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### Projections of a Better World: A Critical Reading of Elfquest's Original Quest

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William C. Riley  
University of Montana Conference for Undergraduate Research  
April 28, 2017

## Projections of a Better World: A Critical Reading of *Elfquest's* Original Quest

Thank you all for joining me this afternoon. Before I begin my presentation, I want to mention that comics, like *Elfquest*, saved me when I was younger. I come from a family of readers, but unfortunately, due to a suite of conditions, reading has long been a difficult task for me. I found comics nearly thirty years ago and discovered their irregular lines of texts and utilization of images to tell stories helped me combat my reading disabilities. Quite literally, without comics, I would not be a student of literature. This presentation represents not only my research on *Elfquest* conducted with the help of my faculty mentor, but also my independent research in Comic Studies over the last five years at the University of Montana as well as my appreciation for the first text I read.

Beginning on the pages of *Fantasy Quarterly* in 1978, *Elfquest*, “is the longest-running, independent fantasy series, with more than 15 million comics, graphic novels, and other publications in print.”<sup>1</sup> It is also distinguished as the first and longest running comic series written and drawn by a woman. Despite its long history, strongly developed fictive world, and compelling characters, this series has received very little scholarly attention with only a few articles published in the early ‘80s. This paper aims to remedy this glaring lack of academic appreciation by providing a close reading of the “Original Quest,” which encompassed the first twenty issues published between 1978 and 1984.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://elfquest.com/eq/>

While *Elfquest* includes elements of science fiction, it clearly operates as a work of fantasy, as explained by professors Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn: “fantasy is about the construction of the impossible whereas science fiction may be about the unlikely, but is grounded in the scientifically possible.”<sup>2</sup> Despite their arrival via a space ship, the appearance of shape shifting creatures with magical powers is one example of the impossible and fantastic found within these comics. Mendlesohn further points out that fantasy relies on the, “dialectic between author and reader for the construction of a sense of wonder.”<sup>3</sup> A similar relationship is required between the writer and artist of comics and their reader as well, using what Dr. Neil Cohn describes as a visual lexicon. Unlike many forms of art, comic book art relies on its visual lexicon to give life and movement to the otherwise static world of text on the page. The relationship between author/artist and reader also gives fantasy another defining characteristic: the author/artist creates a secondary world wherein they can project what Dr. Rosemary Jackson describes as their, “desire for a ‘better,’ more complete, unified reality” that can be inhabited vicariously by the reader.<sup>4</sup>

It is within the framework of author/artist and reader that this paper seeks to explore *Elfquest*’s “Original Quest”. I will argue, first, that comics operate as a form of metafiction. With this established the paper will examine how Wendy Pini, author and artist of *Elfquest*, uses both her status as Other within the comic industry and the genre of fantasy as a work, “produced within, and determined by, its social context”<sup>5</sup> to queer our

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<sup>2</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, p 1

<sup>3</sup> *Rhetoric of Fantasy*, p xiii

<sup>4</sup> *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, p 2

<sup>5</sup> *Fantasy*, p 3

expectations of gender through an examination and close reading of the central elves of the story, the Wolfriders.

When we read comic books and graphic narratives, we are required to navigate the relationship between the often limited text on the page and the images presented alongside it. Of course the adage, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” becomes incredibly salient when considering the graphic aspect of these stories. While it is true that traditional texts may need to dedicate a great deal of their word count to scene setting and description, graphic narratives need to ensure that the images employed will carry the intended meaning or, put another way, will be read as the correct thousand words. With some genres of comics, like the superhero genre, the setting for the story is a world quite like our own, as such the artist can utilize images we are readily familiar with in order to convey setting and utilize short descriptions to fill in for fantastic technology or places we cannot experience.

With a fantasy text, like *Elfquest*, the writer and artist need to create an alien world that is easily read and understood by their readership. With *Elfquest*, Pini opted for the “World of Two-Moons,” an Earth-like planet peopled by humans that look and act like primitive versions of us. Pini’s work in mainstream comics led her to develop what Cohn describes as a Kirbyan art style, found predominantly in mainstream American comics and heavily influenced by Jack Kirby.<sup>6</sup> By using the Kirbyan style, Pini is able to tap into the American Visual Language utilized in superhero comics to help us understand the characters and the world.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Visual Language of Comics*, p 139-41

Comics, as a narrative form, then require readers to be aware of their constructiveness in order to aid the semantic meaning of art used. The reader needs to have learned the visual language employed, as well as understand how panel shape and size provides the temporal element of storytelling. Where a traditional text may expand or contract time by increasing or decreasing descriptive elements, provide internal monologue, or use action forward sentences, panel size provides the temporality of the narrative in comics. In order for the comic to be read successfully, it must draw attention to spatial-temporal relationship within a panel and panel-shift to panel-shift as well as the interplay of the visual language objects to facilitate meaning and understanding. As such, comics function as a type of metafiction, defined by literary critic and Professor of English, Patricia Waugh, who defines metafiction as, “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”<sup>7</sup>

As metafiction, comics and graphic narratives, must draw attention to their status as artifacts in order to generate a large part of the semantic meaning of the text. One of the key ways Pini does this is to draw attention to gender in *Elfquest* as a method of commenting and queering our hegemonic gender expectations. In the “Introduction” to *Queer Theories*, Donald E. Hall presents that there are a variety of queer theories and expresses that, “‘Queer’ theories [...] work to challenge and undercut any attempt to render ‘identity’ singular, fixed, or normal,”<sup>8</sup> which is precisely the position Pini puts readers into over the *Elfquest*’s long history.

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<sup>7</sup> *Metafiction*, p 2

<sup>8</sup> *Queer Theories*, p 15

The first example of this can be found in the protagonist, Cutter, who is frequently depicted with a feral, wolfish, appearance; his naked, muscular, chest framed by only a fur vest. R. W. Connell, in his work on *Masculinities*, points out that, “true masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body.”<sup>9</sup> By utilizing Kirbyan visual language, we view Cutter as hypermasculine in body shape and musculature, with the fur vest simultaneously acting as an indicator of savagery and stepping in for body hair. Just as we begin to process the masculine qualities, we are confounded by the mop of hair atop his head, reminiscent of some popular styles for women’s hair. Typically, in Kirbyan comics, the male protagonist will have short cropped hair, yet Cutter has a veritable mane of white-blond hair on his head.

Cutter is also presented using a variety of Kirbyan action poses which enable him to use his body and display his muscles in such a way as to convey strength and skill in battle, similar to poses used throughout superhero comes. These aggressive actions serve to again highlight the aggression often correlated with hegemonic masculinity. Unlike the typical superhero or other Kirbyan protagonist, Cutter is also gentle, as demonstrated in the first issue when as he intimately holds his fellow tribesman, Redlance, in his arm as the omniscient narrator explain that, “though his folk call him Cutter, in part for his skill with a sword, he is no cold and merciless death dealer. / Cutter loves his small tribe with a strength beyond his years.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Masculinity*, p 45

<sup>10</sup> *Elfquest #1*, p 9/2

The character of Redlance is another character wherein Pini asks us to question and to queer our expectations regarding masculinity within the heterosexual couple. The first quest we find the Wolfriders engaged in is to rescue Redlance from humans—here we are also made to consider the ubiquitous lady-in-peril motivation of most rescues. With his long, red, locks it would be easy to read Redlance as effeminate and possibly homosexual, though this is quickly put to rest when he is reunited with his Lovemate, Nightfall.<sup>11</sup> Later, near the culmination of the elves' quest to retake their homeland, Redlance and Nightfall reverse our expectations—it is Redlance who stays to care and watch over the elven children, while Nightfall dons arms and armor and proves herself to be a capable warrior. It is interesting to note that this couple also highlight the dominant notion that love is equated with monogamy by participating in a large elven orgy with a fellow male elf and later with three other elves.

Nightfall is one of many female elves who work to challenge our expectations towards femaleness. Certainly, just as maleness proceeds from the body, Pini's elven women certainly present much of their femininity through their bodies. Unlike Kirbyan women, though, the elven women do not struggle with ungainly breasts which might otherwise prove to be more of a burden than boon. Characters like Nightfall, Clearbrook and Kahvi demonstrate that elven women are as skilled as men in battle. The character of Leetah, Cutter's wife, also demonstrates female agency that is not often found in fantasy. Cutter's wooing and eventual romantic bond with Leetah certainly fulfills a common trope in fantasy literature. In fact, the much of the romantic drama between two rival males, Cutter and Reyek, helps anchor *Elfquest* into the genre of fantasy. Leetah, however, queers

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 10/1-2

our expectations after the two rivals complete a trial for her hand: “Typically you misinterpret, Wolfrider... you have *not* won me! You have won the right to woo me—no more, no less... but the final decision is mine.”<sup>12</sup> Leetah is more forceful in resisting the magical sexual force of Recognition, a powerful drive for two elves to mate with one another, specifically for the purpose of creating offspring. Though she does eventually fall in passionate love with Cutter, she refuses to be bound by both cultural and biological dictates to take Cutter as her mate.

*Elfquest* utilizes our expectations formed by our knowledge and understanding of the fantasy genre, Kirbyan visual language, and our own mimetic experiences to participate in the author/artist dialog with Pini. As an Other within the comic industry, both as a woman and a producer of independent comics, Pini leverages our shared dialog to queer our experience in *The World of Two-Moons*. And by queering our expectations, the text is asking us to consider our dependence on current heteronormative masculinity and by presenting openly homoerotic and bisexual men as beneficial and heroic, whether on the battlefield or caring for young. Women are challenged to step away from cultural mandates enforced by active agents of patriarchy and embrace their own agency regarding their bodies, sexuality, and romantic identities. By queering and questioning the text empowers us to resist fixed, hegemonic, notions of gendered experiences.

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<sup>12</sup> *Elfquest* #4, p 5/4

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