

ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN ELVES AND HUMANS IN SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER'S *KINGDOMS OF ELFIN*

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In many of the stories in *Kingdoms of Elfin* humans encounter elves knowingly, unknowingly and sometimes unexpectedly. The elves in the short stories coexist with mortals but choose, for the most part, not to interact with them directly and avoid contact with them in the mortal world. This essay gives an insight into the manifold elfin kingdoms and analyses the relationship between elves and humans.

Zygmunt Bauman's concept of the 'stranger', as set out in *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), forms the background of my analysis concerning the way in which humans act towards elves. I shall first examine the opinions humans have of elves and then examine the way elves regard humans to understand the at times difficult relationship. The last part of the essay analyses the short story 'Foxcastle' in the context of Bauman's work regarding the human obsession with order and categorisation and shows why encounters between mortals and elves often end to the mortal's disadvantage.

Most mortals in *The Kingdoms of Elfin* have a low opinion of fairies and believe them to be nothing more than "thieving pests" (Warner, 1979, p.24). Their knowledge derives from legends and folktales or

traditional songs. The reader gleans most of the information on the way mortals perceive elves from the narrator, usually in the introduction to a story. Few mortals have ever encountered a fairy since, as the narrator informs the reader in 'The Revolt at Brocéliande';

Mortals do not see fairies – the generalization is as nearly a rule as anything in this turning world can be. It is certain that they cannot be seen by those who are looking for them. If a fairy of Brocéliande were seen, it was by some peasant whose mind was taken up with his own concerns – hunger, a leaky roof, a lost cow.

(Warner, 1979 p.56).

Whereas fairies can see mortals whenever they choose to, mortals are only able to glimpse elves under certain circumstances and then only if the elf is wearing visibility. This gives elves an advantage over humans, but it is not the only reason why encounters between elves and humans hardly ever end well. The mortal Elisha Blackbone in 'Elphenor and Weasel' encounters elves twice in his life, the first time as a child and the second time as an adult – the reason being that Elphenor, the elf who crosses his path, forgets to turn off visibility, 'though the shift between visible and invisible is a press-button affair' (Warner, 1979, p.24). Blackbone has ambivalent feelings towards elves; he is unsure whether these strange creatures can be classified as friends or enemies: 'There were fairies all round my father's place in Suffolk. Thieving pests, they were, bad as gypsies. But I *half* liked them. They were company for me, being an only child' (p.24, emphasis added).

Zygmunt Bauman states that humans try to make the world as readable as possible and therefore try to categorise other humans – or, as in this story, elves (1991, p.54). The first classification humans make is one of friend or foe. In a structuralistic division, friends are

positive and have a moral duty, whereas enemies are negative and refuse to take a moral responsibility (1991, pp.53-54). However, according to Bauman, the friend-enemy dichotomy omits an important element: that of the *stranger*. The stranger poses a threat since he or she undermines this antagonism: 'As that opposition [of friend and enemy] is the foundation on which rest all social life and all differences which patch it up and hold it together, the stranger saps social life itself' (1991, p.55). Bauman describes the stranger as 'neither friend nor enemy' or both, i.e., the stranger cannot be classified (1991, p.55). With reference to Jacques Derrida, Bauman therefore calls the stranger an 'undecidable'¹ who 'put paid to the ordering power of the opposition, and so to the ordering power of the narrators of the opposition' (1991, p.56).

Based on Bauman's concept of the stranger, Matthias Junge states that there are different ways of dealing with strangers, from exclusion to assimilation or subjugation (2006, pp.66-67). This approach towards strangers can be seen in 'Elphenor and Weasel'. Blackbone's attitude to fairies is highly ambiguous. He is torn between regarding them as 'thieving pests' or as likeable companions of his childhood. Blackbone believes the last option, identified as subjugation by Junge, to be the safest and most beneficial, which is why he hires Elphenor as his assistant. From this moment Blackbone becomes his master.

The narrator stresses that most mortals do not wish to see a fairy, 'since to see a fairy is unlucky' (Warner 1979, p.56). In the first paragraph of 'The Mortal Milk', the narrator gives the reader further information about the fairy kind and recounts that

[i]t is commonly supposed that fairies, or elfins, are trifling little beings, always on the wing and incapable of dying. This misapprehension has come about because they prefer to live in invisibility [...] In fact, they are about four-fifths of ordinary human

stature, fly or don't fly according to their station in life, and after a life span of centuries die like other people – except that as they do not believe in immortality they die unperturbed. (Warner, 1979, p.66).

It thus becomes evident that mortals have very little real knowledge of the fairy folk. The narrator exposes the common beliefs held by mortals ('always on the wing', 'incapable of dying') to demonstrate that fairies are different from what mortals consider them to be with the result that the relationship between 'fairykind' and humankind is closer than supposed. Fairies are not much smaller than ordinary humans and pass away like everybody else. The narrator highlights this aspect in 'The Five Black Swans':

The mysterious tribe of fairies are erroneously supposed to be immortal and very small. In fact, they are of smallish human stature and of ordinary human contrivance. They are born, and eventually die; but their longevity and their habit of remaining good-looking, slender and unimpaired till the hour of death have led to the Kingdom of Elfin being called the Land of the Ever-Young. (Warner, 1979, p.15)

In this description the narrator ironically inserts the adjective *mysterious* to describe the tribe of fairies which indicates that the narrator, on the contrary, does not find elves to be enigmatic. He refers to them in the same way as humans and subtly makes fun of those mortal characters who hold romanticised opinions of the elfin world believing it to be a world of magic inhabited by benevolent *friends*.

The reader is not only dependent on the narrator's direct accounts regarding what mortals believe they know about fairies; intertextual references to existing works of literature verify the existing knowledge on fairies and

lend the narrator further credibility. For example, Gideon Baxter, the Minister of Cotho in 'The Occupation', reads Robert Kirk's *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* to find out more about elves. In this book it says

These *Siths*, or FAIRIES, they call *Sleagh Maith*, or the Good People, it would seem, to prevent the Dint of their ill Attempts, (for the Irish use to bless all they fear Harme of;) and are said to be of a middle Nature betwixt Man and Angel, as were Daemons thought to be of old; of intelligent studious Spirits, and light and changable Bodies, (like those called Astral,) somewhat of the Nature of a condensed Cloud, and best seen in Twilight. (Kirk, 2008, p.47; qtd. Warner, 1979, p.203).

In Kirk's work fairies are not presented in an entirely positive light. Gideon Baxter, however, believes that fairies would make perfect companions, 'he stared round at his empty room, smiling as if to welcome these guests: intelligent, studious spirits, a companionship he had longed for ever since coming to Cotho' (p.203). He does not have ambiguous feelings towards fairies, but assumes they can be placed in the category *friend*. Unfortunately, the Minister comes to realise that fairies are nothing like he had hoped them to be. After the fairies, who are occupying his house, hide his youngest son, the Minister is convinced that they stole his child and left him with a changeling instead. The truth of the matter was that the fairies hid the baby for egotistic reasons – the incessant crying of the infant annoyed them. Nevertheless, the Minister 'felt the weeping resentment of a man betrayed. He felt the fury of a man made fool of' (p.206). At the end of the story the Minister comes to the sobering realisation that he has become a victim of his own delusion. All throughout the fairies have been completely indifferent towards him and had not shown any interest in

socialising with him. In the end the encounter proves to have dire consequences: 'there was nothing for it but to have [the Minister] declared a madman and taken to the County Bridewell' (p.207).

The strangers, whom the Minister believed to be friends, turn out to be – from a mortal's perspective – enemies. Contrastingly, from an elfin perspective no enmity was felt: merely indifference. They occupied the mortal's house because they had no other place to go and left when the situation became too tense. It becomes evident that Bauman's theory offers no explanation for the way elves regard humans. Most elves are not interested in interacting with humans and see themselves above them. According to Bauman, the 'stranger' is always close to the group or individual that tries to classify him or her and determine his or her status. Fairies, however, regarded by mortals as friends, enemies or strangers, do not approach the mortal world to engage with its inhabitants and are not interested in any form of sociation.

Up until now it has been seen that mortals have varying opinions of elves: some believe them to be ill omens and do not wish to cross their path, whereas others try hard to make acquaintance with them, but are often dismayed by their attitude. Hardly any human has any profound knowledge of elves although authors such as Kirk strive hard to analyse and categorise them ('of a middle Nature betwixt Man and Angel'). In contrast to humans, it can be said that most elves are indifferent towards humans and take them for granted. They show little or no intention of engaging with humans unless circumstances require it.

In 'Elphenor and Weasel', for example, the elf Elphenor decides to stay in the mortal world rather than return to the elfin kingdom of Zuy. He becomes an assistant to Blackbone, a necromancer, and discovers that '[after] the cautious pleasures of Zuy everything in his new life, from observing the planets to analyzing specimens of urine, entertained him. It was all so agreeably terminal: one finished one thing and went on to

another' (Warner, 1979, p.25). Elphenor enjoys the orderliness and regularity of the tasks Blackbone makes him perform and especially likes the idea of completing a task before starting a new one. Elves, unlike mortals, are not familiar with the concept of moving within a teleologically structured world and working towards a specific goal. This is due to the fact that they live their life according to a different time scale; they do not feel the limitations of time in the same way as human beings.

The mortal world intrigues Elphenor and he finds the many differences between human and elfin behaviour highly entertaining. However, upon learning that Master Blackbone intends to sell him and his lover Weasel to another necromancer, the elfin couple decides to leave. They spend the next days of their life roaming the countryside until they find shelter in a church. Inside the church Weasel comments laughingly on the man-made works of art supposedly depicting elves:

Weasel was flitting about the roof, laughing at the wooden figures that supported the crossbeams – carved imitation of fairies, twelve foot high, with outstretched turkey wings and gaunt faces, each uglier than the last. 'So that's what they think we're like,' she said." (p.34).

Far from being offended, Weasel is highly amused at her discovery of what she assumes to be images of elves. This scene illustrates the way in which humans attempt to define the world and their beliefs, and that most fairies are indifferent to mortals and what they believe in.

In 'The Late Sir Glamie' the connection between mortals and elves is discussed in greater detail. Here, the elves make it clear that they do not think mortals and elves should unite. Triggered by the reappearance of the ghost of the late Sir Glamie, the elves at Ring Castle try to ascertain the differences between elves and mortals. Up until the appearance of Sir Glamie's ghost, elves were convinced that, unlike humans, no elf possessed a soul

which could reappear in form of a ghost, therefore '[i]n a mortal court, apparitions are unobjectionable – even picturesque, and creditable' (Warner, 1979, p.169) but at an elfin court they are not acceptable since they shatter everything elves believe in:

Most painful of all was the threat to the calm negation on which all Elfindom reposes. Once this was undermined by Sir Glamie's reappearances, libertine speculations and surmises would widen the breach, superstition, proselytizing, fear of an awaiting life after death, would rush in and Elfins sink to the level of mortals.

(p.170).

The elves at this court wish to draw a clear line between the mortal and elfin race, however, they realise that this is not an easy task. They have to admit that mortals and elves do mix: 'at some point or other of Sir Glamie's pedigree an Elfin lady must have yielded to a mortal lover, and immortality, like the pox, has run in the family ever since' (p.170).

At one point in 'The Late Sir Glamie', the Master of Ceremony, the Chancellor, the Chamberlain and the Treasurer discuss the relationship between humans and elves in greater detail. They have information on mortals since, as the narrator points out, 'One could not live on the same planet [...] without an occasional glance at the conventions and convictions which made them a race apart' (p.172). The Master of Ceremonies picks up the narrator's remark but adds, 'A race apart. And a race akin' (p.172). His view on the relationship between humans and elves is supported by the Treasurer, who agrees, 'There are resemblances . . . The same social structure. The same number of toes' (p.172). Whereas the Chancellor believes that wings form the 'essential distinction' (p.172), the Master of Ceremonies considers that mortals' belief in life after death is the most crucial

feature that distinguishes them from elves (p.172). The Treasurer explains,

They lead such unsatisfactory lives. They are so short-lived and so prolific. They see their children dying by the dozen and in the twinkling of an eye are dead themselves. So they avenge themselves on their limitations by thinking there's more to it than that.

(p.172).

This statement stands in strange contrast to the previous discussion held on the ghost of Sir Glamie. All elves present know of the ghost's existence and link it to Sir Glamie's mortal ancestors, that is, to his immortal soul. The assumption being that they would believe that mortals rightly believed in life after death since the evidence is before their very eyes. However, this thought does not occur to them since they are predominantly interested in the elfin condition. The conversation shows that the discussion on mortals is only of any consequence if it has an impact on the life of the elves. This group of elves does not talk about mortals because they are interested in the number of their toes, but because something extraordinary is happening inside their kingdom which is causing the mortal world to impinge on the elfin world.

The fairy species is not homogenous in its treatment of humans and behaviour towards them. If, at the end of one story, the reader believes to have understood how elves think and behave, he or she will find his or her assumptions confuted in another. In 'Visitors to a Castle', for example, the fairies from the Welsh kingdom Castle Ash Grove take care of a mortal who fell off her bicycle and injured her knee. Although they are not overjoyed at the idea of taking her in, the Welsh elves lead her to their castle since 'hospitality is a sacred duty among Elfins' (Warner, 1979, p.98). In this case the fairies appear to be *friends* who 'are moulded out of responsibility and moral duty' (Bauman, 1991, p.54). This stands in stark contrast

to the elfin behaviour described above and hints at the inconsistencies that exist within the different texts and exposes the impossibility of determining accurately which features constitute an elf. The collection of short stories, *The Kingdom of Elfin*, does not form a coherent whole but is characterised by subtle contradictions.

In his introduction to *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Bauman states that human beings strive to categorise everything they encounter in the attempt to organise their world. He further claims that the inability of '[assigning] an object or an event to more than one category' causes distress and uneasiness (1991, p.1). Consequently humans try to eliminate any form of ambivalence and ambiguity within their surroundings. Bauman, however, is of the opinion that '[ambivalence] is a side-product of the labour of classification; and it calls for yet more classifying effort' (1991, p.3). Pursuant to Bauman, we will always be confronted with objects and events that prove to be unclassifiable, regardless of how hard we try to keep everything in order, an idea that is further taken up by Junge: 'There is no one system of categorisation that is able to classify all phenomena' (2005, p.67, my translation). Most humans are aware of the fact that:

Modern existence is both haunted and stirred into restless action by modern consciousness; and modern consciousness is the suspicion or awareness of the inconclusiveness of extant order; a consciousness prompted and moved by the premonition of inadequacy; nay non-viability of the order-designing, ambivalence-eliminating project; of the randomness of the world and contingency of identities that constitute it.

(Bauman 1991, p.9).

Despite this, hardly any humans are willing to totally accept this idea and consequently they continue their futile quest for order.

This desire to establish order is one of the main themes of 'Foxcastle' which tells the story of a mortal, James Sutherland, who enters the fairy world and tries to make sense of it by applying human standards and categories. One day, James Sutherland, who has always been fascinated with fairies, goes out searching for the fairy kind. His encounter with the local fairies of Foxcastle leads to his capture and subsequent incarceration. James Sutherland finds himself alone in a 'shadowy stone vault' and is no longer able to move freely since he is 'bound hand and foot in swathings of cobweb' (Warner 1979, p.210). He is being held captive by elves that remain invisible to him and there is no way for him to escape. Since the moment of his capture the roles have been reversed: instead of him studying them, they begin examining him. At first, it appears that the elves had captured James purely for research reasons:

The fingernail explored the convolutions of his ear, left it, traced the lines on his cheek. Other hands were fingering him, lightly, delicately, adroitly. [...] The cobweb bonds yielded as he writhed and struggled, and each time he thought he had snapped them they tightened again. The explorers waited till he lay exhausted, replaced the watch, and proceeded methodically to his genitals.
(p.210-11).

The fairies show no respect James's feelings and for them he is merely an object and not an equal being. For this reason they do not even try to engage with him. James is unable to make sense of their behaviour; yet despite this he is very reluctant to give up the idealised image he has of fairies: 'Throughout his life they [the fairies] had been his dearest preoccupation. He had believed in them, venerated them, championed them' (p.211). James cannot understand their conduct but tries not to find fault with the fairies. He convinces himself that he alone is responsible for the treatment he is

undergoing and asks himself: 'How had he offended them? Why were they so ungrateful?' (p.211). The fairies continue with their examination of James but as time passes their interest in him wanes:

At lengthening intervals he [James] was measured, but now a little perfunctorily. Before long they would lose interest, and there would be no more visits. Whatever they had had in mind – entertainment, the pursuit of knowledge, the pleasure of being busied about something – they had intended him no harm, no good. It was impersonal, the traffic of water flowing over a stone.

(p.213).

This statement supports the idea that the elves are completely indifferent to James and highlights the fact that they show little interest in a clinical study of human anatomy. Their examination appears arbitrary and seems to derive from a simple 'biological curiosity' (p.212). In contrast to human methods of examination, elves do not aim at categorising and comparing human body parts for research reasons and do not collect the same data in the same way as mortals. Since, however, the narrator does not speak from an elfin point of view in this story the reader never learns the reasons for their research. After a while the elves lose interest in James and they leave him to his own devices. As soon as he realises that he is free to leave his cell, James begins to wander about and take a closer look at the fairy world. His initial encounters remain cautious but gradually he builds up an interaction with the fairies.

One of the first things James decides to do is to analyse the elfin language. As the narrator comments,

One is always disconcerted by the ease with which foreigners talk their native tongue. The speech he [Sutherland] heard resembled no civilized mortal language; slurred and

full of hushed hisses, it was more like some dialect of Gaelic; but though he listened, hoping to catch a word which would put him on the track of what they were talking about, all he knew was that some proposal had been made and accepted. (pp.214-5).

At this point, James still feels uncomfortable in the fairy world, mainly, because he does not understand their language. This, however, does not make him want to leave. He seems convinced that learning and categorising the elfin grammar will help him to familiarise himself with the elfin world and reduce ambivalences. His aim is to apply a mortal structure to the elfin language and to demystify it with the aim of mastering it. However, as Bauman points out,

[t]he ideal that the naming/ classifying function strives to achieve is a sort of commodious filing cabinet that contains all the files that contain all the items that the world contains – but confines each file and each item within a separate place of its own (with remaining doubts solved by a cross-reference index). It is the non-viability of such a filing cabinet that makes ambivalences unavoidable. And it is the perseverance with which construction of such a cabinet is pursued that brings forth new supplies of ambivalence. (1991, p.2).

James's project, however, is doomed to failure since a mere linguistic analysis of the elfin grammar will not enable him to understand the elfin world. Any attempts are bound to result in further ambivalence. Only by accepting the elfin world as it is, with all its vicissitudes and inconsistencies, will Sutherland be able to partake in it. His project cannot succeed for practical reasons due to the fact that he is unable to acquire suitable writing paper, 'the Grammar was never written, because the load of

paper was stolen from a cooked-meats shop, and consisted of a manuscript cantata soaked in grease' (Warner, 1979, p.217). In contrast to what may be termed a lack of scholarly ambition on behalf of the elves (from a mortal point of view), James Sutherland displays great ambition in trying to classify the elfin language and make it transparent. However, he does not succeed because the elves do not take his project seriously. Their life does not revolve around a linear notion of time and order.

James's inability to write a book on elfin grammar turns out to be a major turning point in his life amongst the elves. His character slowly undergoes a change and gradually he adopts the elfin way of living: 'It was as though he had always lived at Foxcastle, accepting his good fortune *without surprise* as the fairies accepted him, and endlessly fascinated by their unaccountableness' (p.218, emphasis added). Although James gives up on structuring their language, he does not give up his lifelong study of elves. He continues to compare their behaviour to that of mortals and soon comes to the realisation that he is unable to find any motives for the fairies' actions. He comes to the conclusion that their behaviour is irrational and thus inexplicable. He waives judgment on their behaviour and henceforth begins to think and act increasingly like a fairy:

[...] the overruling disconcertingness was to find himself unconcerned. It was as if some mysterious oil had been introduced into the workings of his mind. If a thought irked him, he thought of something else. If a project miscarried, a flooding serenity swept him beyond it. He lived a tranquil truant, dissociated from himself as though by a slight agreeable fever – such a fever as one might catch by smelling a flower. (p.217).

James accepts that he cannot structure the fairy world, and that every attempt he makes will fail; he learns to live with ambivalent situations and even appreciates the

fairies' fickleness and inconsistency. The narrator even goes so far as to state: 'What happened to his wig [which fell to pieces] might well be happening to the compartmented order inside his skull' (p.218). James loses the ability to think in straight-forward categories and embraces the incongruity of the fairy world and its incompatibility with the mortal world. Instead of feeling distressed, he feels a new sense of freedom and happiness. James finally realises that mortal structures and systems are not applicable in the elfin world and he stops believing in their face value. He strips himself of the human qualities considered indispensable in the mortal world and '[w]atching these happy beings for whom weeping was impossible, he [becomes] incapable of grief; watching their inconsistencies, he [becomes] incapable of knowing right from wrong; disregarded by them, he [becomes] incapable of disappointment' (p.220).

James lives in a state of bliss in which he remains completely indifferent to his surroundings – just like the fairies of Foxcastle. However, this state of bliss is short-lived. The fairies, who send mortals and changelings away as soon as they detect any sign of old age, exclude James from their world when he visibly starts to grow old. The elves force him back into the world he originally came from – a world which no longer makes sense to him. On his first encounter with humans, he tries to communicate with them; however, '[he] had lived so long with the fairies he had forgotten his native speech; he could only gibber and stammer' (p.221). It is the mortal world that is now entirely alien to James Sutherland.

The above analysis has shown that humans such as James Sutherland try hard to classify elves according to mortal and moral standards. However, they do not succeed since the elves they encounter remain elusive and enigmatic. Very often, from a mortal perspective, elves seem cruel and indifferent to any form of suffering. Crossley describes them as 'elegant, cultivated, shrewd – but petulant, selfish, blasé (1985, p.63). Elves have very little concern for mortals since they are indifferent to the human race. However, the elfin indifference to mortals

does not exclude elves from taking an interest in the mortal world. The elves in 'The Late Sir Glamie' as well as Elphenor in 'Elphenor and Weasel' know about the human world, and in the case of Elphenor, even find it fascinating.

However, in these two stories the elves do not equate themselves with humans, but regard them as playthings that are not to be taken seriously. This can also be clearly seen in 'Foxcastle'. The elves of Foxcastle examine James Sutherland's body without any regard for his feelings and only begin to interact with him when he ceases to be an object of study for them.

NOTES

1. Bauman quotes Derrida on the undecidable to clarify his concept: "[The undecidable] can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganising it, *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics" (1991, p.55, original emphasis).

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