

THE REPRESENTATION OF LIBERAL FEMINISM IN *MULAN AND THE LORD OF THE RINGS: A DRAMATISTIC PENTAD ANALYSIS*

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ABSTRACT

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This research explores the portrayal of feminism in the films *Mulan* (1998) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), focusing on how feminist values emerge through the actions and choices of the central female characters and how mainstream fantasy films can reflect and inspire progressive social change in gender norms and roles. Utilizing Kenneth Burke's Dramatistic Pentad—comprising act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. This study analyzes key scenes where Mulan defies conscription laws by disguising herself as a man and Éowyn enters battle despite royal prohibitions, examined through the lens of liberal feminism, which emphasizes individual autonomy and equal rights. The findings reveal that both characters challenge patriarchal structures by asserting agency within traditionally male-dominated spheres. Mulan and Éowyn not only achieve personal empowerment but also contribute to collective victories

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1. Introduction

Gender inequality remains a persistent issue across sectors. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (n.d.), it involves the unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on gender. Criado Perez (2019) emphasizes that gender discrimination is a prejudiced treatment that disproportionately affects women. In Indonesia, the Gender Inequality Index published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (2023) shows that the male labor force participation rate reached 83.87% in 2022, reflecting a significant gender gap in employment. Promoting gender equality is thus critical—not only for reducing violence against women but also for supporting national economic development (Victorian Government, 2023). As Cooper (2018) asserts, “Your silence will not protect you,” urging individuals to advocate for their rights and visibility.

In this context, mass media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions. Medium (2017) states that the media's rapid evolution has influenced cultural values and

social behavior, often blurring traditional norms. While this can threaten established social structures, it also provides opportunities for transformation and awareness.

Among media forms, film holds exceptional persuasive power. Law No. 33 of 2009 on Film in Indonesia identifies film as a medium of mass communication aimed at educating, nurturing values, and promoting societal well-being (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 33 Tahun 2009 tentang Perfilman, 2009). Films can reflect and challenge dominant ideologies, allowing audiences to engage with feminist role models. With major companies like Walt Disney and Warner Bros. producing globally distributed films, their content has significant influence over cultural narratives, including those related to gender roles (Couldry & Hepp, 2020).

This research focuses on two fictional heroines: Mulan from Disney's *Mulan* (1998) and Éowyn from *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003). Both characters challenge traditional gender roles and embody resistance. Mulan disguises herself as a man to take her father's place in the army, while Éowyn defies royal restrictions by entering battle and defeating the Witch-king. These acts of resistance offer critical case studies for analyzing gender representation through the lens of liberal feminism.

In *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, Tong (2014) outlines seven major schools of feminist theory: liberal feminism, radical feminism (libertarian and cultural), Marxist and socialist feminism (classical and contemporary), psychoanalytic and care-focused feminism, existentialist and postmodern feminism, women of color feminisms, and ecofeminism. Each stream presents a distinct way of understanding women's experiences and the social systems that construct gender roles.

This study applies liberal feminism as its theoretical lens, as it emphasizes women's access to rights, education, labor, and public life—issues clearly demonstrated in the character arcs of Mulan and Éowyn. Unlike more radical strands of feminism, liberal feminism advocates reform within existing structures, aiming to remove legal and social barriers that hinder women from full participation in society (Tong, 2014).

In Disney's *Mulan*, the protagonist defies societal expectations by secretly replacing her father in the army, where only men are permitted to serve. Mulan's act is driven not by a desire to dismantle patriarchal structures, but by moral agency, filial piety, and a belief in her equal capacity. Through perseverance and skill, she earns respect as a soldier, thereby challenging the assumption that gender should determine ability.

Likewise, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Éowyn disrupts traditional gender boundaries by disguising herself as a male warrior and entering battle. Her victory over the Witch-king not only secures a pivotal military success but symbolically affirms her equal worth as a protector of her people. Both characters embody the liberal feminist value of Equal Liberty—the idea that all individuals, regardless of gender, deserve equal rights and opportunities (Tong, 2014).

Tong (2014) argues that sexism is morally unjust because it limits women's freedom to determine their lives, deprives them of opportunities, and contributes to structural inequalities such as poverty and gender-based violence. Liberal feminists aim to dismantle systems that exclude women from domains like academia, public discourse, and leadership. They emphasize that patriarchal societies actively shape how sex and gender are understood and enacted (Tong, 2014).

Munro (2021) supports this view, asserting that Feminism is a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social

movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies.

Compared to other feminist approaches—such as radical feminism, which critiques patriarchal domination more broadly, or cultural feminism, which centers women’s unique values—liberal feminism is best suited to explain Mulan and Éowyn’s roles. Their resistance occurs within existing systems, and their goal is not to reject those systems outright but to claim their rightful space within them.

In conclusion, both Mulan and Éowyn exemplify the liberal feminist ideal: women asserting their agency in traditionally male-dominated arenas and achieving recognition based on merit. Their stories illustrate that gender should not determine one’s role or capacity, reinforcing liberal feminism’s call for equal rights, justice, and opportunity.

2. Method

This study employs Kenneth Burke’s Dramatistic Pentad method to analyze the characters of Mulan in *Disney’s Mulan* and Éowyn in *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*. As stated in *Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application*, “Dramatism, as its name implies, conceptualizes life as a drama, placing a critical focus on the acts performed by various players. Just as in a play, the acts in life are central to revealing human motives” (West & Turner, 2021, p. [insert page number]). The Dramatistic Pentad views individuals as actors within a symbolic stage, whose behaviors reflect underlying motives shaped by both internal intent and external pressures. This analytical tool consists of five elements: Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose. The Act refers to what is being done; Scene refers to the context in which the act occurs; Agent identifies who performs the act; Agency explains how the act is carried out; and Purpose explores the reason or motivation behind the action.

To apply this method, the researcher adopts an interpretive-comparative approach, analyzing how two female protagonists navigate gendered expectations within their respective narrative frameworks. The selected scenes from both films were chosen based on their symbolic weight and narrative significance in expressing resistance to patriarchal norms. In *Mulan*, the focus is placed on the pivotal moment when Mulan cuts her hair and dons her father’s armor—an act that signifies her transformation and willingness to challenge gender boundaries by entering the male-dominated military. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the key scene analyzed is Éowyn’s confrontation with the Witch-king, during which she removes her helmet and declares, “I am no man,” before delivering the fatal blow. This scene was chosen due to its critical role in disrupting the male-centric prophecy and affirming Éowyn’s agency as a warrior.

These specific scenes were not arbitrarily selected but instead reflect turning points where both characters assert their identities against societal constraints. Through the dramatistic lens, this research aims to interpret how the five elements of the Pentad intersect within each scene to reveal deeper motivations, power structures, and ideological messages related to gender roles. By comparing these characters within this framework, the analysis contributes to a richer understanding of how female agency is constructed and communicated in mainstream cinematic narratives.

3. Results and discussion

The most iconic scene in the Disney Princess film *Mulan* occurs at **1:06:38**, when Shan Yu, the antagonist of the film, is revealed to still be alive. Despite Mulan’s disguise being

uncovered and everyone discovering that she is a woman, she insists on being given the same opportunity to prove to those around her that she is just as capable of fighting as any man. The dialogue in this scene is as follows:



Figure 1. Iconic Scene of Mulan at 1:06:38

Mulan: Shang!

Shang: Mulan?

Mulan: The Huns are alive, they're in the city.

Shang: You don't belong here, Mulan. Go home.

Mulan: Shang, I saw them in the mountains. You have to believe me.

Shang: Why should I?

Mulan: (blocking Shang's horse): Why else would I come back? You said you'd trust Ping.

Why is Mulan any different?

From this scene, the use of Dramatistic Pentad analysis elements is explained by the author in the table below:

Table 1.

Dramatistic Pentad Analysis of Scene 1:06:38 in *Mulan*

Element	Description
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<i>Act</i>	In this scene, it is evident that Mulan has returned to being a woman, which causes her opinions to be ignored by everyone.
<i>Agent</i>	<i>The agents in this scene are Mulan, Captain Shang, Yao, Ling, and Chien Po.</i>
<i>Scene</i>	This scene takes place at sunset in the Chinese imperial palace, during a victory parade celebrating China's triumph over the Huns.
<i>Agency</i>	Mulan informs Captain Shang that Shan Yu is still alive and will attack China again, but Captain Shang does not believe her.
<i>Purpose</i>	The purpose of this scene is to highlight the difference in treatment Mulan receives when disguised as a man versus when revealing her true identity as a woman.

Source: Data Processing Result (2025)

Mulan, frustrated by the unfair treatment she received, boldly expressed her anger to Captain Shang. He had trusted her as Ping but refused to trust her as Mulan, even though Ping and Mulan were the same person. Mulan exclaimed, *"You said you'd trust Ping. Why is Mulan any different?"* Captain Shang, seemingly indifferent, walked away, leaving Mulan behind. However, Mulan did not remain silent; she continued trying to warn her friends Yao, Ling, and Chien Po, as well as the crowd gathered at the parade. Yet, a woman was still a woman—her voice was drowned out by the majority in the bustling celebration.

The scene vividly portrays a mix of joyous celebration and underlying tension. The Chinese soldiers, particularly Captain Shang, realize that without Ping—who is, in reality, Mulan—they would not have earned the honor of a victory parade in the imperial city. In truth, the soldiers are in denial, fully aware that Mulan was the key to China's triumph over the Huns. When Mulan comes forward with the urgent news that Shan Yu is still alive and planning another attack, Captain Shang dismisses her warning simply because she is a woman.

This scene highlights the lack of gender equality in the Chinese empire at that time. Despite Mulan's proven credibility, most men and society at large continue to disregard her. This contrast is made starkly evident—when she was disguised as Ping, she was recognized, honored, and celebrated. However, as soon as she revealed herself as Mulan, her words were ignored and dismissed.

Meanwhile, Éowyn's iconic scene in *The Lord of the Rings* occurs when she disguises herself as a man and fights the Witch King. In this scene, she is aided by Merry, who stabs the Witch King's leg from behind, causing him to loosen his grip on Éowyn's throat. This leads to the following exchange:



Figure 2. Éowyn and The Witch King Scene at 2:11:30

Witch King: "You fool! No man can kill me!"

Éowyn: "I am no man!" [She removes her helmet, revealing that she is a woman, and then stabs the Witch King in the face.]

Based on the scene above, the researcher applies the Dramatistic Pentad analysis as follows:

Table 2.

Dramatistic Pentad Analysis of Scene 2:11:30 in The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King

Element	Description
<i>Act</i>	This scene depicts Éowyn protecting her uncle, King Théoden, with all her heart and soul.
<i>Agent</i>	The agents in this scene are Éowyn, King Théoden, the Witch King, and Merry.
<i>Scene</i>	The scene takes place during the daytime in Minas Tirith, during the Battle of Pelennor Fields.
<i>Agency</i>	Éowyn protects her uncle to prevent him from becoming prey to the Nazgûl, and in this scene, she successfully kills both the Nazgûl and the Witch King.
<i>Purpose</i>	This scene demonstrates that Éowyn, as a woman, is capable of defeating the fierce Nazgûl and the Witch King to protect someone she deeply loves.

Source: Data Processing Result (2025)

The situation in this scene is intense because, aside from taking place during the Battle of Pelennor Fields, Éowyn is the only woman fighting in this battle. She has to endure a counterattack from the Witch King, who shatters her wooden shield, with its fragments injuring her chest. Éowyn is on the brink of death as the Witch King's hand grips her neck, threatening her by saying, "No man can kill me," meaning that no man is capable of killing him. Just as Éowyn is about to give in, Merry arrives and stabs the Witch King from behind, causing him to release his grip on Éowyn's neck. After breaking free and seeing the Witch King fall, Éowyn removes her helmet, letting her long hair flow, and swings her sword straight at the Witch King's face, declaring, "I am no man!" She then drives her sword through his face, causing him to vanish.

This proves that Éowyn, as a woman, is capable of defeating both the Witch King and his Nazgûl. The Witch King himself believed that no man could kill him—if men could not, then neither could women. However, Éowyn defied this notion by slaying him, demonstrating that women are just as capable as men in combat. Moreover, women are also able to protect the people they love.

From the scenes analyzed using the Dramatistic Pentad framework, the portrayal of female warriors in *Mulan* and *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* highlights strong, self-sacrificing women who disguise themselves as men to protect their loved ones. This is evident in Mulan's actions in *Mulan* and Éowyn's battle in *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, leading to the following idea:

Mulan and Éowyn are both ordinary women with gentle hearts. They are beloved by their families—Mulan is cherished by her father, while Éowyn is adored by her uncle. Both share a courageous and self-sacrificing nature. These films depict the resilience and determination of female warriors from two different stories, both showing that women are capable of performing tasks traditionally reserved for men. This raises the question: if women can engage in warfare and excel in jobs outside the home, why should they be confined to staying at home and doing nothing?

Mulan and Éowyn are both strong women who bring victory to their respective kingdoms, elevate their own status, and make those around them proud. They are also skilled female warriors who excel in battle strategy. In *Mulan*, Mulan defeats Shan Yu, the film's primary antagonist and greatest enemy. Meanwhile, in *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, Éowyn successfully defeats the Witch King and the Nazgûl, one of the strongest foes in the film.

Mulan and Éowyn are determined, ambitious women who are willing to do anything to ensure the safety of their loved ones. They both seek to have their voices heard as women and reject the gender discrimination that undermines them. More than anything, Mulan and Éowyn long for freedom.

Her strong determination is accompanied by the potential that enables her to accomplish what men can do. This is evident in *Mulan*, where Mulan, despite being a woman, is able to defeat men during her military training before facing the Huns. In fact, it is Mulan who ultimately takes down Shan Yu and plays the most significant role in China's victory. Similarly, Éowyn successfully decapitates a Nazgûl, and when the Witch King arrogantly claims that no man can kill him, she defies him by declaring, "I am no man," before striking him down.

The Results of Dramatistic Pentad Analysis in Relation to Liberal Feminism Theory

The Dramatistic Pentad analysis conducted in this study reveals elements of feminism. According to Rosemarie Tong in *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (2014), feminism consists of seven branches: Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Libertarian and

Cultural Perspectives, Marxist and Socialist Feminism: Classical and Contemporary, Psychoanalytic and Care-Focused Feminism, Existentialist and Postmodern Feminism, Women of Color Feminism, and Ecofeminism. Among these, this study finds that both Mulan, from Disney's *Mulan*, and Éowyn, from *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, align with the principles of liberal feminism. As stated by Rosemarie Tong (2014), liberal feminism advocates for equality in education, freedom, and equal rights between men and women.

Being born as a woman during a time of gender inequality is a fate that both Mulan and Éowyn had to accept. They were perceived as weak by those around them, including their own families. However, both characters share similar traits: bravery, perseverance, and self-sacrifice. These two female warriors successfully secured victory for their respective nations and upheld their dignity without compromising their feminine grace and compassion. Mulan and Éowyn are not portrayed as harsh individuals; instead, they demonstrate that women are capable of performing tasks traditionally assigned to men, sometimes even surpassing them in skill and ability.

It is undeniable that male figures also played a role in supporting Mulan and Éowyn in their respective battles for victory. Characters such as Aragorn and Captain Shang fulfilled their responsibilities well, but their success was significantly aided by Éowyn and Mulan, who proved to be equally skilled and intelligent. This highlights that women are fully capable of performing the same roles as men. Therefore, women should not have to disguise themselves as men to engage in warfare or pursue what they believe to be right. Ultimately, men and women are both human beings, and every individual deserves the same rights, freedoms, and educational opportunities. Tong (2014) asserts that if a woman allows herself to be treated as inferior, as in the cases of Mulan and Éowyn, she essentially consents to being silenced and stripped of her agency. This treatment contradicts her inherent status as a complete human being (Tong, 2014, p. 16).

Gender equality is crucial and necessary. If women with great potential are left unheard, institutions will not benefit from their contributions. In the films *Mulan* and *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, victory and success may not have been achieved without the participation of Mulan and Éowyn. The collaboration between men and women as equal human beings strengthens institutions in achieving their goals. This aligns with Rosemarie Tong's statement:

"Together, women and men might be able to develop the kind of social values, leadership styles, and institutional structures needed to permit both sexes to achieve fulfillment in the public and private world alike." (Tong, 2014, p. 30).

1. Critical Analysis

All acts of communication produce meanings. It is the power of these meanings, what we do with them, that shapes relationships, exercises influence, models reality, generates behaviors of domination, and feelings of subordination (Couldry & Hepp, 2020). The characters of Mulan and Éowyn exemplify this idea through their roles as female warriors who defy patriarchal expectations in their respective narratives. Both characters symbolize strength, resilience, and self-determination—qualities often marginalized in female representations across traditional media. Liberal feminism posits that individuals should be free to pursue their own vision of the good life, and this includes access to rights, liberties, and full participation in society regardless of gender. In this light, Éowyn and Mulan represent the liberal feminist ideals of civil liberty and justice. Their actions affirm the right to express and embody one's convictions, even when these challenge deeply rooted societal norms.

This notion aligns with Schwartzman's (2006) argument that liberalism values the individual's right to develop and pursue their own conception of the good. She writes, "Because all persons have an interest in leading life according to their own conception of the good, all persons have an interest in the freedom and liberties that are needed to develop a conception of the good" (p. 4). For Mulan, this is expressed through her decision to take her father's place in the military—an act not of rebellion, but of filial piety and moral resolve. For Éowyn, it manifests in her decision to secretly join battle, culminating in her iconic defeat of the Witch-king. Both actions represent personal convictions and the assertion of individual agency in the face of gendered restrictions.

However, these acts of defiance must also be understood in their respective cultural contexts. Mulan's story is rooted in traditional Asian, particularly Confucian, values, which emphasize familial loyalty, honor, and the subordination of individual desires to collective responsibility. Her transformation is culturally significant: she breaks gender norms not to assert individualism per se, but to fulfill her duties as a daughter and as a patriot. Her character is deeply informed by East Asian notions of harmony, filial obligation, and national service, where the act of rebellion is still justified through the lens of social duty.

In contrast, Éowyn emerges from a European medieval worldview, heavily shaped by Western heroic tradition and Christian-inflected chivalry. Tolkien's legendarium often positions women within domestic or noble roles, and Éowyn's desire to fight reflects a yearning to escape societal constraints that confine her to the roles of healer and caretaker. Her famous declaration, "I am no man," not only subverts the prophecy but also reclaims space within a male-dominated battlefield. Her arc critiques the gendered valorization of war as a male domain. Thus, while both women exhibit strength and agency, Éowyn's struggle is more explicitly framed within a critique of Western gender norms, whereas Mulan's is more harmoniously reconciled with traditional cultural values.

Both narratives challenge the long-standing notion that "a woman's place is in the home." Marusic (2016) discusses how gender roles have historically confined women to domestic spaces, limiting their contributions to the public sphere. Liberal feminism actively contests these limitations, arguing that male dominance structurally prevents women from accessing platforms where they can fully express themselves and shape society. This is echoed by Griffin (2023), who explains that "Cheris Kramarae is certain that men's dominant power position in society guarantees that the public mode of expression won't be directly available to women" (p. 461). In this context, Mulan and Éowyn disrupt gendered power structures by stepping into traditionally male roles and proving their competence and value on their own terms.

The cultural battles faced by women in these stories mirror real-world social constructions that can be changed through access to freedom, voice, and representation. As Evans & Chamberlain (2021) argues, women must be empowered to express their worldviews, speak for themselves, and pursue both personal and collective justice. Through the acts of Éowyn and Mulan, audiences are offered not just heroic tales but transformative narratives that reshape how gender roles are perceived in both Eastern and Western societies.

Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge the power of media institutions in shaping public perceptions of gender. According to Couldry & Hepp (2020), media representations are not passive but actively construct social realities, as the meanings communicated through media influence how individuals interpret their roles and identities within society. With global reach and influence, major film studios such as Warner Bros. and Walt Disney function as both

cultural institutions and commercial powerhouses. Warner Bros., for example, operates internationally with a production catalog of over 100,000 hours and employs thousands globally (Warner Bros., n.d.). Similarly, Walt Disney boasts a workforce of over 166,000 and a net income exceeding \$5 billion (The Walt Disney Company, n.d.).

Given their extensive reach and cultural capital, the representation of strong female leads like Mulan and Éowyn carries significant societal impact. These media portrayals do more than entertain; they challenge hegemonic norms and offer new models of gender equality. While liberal feminism does not aim to elevate women over men, it demands that both genders be afforded equal rights and mutual respect. When women are given space to act, speak, and lead—like Mulan and Éowyn—they not only prove their capability but also inspire collective shifts in cultural consciousness.

Ultimately, when men and women are provided equal opportunities and women are not silenced by institutional or societal barriers, both can work together toward a more inclusive and equitable world. Like Éowyn and Mulan, who secure military victories against formidable foes, women can lead by example and serve as role models for future generations—across both Eastern and Western cultural landscapes.

4. Conclusion

The narratives of Mulan and Éowyn serve as powerful illustrations of how women can resist, subvert, and transcend traditional gender roles through acts of courage, moral conviction, and self-sacrifice. Grounded in the framework of liberal feminism, both characters embody the principle of Equal Liberty, asserting their right to participate fully in societal life, including domains traditionally dominated by men—such as warfare, leadership, and heroism. Through Kenneth Burke's Dramatistic Pentad, their motives, actions, and purposes become legible as meaningful performances of gender resistance, revealing how communication and narrative can act as tools of empowerment.

While both characters challenge patriarchal constraints, they do so from within markedly different cultural contexts. Mulan, shaped by Confucian values of filial duty and harmony, challenges gendered norms in a way that still aligns with the collectivist ideals of her culture. Her rebellion is not a rejection of tradition, but a redefinition of honor and service. In contrast, Éowyn's arc reflects the Western struggle for female autonomy within a medieval and often restrictive European framework. Her confrontation with the Witch-king is not only a pivotal military act but a symbolic declaration against exclusion and gender prophecy.

Together, these narratives demonstrate how media can reflect, reinforce, and reform cultural understandings of gender. As products of global powerhouses—Disney and Warner Bros.—these films reach vast audiences and contribute to shaping societal norms. By showcasing strong, capable female protagonists, they align with liberal feminist calls for equity, not superiority, emphasizing that men and women should support one another in the pursuit of justice and social progress.

In sum, Mulan and Éowyn are more than fictional warriors; they are narrative agents of change. Their stories exemplify how women, when granted freedom of expression and equal opportunity, are not only capable of fulfilling heroic roles but also of transforming the very definitions of heroism, justice, and societal contribution. As such, they offer a compelling vision for gender equality across both Eastern and Western spheres—a vision that remains deeply relevant in today's ongoing feminist struggles.

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