In the Company of Thorin Oakenshield: A Baggins’ Styled Femininity and Acquired Masculinity in The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey

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The scene, a hobbit hole aglow with warm hues from a fireplace, is set and a frustrated wizard Gandalf growls at a flustered young hobbit Bilbo Baggins, “You’ve been sitting quietly for far too long.” This indictment, one of several catalysts for the hobbit’s eventual departure from The Shire, alludes to his place within the hierarchy of males around him. Although Bilbo is the main protagonist of The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey, he does not represent the ideal ego as main protagonists conventionally do. His lack of the characteristics which comprise protagonists who represent the ideal ego, in addition to settings and props, place him in a feminized position in relation to Gandalf, the leading dwarf Thorin, and the rest of the dwarves. Yet, plot facilitates his abandonment of femininity and acquisition of masculinity.

While Bilbo is the main male protagonist, his image does not conform to the narcissistic phantasies which constitute cinematic representations of the ideal ego. Laura Mulvey, in Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema, states that a “heterosexual division of labor” considers the main male protagonist representative of the “more complete, more perfect, more powerful ideal ego” of the identification process (41) within Lacan’s mirror phase (38). Bilbo fills the role of the main male protagonist Mulvey mentions; however, his image is deficient of the characteristics which cause such protagonists to signify the ideal ego. Steve Neale, in Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema, defines those characteristics, positing that power and omnipotence constitute the main male protagonist (256). Bilbo’s deficiency is highlighted when he is in relation to Gandalf, Thorin, and the rest of the dwarves.

In the Appendix A scene, for instance, despite the hobbit’s protestation that he cannot be the company’s burglar because he has “never stolen a thing in [his] life,” Gandalf decides he will be their thief by proclaiming, “If I say Bilbo Baggins is a burglar, then a burglar he is.” Although the dwarves originally agree with the hobbit that he is unfit to be a thief, they present him their contract to end Dwalin and Balin’s conversation except with an apology also illustrates the weakness of his ideal ego.

In addition to these defining characteristics, Neale also attributes emotional and linguistic reticence to the main male protagonist. Emotional reticence and reticence with language uphold “the image of the self as totally enclosed, self-sufficient, omnipotent” (Neale 257), as the ideal ego. Language ruins this image for it is “a process (or set of processes) involving absence and lack” (Neale 257). Bilbo’s emotions, intentions, and thoughts are consistently well known as he uses facial expression and language liberally. His displeasure at riding a pony is shown via his expression in the Appendix D scene, for instance. Gandalf, Thorin, and the rest of the dwarves, in comparison to the hobbit, use facial expression limitedly; even when they use expression, their expressions are not as dramatic as Bilbo’s facial expressions are (See Appendix E). On the same note, while the other males employ language, the hobbit speaks and asks questions more freely. In a particular scene, when Gandalf, whom Bilbo just met, announces to him, “I’m looking for someone to share in an adventure,” he responds, “An adventure? Now I don’t expect anyone west of Bree would have much interest in adventures. Nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things. Make you late for dinner.” The hobbit’s expressiveness, talkativeness, and inquisitiveness hence prevent his image from being that of the ideal ego.

The features which deem Bilbo unrepresentative of the ideal ego place him in a feminized position. Hélène Cixous, in Sorties, asserts that the activity/passivity binary underlies all hierarchical organization, subjecting all organization to man (Easthope and McGowan 158). Neale’s features are each part of a hierarchy: Power/weakness, reticence/expression. They are structured this way because power, omnipotence, emotional reticence, and reticence with language are equated with the male gender in cinema. Gender, being a signification that a socially differentiated body assumes, “exists only in relation to another, opposing signification” (Butler 9). The opposing signification in the abovementioned binaries is that of woman, seeing how the activity/passivity binary underlying hierarchy is coupled with sexual difference (Easthope and McGowan 158), and the signification of power, omnipotence, emotional
reticence, and reticence with language is already that of man. The hobbit’s need of these features places his image within the facet of weakness and expression, thus placing him in a feminized position. Indeed, his image is feminine for it is the “negative” of the other males’ images and/or “lack” from which their images are differentiated (Butler 10-11). His image not only inverts the features that constitute the main male protagonist, but is situated in a feminized position, for the features are affiliated with sexual difference.

In addition, the settings Bilbo inhabits establish him in a feminized position in relation to Gandalf, Thorin, and the rest of the dwarves. The Shire and Bag End embody the feminine while Middle Earth embodies the masculine, following the laws of association Sigmund Freud used to interpret signs (Hall 260). The Shire’s terrain conveys castration and in effect, the female genital through resemblance in form (Hall 260), it lacks the mountains and cliffs which signify the male genital organ (The Interpretation) (See Appendix F). Bag End’s circular front door signifies the female genital opening (The Interpretation) via resemblance in shape (Hall 260); its curved rooms collectively signify the womb through resemblance in form and function (Hall 260) (See Appendix G). Their form is like that of the womb for they enclose spaces able to be filled (The Interpretation); they function like the womb as they provide warmth, nourishment, safety, and isolation. Although natural scenery of Bag End signifies the female genital (The Interpretation) the setting that Gandalf, Thorin, and the rest of the dwarves inhabit, Middle Earth, is marked by mountains, cliffs, and trees, signifiers of the male genital organ (The Interpretation) (See Appendix H). Trees may be seen in The Shire, but Middle Earth’s exuberant amount renders them conspicuous and suggests a more masculine sphere. That male signs dominate a female sign conveys man’s “glorious phallic monosexuality,” his inability to be bisexual (Easthope and McGowan 159).

The Interpretation

Bag End and Middle Earth also embody the feminine and masculine because they exhibit the mother- and father-identification of the Oedipus complex (The Ego 22) via those who inhabit them. Several phenomena happen during this Freudian complex, two of which are: The boy “develops an object-cathexis for his mother” (The Ego 22), a development that causes him to identify with her prior to discovering sexual difference and, after discovering sexual difference, he identifies with his father (Minsky 110). By possessing Bag End, Bilbo possesses a symbolic womb, a quality the boy assumes himself to have during his identification with his mother (Minsky 110). When inside Bag End, he displays stereotypical feminine qualities, qualities the boy likewise assumes he will have (Minsky 110). The hobbit cooks, frets about appearing decent, and hosts. He concerns himself with food, doilies, utensils, furniture, and his mother’s glory box and pottery. Adhering to the father-identification of this complex, Gandalf, Thorin, and the rest of the dwarves express stereotypical masculine qualities when within Middle Earth. They concern themselves with attack, battle, and murder, eat and sleep outdoors, act aggressively and apprehensively. Moreover, the wandering Gandalf does within this setting is a masculine quality, for a male’s choice not to settle is viewed as a “rejection of home, family, and feminized control” (Domosh and Seager 118). The Shire and Bag End place Bilbo in a feminized position in relation to Gandalf, Thorin, and the rest of the dwarves because they embody the feminine.

Two props further feminize the hobbit through his state of affiliation with each in relation to the other males. His lack of a sword from the film’s start, as well as his later acquisition of the prop, is a reflection of the castration complex in which he is portrayed female. Arising during the Oedipus complex, this anxiety depends upon the boy or girl discovering sexual difference. Freud explains, “[t]he antithesis here is between having a male genital and being castrated” (Laplanche and Pontalis 56-7). Since Bilbo is shown without a sword, a sign of the male genital by likeness in length, uprightness, and ability to penetrate the body (The Interpretation), from the start, he is symbolically castrated. He appears emasculated in comparison Gandalf, Thorin, and the rest of the dwarves who, excluding Bombur, all possess a staff or weapon from the beginning that, like a sword, signifies the male genital (The Interpretation). By possessing such signs from the start, the other males render them inherent to themselves as the male genital is inherent to the boy. Bombur does not own a prop signifying his maleness; however, his relation to the dwarves who possess phallic props allows him to vicariously have a male genital. Bilbo’s lack of a sword portrays him female as the boy and girl, on discovering sexual difference, regard the female castrated (Laplanche and Pontalis 56-7). His acquisition of a sword continues to reflect the castration complex in which he is portrayed as female. Finding herself emasculated, the girl desires male genitalia. She satisfies the desire by developing an object-cathexis for her father, because she feels he will give her a son, a “longed for penis” (Siann 27). This process is represented when Gandalf gifts Bilbo with Sting, a sword and representation of masculinity. The wizard, having watched over, scolded, advised, defended, and answered the questions of Bilbo before the Appendix I scene, assumes the father’s role. Sting, occurring with Gandalf’s father figure and the hobbit’s castrated condition, becomes the coveted male genital.

Bilbo’s tie to food also feminizes him for woman is customarily linked with sustenance. Early foraging societies instituted the connection between females and food. Pregnant or nursing during most of their adult lives, women could not withstand the long-distance animal tracking or maintain the physical strength hunting demanded and in effect, came to gather (Morse 17). They undertook food processing and cooking for these tasks could be interrupted, resumed, and “done close to
home." In other words, these tasks suited pregnancy and childcare (Morse 21). Females’ connection to sustenance persisted from hunter-gatherer in to horticultural societies. Horticultural women’s work involved food preparation, and cooking meals (Morse 27). Faced with population increases, communities developed agriculture. Since agriculture necessitated “muscular strength, long[] hours, and frequent travel away from home,” it was ill-suited for pregnancy and childcare. Agriculture’s exclusivity, followed with land privatization that reduced polygyny, dichotomized men and women’s duties into public and domestic work (Morse 31-3). By “giv[ing] men control of the political and economic structures,” the dichotomy supported female subordination. Among other duties, women were expected to “satisfy[] their family’s food requirements” and serve their husbands at mealtimes in Medieval Europe, for instance (Morse 33-4).

Considering this connection, ingrained in the tradition of the Western World (Morse 33), food enables the hobbit to assume the feminine role of sustenance provider when he is in relation to the other males. In the Appendix J scene, he makes himself dinner, but before he can consume it, Dwalin invades his home and devours his meal. Finishing the food, the dwarf inquires if there is any more. Bilbo produces a plate of biscuits. Dwalin’s consumption of the hobbit’s dinner and Bilbo’s fulfillment of the dwarf’s request for food present the hobbit as a provider. His feminine role is enriched once the rest of the dwarves arrive and clear out food from his pantry. Although he does so reluctantly, Bilbo provides Gandalf and the dwarves with sustenance he gathered and sustenance that has been prepared (See Appendix K). The food has been prepared, and Gandalf and the dwarves consume it right after it is removed from storage. Despite arriving at the hobbit hole late, Thorin is provided for by his host: He is shown eating from a bowl at Bilbo’s dining table, a plate of biscuits and mug of ale to his left and right. Gandalf, Thorin, and the rest of the dwarves, in contrast, do not assume the role of provider. The wizard and dwarf do not supply food to their comrades. While Thorin snaps, “Come on Bombur, we’re hungry,” at one point, the dwarf is not depicted providing or preparing the sustenance he and his allies later eat. The rest of the dwarves do not give each other, Thorin, Gandalf, or the hobbit compensation. By allowing Bilbo to assume the traditionally female role of sustenance provider, food, like Bilbo’s initial lack of sword, situates him in a feminized position.

Yet, in spite of this initial position, plot facilitates Bilbo’s abandonment of femininity and acquisition of masculinity. Joseph Campbell, in The Hero with a Thousand Faces, states a call to adventure within a diegesis signals an individual’s “familiar life horizon has been outgrown, the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand” (51). Gandalf, who announces the call to Bilbo, states that the familiar life horizon has been outgrown: He questions, “Tell me, when did doilies and your mother’s dishes become so important to you?” The hobbit, unlike the other males who have no residences, is associated with home just as woman is. He is introduced within the confines of his hobbit hole, seated behind the fence surrounding Bag End; he does not break from this domestic sphere until he answers the call. Simone de Beauvoir, in The Second Sex, posits man “is but mildly interested in his immediate surroundings because he can find self-realization in projects” (450). Woman, in opposition, is devoted to the home: “Because she does nothing, she eagerly seeks self-realization in what she has” (450-1). Bilbo does nothing—he puffs his pipe, checks the mail, makes himself dinner—and is implied as seeking self-realization in what he has, experiencing the world through his books and maps. Consequently, his conduct and attachment to home ingrains his person with femininity.

By answering the call, he meets the custodians of the first threshold (77), dangers “every hero must encounter who steps an inch outside…his tradition” (Campbell 83). According to this perspective, the trolls, being the foremost threat he comes across, indicate Bilbo’s departure from what has become his tradition, effeminacy. Gandalf confirms the hobbit’s tradition, revealing his once active and therefore masculine condition (Siann 29) when he intones, “I remember a young hobbit who was always running off…, who’d… come home after dark.” The trolls rouse activity, a “sense of morality,” and a “social interest,” traits Freud ascribes to men (Siann 29), in Bilbo as he attempts to recover the ponies and rescue the dwarves from them. On traversing the threshold, the hero “must survive a succession of trials” with the assistance of a supernatural helper and his “advice, amulets, and secret agents” (Campbell 97). The hobbit not only eludes orcs, but survives a thunder battle, fends off a goblin, defeats and escapes Gollum, stays with the company despite being given the means to return home, and endures a fight with Azog. He manages most of these trials with the wizard’s help: Gandalf finds an escape, equips Bilbo with a sword, informs him on how and when to use it, and calls for help. Campbell asserts the hero’s collection of a prize (181) often concludes his journey (193). On receiving it, he must cross the return threshold, reintegrate himself into society and, at the same time, “confront society” with that which he gained through his travels (216-7). Particular elements may place the hobbit in a feminized position in relation to Gandalf, Thorin, and the rest of the dwarves, but plot, even if unresolved, ultimately dissociates him from femininity. The diegesis moves him toward action, a vocation of fighting, creating, and progressing, an acquisition of masculinity (Beauvoir 448). Although he has yet to receive his one fourteenth of the dwarves’ treasure, the prologue reveals he returns home. Hopefully, the change Frodo claims other hobbits perceive in this untypical protagonist refers to the maleness he gained through his adventure, not just to his unsociableness.
Appendix A

Appendix B

Appendix C

Appendix D

Appendix E
Appendix K

Works Cited


