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# The Shieldmaiden of Rohan

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# The Shieldmaiden of Rohan

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Undergraduate Student Essay First Place Winner

Hannah Woodard

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### The Shieldmaiden of Rohan

In spite of, or perhaps due to, their few appearances in “The Lord of the Rings,” J.R.R. Tolkien’s female characters have sparked some of the hottest debate surrounding his works. Of these women, Éowyn is easily the most complex. She is hard to classify as she struggles to find her place in a male-dominated world which affirms bravery and conquest in battle. Éowyn must also find a balance between the masculine and feminine personality traits which she embodies, and like many of the main characters, she also must battle her desire for power, renown and glory won in battle.

Tolkien holds traditional views of women’s roles and what femininity should look like, but he still presents women as equal to men, though he believes they are definitely different. He believes that men and women should maintain a balance of feminine and masculine qualities, although just how much of each is appropriate is determined by their gender. Though Éowyn finds her glory in battle and plays a key role in the fate of Middle Earth, she is not ultimately fulfilled until the passing of Sauron and the Third Age and her acceptance of a new more peaceful power as a healer, paralleling the new peace which has come to Middle Earth.

Éowyn belongs to a culture in which the highest good is glory found on the battlefield, a world closed to women. As a woman, Éowyn’s role is in the home, acting as a hostess and watching over the needs of her failing uncle, the king. She performs both of these roles faithfully, but much to the torment of her soul. From the moment she is introduced, she is described as “grave and thoughtful.” The inner struggle to find her

significance in the culture of Rohan has weighed her down with concerns of a woman far beyond her years.<sup>1</sup> Above all, Éowyn fears “a cage,” a symbolic representation of the gender chains of her culture.<sup>2</sup> Éowyn claims the title of “shieldmaiden of Rohan” in a measure to escape these constraints.<sup>3</sup> Though she does not forsake her womanly duties, such as nursing Théoden or acting as hostess to Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli,<sup>4</sup> Éowyn has not fully come to terms with her femininity. In their first encounter, Aragorn perceives her as “fair and cold, like a morning of pale spring that has not yet come to womanhood.”<sup>5</sup>

Éowyn twice is asked to stay behind when the men ride off to fight, left behind as the guardian of her people. The first time, Éowyn complies, watching the men ride off at a distance, longing to be with them.<sup>6</sup> The second time, she pleads to come with Aragorn as he takes the paths of the dead, but is rejected once more.<sup>7</sup> Éowyn finally takes matters into her own hands. In a subversive act of defiance, she disguises herself as a soldier, takes on the name “Dernhelm” and rides to battle. She is motivated not only by her desire to prove herself and find renown, but also is driven by love for her king and a passionate devotion to her country. While not following the letter of the law which dictated that she mind the duty to her country by staying behind with her people, Éowyn did heed the spirit of her responsibilities by becoming a warrior on her people’s behalf.<sup>8</sup> By riding to battle, she does her king, country and world a far greater service than if she had stayed

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1 Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 152.

2 Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 68.

3 *Ibid.*, 67.

4 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, 168.

5 *Ibid.*, 152.

6 *Ibid.*, 165.

7 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 68,

8 Chance, Jane. “The Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's Epic.” *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Books, 2004.), 224.

behind.

In her defeat of the witch king, Éowyn plays a crucial role in Middle Earth's destiny. Fate is a major theme in Tolkien's work; however, the "Fate which governs all here is not arbitrary... it is to some extent determined by individual acts of will."<sup>9</sup> Through the individual actions of characters, fate can become reality. Éowyn certainly has a strong will, which leads her to take drastic actions such as riding off to war and choosing to face the Witch-king, ending in the defeat of one of Sauron's most powerful forces.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, while Éowyn's battle with the captain of the Nazgûl is the height of her accomplishments as a warrior, her feminine identity is never more important than at that moment. Glorfindel's prophecy states that the witch-king will not fall "by the hand of man;" however, Éowyn is able to defeat him, crying "but no living man am I! You look upon a woman."<sup>11</sup> By emphasizing this distinction – the word "man" in the prophecy is very specific and literal – Tolkien furthers his position that men and women are fundamentally different. Yet Éowyn, though not the same as a man, is certainly just as capable of great deeds. Tolkien remarks that "like many brave women, [she] was capable of great military gallantry at a crisis."<sup>12</sup> To Tolkien, Éowyn is not an anomaly. She performs a crucial role in a desperate time, as he believes many women are capable of doing and have done.

At first glance, Tolkien seems to backtrack on this empowerment of women in the

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9 Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "Power and Meaning in Lord of the Rings." *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Books, 2004.), 59.

10 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 143.

11 *Ibid.*, 439, 141

12 Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 323.

ending which he gives Éowyn's character. He seems to overlook Éowyn's gender in the time of crisis, but when the dire dilemma passes, she must come to terms with her feminine identity and what that means for her role in society. Recovering from her wounds in Gondor, she meets Faramir, who is also healing from battle. In essence, it appears that Éowyn is "tamed" by Faramir. Her warrior spirit, which Tolkien has previously fulfilled and exalted, diminishes, and Éowyn is ready to accept her femininity. This raises alarm in many critics. Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride even go so far as to say that "Tolkien's choices for a would-be woman warrior [are] submit to your allotted role as wife, or die."<sup>13</sup> However, this accusation is perhaps a bit hasty. Tolkien thinks of Éowyn as neither a "dry nurse" nor a true soldier or "amazon," so she cannot truly fit into either of these proposed choices.<sup>14</sup> Éowyn's grief does not end until after the earthquake which, unbeknownst to Éowyn and Faramir, signals the downfall of Sauron and the end of the war. Éowyn's heart changes at this point and not before. Now that the need for battle has passed, her desire is gone, not stifled. Marion Zimmer Bradley suggests that Éowyn "achieves the passing of the 'Heroic Age'" in her rebellion against the gender norms of her culture.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, she has come of age, and can now become a woman. Her need to identify herself as a warrior has passed, along with the passing of Sauron and the Heroic Age.

Nor does Éowyn simply submit to her culturally designated role as a wife. At her turning point, she embraces not a domestic role, but an active career as a healer. Healers

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13 Frederick, Candice, and McBride, Sam. "Battling the woman warrior: females and combat in Tolkien and Lewis."

14 Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 323.

15 Bradley, Marion Zimmer. "Men, Halflings, and Hero Worship". *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Books, 2004.), 82.

possess a kind of power, but not a destructive version. Healing is a gift associated with royalty. Nancy Enright suggests that Éowyn's "personal healing involves... a movement from a desire for power and domination (i.e. as a queen) to the desire to heal and to help things grow."<sup>16</sup> It is a turning away from a power which brings death toward a power which brings life. Tolkien does not present this as submission or a position in any way lower than those of the novel's men. He affirms this shift to a subtler gentler power most clearly through Éowyn's male counterpart, Faramir, who – though accomplished in battle – will not be king.

Faramir's story parallels Éowyn's in many ways. Both have grown up in entirely male families, having lost mothers at an early age, and so have felt pressure toward the "masculine" warlike kind of power.<sup>17</sup> For Faramir, the embodiment of pure masculinity has been his brother, Boromir. Boromir's ambition and desire for power, unchecked by humility, lead him to try to seize the Ring, which ultimately leads to his destruction.<sup>18</sup> Faramir rejects the Ring and symbolically this type of power, repressing his strength with humility and discretion, and is spared Boromir's fate.<sup>19</sup> Éowyn and Faramir have both been wounded by battle, just as they have been marginalized and oppressed by their warlike cultures in which they have no real place. With the destruction of the Ring, Faramir feels a glimmer of hope and an inexplicable joy for Éowyn and himself. Now is the time for the triumph of a different kind of power.<sup>20</sup>

If Éowyn has been punished for anything, it is not for her desire to participate in

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16 Enright, Nancy. "Tolkien's Females and the Defining of Power." *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*. Winter 2007.), 109.

17 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 296, 439.

18 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 514-517.

19 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, 366-367.

20 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 297

masculine endeavors, but her motivations for doing so. Wood presents Éowyn as a character flawed by only one thing: imprudence. He accuses her of “seeking merely her own good rather than the good of friends and the larger community”.<sup>21</sup> This is an overstatement. Éowyn clearly has more than her own glory in mind when she faces the Witch-King. Only someone motivated out of such great love for her king and father figure could face the horrors she sees in battle. When Théoden falls, only Éowyn remains to fight the Nazgûl. She is “faithful beyond fear; and [s]he wept, for [s]he had loved [her] lord as a father.”<sup>22</sup>

However, Wood’s accusation of imprudence can be supported to some extent; this character flaw is more evident outside of the battlefield. Enright argues that “though (Éowyn’s) action is truly heroic... her experience of power must deepen through renunciation of it.”<sup>23</sup> Éowyn asks, “Shall I always be left behind when the Riders depart, to mind the house while they win renown?” She wishes, once Théoden is healed, to live her life as she pleases. Aragorn rebukes her, pointing out that “few may do that with honor,” and he urges her to complete her charge to watch over Rohan.<sup>24</sup> Aragorn reminds Éowyn that renown should not be the supreme goal of valorous deeds nor their measure. Éowyn does not accept this, accusing Aragorn of simply saying these things because she is a woman. However, Aragorn is not speaking only with regard to her sex here. He truly believes what he says. Instead of riding to war, he is about to take the Paths of the Dead, a pathway appointed him, but one that will lead to no great glory or renown should he

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21 Wood, Ralph C. *The Gospel According to Tolkien*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.), 80.

22 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 141.

23 Enright, 106.

24 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 67.

fail.<sup>25</sup> To Éowyn, this is incomprehensible, even madness. This desire for acknowledgement is perhaps a contributing factor in her great sadness and unrest in the Houses of Healing. Though she is healed in body, she says that she will sicken again if she has nothing to do. She feels devalued by her injury which now keeps her from battle, saying, “It is not always good to be healed in body. Nor is it always evil to die in battle... Were I permitted, in this dark hour I would choose the latter.”<sup>26</sup> Though she has proved herself quite emphatically on the battlefield, she is not satisfied. Éowyn is deeply troubled by an unknown darkness, a shadow perhaps representing the sin of the over-desire of power.

The destructive nature of prideful ambition is one of Tolkien’s overarching themes in the epic. Éowyn’s desire may seem more innocent than the desire of a character like Boromir for the Ring, but really, it is not much different – perhaps only by a matter of scale. Boromir’s design for the Ring is cloaked with good intentions, but ultimately, he wants the Ring for the power which it can bring him. Éowyn is never presented with the Ring, but one can only imagine that she might be tempted to wield it to do great deeds and serve her people, but ultimately, to win honor and recognition from a culture which does not value her in the way she desires.

Éowyn’s worship of the powerful warrior image is concentrated in her infatuation with – and what one might call worship of – Aragorn. She is not in love in the romantic sense, though she believes so; unknowingly, she sees him as the warrior and king, who is the ideal of her country, and everything she cannot be. Aragorn perceives this, noting that

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25 Ibid., 68.

26 Ibid., 292.

“in me, she loves only a shadow and a thought: a hope of glory and great deeds, and lands far from the fields of Rohan.”<sup>27</sup> Éowyn repeatedly uses the familiar “thee” and “thou” with Aragorn, who gently but firmly insists on returning her addresses with the polite and more formal “you”.<sup>28</sup> Éowyn’s realization that she can never be with Aragorn, because of his faithfulness to Arwen, is also a symbolic denial of her value as a warrior and the loss of an opportunity for renown. This passion of unrequited “love” also contributes to Éowyn’s darkness and internal struggle.

Faramir perceives this struggle and feels pity for Éowyn. He sees her as a strong and valiant warrior and treats her as an equal.<sup>29</sup> He gently reminds her that she has already won great renown, and he reveals his love for her. He begs her to forget her desire for Aragorn and for power and to accept love based on her inner worth, not on her deeds or position in life, but based on her essence – a large part of which is her identity as a woman. Finally confronted with the reality of her situation, “the heart of Éowyn changed, or at last she understood it.”<sup>30</sup> She declares: “Behold! The shadow has departed! I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren... No longer do I desire to be a queen.”<sup>31</sup> She has given up the sin of the over-desire of glory and power, and her winter passes.

Not only is this turn of Éowyn’s character a turning away from her sin and gloom, but it is an embracing of power of another kind. It is the paradoxical power that Tolkien

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27 Ibid., 175.

28 Kocher, Paul H. *Master of Middle Earth: The Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972.), 156.

29 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, 293.

30 Ibid., 299.

31 Ibid., 300.

believes comes with humility and love. Nancy Enright remarks that true power, according to Tolkien, is found only through renouncing dominance and giving freely of oneself, thinking of others more highly than oneself. Aragorn, Faramir and Gandalf are all cited as examples of characters who exemplify this type of selflessness and enjoy greater power through it, as opposed to those characters who selfishly cling to self-glorification and ambition such as Boromir, Saruman and Denethor.<sup>32</sup> Enright also suggests that the women in the novel are perhaps more naturally inclined toward this giving attitude. Galadriel is a good example, refusing the power of the Ring though it is obviously a temptation and deciding to allow her land to diminish instead of becoming a dark and powerful queen.<sup>33</sup>

Éowyn, however, does not find the transition to this state of mind easy. In fact, she can only undergo this change with guidance from Faramir. According to Jennifer Neville, this relationship highlights a larger theme in the novel; major characters who have a counterpart of the opposite sex, in general, fare much better than characters who do not. Aragorn and Arwen, Galadriel and Celeborn, Sam and Rosie, and Faramir and Éowyn have much happier endings than Saruman, Denethor, Boromir, Gollum and even Frodo.<sup>34</sup> In fact, every character, with the exception of Gandalf, who has a chance to take the Ring and refuses it, is a member of a romantic pair. Those who desire the power of the Ring – and who are often destroyed by it – are on the whole lonely male characters. Tolkien's point is not simply advocacy of marriage and romantic relationships. Romance is hardly

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32 Enright, 109.

33 Ibid., 109.

34 Neville, Jennifer. "Women." *Reading The Lord of the Rings: New Writings on Tolkien's Classic*. (New York : Continuum, 2005.), 107

an emphasized point of the novel, and characters like Faramir and Sam are unconcerned with romantic love at the moments when they are presented with the Ring. Their romantic counterparts are symbolic of a crucial element of their character which allows them to overcome the Ring's power. Tolkien believes that an individual must possess both masculine and feminine traits, working in harmony, to be a balanced and healthy person. This balance manifests itself in a way which allows the character to understand the opposite gender and therefore engage in a successful romantic relationship.

In Éowyn, Tolkien presents his readers with a character who is marginalized by her culture, but rises above her circumstances to achieve an astonishing victory in a different manner than expected. The dissatisfaction she feels with her newly found power and identity as a warrior sparks her inner struggle with her femininity, paralleling other characters' struggle to find balance between their self-motivated power and the humbler, quieter power which comes through selflessness. Éowyn must come to terms with her womanhood, but it is more important that she forsake her struggle for power and find significance in bringing life and renewal to Middle Earth, completing the redemptive theme which runs throughout the book.

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