

# A Wild Shieldmaiden of the North: Éowyn of Rohan and Old Norse Literature

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In *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy Éowyn, shieldmaiden of Rohan, stands out as an example of feminine courage, strength and beauty, but the character has also attracted accusations of sexism against the author.<sup>1</sup> Éowyn's transition from valorous shieldmaiden to peace-loving wife has been seen by some scholars as a criticism of women who transgress traditional gender roles, and a tacit acknowledgement that women belong in the home. The portrayal of Éowyn was at least partly inspired by the shieldmaidens and valkyries of Old Norse sagas, and it is in these stories that the theme of transgression is most apparent. This essay will examine Tolkien's supposed misogyny in light of a comparison of Éowyn with heroines from *Bosa saga ok Herraud̄s*, *Völsunga saga*, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, and *Hrolfs saga Gautrekssonar*. These female warriors defy the expectations of their sex, a violation that is not tolerated within the world of the sagas and must ultimately be corrected. Through a discussion of these shieldmaidens and their stories, an exploration of misogyny and literature, and an analysis of Éowyn's role in *The Lord of the Rings*, I will demonstrate that Tolkien's story, though based on texts that criticize women who attempt to act like men, is not sexist in itself. While Éowyn may be the only female warrior presented within the world of *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR), there is nothing monstrous about her and the text does not censure her. Her choices in life have little to do with societal expectations, as in the Old Norse literature, and the very fact that she has a choice immediately sets her apart. She bears arms and then sets them down not by force, but for love.

### Shieldmaidens in Old Norse Literature

The sagas chosen for discussion belong to the category of *fornaldarsögur* or legendary sagas that, though they may have some historical basis, are set before the founding of Iceland. Torfi Tulinius says that while the sagas have a connection to reality, ‘the characters develop in a world that is not altogether the same as ours’;<sup>2</sup> a world often inhabited by supernatural beings. Such a world is not unlike that of *The Lord of the Rings*, which bears some resemblance to contemporary culture with its heterogenous mix of rural communities and feudal societies, but more properly belongs to the realm of fantasy given the presence of dwarves, elves and other non-human beings. The saga plots are heroic narratives concerned with a single character or family. The stories have mythic qualities, particularly in the case of *Völsunga saga*, the basic content of which has been retold over time and in different languages.<sup>3</sup> In these heroic plots the role of the shieldmaiden may be small. Typically, she is a temporary foil for the hero, her physical prowess providing a match for his, until he wins her in marriage and she gives up fighting. Like the sagas, Tolkien’s story is a heroic narrative with elements of the mythic, and it can be argued that *LOTR* serves a similar purpose to the *fornaldarsögur* in that both exemplify the values of their respective contemporary cultures.

A brief summary of each shieldmaiden’s story follows. Brynhildr appears in one chapter out of the sixteen of *Bósa saga ok Herraudís*. She is the mother of the hero Bósi, and was won in battle by Bryn-Þvari:

Þau börðust, ok bárust sár á Brynhildi, þangat til at hún var óvíg. Tók Þvari hana þá til sín ok mikinn fjárlut með henni. Hann lét gæða hana at heilu, ok var hún síðan hnýtt ok bömluð, ok var hún því kölluð Brynhildr бага. Þvari gerði brúðlaup til hennar, ok sat hún á brúðbekk með hjálm ok brynju, en þó váru ástir þeira góðar. Lagði Þvari þá af hernað ok settist í bú, ok áttu tvá sonu.<sup>4</sup>

Brynhildr is a king’s daughter, and it is not clear why she fights with Þvari, or how much fighting she did prior to this encounter, but her attachment to her

armour, such that she wears it at her wedding, suggests she considers it integral to her identity. Of course, she is not the only one who gives up her former life, as Þvari ‘settles down’ to domestic life also, paving the way for their son Bosi to take over the narrative thread.

The second Brynhildr appears in the epic *Völsunga saga* as a valkyrie, first found asleep by the hero Sigurðr who mistakes her for a man until he removes her helmet. Similarly, Éowyn is able to pass as a man named Dernhelm until she reveals herself to the Witch-King as a woman.<sup>5</sup> Brynhildr tells Sigurðr how ‘Óðinn stakk mik svefnþorni í hefnd þess ok kvað mik aldri síðan skyldu sigr hafa ok kvað mik giptask skulu.’<sup>6</sup> Disciplined by Óðinn not for her fighting desires but for defying him, Brynhildr sets her own terms upon the punishment, namely that if she must marry, it will be to a man who is fearless. She rejects her husband Gunnarr when it is revealed that it was not he who had the courage to ride through fire to conquer her, but her first lover Sigurðr wearing Gunnarr’s guise. Though she longs for battle, Brynhildr also excels at typically feminine pursuits, as she ‘kunni meira hagleik en aðrar konur’.<sup>7</sup> She is strong-willed and gets her way in all things that she can control, even as to the manner of her death and cremation. Brynhildr’s conflict arises from her inability to reconcile herself to a life without violence, and to the perceived loss of her reputation in her marriage to Gunnarr. Like Éowyn, who longs for the ‘chance of doing great deeds’ (RK, p. 767), she values valour, but unlike Éowyn, she does so to the exclusion of everything else.

*Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* covers several generations, beginning with Hervör; Heiðrekr is her son who takes over the tale. She is ‘mær einkar fōgr’ and ‘var sterk sem karlar’.<sup>8</sup> She trains herself to fight and is said to be an unpleasant person, who ‘gerði ok optar illt en got, ok er henni var þat bannat, hljóp hon á skóga ok drap men til fjár sér.’<sup>9</sup> Hervör eventually joins a band of Vikings, dressed as a man and using a male name. In a well-known scene, she awakens her dead father Angantyr to claim the ancestral sword Tyrfing, despite his warnings that it will be the doom of her and her line. She continues her

Viking raids until 'er henni leiddisk svá vera',<sup>10</sup> at which point she returns home to do needlework and then marries. No explanation aside from weariness is given for her change of heart. It is implied that she is a formidable presence in her marriage, and favours her son Heiðrekr over the other son. Her granddaughter, also called Hervör, becomes a warrior who dies heroically in battle defending her brother's kingdom. Her small part in the story places no blame on her for using her fighting skills; she is celebrated as nobly as any other man who dies in battle.

Lastly, Þornbjörg of *Hrolfs saga Gautrekssonar* is the only daughter of King Eiríkr. She has skill with weapons and riding, but 'Eireki konungi líkaði eigi vel, er hún hafði þessa framferð sem karlar, ok bað hana hafa skemmusetu sem aðrar konungadætr'.<sup>11</sup> This Þornbjörg will not do, instead making a lengthy speech to reason with her father as to why she should have a share of his kingdom: 'ok þvi bið ek þik, faðir, at þú fáir mér nokkut af ríki þínu til forráða, meðan þú ert á lífi, ok reyna ek svá stjórn ok umsjá þeira manna'.<sup>12</sup> She rules it as a king, with a male retinue to augment her security, until she is quite literally won over by Hrólfr in battle, after which they marry.

What these women have in common are strength and skill in combat, tempered with domestic skills such as weaving or embroidery, physical beauty, and a propensity to cross-dress and/or wear armour. In itself, a desire to behave as a man is not necessarily a bad thing in medieval culture; after all, a patriarchal society highly values maleness. The attempts of these women to imitate male behavior are often tolerated initially, but ultimately they incur disapproval, particularly from their fathers. As David Wyatt writes of masculine women in Old Norse literature, "the saga accounts suggest that there were only a certain number of social situations in which such behavior was deemed appropriate or necessary".<sup>13</sup> Brynhildr, as a valkyrie, seems allowed to behave in this manner aside from Óðinn's censure, but the others face disapproval and censure. Within the world of the sagas, the heroines are allowed to be shieldmaidens for a time, but such a state of gender transgression

cannot be allowed to continue forever, for it threatens the status quo. Marriage is a rite of passage into adulthood, and the implication is that for a female to act as a man is childish or immature, and to grow up the shieldmaidens must put away childish things and assume fully the feminine arts for which they have already displayed talent, though they have no interest in them. The misplaced impulse to fight and act as a man must be redirected towards love and marriage.

Hervör, the two Brynhildrs, and Pornbörg are by no means the only shieldmaidens found in Old Norse literature, but I have chosen their stories as they represent a good range of shieldmaiden narratives. Two are ‘conquered’ in battle by male opponents as a precursor to marriage, one is considered malevolent not just for a woman but for a human being, and one is a fallen valkyrie controlled and manipulated by male figures despite her personal strengths. The complexities of the varied material in the *Poetic Edda* has stopped me from addressing those poems in this essay, but Leslie Donovan does examine shieldmaiden and valkyrie figures from the *Poetic Edda* and their relationship to *LOTR* in her article ‘The Valkyrie Reflex in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*’.<sup>14</sup> It seems likely that Tolkien also drew inspiration from sources other than Old Norse literature. Jennifer Neville has written on the Victorian view of Anglo-Saxon England which influenced Tolkien’s portrayal of his female characters, and Miryam Librán Moreno has written on the classical Greek and Latin motifs that contribute to the portrayal of Éowyn.<sup>15</sup> Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride suggest that Tolkien must have been familiar with historical female warriors such as the Amazons, and also women of prominence in the British military, and that such knowledge may have contributed to Éowyn’s characterisation.<sup>16</sup>

That Tolkien had knowledge of the Old Norse sagas is logical, given his academic work. As a professor of Anglo-Saxon and then English Language and Literature, he read and taught medieval literatures. His letter of application for the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professorship of Anglo-Saxon, University of

Oxford, describes the range of medieval courses that he taught at Leeds University, including Old Icelandic.<sup>17</sup> While Germanic medieval literature is traditionally seen as a major influence on *The Lord of the Rings*,<sup>18</sup> such blanket statements are not always followed by detailed evidence. Writing in 2003, Leslie Donovan noted that no detailed study had been made of the analogues in Germanic literature for female characters in *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>19</sup> Though concerned only with Éowyn, this essay is an attempt to partially redress that lack.

A preliminary note on terminology. The word ‘valkyrie’ comes from the Old Norse *valkyrja*, a goddess who acted on behalf of Óðinn in battle to choose those meant to die. Valkyries are supernatural beings. The word for shieldmaiden is *skjaldmær*, and although it can be used interchangeably with *valkyrja* it has the more distinct meaning of a female warrior, not necessarily supernatural.<sup>20</sup> These terms and concepts are explored more fully in Leslie Donovan’s article on the valkyrie tradition in *The Lord of the Rings*, and more generally in Jenny Jochens’ book on Old Norse women.<sup>21</sup> ‘Shieldmaiden’ only will be used in this analysis, as the Old Norse heroines under discussion have no supernatural powers and are *skjaldmeyjar* rather than *valkyrjar*, with the exception of Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga*.

### **Defining Misogyny**

It is *de rigueur* for any essay concerning the female characters in Tolkien’s work to include a discussion of the criticisms the author has faced. Critical opinion is divided on whether the portrayal of all of Tolkien’s female characters betrays feminism or misogyny.<sup>22</sup> Laura Michel summarises the issue as follows:

For years, Tolkien has been criticized, attacked, explained, forgiven, and mainly misunderstood when it comes to the matter of women. Criticism on this topic has ranged from mild attempts to excuse Tolkien’s point of view to truly violent accusations of misogyny and chauvinism, sometimes drawing completely unfounded conclusions

about his private life. Those who try to exculpate Tolkien often justify his 'exclusion' of women as due to stylistic and generic constraints (the epic has never allotted important roles to women), or argue that it has to do with his education and his living in a male-dominated scholarly society.<sup>23</sup>

Accusations of misogyny are easy to come by, an extreme example being Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride's conclusion that an implicit theme in Tolkien's work is that 'women must be ugly, or make themselves ugly, or at least distance themselves from femininity, in order to fight'.<sup>24</sup> Other critics are more positive in their scholarship, and Maureen Thum goes so far as to argue that Tolkien's portrayal of Éowyn is in fact subversive: 'Her mask of unconventionality allows Tolkien to depict her independent nature in far stronger terms than if she stated her rebellion against women's traditional roles in overt and clearly discernible forms'.<sup>25</sup> However, definitions of misogyny as used by these critics are less easily found.

Simply put, misogyny is the hatred of women or prejudice against them.<sup>26</sup> The underlying principle of misogyny is the belief that women are physically, mentally, morally and even spiritually inferior to men, therefore they are weak and in need of man's care. Women require the guidance of men, to whom they must be completely subservient. Women cannot or should not be educated, conduct their own affairs, hold jobs (especially those traditionally held by men) or develop personalities. Misogynists often distrust or fear women, especially their sexuality. Misogyny can be applied selectively, to certain groups or perceived types of women, or to individuals or women as a whole gender. *The Lord of the Rings* is not an explicitly misogynist text, as it expresses no overt belief in the inferiority of women to men; however, misogyny in literature is often more implicit than explicit.

In *The Troublesome Helpmate*, Katharine Rogers traces the expression of misogyny in literature from biblical and classical antiquity through to twentieth-century American and English literature.<sup>27</sup> Her texts are selective, with a chapter on medieval texts that ignores the early period in favour of the

High and Late Middle Ages, but through chronological analysis she convincingly argues for both a biblical and Greco-Roman base for misogyny in European literature. Misogyny in literature, for Rogers, includes ‘not only direct expressions of hatred, fear, or contempt of womankind, but such indirect expressions as misogynistic speeches by dramatic characters who are definitely speaking for the author and condemnations of one woman or type of woman which spread, implicitly or explicitly, to the whole sex’ (xii-xiii). She is prepared to excuse those authors who are merely products of their time: ‘The view that women are inferior to men and therefore should be subordinated to them is not in itself misogynistic, because it was almost universally held until modern times. But when an author insists on this view to an extent unusually harsh for his period [...] he is surely revealing misogyny’ (xiii). By Rogers’ argument, medieval texts that portray women as inferior are not misogynistic, whatever else they may be, but if Tolkien’s text proves misogynistic then he himself can be labeled a misogynist, for being out of step with mid-twentieth-century values. But was he? Critical opinion is divided, with Maria Raffaella Benvenuto, for one, believing that Tolkien was “a man of his times with an according point of view – which does not make him necessarily a chauvinist”.<sup>28</sup> However, despite Rogers’ claim, an author’s historical context alone cannot excuse him from misogyny, nor condemn him, because, as Kate Millett demonstrates and I discuss below, misogyny functions as a tool of the patriarchy at an insidious level. The unconscious or unintentional expression of misogyny, whether or not in accordance with accepted contemporary views, is worth examination as much as intentional expressions.

The misogynist view of women as inferior in both body and mind has its beginnings in early literature. Rogers compares two versions of Genesis 2, by the so-called Elohist and Jahwist sources. The former has Adam and Eve created both in God’s likeness, with woman being subordinate to man but also ‘his natural companion, essential to his welfare and happiness’ (ix). The Jahwist source, however, is responsible for having Eve created from Adam’s rib, and

thus 'the implication that to this day she [woman] exists not in her own right, but only as a "help meet," an accessory to man' (4). Medieval thinking built on passages from both the Old and New Testaments as well as classical philosophy to hold that 'woman is morally weaker than man and was created only to fulfill her sexual function' (67). While Rogers also discusses the role of the myth of Pandora's box, Kate Millett makes explicit the connection between this myth and that of the Fall, since they share similar themes and have survived 'even in a rationalist era which has long ago given up literal belief in it while maintaining its emotional assent intact. This mythic version of the female as the cause of human suffering, knowledge, and sin is still the foundation of sexual attitudes, for it represents the most crucial argument of the patriarchal tradition in the West.'<sup>29</sup> Through these two overarching myths, women are portrayed as inherently lustful and evil, so that misogynist literature 'directs its fiercest enemy at feminine guile and corruption, and particularly that element of it which is sexual, or, as such sources would have it, wanton.'<sup>30</sup>

This particular form of misogyny is absent in *LOTR*, which is as a whole free of sexual lust. Evil in *LOTR* is figured as male through Sauron, Saruman, the Nazgûl, Gollum, and others. However, the contrasting goodness is not figured as exclusively female but also as male, channeled as it is through the hobbits, Gandalf, Aragorn, and the rest of the Fellowship. The female characters are scarce but benevolent: Galadriel, Goldberry, Arwen, and Éowyn herself. One exception is Shelob, female and bestial, but also not human.<sup>31</sup> None of these women are considered lascivious, nor any of the men. The only character implicated in sexual lust is Gríma Wormtongue, who 'watched her [Éowyn] under [his] eyelids and haunted her steps' and, called a snake by Gandalf, recalls the serpent in Eden (*TT*, 509). Therefore Tolkien's work disregards the conventional literary model of misogyny, which holds women as corrupting influences on men. All evil and corruption in *The Lord of the Rings* comes from male characters, while women are positive forces of healing and goodness.

Though *LOTR* lacks sex, it does not want for portrayals of love. The feminist writers under discussion here consider the concept of heterosexual love as a further tool of the patriarchy. Rogers describes what she calls “the cult of courtly love” as having a mitigating effect, however illusory, on medieval misogyny, but notes that there was also a movement against it (58).<sup>32</sup> Millett agrees that ideals of both courtly and romantic love have served to somewhat ‘soften’ the patriarchy, while still restricting women, as ‘both have had the effect of obscuring the patriarchal character of Western culture and in their general tendency to attribute impossible virtues to women, have ended by confining them in a narrow and often remarkably constricting sphere of behavior’ (37). *Fin’amors* is not a theme of *LOTR* or of Éowyn and Faramir’s relationship for, as discussed below, their love is based on mutual admiration and respect. But as Millett continues, marriage, considered the legitimate outcome of love, is really an economic transaction involving ‘an exchange of the female’s domestic service and (sexual) consortium in return for financial support’ (35). The question for *LOTR*, then, is what do love and marriage mean in Tolkien’s world: is love a disguise for the weak position of women, and marriage merely an exchange of benefits?

### **Tolkien’s Shieldmaiden**

Éowyn is first seen attending to King Théoden in Rohan. She is not physically imposing, like Þornbjörg on her throne, but delicate, ‘like a morning of pale spring that is not yet come to womanhood’ (*TT*, 504).<sup>33</sup> The two Brynhildr are introduced at the end of their fighting careers, and Hervör and Þornbjörg at the beginning, but Éowyn is not introduced as a warrior at all. Later, she bears the cup to Théoden and his guests, a traditional role for noble women in Germanic heroic literature, played by both Brynhildr (of *Völsunga saga*) and Þornbjörg (when married).<sup>34</sup> When the party prepares to leave and Háma suggests that Éowyn be named as ruler in Théoden’s place another role for her emerges; one

that Théoden had not previously considered. Théoden gives her a sword and corslet (*TT*, 512), perhaps intended largely as a ceremonial gift, for it is not clear if Éowyn will be expected to use the sword and armour to defend Edoras should the others not return. Although no other shieldmaidens are depicted in the novel, Éowyn has obviously been trained to fight, so her skills are not a controversial issue, and she is not a threat to masculinity and traditional male roles; indeed the people of Rohan have great respect for her. However, her feminine beauty and nobility in the hall are foregrounded over her fighting skills in these early scenes in chapter six of *TT*, “The King of the Golden Hall”. Her story therefore inverts the first part of the shieldmaiden motif: while Éowyn is kept from battle but goes on to win glory, the other shieldmaidens fight first and then are prevented from doing so.

It is unclear how much personal authority Éowyn has in the kingdom, even when she has been placed in charge. She is initially too obedient to defy Théoden, unlike Þornbjörg who reasons with her father until he gives her a share of his kingdom. In order to rule effectively Þornbjörg has to assume a male identity and call herself a king, not a queen, while Éowyn is loved by her people as she is, ‘fearless and high-hearted’ (*TT*, 512). The placement of Éowyn in this position of power creates a conflict between duty and desire: she wants to fight, but her people need her. It is a dilemma shared by all leaders when defence is required beyond the home front, but not one faced by any Old Norse shieldmaiden, because none except Þornbjörg were ever entrusted with such leadership or governing power. Théoden and Éomer have to ride away to war, so someone must stay behind. In choosing to go to battle Éowyn forsakes her duty. Éowyn’s subsequent injury could be seen as a punishment for leaving her people, but it is more likely that the text condemns the barring of a trained shieldmaiden from battle. Nancy Enright writes, ‘Éowyn has grown up feeling cramped and devalued’ because her culture ‘highly values physical prowess and strength in arms’ and yet she has been ‘kept from activities that she proves herself to have been more than capable of performing’.<sup>35</sup> Thum would have it

that Éowyn ‘recognizes clearly that traditional women’s roles are a trap,’<sup>36</sup> although leadership of a people is not a traditional female role.

In the Old Norse sagas there is a sense that a female warrior is abnormal or even abhorrent, because she has usurped a male role, but not in *The Lord of the Rings*. For Éowyn to be both woman and warrior is not problematic. King Eiríkr does not like Þornbjörg’s masculine behaviour and tries to confine her to her room, but Théoden and Éomer are unsurprised when Éowyn comes to meet them ‘with long braided hair gleaming in the twilight’, wearing a helmet and ‘clad to the waist like a warrior and girded with a sword’ (RK, 778), like any Old Norse shieldmaiden in her armour. However, one wonders if Éowyn’s male relatives would accept her as a shieldmaiden if she were to behave as violently as Þornbjörg, Hervör and Brynhildr, who can seem as terrifying as any *berserkr*. Éowyn is not nearly so aggressive; she is ‘slender and tall’ but strong and ‘stern as steel’ (TT, 504). She is a gentler sort of shieldmaiden, who combines physical strength with mental competence, and replaces domestic skills such as weaving and embroidery with governmental authority and service in the hall.<sup>37</sup>

Éowyn’s femininity is not compromised by her ability to fight, and indeed she is described as if her features are enhanced by the wearing of (masculine) armour. The Old Norse shieldmaidens are beautiful too, perhaps because they would be more repulsive and less sympathetic if ugly. Éowyn does not have to be ugly or distanced from her femininity to be able to fight, as Fredrick and McBride contend.<sup>38</sup> Instead, at a crucial moment in the battle of the Pelennor Fields her beauty is emphasised when she lets down her hair so that it ‘gleamed with pale gold upon her shoulders’. She then proclaims her gender: ‘No living man am I! You look upon a woman’ (RK, 823), and smites the Lord of the Nazgûl. Not only is her womanhood no barrier to fighting, but it is the very reason why she is able to defeat the Witch-King. There is no recrimination for the deception that Éowyn employed to get to this point, rather, as Thum writes, ‘the male characters do not condemn her for donning a disguise in order to go

to war. Instead, they recognize and honor her for her qualities as a warrior'.<sup>39</sup> Leslie Donovan finds Éowyn progressive, in that she 'realizes a full human potential that joins both her masculine and feminine selves, which was impossible for other valkyrie antecedents such as Brynhild and Hervör'.<sup>40</sup> I agree; the Old Norse heroines combined the masculine pursuits of war with feminine arts in the hall, but ultimately they must choose one over the other (inevitably feminine over masculine). Brynhildr wears a helmet and mailcoat at her wedding to Þvari, 'en þó vǫru ástir þeira góðar',<sup>41</sup> presumably because she left the fighting to her husband. A union of masculine and feminine lifestyles seems impossible for a medieval shieldmaiden, because the domestic hall and the battlefield were worlds apart.

*The Lord of the Rings* acknowledges the difficulties for women like Éowyn, 'born in the body of a maid' (RK, 848), with the expectation of physical weakness and her part being only in the house (RK, 767). Rather than being physically deformed by battle like Brynhildr (of *Bósa saga*), Éowyn is mentally scarred, but her illness did not begin on the battlefield. Kept from battle, Éowyn is unhappy and emotionally isolated in Edoras, where Wormtongue has 'haunted her steps' (TT, 509). Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga* is twice found in physical isolation, first inside a fort (ch. 21) and secondly surrounded by a ring of fire (ch. 29).<sup>42</sup> Éowyn, touched by frost, is not surrounded by any barrier but still feels caged and alone.

Aragorn is the Sigurðr who wakes Éowyn from her sleep, first metaphorically at Edoras and then literally in the Houses of Healing (although there he has her brother complete the waking). His presence induces a change in her, for her brother Éomer 'knew not that [she] was touched by any frost, until she first looked on' Aragorn (RK, 848), and in him she finds 'a hope of glory and great deeds, and lands far from the fields of Rohan' (RK, 849). The love of the Old Norse women for the men who conquer them is never explored or explained in any similar way. All the women with the exception of Hervör simply marry the man who proves stronger than themselves, and while

Brynhildr found in Sigurðr an intellectual and physical equal, their love is doomed, as is Éowyn's for Aragorn. Both Brynhildr and Éowyn's stories invoke the Sleeping Beauty motif, a metaphor for growing up and 'awakening to adult life'.<sup>43</sup> Éowyn's awakening is completed by her romance with Faramir. It is tempting to see Faramir as the Gunnarr figure here, a second-class hero who wins Éowyn by default, Aragorn being already betrothed. However, Aragorn made no promises to Éowyn and she comes to love Faramir fully. So, in the words of Thum, 'Tolkien thus validates Éowyn's unconventional role by rewarding her with happiness and fulfillment, not as a man, but as a woman.'<sup>44</sup>

In her early desires, Éowyn is one of the most heroic or heroic-thinking characters in *LOTR*. She longs to do great deeds and win renown, with less bloodthirstiness than her Old Norse counterparts but the same desire for a glory that transcends her current life. This desire is not unusual for any man or woman within the world of the story, rather, what is unusual is her timidity about acting upon her desires. Though she begs to ride with Aragorn through the Paths of the Dead, there is no scene of her begging to fight with Théoden and Éomer; instead, she quietly accepts their decision that she should stay behind to govern, and it takes time for her to gather the courage to defy them. She says to Aragorn, 'I have waited on faltering feet long enough. Since they falter no longer, it seems, may I not now spend my life as I will?' (*RK*, 767). It takes her longer than the Old Norse shieldmaidens Hervör and Þornbjörg, who did not wait for their father's permission to do as they wished, but eventually she exercises her strong will and fulfils her desire for battle. Jennifer Neville sees Éowyn's action as a rejection of passivity, and concludes that 'far from being old-fashioned in his portrayal of women, Tolkien has been radically modern in depicting a woman who dares to do what would have been unthinkable in the culture upon which he based the Rohirrim.'<sup>45</sup> I do not think that Tolkien has been as radical as Neville suggests, for whatever the status of women in Anglo-Saxon England may have been, the fictional community of Rohan values them as possible leaders and warriors, although it is true that

Éowyn's full potential is disregarded until she is needed to govern in the absence of men. However, her participation in battle is hardly 'unthinkable', for she has been trained to fight.

Éowyn's motivation for acting as she does is more complex than a longing for valour. To Merry, her disguised face is 'the face of one without hope who goes in search of death' (RK, 785); her hope is lost because she thinks Aragorn will die on the Paths of the Dead. Though no shieldmaiden expresses a longing for death, they and Éowyn do not fear it. It seems impossible for her to win against the Lord of the Nazgûl but she faces him anyway, with indomitable courage. She succeeds, but also falls in battle, like the second Hervör of *Hervarar saga*, and like so many other Germanic warriors. Éowyn has fulfilled her two desires, the first to find valour and renown and the second, later desire to find death, for her injury from the Nazgûl is termed the Black Shadow and is akin to death: 'those who were stricken with it fell slowly into an ever deeper dream, and then passed to silence and a deadly cold, and so died' (RK, 842) Having experienced both glory and a death of sorts, she realises that they are still not enough, and something must replace or redirect her desire.

Éowyn's injuries from the battlefield, the pain of unrequited love and her isolation in Edoras have wounded her deeply, and she undergoes a metaphorical death. In the process of recovering from these wounds, her old self dies. The Old Norse women who were conquered in battle also underwent a dying of the self, to be reborn as women who expressed no desire to fight (whether they still felt the desire and suppressed it is a matter of conjecture). Unlike the shieldmaidens who put down their swords and instantly take up the needle and thread, Éowyn's renunciation of battle and return to the domestic sphere is the result of a slow healing process. Frederick and McBride call this healing 'a victory, not only for Faramir, but also for Middle-earth's civilization; an unruly impulse to transcend prescribed gender roles has been successfully thwarted',<sup>46</sup> but nowhere in the text is Éowyn a gender-transgressive figure. Frederick and McBride also diagnose Éowyn's ailment as formed from an

‘unwillingness to accept her lot in life: living as a female who, as such, is disbarred from a life of glory on the battlefield. Had she not been so healed, one can infer, she would have died. Tolkien’s choices for a would-be woman warrior: submit to your allotted role as wife, or die.’<sup>47</sup> I disagree. Aragorn, as healer, says that if Éowyn awakes to despair ‘she will die, unless other healing comes which I cannot bring’ (*RK*, 849). Her despair is an emotional ailment that is partly healed by the love of Faramir, but partly also by her own recognition that fighting does not bring her fulfilment, and that she would rather heal than wound. By contrast, no Old Norse shieldmaiden specifically chooses gardening or healing when they marry, although the full resumption of domestic duties is assumed to be an equal replacement for the desire to fight. Perhaps we may take the bearing of children as evidence of nurturing qualities, and indeed Þornbjörg and Hervör are each said to prefer one child above another, but Brynhildr leaves her daughter in the care of others when she marries Gunnarr.<sup>48</sup>

### **Love, Marriage, and Misogyny**

I earlier posed the question of what marriage means in Tolkien’s work, but first we must consider marriage in Old Norse literature. In the sagas we have discussed, the marriages depicted are relationships of power, usually male over female. Brynhildr becomes upset when she learns the man she married is not as talented as she thought, because he can no longer be considered her equal, but she is a rare case. Shieldmaidens marry the man who bests them in battle, or penetrates their ring of fire.

Though neither the selected Old Norse texts nor *LOTR* display a fear of woman’s sexual wiles, in the sagas there does seem to be a fear of female domination. As Rogers writes, ‘what the patriarch most resents in women is self-assertion, and he is hyper-sensitive to signs of this. Furthermore, a patriarchal system is apt to provoke women into struggling against it’ (93). Rogers cites here the stereotype of the gossip and women’s chatter as ways in

which medieval women were said to rail against the patriarchy, but cross-dressing is surely another. As Millett writes, the patriarchy dictates ‘a consonant and highly elaborate code of conduct, gesture and attitude for each sex’ (27). In an intensely patriarchal society, one of the few ways a woman can attempt to overcome her oppression is to behave like a man, and this must surely be a motivation for several of the shieldmaidens under discussion. David Wyatt agrees that the saga evidence suggests, ‘if a woman wished to attain an autonomous position of power and leadership over men then she must adopt appropriate masculine traits.’<sup>49</sup> The self-assertion through strength in arms of an Old Norse shieldmaiden is generally tolerated for a time, or even a source of mirth within the story, but it cannot continue forever. Woman must be put in her proper place by marriage to a man.

As Rogers describes, marriage during the Victorian era made it a vocation for women, one of ‘self-sacrifice’, and ‘devotion of her life to ministering to men’ (189). Aspirations to strength in body or mind were considered unfeminine, and men objected to competition from women in education and jobs (209). Rogers traces more overt expressions of hostility through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as women made greater gains in personal autonomy. A fear of domination by women was expressed, fuelled by Freud’s theories of the omnipotence of mothers and the role of the mother in the son’s sexual identity. As she writes, ‘the fear that the woman who is freed from restrictions will become man’s master lies at the root of patriarchal insistence of her subjection’ (275). This fear could be said to underlie all expressions of misogyny, including in Old Norse literature. If a woman can dress like a man and fight like a man, then there is nothing to separate the gender roles of men and women, and if the woman has more skill, then she is naturally the master of the man. Female equality exposes the myth of female inferiority.

In a letter to his son Michael dated 6-8 March 1947, Tolkien espouses at length his views on marriage and women.<sup>50</sup> He recognises the idealization of

women as a fantasy, because ‘woman is another fallen human-being with a soul in peril’, then further says that ‘women really have not much part in all this’ (49), ‘this’ being man’s love for them. The role of women, for Tolkien, is passive: ‘it is their gift to be receptive, stimulated, fertilized (in many other matters than the physical) by the male.’ While ‘modern conditions have changed feminine circumstances [...] they have not changed natural instinct’ (50). It is clear that Tolkien does not hate women in any sense, however, he maintains a belief in an inherent difference between the sexes that one is created superior and the other inferior. Tolkien was writing at a time when increasing numbers of women were entering universities and the workforce, hitherto mostly masculine domains. If he were to repeat the theme of the Old Norse sagas and label women who attempt traditionally masculine behaviours as deviant and in need of subordination, then he would be an overt misogynist, and he is not.

But is he a *covert* misogynist? Tolkien’s collected letters also contain a draft letter to a reader in which Tolkien discusses Éowyn specifically.<sup>51</sup> He says of her actions: ‘she was *not* herself ambitious in the true political sense. Though not a “dry nurse” in temper, she was also not really a soldier or “amazon”, but like many brave women was capable of great military gallantry at a crisis’ (323). This statement is not at odds with anything Tolkien wrote in *LOTR*, and gives no sense that Tolkien thought women’s place was in the home. He also discusses Éowyn’s feelings for Aragorn and Faramir, and says of Faramir, ‘I think he understood Éowyn very well.’ This much is clear in the text.

Faramir loves Éowyn for who she is. He recognises that she is ‘a lady high and valiant and [has] won renown that shall not be forgotten’, but also says that he would still love her if she were ‘sorrowless, without fear or any lack’ or ‘the blissful Queen of Gondor’ (*RK*, 943). He also helps her to overcome her pride, telling her not to ‘scorn pity that is the gift of a gentle heart’ (*RK*, 943). This acceptance of Éowyn in any form is what leads to her renunciation of arms. Paradoxically, now that Faramir has recognised and praised her legitimate strength of arms in explicit approval, she feels no need to exercise her skills

again. This is potentially problematic: was Éowyn merely seeking male approval? She then tells Faramir: '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 [...] No longer do I desire to be a queen' (RK, 943). Her desire, then, was not to perform valorous deeds for their own sake, but to earn personal glory. *LOTR* is a story that counsels against egotistic displays of power, most obviously in Sauron's hunger for the Ring, and so Éowyn learns that she does not need to earn glory to be happy. She chooses to marry Faramir of her own accord, and she does not, one assumes, wear a coat of mail at her wedding. Though she jokes with Faramir that people will say he 'tamed a wild shieldmaiden of the North' (RK, 944), it is clear that she gives herself willingly, and will rule as his equal, like Þornbjörg with Hrólf. In Aragorn she loved 'only a shadow and a thought' (RK, 849), but her love for Faramir is based on knowledge and understanding of his true self. For the Old Norse shieldmaidens marriage was dependent on giving up the fight, but Faramir imposes no conditions on Éowyn. He does not win her by defeating her in battle, and she is not ordered to marry by any male relative. It is entirely her choice.

Though it is her own decision, this exchange of swordplay for gardening may still seem sexist, a return to the gendered status quo sanctioned by the sagas, but Tolkien does not prescribe this route for all women. It is true that the other major female characters also marry at the end of the novel, if they are not already married, but so do most of the men. I agree with Nancy Enright, who sees Éowyn as choosing love over pride, in tandem with the other major female characters, 'a message central to the novel and one that transcends all gender roles'.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately Éowyn's coming-of-age – for it is a coming of age, a recognition of her true self and the direction of her adult future – happens as part of the greater coming-of-age of Middle-earth, the beginning of the new age. Although battles continue to be fought after Pelennor Fields, the destruction of the Ring and Aragorn's accession to the throne of Gondor signal the end of the

need to fight. All over Middle-earth there is instead a need for healing, which is essentially what the hobbits are doing in the Scouring of the Shire, and that healing allows them to settle down to married life (with the exception of Frodo). Weapons are not as useful now as love. As Maria Raffaella Benvenuto points out, Éowyn's desires to heal are 'the polar opposites of her former aspirations towards power and glory', and gardening and healing are 'not exclusively a feminine prerogative'.<sup>53</sup> While choosing to marry might mean 'an acceptance of traditional feminine roles (like motherhood) on her part [...] it also means embracing some definitely positive values generally considered as feminine, namely the refusal of violence, aggression and power for its own sake in favour of creativity and peace-making'.<sup>54</sup> This is a choice being made across Middle-earth.

Tolkien takes from the Old Norse sagas the general idea of the *skjaldmey* who wears armour and wields a sword with as much skill as any man. He follows the basic pattern of the maiden's 'taming' and marriage, but varies the reasoning behind the event and the way it happens, and inverts the early stages so that Éowyn submits to the will of her male relatives before choosing to follow her own desires. She finds these desires hollow, and so pursues a new role of her own accord. Rather than being violently won through defeat in battle, Éowyn chooses love after realising that valour is empty for her. Éowyn's life is more complicated than that of her literary ancestors, for in choosing to fight she also chooses to abandon her people, but the consequences of this abandonment are not explored. Her behaviour is not childish or wrong, and though not encouraged by her male relatives, it is tolerated, with no demands on her to give it up. Her desire has been misplaced, but recognition and correction of this comes from Éowyn herself, as the world around her changes also. Her decision to lay down arms is made independent of her decision to marry, and her marriage is not a match borne of violence, but of respect and love.

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<sup>1</sup> Specific examples of such criticism are given in Section Two, 'Defining Misogyny.'

<sup>2</sup> Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik (Odense: Odense University Press, 1992), 18. See also for background information on the sagas discussed here.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in poems found in the *Poetic Edda* (Old Norse), as a digression in *Beowulf* (Old English), and in the *Nibelungenlied* (Middle High German).

<sup>4</sup> 'Bósa saga ok Herrauðs,' chap. 2 in *Fornaldur Sögur Norðurlanda 3*, ed. Guðni Jonsson (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950), 284. My translation: 'They beat each other, and Brynhildr suffered a wound, until she was unable to fight. Pvari then took her to him and much property with her. He took care of her until she was healthy, and then she was bent and twisted, and so she was called Brynhildr Baga. Pvari married her, and she sat at the bride's bench with helmet and mail-coat, but their love was good anyway. Pvari left off raiding and settled in the household, and they had two sons.'

<sup>5</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1955/68; repr. Harper Collins, 1995), *The Return of the King*, chap. 6. Further references to the novels are given after quotations in the text. *The Two Towers* is abbreviated to *TT*, and *The Return of the King* to *RK*.

<sup>6</sup> *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. and trans. R. G. Finch (London: Thomas Nelson, 1965), 35. My translation: 'Óðinn stabbed me with a sleep-thorn in revenge and told me I should never again have victory, and that I must marry.'

<sup>7</sup> 'Had more skill with handicrafts than other women,' *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> 'A very beautiful girl' and 'as strong as men', *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, trans. Christopher Tolkien (London: Thomas Nelson, 1960), 10. All quotations are from this edition of the saga, but the translations are mine.

<sup>9</sup> 'Did more often bad than good, and when she was forbidden to do that, she ran to the forest and killed men for her own gain,' *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> 'She became weary of it,' 20.

<sup>11</sup> 'Hrólf's saga Gautrekssonar,' in *Fornaldur Sögur Norðurlanda 4*, ed. Guðni Jonsson (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1950), 51-176, 63. My translation: 'King Eiríkr did not like that she had the conduct of a man, and he told her to sit in her ladies' room like other kings' daughters'.

<sup>12</sup> 'And this I ask you, father, that you give to me some of your kingdom to manage, whilst you are alive, and I will try to govern and provide for those men,' 'Hrólf's saga Gautrekssonar,' 63.

<sup>13</sup> David Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain and Ireland, 800-1200* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 176. See Chapter Three, 'Slavery, Power and Gender,' especially 175-182.

<sup>14</sup> Leslie Donovan, 'The Valkyrie Reflex in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: Galadriel, Shelob, Éowyn, and Arwen,' in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance (London: Routledge, 2003), 106-32.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Neville, 'Women,' in *Reading the Lord of the Rings: New Writings on Tolkien's Trilogy*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Continuum, 2006), 101-10; and Miryam Librán Moreno, 'Greek and Latin Amatory Motifs in Éowyn's Portrayal,' *Tolkien Studies*, 4 (2007), 73-97.

<sup>16</sup> Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride, 'Battling the Woman Warrior: Females and Combat in Tolkien and Lewis,' *Mythlore*, 25, 3-4 (Spring-Summer 2007), 29-42, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, eds. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), letter 7, 12-13, 12.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, T. A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982; revd. London: HarperCollins, 2005), which discusses at length Tolkien's many influences.

<sup>19</sup> Donovan, 'The Valkyrie Reflex,' 108.

<sup>20</sup> These definitions are based on those in *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, 2nd ed (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957).

<sup>21</sup> Donovan, 'The Valkyrie Reflex,' and Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> See the introductions to recent articles such as Fredrick and McBride, 'Battling the Woman Warrior,' or Nancy Enright's 'Tolkien's Females and the Defining of Power', *Renascence*, 52.2 (Winter 2007), 93-108.

<sup>23</sup> 'Politically Incorrect: Tolkien, Women, and Feminism,' in *Tolkien and Modernity 1*, eds. Frank Weinreich and Thomas Honegger (Zollikofen, Switzerland: Walking Tree, 2006), 55-76, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Fredrick and McBride, 'Battling the Woman Warrior,' 40.

<sup>25</sup> Maureen Thum, 'Hidden in Plain View: Strategizing Unconventionality in Shakespeare's and Tolkien's Portraits of Women,' in *Tolkien and Shakespeare: Essays on Shared Themes and Language*, ed. Janet Brennan Croft (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), 229-50, 243.

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- <sup>26</sup> I base this discussion of misogyny on the definition in the OED and that used by Katherine M. Rogers in *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966).
- <sup>27</sup> Rogers, *The Troublesome Helpmate*.
- <sup>28</sup> Maria Raffaella Benvenuto, 'Against Stereotype: Eowyn and Luthien as 20th-Century Women,' in *Tolkien and Modernity 1*, eds. Frank Weinreich and Thomas Honegger (Zollikofen, Switzerland: Walking Tree, 2006), 31-54, 39.
- <sup>29</sup> Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Hart-Davis, 1971), 52.
- <sup>30</sup> Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 57.
- <sup>31</sup> See Donovan, 'The Valkyrie Reflex,' 118-21 for further discussion of Shelob.
- <sup>32</sup> The now prevailing term is *fin'amors*, and Rogers' appraisal of the 'cult' is far from thorough.
- <sup>33</sup> For an analysis of this and other images applied to Éowyn, see Librán Moreno, 'Greek and Latin Amatory Motifs.'
- <sup>34</sup> See also Michael J. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy, and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1996) for further exploration of this trope and its historical context.
- <sup>35</sup> Nancy Enright, 'Tolkien's Females,' 104.
- <sup>36</sup> Thum, 'Hidden in Plain View', 244.
- <sup>37</sup> Éowyn has both a ceremonial role as the king's niece and an official one when she is named leader while her father and brother are away. Both roles require her to greet and wait upon visitors in the hall.
- <sup>38</sup> Fredrick and McBride, 'Battling the Woman Warrior,' 40.
- <sup>39</sup> Thum, 'Hidden in Plain View', 245.
- <sup>40</sup> Donovan, 'The Valkyrie Reflex,' 109.
- <sup>41</sup> My translation: 'their love was good anyway', 'Bósa saga ok Herrauðs,' Chapter 2, 284.
- <sup>42</sup> *The Saga of the Volsungs*.
- <sup>43</sup> Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1980), 34.
- <sup>44</sup> Thum, 'Hidden in Plain View', 245.
- <sup>45</sup> Neville, 'Women,' 101-10, 102.
- <sup>46</sup> Fredrick and McBride, 'Battling the Woman Warrior,' 36.
- <sup>47</sup> Fredrick and McBride, 'Battling the Woman Warrior,' 35.
- <sup>48</sup> *The Saga of the Volsungs*, chap. 29.
- <sup>49</sup> Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors*, 180.
- <sup>50</sup> Carpenter and Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, letter 43, 48-54.
- <sup>51</sup> Carpenter and Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, letter 244, 323-24.
- <sup>52</sup> Nancy Enright, 'Tolkien's Females and the Defining of Power,' 95.
- <sup>53</sup> Raffaella Benvenuto, 'Against Stereotype,' 50-51.
- <sup>54</sup> Raffaella Benvenuto, 'Against Stereotype,' 50-51.