

THE PROBLEM OF ÉOWYN: A LOOK AT ETHICS AND VALUES IN MIDDLE-EARTH

Dawn Catanach

It is a fair criticism to point out the paucity—in numbers—of female characters in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In this case, however, what is lacking in quantity is made up for in quality. Where earlier writers such as Malory may have put a sizable number of women in epic narratives such as *Le Morte Darthur*, their women characters are quite flat; in many cases these women do not even warrant a name while each knight, no matter how minor, is named. In contrast to such treatment, Tolkien proves himself capable of writing female characters with much more depth and complexity. Éowyn is an excellent example of this: not only is her role non-traditional, she is morally ambiguous. Some call her a heroine while others consider her a deserter. But she is not unequivocally deserving of either label. The truth of her character lies somewhere in between.

From a deontological point of view, Éowyn deserts. Simply put, she ran off to war instead of staying behind to lead the people of Rohan in the absence of Théoden and Éomer. Clearly, because she did not stay behind, she shirked her duties, thereby committing an ethical wrong. However, this view ignores the mitigating circumstances in Éowyn's situation. Hers is not a straightforward case of disobedience. Éowyn fulfills the letter of her duty, at least as far as the reader knows what that duty is. Théoden's explicit instructions to her are to lead the people to Dunharrow and to rule them in his absence. Aragorn finds her at Dunharrow, where he reminds Éowyn (and the reader) that she is to remain there as ruler until Théoden's return, which occurs the day after Aragorn leaves for the Paths of the Dead. Here is a chance for Éowyn to display a serious disregard for duty. She asks Aragorn if she might join those going with him to the Paths of the Dead. He does not allow it because of her charge, from which he neither can nor will release her. So she indeed stays until Théoden arrives at Dunharrow. Her explicitly-stated charge is fulfilled, and the reader does not find out if she is given another. When Théoden left Edoras for Helm's Deep, his farewell to and appointment of Éowyn as his deputy was public, but he conducts his farewell to Éowyn at Dunharrow in private—it is a scene that neither the reader nor those within the story witness.

It may be objected that even if Éowyn was not specifically commanded to serve as ruler after Théoden's departure for war in Gondor, she did her people a disservice by leaving them leaderless. Yet, this speculation is not based on solid evidence from the text. Simply because Tolkien writes no scene in which Éowyn hands her authority to someone else does not mean that she leaves without making arrangements. Obviously her going to war was not a complete secret; she seemed to have an understanding with Elfhelm, leader of her *éored*. It is hard to imagine such a leader would be willing to look the other way if no arrangements had been made for Éowyn's absence. Later on, there is no report of Rohan falling completely to pieces because no one was there to lead them. In general, Middle-earth never lacks for someone to lead; when the lines of succession fail, someone else is always appointed or willing to step in—the stewards in the kingdom of Gondor, and Aragorn in the Fellowship. Furthermore, the Rohirrim are capable of choosing their own leaders—Hama the Doorward originally suggests to Théoden that he appoint Éowyn to lead in his absence.

Nevertheless, these ambiguities concerning Éowyn's specific responsibilities and the state of affairs in her absence cannot constitute a full defense of her actions. It is important to consider her motivations as well. Most discussion of this subject centers on Éowyn's emotional state at the time of her desertion. Textual evidence suggests that she acts on impulse and out of despair. Dernhelm—Éowyn in disguise—wears an expression that Merry notices is "the face of one without hope who goes in search of death" (*Return* 69). This hopelessness is the key to understanding Éowyn's reasons for going to war. Many regard the source of Éowyn's hopelessness as her obvious infatuation with Aragorn. Her desire to follow him on his journey comes out of love. With Aragorn goes all hope; one of his many names, Estel, means "hope." Thus, when Aragorn leaves Éowyn behind, hope leaves her too. It is the second time she has been left to face her greatest fear, which is to "stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire" (*Return* 47). These incidents come after a string of events sufficient to sap the joy out of anyone, namely the decline of her uncle, Théoden, and Gríma's treatment of her. This picture of Éowyn is that of a woman already brought low who becomes desperate for a way out of her situation when denied love. If at this point all hope is lost, Éowyn has nothing to lose and everything to gain by leaving with the Grey Company. Her reason for doing so would match their reason: love for Aragorn. Instead, she chooses to stay and wait for Théoden's arrival. It is only after being left behind for a third time that she deserts Dunharrow.

Éowyn's reasons for disguising herself and running off to war involve people closer and more familiar to her than a kingly man she just met. Her desperation truly becomes evident when the members of her household leave her again, this time with the very real possibility that they will not come back. This, not Aragorn's departure, is the breaking point. The Rohirrim, with help from the Ents, have won victory over Isengard, and it is time to ride to the aid of Gondor, where no victory is assured and is in fact quite unlikely. The threat of total annihilation in the West, magnified in the coming of the Dawnless Day, is very real; little hope exists that either Théoden or Éomer will come back to Rohan. All those present at the muster of Rohan think it more likely that it will be Sauron's armies who come marching from the east in victory. Aragorn says as much when he tells Éowyn "there will be need of valor without renown, for none shall remember the deeds that are done in the last defense of your homes" (*Return* 47). Even as these words become more likely to prove true, Éowyn's answer becomes more apt: she has "leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more" (*Return* 47). If the combined forces of Rohan and Gondor cannot stop Sauron's army, the group left for the last defense has no better chance of succeeding where the much larger force failed.

The hopelessness of the situation is not the main reason Éowyn deserts. After all, she did not choose her moment to leave when Aragorn went on the Paths of the Dead—a situation just as hopeless as that of the Rohirrim. When the Riders leave, those leading them are not simply men Éowyn respects, but the members of her household, men she has known and loved all her life. One of these is Théoden, her uncle who is a father to her in addition to his role as lord of Meduseld and king of Rohan. Second to Théoden is Éomer, her brother and peer. This group of three, Éowyn, Éomer, and Théoden, resembles a *comitatus*—a group of warriors bound together by loyalty.

The notion of *comitatus* is prominent in the Old English poem "The Battle of Maldon," a work which Tolkien knew well. In this piece, the fighting force is an earl, Beorhtnoth, and his warriors, the "sharers of the hearth" (line 204). These men fight to the last for their lord, even after his death: "[T]hey desired all one of two things, / to leave life or else to avenge their dear lord" (lines 207-8). Loyalty is the foremost value among the band of warriors. As one of them says:

I have no desire among Sturmere's unyielding heroes
to reproach my word, now that my patron has perished,
that I now lordless go on a homeward journey,
having turned away from battle, but rather I shall be taken by weapons,
either spear or iron. (lines 249-53)

For the members of the *comitatus*, it is a fate worse than death to be cut off from the group, particularly from the lord, either because one is the sole survivor or an exile. In return for this fierce loyalty and love, the lord has a responsibility to take care of his warriors, both within the mead-hall and out on the battlefield. Tolkien considers Beorhtnoth to have failed in that responsibility, as he discusses in the "Of ermod" section of "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son." In a cocksure moment, Beorhtnoth allows the Vikings across the bridge without a fight, confident he can beat them once they get across. It is not the best tactical decision he could have made, and it is one that forces his warriors into a difficult position. He is not, in fact, able to overcome the Viking forces, and he is himself slain. Most of his warriors stand their ground and fight on, fulfilling their part of the arrangement even after Beorhtnoth's failure. In Tolkien's view, the warriors are the more honorable for keeping their oaths in all circumstances.

Tolkien uses elements of the *comitatus* throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, beginning with the hobbits. Sam, Merry, and Pippin are willing to follow Frodo out of the Shire, where ever he must go, out of a sense of love and friendship, of which loyalty is a part. In turn, Frodo feels a responsibility to them in that, unlike Beorhtnoth, he does not want to lead them unnecessarily into danger. The group Aragorn leads into the Paths of the Dead is another example. Legolas, Gimli, and the Grey Company all accompany Aragorn out of love and loyalty, and he does not require that they go for any other reason. Other *comitatus* groups conform to the model presented in "The Battle of Maldon" to varying degrees. Pippin and Beregond display love and loyalty to Faramir, whose life they go to great lengths to save. The Company of the Nine Walkers is a looser, more egalitarian sort of *comitatus*; neither Gandalf nor Aragorn seem to hold themselves above the other members of the fellowship, though as leaders they are responsible to the others. In this group, each member is mutually loyal to all other members.

Of the various *comitatus* groups in *The Lord of the Rings*, however, Éowyn's *comitatus* most closely follows the Anglo-Saxon model in "The Battle of Maldon." Some of the *comitatus* groups in Middle-earth do not conform to that model because they include members who are not warriors, namely the hobbits. The true *comitatus*, such as those formed in Rohan, consist solely of warriors. Éowyn, trained as a shieldmaiden, has the skills of a warrior and is thereby eligible for membership in a Rohirric *comitatus*. As alluded to above, this particular *comitatus* consists of Théoden's household. He provides for Éowyn and Éomer, and in return their love and loyalty is given to him (though undoubtedly Théoden loves them; they are a family as well). The dynamics of the *comitatus* relationship lead Éowyn to her stand against the Witch-king. After his attack on Théoden, all of his knights are either scattered or dead, except for one, "Dernhelm [Éowyn] the young, faithful beyond fear; and he wept, for he had loved his lord as a father" (*Return* 114). Éowyn upholds her end of the arrangement, even though Théoden, like Beorhtnoth, appears to have failed in his responsibility to her as a member of the *comitatus*. In the first place, he is prone to underestimating her worth. When Hama suggests that one of the House of Eorl lead the people during the battle of Helm's Deep, Théoden's first thought is of Éomer, who must go with him, not of Éowyn, whom he does not consider until Hama clarifies his suggestion. Second, leaving her behind in Rohan is, in essence, exiling her from the group. Third, he is likely to (and does) go to his death in Gondor, and because of her exile, she would have no chance to avenge that death as a proper warrior should. Éowyn is likely to be condemned to that fate worse than death for not just one, but two reasons. She seeks death not because she has been rejected by Aragorn, but rather because everyone she knows and loves is doing the same thing. The Rohirrim ride to Gondor without hope of coming back. There is

nothing left for her; she either endures exile from her *comitatus*, or she goes with them to what appears from the gloom of the Dawnless Day to be certain death.

Fortunately for everyone, Éowyn does not allow herself to be abandoned by her *comitatus*. Instead, she takes decisive action to fulfill her appropriate duty as a member of that group, and in the process achieves heroic deeds. From a teleological viewpoint, achievement of these deeds warrants praise and honor. Regardless of the means it took to get her to the Fields of the Pelennor, in the end she was meant to be there.

Éowyn's deed—the slaying of the Witch-king—is one that few others in or near Minas Tirith at the time could have achieved. The Macbeth-like prophecy about the Witch-king proclaims that he cannot be defeated by any living man.¹ He is largely safe on the Pelennor Fields, since it is almost exclusively men save Éowyn and Merry, also left behind by Théoden, his lord, who have ridden to Gondor's aid. Gondor's own defensive forces include Gandalf and Pippin, who are also not men. Gandalf on his own is up to the task of battling the Witch-king, and he thinks it his fate to do so. But it falls to Éowyn and Merry to defeat him, since Gandalf is called away to defuse Denethor's situation. Loss is inherent in every possibility, but if Éowyn and Merry had not been at Pelennor to stop the Witch-king, the losses could very well have been more grievous. With only Gandalf around, either the Witch-king could have caused more havoc on the battlefield after attacking Théoden, possibly scattering all the armies of the west, or Denethor would have proceeded with his plan to put both himself and Faramir on a funeral pyre.

In addition to being a requirement of fate, Éowyn's presence on the Pelennor Fields enhances the parallels within the narrative. The cancellation of the confrontation at the gate between Gandalf and the Witch-king stands at the beginning of two sequences of events: Gandalf's rescue of Faramir and the Witch-king's attack on the Riders of Rohan. The key figures in these events are Denethor and Théoden, who each die within the same hour. If the confrontation at the gate had taken place, Théoden would have been spared, to the loss of both Faramir and the parallels between Denethor and Théoden. Tolkien sets up these two characters as foils for each other. Both are aging rulers under threat from evil forces (Sauron and Saruman), both lose sons (Boromir and Théodred), and both acquire a hobbit squire (Pippin and Merry). The difference between the two rulers shows in the oaths they take from their new squires. Merry offers his service to Théoden out of love, as befits a *comitatus* system. In contrast, Pippin offers service to Denethor out of a sense of duty. If love plays any part in his decision, it is admiration for Boromir, not for Denethor—the lord to whom he swears fealty. The parallels continue into the next generation with Éowyn and Faramir. They both suffer from the Black Breath of the Nazgul after having gone through experiences that already deprived them of hope, both are thought to be dead or as good as dead but are discovered to be alive and are subsequently healed by Aragorn.

It is fitting, then, that in the end, Éowyn and Faramir are rewarded with a chance for happiness together. In Middle-earth, the characters ultimately get their just deserts for their deeds.² In the

¹ The Witch-king is, however, in considerably more danger than Macbeth, as Middle-earth is full of beings who are not living men, including Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits, Wizards, Ents, and the Army of the Dead, not to mention women. Fortunately for him, few of them happen to be around during the Battle of the Pelennor Fields.

² Evil characters in Tolkien's texts come to a bad end: Gollum falls into the Cracks of Doom; Sauron is defeated, presumably never to rise again; Saruman dies at the hands of his servant; Wormtongue falls outside of battle full of hobbit arrows after getting kicked in the face. Those characters on the side of good get chances for happiness: Frodo seeks healing in the Undying Lands; Sam becomes a gentlehobbit and starts a large family; Aragorn takes the throne and weds Arwen; Beregon, kicked out of the Guard of the Citadel, gets a new assignment among Faramir's men, for whom he sacrificed his place in the Guard; Gimli spends the rest of his life in Middle-earth in the Glittering Caves of Aglarond, then removes with Legolas to the Undying Lands. Those few good characters who die before the end of the book—Boromir and Théoden—at least get a glorious death in battle, a death a warrior can be proud of. Boromir's case is especially noteworthy because he is not unequivocally good; he gives in to the temptation of the Ring, and had he been able to get it from Frodo, (continued...)

larger context of Middle-earth, Éowyn is forgiven her transgression, that is, desertion, because of her valiant role on the fields of the Pelennor Fields as shown by her reward of a happy life following the War of the Ring. Even if she had fallen before the Witch-king, her death would have been a valiant one. In whatever way that battle had ended, it was worthy of songs about the White Lady of Rohan. Éowyn has been forgiven among her own people, for the Rohirrim remember events in song. When all is said and done, Éowyn is both a heroine and a deserter. She had to desert Rohan in order to achieve the heroic deeds fated for her. In doing so, she was motivated by the values of Rohirric culture, namely courage, valor, and loyalty to one's lord. Therefore, she deserves and receives forgiveness for her transgression.

Works Cited

- "The Battle of Maldon." Trans. Douglas B. Killings. July 12, 2004.
<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/ballc/oe/maldon-trans.html>.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son." *The Tolkien Reader*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1966. 3-27.
- . *The Return of the King*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1966.
- . *The Two Towers*. New York, Ballantine Books, 1966.

²(...continued)

who knows how far he would have gone before realizing his mistake. He gets a chance to repent and is rewarded with a noble end.