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“Éowyn it was, and Dernhelm also”: Reading the ‘Wild Shieldmaiden’ Through a Queer Lens.

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The Éowyn of the published text is not Éowyn as Tolkien first imagined her, but you have to dig into *The History of Middle-earth* to see that. In *The Treason of Isengard* Éowyn first appears as Éomund's or Théoden's daughter and is called "Éowyn Elfsheen," suggesting an Elvish connection, but nothing more is said about her at this point except for her daughter status.¹ She subsequently appears as the sister of Éomer, serving the guests at the funeral feast of Háma and Théodred but when the Rohirrim ride east to Minas Tirith, "Éowyn goes as Amazon" and rides with Aragorn,² Tolkien having designed her as a suitable future wife for him.

By the time we get to *The War of the Ring*, changes have been made but Éowyn is still a warrior who rides openly with Théoden and Aragorn. When a messenger from Minas Tirith arrives with the news of Sauron's attack, Éowyn tells Théoden that "women must ride now, as they did in a like evil time in the days of Brego."³ Women have clearly ridden into battle before, and Éowyn points out that it can happen again.

The next version has Éowyn greeting Théoden as he returns from Helm's Deep, pledging to ride with him in any future battle.⁴ Most of these early drafts have Éowyn and Théoden dying side-by-side on the battlefield; seemingly Tolkien was determined from early on to prevent any marriage between Éowyn and Aragorn.

One interesting draft for this discussion is this one in *The War of the Ring* that Christopher was unable to definitively date, showing the confrontation between Éowyn and the Witch-king:

"But Théoden was not alone. One had followed him: Éowyn daughter of Éomund, and all had feared the light of her face, shunning her as night fowl turn from the day. Now she leapt from her horse and stood before the shadow; her sword was in her hand."⁵

This is a fascinating early draft, for so many reasons, including the fact that some of the language is familiar from the final published version. Here, Éowyn is not Dernhelm but simply Éowyn. In addition, she is powerfully victorious, framed by the

¹ *Treason* 390

² *ibid* 437

³ *War* 243

⁴ *ibid* 247

⁵ *War* 365-366

light of the day, a terrifying foe to the Harad that face her. This is a different Éowyn to the one we are more familiar with, not least because she has not had to fight for her place as a Rider, nor has she had to overcome the same difficulties as our Éowyn. For one thing, the Éowyn of *The Lord of the Rings* performs her masculinity not just as a warrior, but as a male warrior – Dernhelm – and this performance of gender is something I want to explore further.

First, some thoughts on Éowyn’s experience of trauma. Like Tolkien, Éowyn suffers great personal loss, losing both parents by the age of seven when her father fell in battle, and her mother wasted away in grief. She loses her cousin Théodred, killed fighting orcs. Then her uncle, her de facto father-figure, is stricken by some unidentified illness and she is powerless to help him. During this time, her brother Éomer is imprisoned for supposed crimes against Théoden, leaving her alone to care as best she can for the ailing Théoden, all whilst being pinned under the lascivious gaze of Wormtongue. In addition, she is fully aware of the dangers posed to her homeland by the encroaching orcs – again, she is powerless to do anything. As a result, her dreams are affected, as is her outlook on life.

When Théoden is ‘healed’ by Gandalf, and Wormtongue sent away, one might think that this would be an opportunity for Éowyn to begin healing. Unfortunately, there is no moment of calm in which she might begin that healing process. Her country is now at war. Her desire to find new meaning in her life and take some active control, a completely understandable response to her previous helplessness in the face of trauma, is continually thwarted by the men around her. For example, in this moment in ‘The King of the Golden Hall’, Théoden seemingly completely overlooks Éowyn and must be reminded by Hama:

“‘But Éomer I cannot spare,” says Théoden, “nor would he stay...and he is the last of that House.’

‘I said not Éomer,’ answered Hama. ‘And he is not the last. There is Éowyn, daughter of Éomund, his sister.’”⁶

So, a few things here. First – has Théoden forgotten Éowyn? It’s almost like Hama has to remind him of her existence. He even names Éomer as the last of his House –

⁶ Bk 3: Ch VI 512.

do only males count as being members of a royal house? If he hasn't actually forgotten her, is it more a case that he has automatically dismissed her as potential ruler over the people because she is female? Also, notice that Hama simply uses her name: Éowyn. When Théoden proclaims her leader in his stead, he uses the honorific of 'Lady' before her name. Yes, this emphasises her position as part of the royal family, but it also emphasises her gender. Note also that he uses the verb 'lead', not the verb 'rule', which have very different connotations. So, a woman may lead, so long as there is no other suitable man around, but she may not rule?

One of the other ways in which Éowyn tries to find new meaning in her life is in connection with Aragorn. She sees in him the very figure of masculinity and warriorhood that she admires and would wish to emulate, and this becomes an emotional connection for her. However, her love for Aragorn, and her desire to fight alongside him, is rejected (however kindly):

“‘Lord,’ she said, ‘if you must go, then let me ride in your following. For I am weary of skulking in the hills, and wish to face peril and battle.’

‘Your duty is with your people,’ he answered... ‘Therefore I say to you, lady: Stay! For you have no errand to the South.’ ‘Neither have those others who go with thee. They go only because they would not be parted from thee – because they love thee.’ Then she turned and vanished into the night.”⁷

This is followed the next morning by her final plea to Aragorn to allow her to stay with him and fight by his side. Again, she is rejected:

“‘Aragorn, wilt thou go?’

‘I will,’ he said.

‘Then wilt thou not let me ride with this company, as I have asked?’

‘I will not, lady,’ he said. ‘For that I could not grant without leave of the king and of your brother; and they will not return until tomorrow. But I count now every hour, indeed every minute. Farewell!’

⁷ Bk 5: Ch II 766-767.

Then she fell on her knees, saying, 'I beg thee!'

'Nay, lady,' he said, and taking her by the hand he raised her."⁸

This is one more 'loss' to deal with and adds to the emotional difficulties that she has been dealing with. It is noticeable that, throughout this encounter with Aragorn Éowyn uses his name; he, on the other hand, does not use hers at all but addresses her simply as 'lady'. Perhaps this indicates some distancing here on Aragorn's part; perhaps it is also a gentle, subtle reminder that she has a position and a duty that must be fulfilled. What it also does, of course, is highlight Aragorn's perception of her gender and, concurrently, her perceived femininity that he sees as inextricably linked to her identity.

Is it any wonder that she feels despair, and determines that her only course of action is to seek death in battle? She begs to go to war several times but is refused permission. She reveals her frustration, her hurt, her weariness from the years of tending her uncle and watching everything she loved being unravelled before her very eyes. Her distress, her pain, and her trauma – all go unrecognised and unacknowledged by those around her. Théoden's first words to her when he is 'healed' by Gandalf, and the last before he, eventually, takes his leave of her and heads off to battle, are "Go, Éowyn sister-daughter!" said the old king. "The time for fear is past."⁹ Is this really true? Théoden probably means that she need no longer fear for *him*; however, he seems to have been unaware of all that Éowyn has been through whilst he was incapacitated. Later in that chapter, Gandalf – who has observed Wormtongue's lascivious gaze – tells Éomer that "Éowyn is safe now", which seems a rare lack of understanding or perception on his part. It is unlikely that Éowyn's fears, given her trauma, are so easily set aside. When she presents as Dernhelm, whose name aptly translates as 'Secret Helmet', she is fully intending to leave 'Éowyn' behind and is seeking death as the only way to find meaning in her life.

Even if Éowyn would in the end have been deemed capable of ruling the Rohirrim, she would have been very much an exception as a female ruler amongst the Édain. The custom begun in Númenor by Aldarion in which women could take the throne – enacted mostly to spite his wife Erendis - was not maintained in the

⁸ Bk 5: Ch II 768.

⁹ Bk 3: Ch VI 504.

successor kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor. There is not a single female name among the rulers of either kingdom listed in the Appendices, nor indeed among the stewards of Gondor. As a woman in Rohan in this time, Éowyn is very much occupying a gendered space, one that has been predetermined for her. As Doreen Massey argues in her essay ‘Spaces of Politics’, “from the symbolic meaning of spaces/ places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straight forward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in there being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is understood.”¹⁰ In other words, the ways in which spaces are constructed reflect gender assumptions and gender norms, whilst also reinforcing these ideas. Gendered spaces tend to trap women within these norms, thus perpetuating social ideas of the meaning of ‘woman’. The “limitation”, Massey says, “of women's mobility, in terms of both identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination, and the two forms of limitation have been crucially related.”¹¹

How can we use Massey’s ideas to help us to understand depictions of femininity in *The Lord of the Rings*? If we examine his words in Letter 53 to his son Christopher we can see some of Tolkien’s thoughts on feminism:

“The bigger things get the smaller and duller or flatter the globe gets. It is getting to be all one blasted little provincial suburb. When they have introduced American sanitation, morale-pep, feminism, and mass production ... how happy we shall be.”¹²

Ah Tolkien – that grumpy old Luddite! See how he connects feminism with American sanitation, morale-pep, and mass production?

In letter 43 to his son Michael in March 1941, Tolkien articulates the limitations he believes are natural to women. They are, he says, “very ready to enter into all the interests, as far as they can...of the young man they are attracted to.” They have a “servient, helpmeet instinct” and “they can in fact often achieve very remarkable insight and understanding, even of things otherwise outside their natural range: for it is their gift to be receptive, stimulated, fertilized (in many other matters

¹⁰ Massey 179.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *Letters* #53

than the physical) by the male.”¹³ His commentary in this letter on the nature of women gives us some insight into his thoughts when writing his own female characters.

Let’s examine this further. When, in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir asks: “What is a woman?” she makes a distinction that has become central to feminist thought: biological sexual difference is not the same as gender, which is a socially determined characteristic. So, she declares, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”¹⁴ This socially determined ‘becoming’ is shaped by male expectations and prerogatives. Throughout history the male human has been thought of as the epitome of a human, as the embodiment of humanity—the One. Woman, however, has been cast as the Other, a creature defined in relation to man. Women are secondary; men are primary.

Julia Kristeva reminds us that “[a] woman is trapped within the frontiers of her body and even of her species, and consequently always feels exiled both by the general clichés that make up a common consensus and by the very powers of generalization intrinsic to language.”¹⁵ Whether she likes it or not, agrees with it or not, accepts it or not, Éowyn is connected to a domestic space. Therefore, for her to be able to fight alongside the other warriors and leave that domestic space Éowyn must show on the outside what she has already performed on the inside - a female masculinity as Dernhelm that is a non-normative expression of gender.

To understand this in the current context, we can read Éowyn through the lens of Jack Halberstam’s theory of female masculinity. Halberstam’s argument, that there are many types of masculinity and that what masculinity is need not be tied only to the male body, reveals that the female is equally capable of masculinity if it is understood as separate from biological gender, and that biological females also participate in the construction of masculinity. The problem arises when this is not recognized socially and is labelled somehow aberrant. As Halberstam reminds us, this has very much been the case and “[m]asculinity...has been reserved for people with male bodies and has been actively denied to people with female bodies.”¹⁶

¹³ *Letters* #43.

¹⁴ De Beauvoir 301.

¹⁵ Kristeva 296.

¹⁶ Halberstam (1998) 269.

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler writes that “to assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance.” To conflate, they argue, “the definition of gender with its normative expression is inadvertently to reconsolidate the power of the norm to constrain the definition of gender. Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized...Whether one refers to “gender trouble” or “gender blending,” “transgender” or “cross-gender,” one is already suggesting that gender has a way of moving beyond that naturalized binary.”¹⁷ These theories, both feminist and queer, offer a lens through which we may read Éowyn’s presentation as Dernhelm.

The descriptions of Dernhelm when we first meet him in the text offer little clue that this is Éowyn, and Merry, who has met Éowyn a number of times now, fails to discern any difference. Merry is far more concerned with the look in Dernhelm’s eyes, although he does perceive a small difference in physicality between Dernhelm and the other riders.¹⁸ Even when they finally speak, Merry only sees a young man, and Tolkien uses only masculine pronouns in the exchange.¹⁹

This, I suggest, is because Dernhelm is not merely a disguise for Éowyn; Dernhelm is Éowyn. Éowyn is Dernhelm is Éowyn. One is an outward expression of her femininity; the other is an outward expression of his masculinity. ‘Dernhelm’ is also symbolic of Éowyn’s desperate desire to deny, reject, turn away from who/what she has been reduced to by the men around her. It isn’t that she has no power: as regent for her people, she does have power. What she doesn’t have is control. Her statement that she is tired of duty reflects her exhaustion over being a caregiver, often highly gendered work that is unappreciated even in our primary world. She is bitter that, rather than fighting alongside the men of Rohan, her task seems to be “to mind the house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return,” countering Aragorn’s counsel with “All your words are but to say: you are a woman,

¹⁷ Butler 42-43.

¹⁸ Bk 5: Ch III 785.

¹⁹ *ibid* 787.

and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more.”²⁰

As Gandalf points out to the clueless Éomer in *The Houses of Healing*:

“‘My friend’, said Gandalf, ‘you had horses, and deeds of arms, and the free fields; but she, born in the body of a maid, had a spirit and courage at least the match of yours. Yet she was doomed to wait upon an old man, whom she loved as a father, and watch him falling into a mean dishonoured dotage; and her part seemed to her more ignoble than that of the staff he leaned on...But who knows what she spoke to the darkness, alone, in the bitter watches of the night, when all her life seemed shrinking, and the walls of her bower closing in about her, a hutch to trammel some wild thing in?’”²¹

Éowyn feels her life is inconsequential; the words she uses specifically to describe how she has been reduced are “dry-nurse,” and “serving-woman” and she feels trapped, fearing, as she tells Aragorn, a cage, “To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them.”²² This ‘cage’ is symbolic of the entrapment of women behind both domestic and emotional labour and, to escape that cage, she must shed all vestiges of her femininity, including the outward performance of gender, to embrace fully the masculine side of her personality and be Dernhelm. Openly performing masculinity is also a way of turning aside the dangerous male gaze of Wormtongue she has been trapped under for so long. She has been through more than she should have. She has suffered harassment, abuse, diminishment, and her life being wasted away without anything beyond being a carer, a role she did not choose but was forced upon her. Her trauma is undiminished at the point where she rides off as Dernhelm, but it is a powerful moment in which Éowyn takes control over her life and her choices.

In Jack Halberstam’s work ‘*Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*’, he discusses the work of European theorist Paul Preciado in examining how society is beginning to break away from binary ideals. In “leaning more toward a Deleuzian understanding of the body as a liquid set of dynamics than toward either a Freudian concept of the hydraulic functions of repression or a Foucauldian insistence

²⁰ Bk 5: Ch II 767.

²¹ Bk 5: Ch VIII 848-849.

²² Bk 5: Ch II 767.

on the propulsive trajectory of power through flesh,” says Halberstam, “Preciado flips the terms of bodily identity away from surfaces (secondary sex characteristics, for example) and toward depths (molecular composition and decomposition), away from fragmentation (Freudian stages) and toward flow (the passage of chemicals through the organism), away from fictions of identity and toward a disarticulation of parts not only from wholes but even from other parts.”²³ The trans body, Halberstam argues, is party to shifts and changes that go far beyond what is at surface level, and he equates this with other bodily changes such as aging or pregnancy, both of which are subject to hormonal processes. As Halberstam articulates, “The feeling of the body as experienced from the inside can sometimes be at odds with appearance or external features.”²⁴

This seems to me to articulate the story of Éowyn and her body. Embodying a masculine femininity yet forced by convention to present an appearance of femininity, Éowyn finds expression of the self through externalising her masculinity via Dernhelm. Dernhelm is not merely a disguise for Éowyn but an intrinsic part of her: Éowyn is Dernhelm is Éowyn. Tolkien emphasises this by always using masculine pronouns for Dernhelm. In the scene with the Witch-King, for example, as Théoden lies stricken on the battlefield, Tolkien reveals that the king is not utterly forsaken as “one stood there still: Dernhelm the young, faithful beyond fear; and he wept, for he had loved the lord as his father.”²⁵ At this point, then, Tolkien is holding to his presentation of Dernhelm as being unmistakably masculine but also, in this moment, performing a femininity: facing a dreadful enemy, but openly weeping for Théoden.

So, let us examine the scene between Éowyn and the Witch-King through this lens. We know that Gandalf does not believe that he can kill the Witch-king himself and, referring to Glorfindel’s prophesy in TA 1973, ²⁶ one of the reasons is that “if words spoken of old be true, not by the hand of man shall he fall, and hidden from the wise is the doom that awaits him.”²⁷

²³ Halberstam (2018) 30-31

²⁴ *ibid* 31

²⁵ Bk 5: Ch V 822.

²⁶ ‘Appendix A’ 1027.

²⁷ Bk 5: Ch IV 800-801.

Like many prophecies, of course, this one is tricky. The Witch-King is confident that “No living man may hinder me!”²⁸, facing, as he thinks, the man Dernhelm, but Dernhelm is also Éowyn. When Dernhelm laughs at the Witch-King, and Éowyn confronts him, the Witch-king is faced with a conundrum that, for a moment, renders him silent “as if in sudden doubt.”²⁹ Dernhelm may be a living man but Éowyn is not.

When Dernhelm removes his helm, and Éowyn steps forward to confront the Witch-King, telling him that he looks upon a woman, what I read here is Éowyn’s ability to embrace all aspects of her character, both the masculine and the feminine. There is a fluidity to Éowyn’s gender performance that shows that she is not ashamed of being a woman, nor does she want not to be a woman at all. What she wants is the freedom to also express her masculine side and to feel that each part of her is as valued as the other. As Tolkien tells us: “Éowyn it was, and Dernhelm also.”³⁰ She claims her femininity with pride as she challenges the Ringwraith, and it is this that strikes the fear and doubt into him. Indeed, Tolkien does not attempt to indicate that Éowyn the woman is weaker, or less courageous, than Dernhelm the man. As the fell beast attacks, “still she did not blench: maiden of the Rohirrim, child of kings, slender but as a steel-blade, fair yet terrible.”³¹ The Black Rider towers over her, shatters her shield and breaks her arm but she does not give up but pulls together the last of her strength and “drove her sword between crown and mantle, as the great shoulders bowed before her,”³² ending his existence.

To sum up, then, what I perceive is an extraordinary performance of both masculine femininity and a feminine masculinity in Éowyn/ Dernhelm. This can only be appreciated if we step back from perceiving Dernhelm as a disguise and understand that Éowyn and Dernhelm are equal elements of one body, co-existing but not as some kind of ‘split personality’ – instead, they represent a dual and equal performance of gender that finds its harmony as Éowyn is finally able to take control of her life, make her own choices, and understand who she truly is.

²⁸ Bk 5: Ch V 822.

²⁹ Bk 5: Ch V 823.

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

³² Bk 5: Ch V 824.

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