firstly, on a more theoretical level, caught between being a descendant of the fallen utopia kingdom of Númenor to the East, and a resident of Minas Tirith, the shining city on the hill that will soon become a new utopia, to the West (Williams 2020). A student of history, Faramir describes this dichotomy of a fallen history versus a wiser present during his conversation with Frodo and Sam in Ithilien. His descriptions of the history of Men is notably informed by his Gondorian education, which has been described by Robert Stuart (2022) as an echo of Gobineau's aristocratic or hierarchical racism, wherein "uncontested Númenórean racial rule thus remains inscribed throughout the annals of Gondor (298)." And secondly, he embodies the conflict a very literal level: if he looks anything like the other men of Gondor, Faramir is a pale-skinned man battling against other Men from the south and east with darker skin and elephants.

But in Tolkien's fantasy world, what might appear analogous to British colonialism did not bring violence and conquest to foreign shores. Rather, the Men of Gondor defend against foreign invasion on their own shores of the Anduin. What could be read as a representation of real-world Orientalism or racialized conflict is subverted through this recasting of offense and defense, wherein morally one is more easily justified in defending his home than attacking another's. This problem crystallizes, for better or worse, around Faramir: he participates in this white-washed fantasy war against Men with darker skin that ally themselves with monsters and mystical embodiments of evil, but he takes no pride or joy from his involvement. While other characters in the War of the Ring have the moral luxury of battling non-human monsters, the captains of Gondor must also kill Men, somewhat dehumanized as "Men of Darkness" but inarguably Men in comparison to orcs and trolls. This incomplete dehumanization of his enemy offers some explanation of why Faramir may start to feel something akin to monstrous himself, as he articulates his resentment of war and violence. Faramir and the Men of Gondor are "perpetrators" of dehumanization against the men of Harad, and yet Tolkien places him in a sympathetic defensive position where we empathize with the victimhood of the perpetrator as well (Timár 2021), as he fights for the safety of Gondor and the survival his people, simply because he must. For Legolas and Gimli, the war is a fantasy battle against monsters that can be reduced to a game with little remorse, but for Faramir the war is not so different from real human conflicts, and just as he must adjust his martial strategies according (Carter 2012), so too must he wrestle with the ethical ramifications in ways that others do not. Men killing Men is a necessary—perhaps even justifiable—sin in this scenario of good versus evil, light

versus dark, defense versus offense, but a sin nonetheless. And we, like Faramir, are allowed to feel a powerful and justifiable discomfort with such portrayals of warfare, and perhaps we should.

There is of course one more example of Men killing Men: Beregond of the Tower Guard kills another guard in the midst of the chaos of the Battle of Pelennor Fields. At the center of this conflict is again Faramir. Beregond kills a guard who is following Denethor's orders so that he, Pippin, and Gandalf may save the wounded and unconscious Faramir from being burned alive alongside his father. This slain servant of Denethor's is intentionally humanized compared to the fallen Haradrim, and his death is considered regrettable by all involved. Faramir is not the first, and won't be the last, commander or leader in truth or fiction that other men are willing to kill and die for. In a fantasy war epic, Faramir's circumstances repeatedly anchor the story to the brutal and messy reality of human conflict, robbing such bloodshed of any glory.

But if Faramir is our window into a more brutal reality in an otherwise fantasy landscape, he becomes much more emblematic of the fantasy world as his story concludes. Ultimately, it is not an arrow wound that almost kills him, but his infection with the Black Breath from proximity to the Nazgûl in his many battles in defense of Gondor. There is a mythical quality to this illness, wherein supernatural evil has the potency to turn into a physical sickness in the bodies of mortals. His salvation from this sickness is just as mythical, akin almost to fairytale. Aragorn's divine kingship manifests as his ability to heal Faramir, Éowyn, and Merry from the Black Breath (Ford and Reid 2009), and yet the revival of each of these three characters is quite different. Éowyn's illness is treated by Aragorn, but ultimately she is revived to consciousness not by Aragorn but by her brother Éomer, who is able to reach her in her depression. Merry is awakened by Aragorn with little difficulty and faster recovery, as the uncanny resiliency of hobbits is found remarkable yet again. Both Éowyn and Merry were revived by familiar voices, but Faramir alone was retrieved from the shadows of this illness by a stranger—followed by what is most accurately described as (presumably platonic) love at first sight:

Suddenly Faramir stirred, and he opened his eyes, and he looked on Aragorn who bent over him; and a light of knowledge and love was kindled in his eyes, and he spoke softly. 'My lord, you called me. I come. What does the king command?'³³

What is for Aragorn a recognition and affirmation of his divine kingship in Faramir's eyes also marks Faramir's re-transcendence, from a World War I-

³³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, "The Houses of Healing."

inspired reality in an otherwise fantasy world, into a sleeping beauty-inspired awakening, from which point he can continue to participate in the fantasy world until the culmination of the story. As a grim young soldier, Faramir's life was marked with loss: fighting losing battles in a failing defense of his country, losing his brother and father, and very nearly losing his own life. And yet, the story concludes with all that he has gained. He retains of the office of stewardship so that he might continue to both serve and lead, and his marriage proposal is accepted by Éowyn. The king that he has so long awaited has ascended to the throne and made peace with the Haradrim, ending the conflict of white and black, East and West. He has crossed the threshold and escaped from the pains of reality into the eucatastrophe of the burgeoning Fourth Age, arriving at a fantasy ending that is almost too good to be true.³⁴

Why Faramir Matters

As the man caught in the middle of the competing forces at work in Middle-earth, Faramir is a character that defies classification other than, perhaps, that of the moral compass of Tolkien's world of Men. Rather than dealing in absolutes, he finds his own way *in between*. He accepts his position, between the Norse-inspired past and Christian-inspired future of Gondor, almost as a point of responsibility. His reverence for Boromir and acceptance of Aragorn helps to solidify both characters' respective arcs of redemption and salvation, and much like Tolkien himself, Faramir can look back on historical narratives and let the echoes of the past guide his decisions, though tapered by a moral sensibility firmly rooted in the present.

Faramir also embraces the practical distinctions between expectations and calling, crossing the lines between expectations of masculinity and the practical callings of service and duty. Though there are clear gender roles and hierarchies instituted within Tolkien's world of Men, Faramir does not prescribe to them as well or as completely as other characters. He will operate between masculine and feminine roles to best fit the situations he finds himself in, shamelessly transitioning from mastering battles and commanding troops, to caring for lost hobbits and relying on emotional intelligence rather than brute force to make strong and pivotal decisions. In both his own nurturing actions and his acceptance of Éowyn's gender

³⁴ Happy endings are not a given or universal in Tolkien's literature, despite his own famous and often misunderstood assertions that fantasy should be "escapist." The clearest departure in *The Lord of the Rings* is Frodo's arc, which his life begins rather idyllic in the Shire, and ends tormented by his burdens and in search of eternal comfort from his wounds in Valinor. For more on Frodo's healing journey and lack thereof, see: Milos 1998, Leonard 2023.

role transgressions, Faramir does not strictly abide by the rules when exception is clearly called for.

Furthermore, Faramir complicates the moral position of Gondor in a manner that other characters do not, by wrestling with instead of ignoring the tensions between the monstrosity of warfare and the moral duty of self-defense. Though Tolkien (albeit likely unintentionally) replicated Orientalist tropes in his battles between good and evil, light and dark, in the character of Faramir he gives us a slightly more nuanced portrait of a soldier who instinctively knows that no conflict is quite so concrete or one-sided, even when he is so embroiled in that conflict that he is incapable of seeing beyond it in the moment. Rather than remaining caught between the sides of this conflict, this positionality of Faramir becomes one of transience or transcendence. When we first meet Faramir, he cannot foresee victory for Gondor or peaceful resolution of the war, and he functionally anchors both the reader and the story to the real-world horrors of warfare in an otherwise fantasy landscape. As his character's circumstance slips unexpectedly from catastrophe to eucatastrophe, so too does the story as a whole, and allows us to see a resolution of these tensions on all fronts, and a character who has up until this point invoked a sense of unbelonging is suddenly in a position to become an archetype of the fairytale ending.

As Tolkien may have accidentally written himself into the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* in the form of this scholar-turned-reluctant-soldier, Faramir's initial sense of unbelonging should not come as a surprise. An author does not truly belong in their story world, but they do tend to write—and embellish for dramatic effect—what they themselves know and understand best. Faramir articulates for the reader the breadth of Tolkien's influences that were incorporated into Middle-earth, as well as the ways in which those influences conflicted with Tolkien's own morality, and thus needed to be challenged, discussed, and modified. Those internal discourses can be interrogated throughout Faramir's monologues and contradictory positions within the literature, history, and society that Middle-earth represents. And though he routinely stops the catastrophe to give history lessons and engage us in nuanced and at times difficult conversations about belonging and otherness, he was not ultimately 'removed to the appendices' presumably because Tolkien believed, just as Faramir does, that these are conversations worth having.

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