

REVISITING “ALLOYED” HEROISM: READING WOMEN AS
CHARACTERIZATIONS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN’S “NORTHERN HEROIC SPIRIT”

by

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We are all Treaty people.

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*to Great Explosion Murder God Dynamight,
for reinspiring my love of heroes
(but not for choosing that name)*

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on existing scholarship in Tolkien and Old English studies, this thesis explores how Tolkien's concept of "northern heroic spirit" might be applied to Tolkien's own characters and to the Old English literary figures from which he drew inspiration. While previous discourse surrounding northern heroism has foregrounded— or often exclusively considered— men, I argue that women demonstrate a distinct form of "alloyed" northern heroism due to their experiences of marginalization and, as such, offer further possibilities for how northern heroism might function. By comparing Tolkien's Éowyn to the Old English, Judith, through the lens of northern heroism, I seek to demonstrate the adaptability of medieval literary theory. And, in doing so, I seek to further the contemporary conversation in medieval scholarship which challenges the notion that medievalism and its branches are inherently masculinist.

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CHAPTER 1— INTRODUCTION

In his essay, “Of *fermod*,” J.R.R. Tolkien defines Old English “northern heroic spirit” as “the heroism of obedience and love, not of pride or wilfulness” (*Tree and Leaf* 148). This, he writes, “is the most heroic and the most moving” (*Tree and Leaf* 148) form of heroism. Significantly, Tolkien defines “northern heroic spirit” only in terms of men, using male figures as examples to supplement his analysis. He considers excessive pride in terms of Beorhtnoth of “The Battle of Maldon,” Beowulf, and Sir Gawain of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and wonders if men who fight subordinate to ruling powers come the closest to exemplifying “unalloyed” heroism given that they are “placed in greater peril [in battle]” (Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* 145) than those they bravely serve. Yet, Tolkien does not once mention a woman as a possible hero. This pattern carries through Tolkien scholarship, as critics mostly remain hesitant to attribute Tolkien’s theory of “northern heroic spirit” to female characters, whether in Old English literature or in analyzing Tolkien’s own medieval scholarship and narrative fiction. However, I argue that both Old English women and Tolkien’s women are worth considering for their heroism, especially as doing so offers new insight for how northern heroism might function.

Critics have argued that Tolkien uses his male northern heroic characters to fix the broken heroism of Old English figures, but I suggest that Tolkien does not pursue the same motivation in constructing his heroines. Rather, he allows women’s heroism to be imperfect, or “alloyed.” Their heroism cannot perfectly, unendingly support those they serve due to their social marginalization when we compare the heroic actions of the Old

English, Judith, and Tolkien's Éowyn. While demonstrating northern heroic qualities, both of these characters must additionally contend with threats of sexual assault. Their heroism is implicated in their identities as women, and those identities are explicitly linked to the possible violation of their bodies by men.

“MALDON” AND MALENESS

Tolkien cites “The Battle of Maldon” as a primary example of Old English heroism, centering his definition of “northern heroic spirit” around the poem. Why have these male characters in particular been so compelling? Why does Tolkien foreground them (and their maleness) over less archetypically masculine Old English characters who may appear equally heroic? “Maldon” is a large, fragmented poem¹ about a battle between Viking and English troops. The English are led by Byrthnoth, whose extraordinary courage has become a point of contention in scholarly discourse. Mark Griffith says, “[t]he relevant lines tell us that [Byrthnoth] gives too much land [...] to the Viking crossing the causeway between the opposed forces because of his *ofermod*. The sense or senses of the affixed form have been discussed frequently and exhaustively” (180). Critics have endlessly debated whether *ofermod* [“overconfidence”]² is complimentary or critical of Byrthnoth. Regardless of *ofermod*'s connotations, however, what is most significant is the courage behind Byrthnoth's *ofermod*.

The main passage used to define “northern heroic spirit” comes towards the end of the existing “Maldon” fragment. It reads: “Hige sceal þē heardra, heorte þē cēnre, /

¹ Its beginning and end are missing.

² *Ofermod* is usually translated as “overconfidence,” “excessive confidence,” or, as Tolkien writes, “overmastering pride” (*Tree and Leaf* 143). But, as stated by Griffith, there are no definitive answers to the questions of interpretation *ofermod* raises, as the issues lie primarily in its connotations, rather than its translation.

mōd sceal þē mære, þē ūre mægen lýtlað” (312-313),³ emphasizing the importance of strength in battle (*ofermod*)— strength which is necessarily emotionally hardened— while subtextually condemning those who choose to flee, even when faced with certain death. James Dyas Thayer furthers an argument for the necessity of standing strong in defining “northern heroic spirit” by considering the significance of the names of those who fled from battle. The first fleeing warrior named is Godric, one of the sons of Odda. Thayer writes that earlier in the poem “[h]is name has poetic resonance that approaches the allegorical. His name, a compound, may be translated variously, with *God* referring to ‘God,’ or more typical of a name, ‘good,’ and *ric* a reference to power or empire” (9). Therefore, his name coupled with his fleeing could symbolise the loss of a “[g]ood-realm” (Thayer 9). Thayer further explains, “[p]oetically, the loss of good-realm references the relative peace that the Viking raids disrupted, an assault on the good realm that included all manner of crimes from theft to murder, rape, and enslavement” (9). And, I posit that the loss of “good-realm” may also indicate the loss of goodness as defined through the concept of “northern heroic spirit.” Just as the Vikings disrupt the physical realm, so too is the moral foundation of the English army disrupted.

After Godric flees, there follow a number of speeches by men who proclaim that they are doing the opposite by standing strong in battle. A warrior named Leofsunu says, “[i]c þæt gēhāte þæt ic heonon nelle / flēon fōtes trym, ac wille furðor gān, / wrecan on

³ “Thought must be the harder, heart the braver, / courage must be the greater because our might diminishes” (unless stated otherwise, translations throughout are my own). As these are some of the most commonly cited lines in “Maldon,” translations vary. R.M. Liuzza translates the lines, “[s]pirits must be the harder, hearts the keener / courage the greater, as our strengths grow less” (312-313). And, recognizing the impossibility of translating perfectly between languages, I argue that this translation takes very few creative liberties. As an additional example, David R. Slavitt translates: “[y]our minds put in order, / and settle your hearts. Our courage must grow / as the strength we have ebbs” (111), adopting a much more comforting tone than is usually chosen and demonstrating how translations might be shaped by their translator.

gewinne mīnne winedrihten” (“Maldon” 246-248).⁴ Similarly, Dunnere proclaims, “[n]e mæg nā wandian se þe wrecan þenceð / frēan on folce, ne for fēore murnan” (“Maldon” 258-259),⁵ highlighting an intersection between military strength and masculinity through his use of conventionally male pronouns. These speeches do not guarantee success. Readers cannot know what happens to Leofsunu and, of Dunnere, we know only that he fought “þā hwīle ðe hē wāpna wealdan mōste” (“Maldon” 272).⁶ What is clear, though, is that these men have acted commendably within their (male-centric, military) cultural context. While Byrthnoth invites critique for his disastrous overconfidence, most scholarship on “Maldon” recognizes his men as heroes. Griffith argues that “heroic intent and heroic action” are seamlessly bound in “Maldon” (182). And, I argue that it is precisely this binding that has led to the recognition of “Maldon” as the key heroic poem in the Old English canon.⁷

Much of Tolkien’s definition of “northern heroic spirit” hinges on the notion that heroic intent, in itself, is bound at the core of heroism. Tolkien defines the Old English “northern heroic spirit” as something that “is never quite pure; it is of gold and an alloy” (*Tree and Leaf* 144). However, he imagines an “unalloyed” form “would direct a man to

⁴ “I vow that I will not hence / flee the short length of a foot, but will go further, / avenge my friend and lord in battle.”

⁵ “He must never flinch, who intends to avenge / the lord in the army, nor be fearful for his life.”

⁶ “For as long as he could wield weapons.”

⁷ For me, no other Old English poem demonstrates such an overlap between “heroic intent and heroic action” (Griffith 182). “The Battle of Brunanburh” celebrates Old English heroism, claiming that they, as “wlanca wigsmiþas” [“splendid war-smiths”] (72), defeated Welsh forces, gaining both land and glory. However, this battle poem does not place any emphasis on the hearts of its warriors, leaving most to the imagination. Perhaps “The Fight at Finnsburh” comes closer to exemplifying “northern heroic spirit.” Beginning this poetic fragment, the Danish king Hnæf highlights the importance of firm-mindedness (10-12), mirroring Byrthnoth’s impassioned speeches. Yet, the key difference is that “Finnsburh” foregrounds the valor that will arise from heroic action, whereas “Maldon” does not explicitly offer external reward for heroism. “Maldon” suggests that “pure” heroic intent should be innate, even if this is not the way it always— or even usually— manifests.

endure even death unflinching, when necessary: that is when death may help the achievement of some object of will, or when life can only be purchased by denial of what one stands for” (Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* 144), while recognizing that, in action, the motivating forces of warriors are usually much more nuanced. The primary examples that Tolkien uses to define “alloyed” heroism are Byrthnoth, Beowulf, and Sir Gawain. For each of these men, Tolkien explains, “[an] element of pride, in the form of the desire for honour and glory, in life and death, tends to grow, to become a chief motive, driving a man beyond the bleak heroic to excess— to chivalry” (*Tree and Leaf* 144). And, while his conception of heroism remains inherently bleak, he proceeds to argue that perhaps the men who come closest to exemplifying “unalloyed” heroism are those who fight subordinate to a ruling power. Of the “Maldon” warriors, referencing Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” Tolkien writes, “Their part was to endure and die, and not to question [...] In their situation heroism was superb. Their duty was unimpaired by the error of their master, and (more poignantly) neither in the hearts of those near to the old man was love lessened” (*Tree and Leaf* 148). The binding of “heroic intent and heroic action” (Griffith 182) is not inherently gendered in this passage, as anyone might intend to unquestioningly “endure and die” for their master. Nonetheless, I posit that the traditional masculinity of the “Maldon” warriors, as ideal characterizations of such a binding, leads to broader associations of northern heroism with masculinity. Perhaps this suggestion begins to answer why, in all examples, Tolkien does not mention a woman, or even a man characterized as being non-traditionally masculine. His chosen heroic figures, both “alloyed” and potentially “unalloyed,” are common examples used to define Old English as a masculine language and Old English literature as being *for* and *by* men. He

chooses figures whose heroism has been explicitly tied to their masculinity; however, he may do so out of normativity, rather than necessity.

NORTHERN HEROISM IN TOLKIEN SCHOLARSHIP

Tolkien scholars are slightly more adventurous in attributing “northern heroic spirit” to Tolkien’s characters. Alexander Bruce begins contemporary conversation by considering Gandalf’s fall at the bridge of Khazad-dûm as mirroring Byrthnoth’s fall in “Maldon” (150). He writes that Gandalf, “issues a challenge to Balrog, just as Byrthnoth challenged the Vikings. He holds off the Balrog’s first attack, as the three Anglo-Saxon defenders held off the Vikings” (Bruce 153). However, Bruce acknowledges that a connection between the two characters ends in this moment. This is where, he argues, Tolkien uses Gandalf as a means “to ‘correct’ the behaviour of the self-serving Byrthnoth through the actions of the less self-centered Gandalf” (150). Gandalf “personally stands his ground and saves the party by destroying the bridge and casting the Balrog into the abyss— though he himself is unwillingly dragged down in the process” (Bruce 153), rather than exhibiting excessive pride and endangering his companions. Bruce takes a similar stance in describing Aragon’s heroism, explaining that it is amended when Aragon makes the choice “to lead his reduced forces right to the very gates of Mordor expecting death but not defeat, for he knows he is giving Frodo more time to destroy the Ring” (156). These arguments mark the creation of the formula that future Tolkien scholars will use in analyzing Tolkien’s use of “northern heroic spirit” in his own fiction. There remains a general consensus that, when Tolkien employs northern heroic qualities, he often does so in critique of “alloyed” heroism—the type of excessive pride that drove Byrthnoth.

While Gandalf and Aragorn are rather typical examples of northern heroism, Bruce does briefly offer an unconventional stance. Following his argument for Aragorn's amended heroism, Bruce notes another example: "Éowyn and Merry face the Witch-King to protect the fallen Théoden" (156). This is particularly interesting because, despite Tolkien's foregrounding of men in defining "northern heroic spirit," and despite Bruce's foregrounding of men until this point, he seems to be arguing that women can occupy the same role as men. While previously unconsidered in further detail, this argument sets a precedent for the possibility of expanding conversations on northern heroism in previously implausible directions.

Mary R. Bowman cites Bruce as inspiration for her article on "northern heroic spirit" in Tolkien's fiction (91) and pushes his analysis further in a few ways. First, she notes the link between Old English heroism and the Rohirrim people, suggesting that, if they have songs that reference Old English elegies, it is not unthinkable that Old English battle poetry and, therefore, literary "northern heroic spirit" would be part of their culture (Bowman 94).⁸ Second, while she mentions other male characters, she uses Sam as a primary case study for northern heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*. In considering the aftermath of Frodo's attack by Shelob, Bowman argues that the options Sam weighs, like suicide and revenge, "are comparable to the flight of the sons of Odda: doing what serves the individual interest at others' expense" (101). Sam is made heroic because he ultimately continues on his quest, being focused on "his 'purpose and duty'—repetitively

⁸ Additionally, when Aragorn recites the Rohirrim song based on "The Wanderer," Legolas remarks that the language "is like the land itself; rich and rolling in part, and else hard and stern as the mountains. [...] it is laden with the sadness of Mortal Men" (508). This may be an extension of Tolkien's analysis of "northern heroic spirit" as being "beyond the bleak heroic to excess" (*Tree and Leaf* 144). Just as the heroism of the Mortal Men is bleak, they carry with them a sort-of perpetual sadness.

so” (Bowman 101). Bowman continues, “[Sam’s] choice also transcends the appeal of personal glory remembered in a song, making a pointed contrast with Byrthnoth himself” (102). In the same manner as Bruce argues that Tolkien’s “northern heroic characters” are a means to amend flawed heroism, Bowman sees Sam as a figure onto which Tolkien constructs an idealized form of northern heroism.

While I agree that Sam is a heroic figure, I question the extent to which he exemplifies “northern heroic spirit” rather than a more modern form of heroism. This is because Sam’s narrative trajectory lacks the essential bleakness that Tolkien associates with “northern heroic spirit.” While northern heroic figures meet their ends in darkness, Tolkien’s hobbits do quite the opposite, and their heroism appears to be located in their resistance to darkness—their constant ability to keep moving forward. No better place is this represented than in the following passage, as Bilbo slowly creeps towards Smaug: “Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterwards were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait” (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 249).⁹ Bilbo’s heroism does not arise from his ability to fight, and very likely die, for “some object of will” (Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* 144) or moral necessity. Instead, it arises from his ability to fight fear rising within himself and continue on in spite of himself. Sam’s heroism is much the same. When he decides to continue his journey without Frodo, his main challenge is to overcome the darkness consuming his mind. He must fight against emotional ruin, rather than physical ruin.

⁹ As argued by Kathy Cawsey in her Week 3B lecture for ENGL 2235- Tolkien: Fantasy and Medievalism at Dalhousie University.

When Tolkien “corrects” northern heroism in his depiction of Gandalf on the bridge, on the other hand, that depiction remains inherently bleak. While Gandalf saves his companions, he himself plummets to what readers then assume is his death. And, I argue that Tolkien presents a similar bleakness in his correction of Thorin’s heroism. At the end of *The Hobbit*, Thorin displays both bravery in battle, being willing to die for the safety of his companions, and verbally amends his previous “chivalry,” or excess. He says, “If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world” (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 333), moving beyond selfish desires. However, because he must die in the same moment that his redemption occurs, his heroism— even if potentially “unalloyed”—remains bleak. For Tolkien, the presence of “northern heroic spirit” necessitates the possibility of a tragic end.¹⁰

Regardless of which character better exemplifies northern heroism, Bowman has nevertheless advanced a necessary conversation through her argument for Sam’s heroism.¹¹ While she does not mention Tolkien’s women, by considering a non-traditionally masculine figure as a characterization of an archetype so centered on masculinity, she adds another dimension to the argument that Bruce starts to make

¹⁰ Bard also seems to demonstrate characteristics of northern heroism, without the initial selfishness/excess that a character like Thorin displays. He consistently cares for others, being motivated to kill Smaug and rebuild the Lake-town (which had been attacked by the dragon). As well, while his end is not ultimately tragic, Tolkien never eliminates the sense that he might die in battle. For example, Bard’s fight with Smaug ends with him drawing his last arrow— “Black arrow! I have saved you to the last. You have never failed me and always I have recovered you” (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 289)— suggesting that he will fight until either he or his enemy is defeated.

¹¹ Peter Grybauskas cites both Bruce and Bowman in arguing for the importance of reading “Maldon” as an influential text for Tolkien’s construction of non-traditionally masculine heroism; though, he argues that Tolkien most clearly amends northern heroism in “The Homecoming” (38). In this text, he suggests that Tolkien “[represents] a compromise between [...] heroic praise and censure, striking the kind of balance at the heart of Tolkien’s dialogic works” (Grybauskas 55), nuancing the existing “alloyed or unalloyed” conversation on “northern heroic spirit.”

through Éowyn and Merry. This is significant because it demonstrates the potential adaptability of “northern heroic spirit” for contemporary discourse. For example, when coupled with the concept of intersectional feminism— feminism which seeks to “focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics” (Cho et al. 787) and challenge “single-axis thinking” (Cho et al. 787)— “northern heroic spirit” can offer insight into the multilayered, perhaps intertextually reaching, social marginalizations that are unique to the construction of female (or non-traditionally masculine) characters. Applying this lens to Bowman’s argument leads me to further question whether there is an Old English precedent for a non-masculinist “northern heroic spirit” and whether Tolkien may have ever derived inspiration from non-traditional heroic sources.

CHAPTER 2— OLD ENGLISH FOUNDATIONS

EXILE POETRY

In answering the questions my introduction poses, I will first consider Old English exile poetry as exemplifying some of the qualities— even if “alloyed”— of a “northern heroic spirit.” Stanley Greenfield defines four features of the exile theme, a prominent part of many Old English elegies, as follows:

1. Status
2. Deprivation
3. State of mind
4. Movement in or into exile (201)

The speaker must be in exile or otherwise alone. As a result of this, the speaker must lack worldly joys and have a sad or solemn state of mind. There must also be a sense that the speaker’s exile is unending. While some of these features may be present in non-Old English literature, the combination of all four creates a distinctly Old English elegiac poetic style; further, all four are rooted in Old English metrical patterns. For example, Greenfield explains that exile deprivations are formed by “an A-verse consisting of the instr. or gen., sg. or pl., of the ‘property’ removed together with the pp. of a verb of deprivation. The properties range from the physical ones of gold and land to abstract concepts of comforts and joys” (202). Put simply, the alliterating half-line must have a *stressed-unstressed-stressed-unstressed* metre. Then, also within the half-line, there must be a property of which the speaker is actively deprived.

“The Wanderer” is an Old English exile poem which offers glimpses of heroism that existed in the past. The poet writes, “[g]emon hē selescegas ond sinþege, /

hū hine on geoguðe his goldwine / wenede tō wiste. Wyn eal gedrēas” (“Wanderer” 34-36).¹² These lines implicate the figure of The Wanderer in an Old English warrior culture. Like Beowulf’s description of the “god cyning” (11), or “good king,” who defeats his enemies and gives gifts to his men, the “goldwine” of “The Wanderer” fulfills the idealized role of an Old English ruler. However, those days have long passed. The Wanderer repeatedly remembers his present suffering. The poet continues, “Hwær cwōm māþþungyfa? [...] Ēalā beorht bune! Ēalā byrnwiga! / Ēalā þēodnes þrym! Hū sēo þræg gewāt” (“Wanderer” 92, 94-95),¹³ using the four features of the exile theme to alter, or unsettle, the foundations of traditional “northern heroic spirit.” The Wanderer’s status is always both present and past, marginalized and privileged—he is in exile (representing his marginalization) but he is also previously a warrior (representing his privilege). Similarly, his present deprivation, state of mind, and movement into exile are always referential to the past. Each loss, each feeling, and each movement is determined by the loss of a culture of “northern heroic spirit”—his removal from traditional, masculine heroism. This is additionally why the formula for deprivation within the exile theme is so significant. Within a half line, the poet uses the *stressed-unstressed-stressed-unstressed* metrical pattern to highlight The Wanderer’s lost heroic lifestyle, placing equal emphasis on glory and loss.

Tolkien certainly takes inspiration from formulaic depictions of long-passed heroism like that of “The Wanderer.” Many of his characters are men who were once heroes, or admiring of heroism, but have since grown disillusioned with battle. For

¹² “He remembers the men of the hall and the receiving of treasure, / how in his youth his gold-lord / accustomed him to abundance. That pleasure all perished.”

¹³ “Where is the treasure-giver? [...] Oh, the bright cup! Oh, the warrior in mail! / Oh, the king’s might! How that time departed.”

example, in “The Homecoming,” Tolkien’s companion to his “Ofermod” essay, Tolkien uses the character Tidwald, a world-weary old man, to contrast the battle-ready optimism (and almost desperate “northern heroic spirit”) of the younger, Torhthelm. While Torhthelm’s verse speaks to traditional Old English heroism, saying, “[Byrthnoth’s] head was higher than the helm of kings / with heathen crowns, his heart keener / and his soul clearer than the swords of heroes” (Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* 130), Tidwald speaks to the sorrowful realities of the present, saying, “Beorhtnoth we bear not Beowulf here: / no pyres for him, nor piling of mounds; / and the gold will be given to the good abbot” (Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* 132). In juxtaposing these perspectives, Tolkien does not overtly privilege one character’s position over the other, demonstrating instead the potential value of both traditionally and non-traditionally masculine heroism.

“JUDITH”

In addition to exile poetry such as “The Wanderer,” Tolkien may have drawn inspiration from examples of heroism in Old English women’s poetry. “Judith” is an Old English poem about a biblical heroine by the same name who rescues the people of Bethulia by beheading Holofernes, an Assyrian general depicted in the poem as drunk and sexually aggressive. Perhaps the passage most reminiscent of the “Maldon” “[h]iġe sceal þē heardra” passage is Judith’s prayer to God. Judith begins, “þearle ys mē nū ðā / heorte onhæted” (86-87).¹⁴ Similar to how the warriors of “Maldon” must harden their spirits for the heroic task ahead, Judith must inflame her heart to challenge Holofernes. In both cases, an intentional shift in perspective must occur as the characters

¹⁴ “Exceedingly now is my heart inflamed.”

ready themselves to fight,¹⁵ demonstrating one way “Judith” highlights the role of heroic intent as part of “northern heroic spirit.” Another example is when Judith asks God, “þæt ic mid þȳs sweorde mote / gehēawan þysne morðres bryttan. [...] þæt mē ys þus torne on mōde, / hāte on hreðre mīnum” (“Judith” 89-90, 93-94).¹⁶ Judith gathers her courage and decides to act heroically before performing a heroic action. For me, there is no reason why this heroic characterization should not warrant consideration by Tolkien—or by Tolkien scholars—especially given that Judith is fighting as a subordinate to God in this poem. She is not acting for her own glory; she is acting for her moral obligation to others, what Tolkien describes as “the most heroic and the most moving” form of heroism (*Tree and Leaf* 148).

However, this is not to say that Judith’s heroism is identical to that of the “Maldon” heroes. Old English women, while potentially heroic, are implicated in fundamentally different social relations and responsibilities than men. Women’s subordination cannot operate in quite the same way because of their pre-existing marginalization, which we might conceptualize through intersectional feminism. Even if her struggles are not exacerbated by race or class, the layered inequalities that Judith faces as a woman and a symbol of feminine chastity work to further marginalize her in relation to male heroes. While Judith acts for her moral obligation to others, fighting for and through God, she also acts for self-preservation. In addition, while such concern for

¹⁵ However, it is interesting that, through the implications of hardening their hearts, the “Maldon” warriors seem to shift away from emotion, while Judith shifts towards emotion. This may be due to gendered associations with emotion—the sense that men must reject emotion and women must remain fundamentally emotional.

¹⁶ “That I, with this sword, may / kill this giver of murder [...] let the grievances of my mind weigh / hotly on my heart.”

the self is uncourageous for the “Maldon” warriors, self-preservation is a necessary part of Judith’s heroism.

Therefore, I argue instead that it is in the differences between male and female depictions of northern heroism that generative discussions may emerge. In examining Judith’s role as a warrior, Rebecca Stephenson explains that Old English vocabulary developed around a culture of men as warriors. She writes, “[w]hile the Old English word *mann* can refer to humans generally, a person who is specifically male (as opposed to female) is called a *wæpnedman*, a man who bears arms” (Stephenson 80). This places Judith at a junction between masculinity and femininity because, while she is a chaste woman, she is also able to wield weapons. This overlapping identity is further complicated by the nature of Judith’s chastity (Stephenson 85). While she is chaste, she is not a virgin in biblical tradition. Rather, she is a widow driven to violence during an attempted assault by Holofernes. It is only in rewritings, like Ælfric’s¹⁷ epilogue to his translation of the poem, that her sexual history is reconstructed. While Ælfric first describes Judith as “*an ænlic wimman on wudewanhade* [a singular woman living as a widow]” (qtd. and trans. in Stephenson 85)¹⁸, in Ælfric’s epilogue, he calls her “*his an clæne bryd* [[Christ’s] one clean bride]” (qtd. and trans. in Stephenson 86). This is not the only case of rewriting Judith’s sexual history. Stephenson explains that “[t]here is a strong scholarly tradition that connects Judith to heroic, fighting virginity in both Prudentius’s *Psychomachia* and Aldhelm’s *Carmen de virginitate*” (87). And, she argues that this emphasis on virginity has not necessarily emerged from the biblical texts

¹⁷ Ælfric was a monk and well-known writer of Old English literature, especially interested in documenting biblical accounts.

¹⁸ The manuscript is held at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 303. Additional fragments are held at the British Library in London, MS Cotton Ortho B.x., fols. 29 and 30.

themselves, but from the association-based studies of monks that find Judith “woven into a rich trope of heroic virginity” (Stephenson 88) and thus place Judith’s fight against Holofernes in larger, culturally entrenched tropes of chastity vs. immorality—tropes which, while perhaps more frequently challenged, remain intertextually rooted in contemporary literature.

Christine Thijs resists this type of totalizing allegorical reduction of Judith’s character by arguing that the “‘cinematographic’ narrative technique used for the battle scene; this very Anglo-Saxon addition, in which the action is portrayed visually, is reminiscent of other heroic poetry such as the *Battle of Maldon* and the *Battle of Brunanburh*, neither of which can be reasonably viewed as religious allegories” (43). Thijs writes that the characters are “too real, too human to be reduced to types” (43). She quotes Mark Griffith in saying “Judith is wise, but not a typification of wisdom, and Holofernes is devilish, but not simply a mask of Satan” (43). While the “Judith” poet appears to remain aware of biblical allegory, allegory is not central to their writing (Thijs 43). However, we cannot overlook that these tropes have shaped both cultural and scholarly readings of the poem to this point.¹⁹ Despite Judith’s potentially subversive gender expression, until recently, most critical studies of Judith’s gender and chastity have still positioned men at the centre of their analysis. She *has* been frequently reduced to a series of allegorical tropes for the benefit of male readers.²⁰ It also remains significant that discourse surrounding one of the very few Old English poems about a

¹⁹ Similarly, it should not be overlooked that allegorical tropes have shaped intertextual references to “Judith” in translation and adaptation.

²⁰ For example, Stephenson argues that Judith “offers insight into how women function as representational tools for monks” (92), suggesting that her lack of traditional masculinity (being a chaste warrior) made her a valuable symbol because monks were sworn not to participate in such practices.

woman—let alone a woman who might exhibit northern heroic qualities— still centers on her chastity as being merely a moral good.

Judith’s fight against Holofernes is not only a fight against an opposing political power, but it is also implicated in struggles against the sexual subjugation and harassment of women. Following a feast, Holofernes’ men seize Judith and take her unwillingly to his bed. The poet writes, “Pā wearð se brēma on mōde / blīðe burga ealdor, þōhte ðā beorhtan idese / mid wīdle ond mid womme besmītan” (“Judith” 57-59).²¹ This risk of sexual assault is what leads to her heroic action. While the “Maldon” men draw inspiration from strength of their lord and their moral duty to him, Judith draws inspiration from the necessity of defending both her people and her own body. The injury that she risks is more violating than even the most violent of deaths that the men face.

In turn, her retribution is far gorier than that seen in most Old English battle poems. When Judith revenges herself against Holofernes, through God, she completely destroys him. It is noted that, not only does she behead him in a series of bloody blows, but she also leaves him “orsāwle” (“Judith” 108).²² In the biblical context, she removes his very being from himself. Ivan Herbison explains that scholars have previously argued that this killing is an example of “‘gender reversal,’ that that the beheading is an act of sexual violence, a symbolic rape. The act of decollation has been interpreted as a symbolic castration or circumcision” (12). However, I agree with Herbison’s assessment that such claims “conflate gender and social roles” (12). Judith does not take on the role of a male warrior in killing Holofernes, nor is Holofernes feminized. As Herbison argues,

²¹ “The famous lord of fortresses became happy in mind. He intended to defile the bright woman with filth and stain.”

²² “Without a soul.”

while a sense of social masculinity might arise from Judith's act of heroism, the "Judith" poet continuously reaffirms her femininity through their choice of descriptive language including "repetition of the term *ides*²³ (14, 55, 58, 109, 146, 340) and *mægð*²⁴ (35, 43, 78, 125, 135, 145, 165, 254, 260, 324, 334)" (11). The poet mobilizes gendered language to a similar effect in writing Judith's destruction of Holofernes' body. Herbison highlights the following passage:

Genam ða þone hæðenan mannan,
 fæste be feaxe sinum, teah hyne folmum wið hyre weard,
 bysmerlice, ond þone bealofullan listum alede, laðne mannan,
 swa heo ðæs unlæden eaðost mihte
 wel gewealdan. ("Judith" 98-103)²⁵

Here, "[t]he repetition of *mannan* and the use of feminine pronouns (*hyre*, *heo*) draw attention to the male/female contrast" (Herbison 12). While the "act of *feaxfeng*" [grabbing by the hair] (Herbison 12) may hold sexually insulting connotations, the passage spends more time foregrounding the gendered differences between characters without significant evidence of gender reversal.

This is also one of the passages where the violence of "Judith" extends beyond that of the battle poetry like "Maldon." When "Maldon" men fall, even men whom the English fight against in defence of their lord, the poet does not linger on the desecration of their bodies. Instead, descriptions of death are largely impersonal. When Byrthnoth and his closest retainers die, the poet writes, "[d]ā hine hēowon hāðene scealcas

²³ "Lady" or "woman" (often connotes that she is highly respected).

²⁴ "Maiden."

²⁵ "She then took the heathen man fast by his hair, with her hands pulled him towards her, and skillfully placed the hateful man, shameful and malicious, so she could most easily wield control of him."

/ and bēgen þā beornas þe him biġ stōdon: / Ælfnōð and Wulmāer bēgen lāgon
 / ðā onemn hyra frēan feorh ġesealdon” (“Maldon” 181-184).²⁶ While there is some violent imagery in this passage, the poet does not linger on the graphic details of the men’s deaths, nor is there any description of their bodies’ treatment after death. Even when Vikings are killed as enemies of the English, their deaths are not coated in celebratory gore. Instead, the poet briefly inserts battle imagery between the speeches of Byrhtnoth’s remaining men. Where the “Judith” poet foregrounds acts of heroic violence, the “Maldon” poet foregrounds heroic inspiration for violence.

I suggest that the difference between these two poetic choices lies in the nature of the threats their characters face. The “Maldon” warriors face social stigma and demasculinization should they flee from battle. As Byrhtwold states toward the end of the poetic fragment, “[ā] mæg gnornian / se ðe nū fram þisum wīġplegan wendan þenceð” (“Maldon” 315-316).²⁷ A significant amount of personal shame would arise from choosing a “cowardly” action in the heat of battle. However, there is no shame for those who fall in battle. The “Maldon” warriors who fall are celebrated for fearlessly surrendering their lives in defense of their “lēofan men” (“Maldon” 319).²⁸ This is the opposite of what would occur should Judith fall in battle. Should she run, she would face the same shame associated with cowardice as the “Maldon” men. But, Judith does not have the option to fall in a fight for her own chastity. Should Holofernes win, Judith would not only lose to the political enemy of her nation, but she would also be personally ruined. Having no husband—either as a widow, or as the virgin of poetic emendations—

²⁶ “Then heathen warriors cut him apart / and both the men who stood by him, / Ælfnōth and Wulmaer, both lay dead, / who gave their life beside their lord.”

²⁷ “May he mourn forever, he who turns now from this battle-play.”

²⁸ “Beloved man.”

her social standing would crumble should she lose her status as a “chaste woman.” When she fights (and she must fight), she risks further, permanent social and cultural marginalization.

To ensure victory under such extreme circumstances, then, Judith must resort to extreme violence. In destroying Holofernes, I argue that Judith comes as close as possible to enacting the type of misogynistic violence that would occur following her own defeat. And, this is why the poet must also highlight the real gendered dynamic between the two characters, rather than reversing it. Thijs argues, “[t]he *Judith*-poet went to some lengths in order to ensure acceptance of Judith’s role as a killer, even though her victim is the army general besieging her people, for the text would miss its aim if the reader were to ‘feel differently about a woman doing something consciously cruel because of society’s expectations of [women]’” (41). There exists a sense that violence, especially the sort of brutal violence committed by Judith, is much more offensive than the same violence committed by a man. Thijs writes, “a female hero who seeks out and decapitates the enemy with his own sword is not compatible with the still wide-spread image of Anglo-Saxon peace-weaving and cup-bearing ladies” (41). Therefore, Judith must maintain some degree of feminine virtue. She cannot paradoxically occupy the role of male sexual aggressor while fighting male sexual aggression as a symbol of idealized female chastity. Her role as a hero in battle remains fundamentally inflected by her gendered role.

This is not the only way that Judith’s heroism might be complicated. Herbison argues that the poem demonstrates a “complex and ambiguous relationship to the heroic tradition” (2). This is because, while Old English poetry has generally lacked comedy, the “*Judith*” poet uses “the comic devices of parody, dramatic irony and the grotesque [to]

undermine and destabilise the concepts of the male hero, the feast, and the comitatus” (Herbison 2), the majority of which other critics have overlooked. While critics have noted the irony in “Judith,” Herbison asserts that “they deny that it is used to undermine heroic values. Holofernes and the Assyrians are regarded as the antithesis of heroic ideals rather than as a subversion of them” (13-14). Critics instead choose to follow an existing impulse towards categorizing the poem through its adherence to heroic conventions. And, in doing so, they neglect much of what makes “Judith” so unique as an example of battle poetry.

In detailing the “Judith” poet’s use of parody, Herbison suggests that Holofernes’ feast is a parody of the battle scene that follows. The diction overlaps significantly between the two scenes, and “Holofernes himself has been reduced to ‘a male parody’ and is even denied representation through direct speech” (Herbison 16). This makes Judith’s absence from the feast all the more significant; Herbison argues that it “separates her from a social institution linked to drunkenness, boasting, pride, and spiritual death” (16). And, I argue that it is additionally interesting for a couple reasons. First, it separates Judith from the traditional role of the cup-bearer or peace-weaver, marking her difference from archetypal Old English women. Second, it affords incongruence to reading of the battle scene as feast-parody. While the scenes are linguistically similar (as charted in Herbison 15), the addition of a key character renders the battle scene structurally uneven. Just as Judith occupies a socially complex role, being characterized by both masculine heroism and chaste femininity, her narrative positioning in the poem demonstrates incongruence. There is something disruptive about her very presence.

This carries into another example of comic subversion considered by Herbison: the “evident delight of the poet in providing grotesque detail in his description of the fate of Holofernes” (20). He writes, “[a]fter describing Judith’s careful arrangement of Holofernes’s head in preparation for the act of decollation, the poet elaborates the Vulgate account by describing the head rolling on the floor [...] In the same manner the poet dwells on the torments of Holofernes in hell” (Herbison 20), describing these scenes as an example of deeply discomfiting comedic excess. Herbison attributes this “unsettling” (21) quality to the notion that a woman, Judith, can appropriate the role of a male hero. “The poem,” he writes, “does not resolve its ambiguous attitude to the heroic, but it poses crucial questions which lie at the heart of the heroic ethos” (Herbison 22). However, I argue that if feelings of discomfort emerge in a contemporary audience (as I am hesitant to attribute these responses to a medieval writer/audience), they are even more potentially complex. If we read the “Judith” poet as revelling in the gratuitous violence of Judith’s murdering, they are not only revelling in the social triumph of a woman over a man, but also in an explicitly feminized act of revenge. In this case, discomfort would emerge from the notion that a woman is capable of maintaining complete control of her body— that a woman could not only prove socially masculine, but also could violently suppress male acts of violation. Discomfort would emerge from a woman’s relentless drive towards resistance, even as she faces intersecting social marginalizations.

CHAPTER 3—ÉOWYN'S HEROISM

Tolkien's characterization of Éowyn reflects traits similar to those of Judith—traits which may also be read through the lens of intersectional feminism. As I have argued, both Judith's call to heroic action and her violence against Holofernes are affected by the intersections of her womanhood with her socially constructed roles and responsibilities. In constructing Éowyn, then, Tolkien also considers intersecting effects of womanhood. While he ultimately uses his male northern heroic characters, like Gandalf and Thorin, to amend broken—or “alloyed”—heroism, Éowyn does not seem to function in the same way. Her race, her desire to fight, and her willingness to die all align her with a traditional definition of “northern heroic spirit.” However, her initial social role as cup-bearer, the Witch-king's threat of sexual violence against her, and her ultimate return to the private sphere shape readings of her heroism in ways that are entirely inapplicable to Tolkien's male characters. Therefore, I suggest that Éowyn's (female) heroism works to highlight the social differences between male and female characters. Much like the “Judith” poet leans into a sense of contradiction in their construction of Judith, through Éowyn, Tolkien leans into imperfect, perhaps even paradoxical, heroism.

Tolkien constructed Éowyn—and the Rohirrim people—within an Old English framework.²⁹ Théoden fulfills the role of an Old English “god cyning” in a few ways.

²⁹ Tom Shippey argues that “[w]ith one admitted exception [that they have horses] the Riders of Rohan resemble the Anglo-Saxons down to minute details” (106). Their language is Old English and, in it, “[t]hey preserve the sonority, the sadness, the feelings for violent opposites [...] integrated [from Old English into] the Riders' language and culture” (Shippey 114) as well as preserving the alliterative metre of Old English poetry. Expanding these ideas, Jorge Luis Bueno Alonso notes that the language and culture of Rohan demonstrate the influence of “the elegiac tone, the memories of the pleasures of life in the *comitatus*, the social values of life in the mead-hall, the banquets, the symbols of past glories, the transience of life, etc.” (24) of Old English language and culture. The Rohirrim also participate in Old English battle culture

First, he participates in the tradition of the hall. When the adventurers come upon his land, Gandalf says, “Edoras those courts are called [...] and Meduseld is that golden hall. There dwells Théoden son of Thengal, King of the Mark of Rohan” (507). Here, Tolkien draws on the image of a “golden hall,” an image reflected throughout many Old English texts. Tolkien also draws on an Old English naming culture, noting Théoden’s lineage upon introducing him, much like characters are introduced in *Beowulf*, “Maldon,” etc. For example, upon introducing the much older Beowulf near the beginning of the text, the *Beowulf* poet calls him, “Scyldes eafera” [the son of Scylde] (19).³⁰ Michael R. Knightly also notes these connections, drawing on Tom Shippey’s argument that “The King of the Golden Hall” chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* is “calqued on *Beowulf*” (112). Knightley explains that Tolkien’s use of calquing leads to a sense that likenesses to *Beowulf* “act as signposts, creating a signaling effect that resonates throughout the entirety of the chapter, even as the similarities progressively fade into differences” (119). The purpose of this, he argues, is to “maneuver the reader into interpreting the main characters of the second half of the chapter primarily in terms of their counterparts in *Beowulf*, beginning with Théoden and Hrothgar” (Knightley 119). So, when Gandalf and company approach the golden hall, Tolkien is at the same time referencing Beowulf’s first glimpse of Hrothgar’s golden hall.³¹

through both their courageous dedication to battle and their “calls to battle” (Bueno Alonso 24), as when Theoden cries, “*Arise, arise, Riders of Theoden! / [...] Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor*” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 838) before leading his men to fight.

³⁰ These are by no means the only ways Théoden fulfills the Old English “god cyning” role. His relationship with his sister-son mirrors that of Beowulf and Wiglaf, he personally leads his men into battle (even in his old age), he seeks to protect his people, he participates in the OE boasting tradition (ex. Beowulf’s swimming contest), etc.

³¹ The *Beowulf* poet writes, “Guman onetton, / sigon aetsomne, op pæt hy sæl timbred / geatolic on goldfah ongyton mihton” [“men hastened, marched together until they could glimpse the timbered hall, splendid and adorned with gold”] (306-308).

This referencing, Knightley argues, becomes even more direct when the group approach the walls of Edoras. He explains that the challenge posed to the company by the gate guard of Meduseld, “[w]ho are you that come heedless over the plain thus strangely clad, riding horses like to our own horses? Long have we kept guard here, and we have watched you from afar [...] Say, are you not a wizard, some spy from Saruman, or phantoms of his craft? Speak now and be swift!” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 508-509), is nearly identical to the challenge posed by Hrothgar’s guard in *Beowulf*. On the other hand, Knightley argues that Tolkien introduces a difference to *Beowulf* in this passage. While *Beowulf* is immediately trusted by Hrothgar’s guard, Théoden’s guard does not trust Gandalf without some convincing. Tolkien writes, “Wonder was in [the guard’s] eyes but little friendliness; and they looked darkly upon Gandalf” (*LOTR* 508). For Knightley, this demonstrates that, by intentionally creating a scene in which both similarities and differences to the Old English text are highlighted, Tolkien “signals the reader to not only compare the chapter to the first third of *Beowulf* but also to be willing to contrast them” (*LOTR* 122). While Knightley does not conduct a detailed examination of Éowyn in further comparisons to *Beowulf*, focusing on Théoden, Gandalf, and Wormtongue, his argument for the necessity of both comparing and contrasting Tolkien’s characters with their Old English counterparts has proven essential to my thinking about the relationship between Éowyn and Judith.³²

At first, Éowyn acts within the archetype of the “peace-weaving and cup-bearing ladies” (Thijs 41), aligning her with Wealþeow of *Beowulf*. Knightley notes that this

³² It is worth noting that many additional scholars mark comparisons between the Rohirrim and the Old English. For example, Amendt-Raduege, Cawsey, Fisher, Flieger, and Meyer consider the overlapping musical/sonic qualities of two cultures’ poems. Additionally, Lee and Solopova and Phelpstead expand discussions on Tolkien’s use of Old English alliterative meter.

occurs when Éowyn “ceremoniously” (133) serves Théoden a cup of wine.³³ However, the resistance to traditionally female roles that Éowyn soon demonstrates quickly separate her from Wealþeow, overturning the expectations of readers familiar with Old English cup-bearing women. Wealþeow plays an important role in *Beowulf* as both cup-bearing and peace-weaving, but she is not a warrior. She does not demonstrate a longing to fight or to challenge her existing social position. This is why I suggest that Éowyn may align more significantly with Judith—their differences are not so great as those of Éowyn and Wealþeow.

Brent D. Johnson highlights Éowyn’s initial lack of character, arguing that when Tolkien first introduces her, Éowyn is merely “a flat character who fills a space in the hall, a woman who has no name” (120). Still, he also argues that Tolkien quite quickly undoes this flatness. Tolkien’s first descriptions of Éowyn are “the kind usually reserved for leaders” (Johnson 121). Johnson notes that he describes her as being “[g]rave and thoughtful” (qtd. in Johnson 121), and that he furthers this description in her cup-bearing scene. Johnson writes, “Here she is described as a person of trust [...] a noble person not simply because of her birth, but due to her unique abilities and sensibilities” (121). Something about Éowyn immediately sets her apart from the traditional archetype for a woman of Old English literature. She bears the cup, but Tolkien’s physical description of her does not match her ceremonial actions. This depiction is reflective of Judith, whose intelligence is also immediately foregrounded, as she is described as being “glēaw on geðonce” [“wise in thought”] (“Judith” 13). It also reflects the potentially

³³ Though, he explains that he does not expand this thought in his article both for Éowyn’s lack of character development in “The King of the Golden Hall” and because “the issues of gender roles and male-female power relationships that both Wealþeow and Éowyn raise form a central effect of their pairing, an effect that deserves far more attention than this paper can give” (Knightley 133).

unsettling (as suggested by Thijs) connection between Judith's heroism and femininity. While the beginning of "Judith" is fragmented, when she is introduced, her beauty and heroism are intertwined as the poet alludes to the violence the "ides ælfscīnu" (15)³⁴ will soon enact.

Tolkien later confirms Éowyn's contradictory state of being in a conversation with Aragorn, after she learns that he plans to embark on a dangerous journey. First, she tries to persuade him not to risk his life; nevertheless, she soon alters the course of the conversation saying, "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" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 784). Aragorn then counters her proposal by speaking of duty, arguing that Éowyn's duty is to her people, but she cannot fully accept this. She returns, "All your words are but to say: you are a woman 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. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 784). Here, Éowyn's "northern heroic spirit" is complicated by her social role—the intersection of her class and womanhood. Her courage is equal to, if not more than, that of male warriors, but she desires more than to serve her people in the traditional female way. Having been barred from battle, she also longs to save herself from entrapment. When Aragorn asks what she fears, Éowyn replies, "A cage [...] [t]o stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds³⁵ is gone beyond recall or desire" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 784). This

³⁴ "Lady of elven beauty."

³⁵ Here, the sense of "great deeds" is gendered. Éowyn desires the kind of honour and renown that are only accessible to men.

is an example of “alloyed” heroism because it is, in part, selfish. However, Tolkien’s theory of “alloyed” heroism does not account for additional motives that are applicable only to a specific class of women. Because male heroes are not relegated to the domestic sphere, their desire for battle never conflicts with personal duty; it is their duty. Just as Judith’s heroism is highly complicated, she is not burdened with a cup-bearing or peace-weaving role. For a female hero like Éowyn to become heroic, however, her heroism must be paradoxical by definition— within the structures and limitations of her society, it is impossible for her to become a hero in the northern heroic sense. Therefore, a personal desire to challenge this status must drive her to reject her existing service (her present unselfish undertaking) for a new role.

Éowyn *does* fit many aspects of Tolkien’s definition of “northern heroic spirit.” Like how Judith fights through God against an enemy of God and her people, Éowyn fights the Witch-king as the enemy of her people, who poses an even more specific threat to her uncle. She cares deeply about those she seeks to defend, wanting to do everything in her power to save them. As well, Éowyn participates in the tradition of “bleak heroism.” As for Gandalf, Thorin, and Bard, the possibility of a tragic end always exists for Éowyn. Tolkien signals this through her unflinching motivation to fight until the end and through Merry’s recognition of a hopelessness in her expression (Tolkien, *LOTR* 841); there is no sense that Éowyn would ever flee from death. Despite having both her shield and arm broken by the Witch-king/The Lord of the Nazgûl, Éowyn ends their battle by using “her last strength” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 842) to stand and destroy him. Following a thread that carries through both “Maldon” and “Judith,” Éowyn’s courage is absolute. However, as previously stated, the totality of her situation is not so simple.

Éowyn's positioning also mirrors that of Judith for her fight against sexual violation. In an article for *The Mary Sue* (a non-academic website), Mariah Huehner highlights the passage just before Éowyn's famous "no living man am I" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 841) speech. The Witch-king says, "Come not between the Nazgûl and his prey! Or he will not slay thee in thy turn. He will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond all darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shrivelled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 841). In a conversational tone, Huehner explains that, for her, this passage deserves further investigation. She writes of Éowyn that the Witch-king "didn't just threaten her with death. He threatened her with horrifying, endless torture and mind rape, basically" ("The Story of Eowyn"). I agree with Huehner's assessment of this scene. The notion of being "left naked to the Lidless eye" is laden with sexual implications— implications that Tolkien's male characters do not face in battle. Here, Éowyn's situation is deeply reflective of Judith's fight against Holofernes. On the surface, she is exhibiting "northern heroic spirit" as it has been commonly conceived. However, like Judith, Éowyn must fight for herself in the same instance.³⁶

Dorota Filipczak argues that Éowyn's fight against the Witch-king poses an interesting contrast to Gandalf's earlier experience with him. When Gandalf tells the Witch-king that he cannot pass through the archway that had been previously unentered by enemies, the Witch-king "is not intimidated by these words: 'from a mouth unseen there came a deadly laughter'" (Filipczak 412). Filipczak suggests that Éowyn echoes this laughter in her own fight. Tolkien writes, "Merry heard of all sounds in that hour the

³⁶ Éowyn also implicitly faces this threat through Wormtongue. While intensified in the *LOTR* films, Wormtongue is also latently sexually threatening in the novels. He clearly desires Éowyn, thinking of her as a possible war prize, and Gandalf comments, "[t]oo long have you watched her under your eyelids and haunted her steps" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 520), implying Wormtongue's violating intent.

strangest. It seemed that Dernhelm laughed” (*LOTR* 841); “Thus Éowyn not only parries the Nazgûl’s would-have-been attack on Gandalf, but also parries his deadly laughter from the scene in Minas Tirith” (Filipczak 412). This is a testament to Éowyn’s heroism. Tolkien aligns her with the Witch-king, Filipczak argues, completely undercutting the enemy’s superiority and preventing his advancement (412). Here, Filipczak briefly extends her argument to posit an additional connection between Éowyn’s fight with the Witch-king and Gandalf’s fight at the bridge of Khazad-dûm, although she does not mention the many differences between these two scenes.

Filipczak also notes that there may be a connection between Éowyn and the biblical Judith (separate from the Old English Judith) (406). However, Tolkien’s notable distaste for allegory leads me to wonder if he would have chosen the biblical Judith over the Old English Judith as a template for her characterization of Éowyn. Having written, “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and have always done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence” (*LOTR* xxiv) in the forward to the Second Edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, it stands to reason that Tolkien may have taken to Old English biblical accounts—rather than the King James Bible cited by Filipczak—for their striking lack of allegory. In the same way as Thijs argues that allegory is largely absent in “Judith,” Tolkien may have found that Old English poetry more suitably reflected “history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers” (*LOTR* xxiv). Additionally, due to her focus on the biblical Judith, Filipczak does not address the extent to which sexualized violence is prevalent for both of these figures. She writes, “In both biblical scenes where the beautiful women confront the male enemy, the suspicion of seduction is in the air [...] even if the scene is an ironic reversal

of sexual intimacy” (408). This claim diminishes both the circumstances of Judith’s heroism and the mirroring circumstances of Éowyn’s heroism.

Much like Judith, the possibility of failure—of falling in battle—needs to be accessible for Éowyn to portray the type of perfected “northern heroic spirit” that Tolkien demonstrates through Gandalf on the bridge. Like the “Maldon” warriors, Gandalf’s fall is an essential part of his heroism. It proves that he is willing to die courageously for his people. Before Gandalf falls, Aragorn tries to fight with him. He yells, “He cannot stand alone! [...] I am with you, Gandalf!” (*LOTR* 331), before attempting to fling himself into the fray. Similarly, Boromir yells, “Gondor!” (*LOTR* 331), and charges after Gandalf. In these lines, Tolkien uses the passionate support of Aragorn and Boromir to emphasize the “unalloyed” heroism of Gandalf’s choice. Because they would risk their lives for him, Gandalf, as a northern heroic figure, must be equally willing to die for them. Gandalf breaks the bridge, is grabbed by the Balrog, and plunges into the shadows with it, using his last breath to encourage his companions onward (*LOTR* 331).

Éowyn certainly has the same impulse towards death, in the sense that she does not fear her possible demise. Merry notes this through his sudden concern for her after she reveals her gender. However, like Judith in her fight against Holofernes, Éowyn could not fall in battle as simply as Gandalf. Gandalf’s companions push forward following his loss, saying, “Come! [...] We must obey his last command!” (*LOTR* 331), recognizing that they may be able to avenge his death if they move forward (*LOTR* 333). Éowyn would be less able to recover from her potential defeat. She would face more trauma and injury than Gandalf because, while her physical harm would be similar, she would additionally experience extensive psychological and mental damage. When

Gandalf “dies,” Tolkien writes, the Balrog “swung its whip, and the thongs lashed and curled about the wizard’s knees, dragging him to the brink. He staggered and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss” (*LOTR* 331). Gandalf is certainly not “devoured [...] [and] left naked to the Lidless Eye” (*LOTR* 84). Even when Gandalf describes his resurrection, saying, “[n]aked I was sent back—for a brief time, until my task is done. And naked I lay upon the mountain-top” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 502), the threat he faces is not a violation of his body. Rather, he is “alone, forgotten, without escape” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 502), suffering from extensive isolation. As the “Maldon” warriors do not face the same consequences for defeat as Judith, Gandalf does not face the same consequences for defeat as Éowyn.

Perhaps even more than for Judith, the outcome of Éowyn’s fight against the Witch-king is determined by her role as a woman. The relationship that Éowyn has to Théoden is different than the relationship that Gandalf has with Aragorn and Boromir, and it is different to the relationship that Judith has with God. She must save Théoden, but saving him does not mean the same thing as it means for Gandalf and Judith. On a personal level, she cares about him as his niece. She is also subordinate to him in a traditionally feminine, societal way, being his cup-bearer and care-giver. As well, her role as a potential peace-bride necessitates that her virginity be intact. Therefore, when she saves him, she does so in conversation with all of these existing roles. As well, while Tolkien does not explicitly make Éowyn a symbol of purity, his frequent allusions to her ‘whiteness’ and ‘brightness’ connote purity. Like the “Judith” poet describes Holofernes’ attempt to defile “*ðā beorhtan idese*” [the bright lady] (58), there exists a sense that it would be catastrophic for the lady about whom “a light fell” and whose “hair shone in the

sunrise” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 842) to be sexually violated by the enemy. This combination of social duty and socially constructed purity render failure even more traumatic for Éowyn, just as it is impossible for Judith. If the Witch-king were to defeat Éowyn, the foundation of her character would crumble.

The violence of Éowyn’s fight against the Witch-king is also reflective of the violence in “Judith.” Tolkien rarely highlights violence, focusing more on the emotional experiences of fighting than on the fights themselves (Bilbo is unconscious for most of the Battle of Five Armies and, despite its lengthy film portrayal, the Battle of Helm’s Deep is a rather short section), but Éowyn is quite openly violent in her fight. Following the Witch-king’s threat of mental sexual assault, Tolkien highlights Éowyn’s sword. He writes, “A sword rang as it was drawn” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 841) issuing a sonic threat of violence before Éowyn actually speaks a threat. Then, in metaphorically connecting Éowyn to the sword, Tolkien writes, “the clear voice was like the ring of steel” (*LOTR* 841) when Éowyn says, “no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund’s daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 841). There are a few important things happening in this passage. First, Tolkien allows Éowyn to threaten the Witch-king to the fullest capacity. Her threat of “smiting” him is reflective of Judith’s murder of Holofernes, where she rips his soul from his body. It is the complete, assured destruction of the enemy, carrying godly connotations. As well, Tolkien is explicitly highlighting the gendered dynamic between the characters in preparation for their fight. Like Herbison argues that the “Judith” poet highlights Judith’s

gender through their choice of descriptive language, Tolkien chooses to construct a moment where Éowyn's womanhood is the focal point of her character.³⁷

This highlighting of Éowyn's gender only increases as Tolkien begins describing her through Merry's eyes. When Merry sees Éowyn face the Witch-king, "the helm of her secrecy [has] fallen from her, and her bright hair, released from its bonds, gleam[s] with pale gold upon her shoulders. [...] A sword [is] in her hand, and she raise[s] her shield against the horror of her enemy's eyes" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 841). Here, Tolkien constructs masculinity as binding, or restrictive, while he makes Éowyn's femininity a necessary part of her heroism. The masculine disguise that Éowyn takes as she enters the battlefield is a "bond" for her hair—her hair being a metonymy for her femininity—and she cannot physically engage in battle until her femininity is recognized. As well, while Éowyn embodies the bleakness of the "northern heroic spirit" as Merry reflects on "the memory of the face that he saw at the riding from Dunharrow: the face of one that goes seeking death, having no hope" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 841), Merry's new understanding of Éowyn as a woman changes his assessment of this bleakness. He thinks, "[s]he should not die, so fair, so desperate! At least she should not die alone, unaided" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 841). This passage suggests that, at least in one character's perception, the role of the hero is fundamentally different for a man than a woman.

Then, as is the case in Judith's murder of Holofernes, Éowyn's violence becomes all the more significant through Tolkien's focus on her femininity. He creates a

³⁷ While I cannot expand this line of thinking within the scope of my project, it may be interesting to note that, in mirroring the "Judith" poet's explicit feminization of a female hero, Tolkien departs from a separate—maybe more common—literary tradition which masculinizes women to demonstrate their power/strength/intelligence ex. Lady Macbeth, Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, the "not like other girls" trope, etc. Through this departure, Tolkien creates what is, for me, a much more positive and generative depiction of femininity.

potentially subversive situation in which a cup-bearing lady forcefully destroys her enemy. The way that Éowyn kills the Witch-king is also reflective of the way Judith kills Holofernes. First, she kills the “great beast” (Tolkien 841) the Witch-king rode into battle. Tolkien writes, “A swift stroke she dealt, skilled and deadly. The outstretched neck she clove asunder, and the hewn head fell like stone. Backward she sprang as the huge shape crashed to ruin, vast wings outspread, crumpled on the earth; and with its fall the shadow passed away” (*LOTR* 842). This passage is significant both because it emphasizes Éowyn’s skill as a warrior— as in “Judith,” where the poet remarks, “[h]æfde ðā ġefohten foremærne blæd” (121)³⁸— and because Éowyn’s act of decapitation mirrors that of Judith. It is significant that both Holofernes and the Witch-king take multiple blows before dying. Judith strikes Holofernes twice in the neck before he falls (“Judith” 105-110), the first leaving him “on swīman” (“Judith” 106),³⁹ just as the Witch-king stumbles before Éowyn’s final blow (Tolkien, *LOTR* 842). Additionally, as argued by Herbison about Judith, one might read a writer’s emphasizing of the processes and effects of decapitation as an almost celebratory form of gratuitous violence (12). This only increases when a warrior decapitates their enemy by hand, and the violence becomes deeply personal.

The fight does not end here, though. The Witch-king quickly turns to Éowyn and “[lets] fall his mace” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 842) breaking both her arm and shield before “raise[ing] his mace to kill” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 842). Merry then enters the fray, attacking the Witch-king himself: “Merry’s sword had stabbed him from behind, shearing through the black mantle, and passing up beneath the hauberk had pierced the sinew behind his

³⁸ “By fighting [Judith] obtained outstanding glory.”

³⁹ “In a swoon.”

mighty knee” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 842). This gives Éowyn the opportunity to kill the Witch-king. Tolkien writes, “tottering, struggling up, with her last strength [Éowyn] drove her sword between the crown and the mantle, as the great shoulders bowed before her” (*LOTR* 842). While Judith does not have an assisting hobbit in her fight against Holofernes, the outcome is much the same. It is significant that Éowyn’s final blow to the Witch-king is also to the head, having a similar effect to decapitation.⁴⁰ This is especially the case as Éowyn completely destroys the Witch-king by this blow. She leaves him “a voice bodiless and thin” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 842) that is quickly smothered and “never heard again in that age of this world” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 842). This is not to say that Tolkien extends his violent descriptions in the exact same ways as those of the “Judith” poet. He remains uninterested in blood and gore, describing only basic actions and outcomes. However, the violent descriptions Tolkien *does* employ in this passage have a similar effect to those of the “Judith” poet, making the reader acutely aware of an enemy’s complete annihilation by a woman.

Éowyn’s violence in her fight against the Witch-king is also made more prominent by her later departure from a warrior lifestyle. Where Tolkien scholars have attributed “northern heroic spirit” to Tolkien’s characters, there has rarely been a sense that part of the heroism of those characters is a classic retirement. Most of Tolkien’s men cannot experience a life outside their northern heroic roles. Thorin dies once he has achieved heroism, Aragorn becomes King Elessar of Gondor, and Gandalf eventually

⁴⁰ It is also significant that she kills the Witch-king with a piercing motion. While I will not linger on a reading of phallic symbolism, much like there exists a potential argument for a reversal of sexual domination in “Judith,” Éowyn’s piercing of the Witch-king through the head could mirror his threatened sexual assault on her mind.

continues his travels outside of Middle-earth. Likewise, there is no sense that Judith will abandon her warrior status. Éowyn, however, meets and marries Faramir after the War of the Ring. She decides, “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” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 965). While it is possible to read this passage as Tolkien undercutting his previously progressive approach to Éowyn’s characterization, I suggest that it may be more complex. While the end of Éowyn’s story differs from that of Judith, it remains significant that both characters actively choose contradictory, potentially subversive paths to heroism. The contrast in Éowyn’s new outlook from her previous heroic violence highlights the severity of that violence and the weight of her initial decision to fight. And it also rewards her through an ultimate escape from “bleak heroism.” It may be the case that, through Éowyn, Tolkien is demonstrating a shift from northern heroism to the modern heroism of characters like Frodo and Sam, which he seems to favour towards the end of the narrative. If this is so, Tolkien is not negating potential feminism, but is instead continuing his commentary on heroism.

CHAPTER 4— CONCLUSION

This discussion of potentially feminist readings of Tolkien's work is significant because it begins to answer the overarching question guiding my thinking: why men? Why have Tolkien and Tolkien scholars regularly defined "northern heroic spirit" in reference to male characters? The answer seems, at least in part, to be that Tolkien's theory depends on the ability of characters to occupy social spaces that are not always accessible to women due to their pre-existing marginalizations. In order to discuss women's northern heroism, it is first necessary to accept that their heroism must be fundamentally "alloyed" in order to exist. It is necessary to discuss both how their heroism mirrors traditionally male heroism, and also how their identities as women (and the linking of their womanhood to threats of sexual assault by men) might alter the nature of their heroism. However, I argue that, despite the difficulties it poses, this is a vital conversation both for its feminist recontextualization of a central theory in Tolkien studies—which emphasizes the male, misogynistic aspects of northern heroism— and also as a way into challenging alt-right co-opting of medieval literature and theories. By bringing non-traditionally masculine and non-male characters to the forefront of my analysis, I hope to participate in the work that many critics have begun in subverting the notion that medievalism and Tolkien are inherently masculinist. There remains space for recontextualization and rethinking.

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