



"OH . . . OH . . . FRODO!":

READINGS OF MALE INTIMACY

IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*<sup>1</sup>

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Negative criticism of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has frequently centered on the charge of childishness—critics such as Edmund Wilson called it "juvenile trash" (55), and Edwin Muir complained that the heroes are in effect boys who have no understanding of women. Catharine Stimpson claims that "[w]hen Tolkien does sidle up to genuine romantic love, sensuality, or sexuality, his style becomes coy and infantile" (20). Found lacking in his representation of women and heterosexual relationships, Tolkien does not satisfy on other counts either. Stimpson declares, "[u]nlike many very good modern writers, he is no homosexual" (20). Although Stimpson recognizes that "the most delicate and tender feelings in Tolkien's writing exist between men, the members of holy fellowships and companies" (19–20), this fact seems to become part of the general resentment and criticism of his inadequate representation of sexuality. For Stimpson, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*—or Tolkien himself, apparently—was neither homosexual nor heterosexual enough, and other critics echo at least the latter of these sentiments, if not both.

The questioning of sexuality in Tolkien's story has intensified now that reception of the text has become complicated by the intertexts of the Peter Jackson films, the extended DVD versions of the films along with their commentaries, and the enormous outpouring of fan fiction and fan art that has been posted on the Internet.

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Some entertainment reporters, who do not always distinguish between the characters in the film or the actors themselves, have enjoyed insinuating that the hobbits are gay.<sup>2</sup> While the screenwriters and the actors explain that the films intend to show the deepest friendship between characters (and the DVD commentaries insist on the real-life fellowship among the actors), many fans have seized on the representation of that fellowship—in film, DVD commentary, book version, or a conflation of all of these—and have rewritten Tolkien's story as an explicitly sexual one through the genre of slash fiction.

For a book that is supposed to be devoid of adult sexuality, *The Lord of the Rings* has always elicited strong reactions focusing on sex. The male intimacy that Tolkien describes, particularly the relationship between Frodo and Sam, often has an unsettling effect on readers whose reactions may range from dissatisfaction to erotic excitement. Neither of these extremes usually recognizes that the Frodo-Sam relationship reflects a historically contingent mode of British male friendship that belongs to the First World War. After examining the possibilities for male intimacy in that historical context, I will look at the contemporary (predominantly British and North American) reception of that friendship in film and fan fiction, where it is evident that the Frodo-Sam relationship continues to challenge categories of gender, sexuality, and male friendship.

Part of the difficulty in understanding Tolkien's representation of male friendship may be caused by those readers who assume that Tolkien's medieval idiom marks his book as belonging to a childish or adolescent genre, a throwback to Victorian and Edwardian medievalized stories for young boys. In fact, this connection between medieval literature and young readers predates even the nineteenth century. Ever since the early modern period, when medieval literature had been perceived as falling short of the standards of classical elegance required in polite literature, medieval stories were deemed good enough for children, who were given drastically reduced medieval tales in chapbook form. By the late nineteenth century, however, in the midst of an unprecedented medieval revival, a flourishing children's publishing industry turned to medieval stories as a staple of children's reading and asserted their pedagogical value. Particularly influential was Andrew Lang's championing of the "survivals" theory that children represented a primitive stage in the development of civilized nations; by extension, then, the earliest, primitive literature of a nation, to be found in its medieval texts, was considered naturally suitable for children. By the late Victorian period, numerous school texts, anthologies, periodicals, and historical novels presented heroes of the Middle Ages to boys as role models.<sup>3</sup> Medieval concepts of chivalry even provided the inspiration for youth

groups such as the Boy Scouts and the Knights of King Arthur (Adams 65–66).

The ubiquitous medieval story in children's publications did not, however, introduce its readers to any sense of adult sexual behavior as represented in the original medieval tales. Other than the occasional rescue of a girl by a boy hero and his chum, young readers would not find Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" or "Reeve's Tale" in their books, nor would they be likely to read Malory's account of King Arthur's conception or the adultery of Lancelot and Guinevere. Despite frequent assertions that medieval literature, documenting the nation's childhood, was the appropriate reading material for children in the present, that literature had to be bowdlerized in order to make it fit what was considered suitable for young minds. As Michael C. C. Adams points out, the general effect of education by the end of the Edwardian period was to keep the sexes separate and as innocent as possible, or at least fearful, about sexual knowledge (15–18). The connection between the child and the medieval was so pervasive and longstanding that even Tolkien accepted it at first at the time of writing *The Hobbit*, although it was a connection that he later regretted in his letters and argued against in his essay "On Fairy-Stories," which he originally presented as the Andrew Lang Lecture at the University of St. Andrews in 1939. Tolkien's broad definition of "fairy-story" includes most of the medieval literature that children would have read in adaptations or translations, including examples such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Beowulf*, the Arthurian legends, and other folktales, and he takes pains to reject the assumption that such stories belong exclusively to children. He understands that the modern adult canon had largely omitted what he termed the fairy-story: "Fairy-stories have in the modern, lettered world been relegated to the 'nursery,' as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the play-room, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused" ("On Fairy-Stories" 130). In a draft of a letter written in 1959, Tolkien explains, "I had been brought up to believe that there was a real and special connexion between children and fairy-stories. Or rather to believe that this was a received opinion of my world and of publishers. I doubted it, since it did not accord with my personal experience of my own taste, nor with my observation of children (notably my own). But the convention was strong" (*Letters* 298). Tolkien questions the concept of the child reader: "Children as a class—except in a common lack of experience they are not one—neither like fairy-stories more, nor understand them better than adults do; and no more than they like many other things" ("On Fairy-Stories" 130). His letters frequently warn his publisher, Stanley Unwin, that in writing *The Lord of the Rings* he was producing something

"more 'adult'" (*Letters* 41). He goes on to explain, though, that after thinking through the issue for his Lang lecture, he then was able to write *The Lord of the Rings* as "a practical demonstration of the views that I expressed. It was *not* written 'for children,' or for any kind of person in particular, but for itself" (*Letters* 310).

Tolkien was clear on the nature of what he was writing in *The Lord of the Rings*. Although he had read in his childhood some of the medievalized stories that most children were exposed to, he knew, obviously, a good deal of medieval literature in its original form. He chose to write in what could be called a medieval idiom not because he wanted to imitate Victorian adventure stories, but because his deepest personal and professional thoughts were immersed in that idiom. Still, he had to clarify and defend what he was doing. In notes that he sent to his American publishers he states, "I think the so-called 'fairy-story' one of the highest forms of literature, and quite erroneously associated with children (as such)" (*Letters* 220). Unfortunately for Tolkien, not all readers had come to the same conclusions. One finds in some reviews the persistent assumption that a story that had a medieval-like setting and characters and that clearly belonged in the realm of Faërie must be suitable only for children. In 1954, Maurice Richardson seemed to be shouting an alarum in a *New Statesman* review: "Adults of all ages! Unite against the infantilist invasion," and he goes on to malign W. H. Auden, an admirer of *The Lord of the Rings*, as someone who "has always been captivated by the pubescent world of the saga and the classroom" (qtd. in *Letters* 445). Dismissed in one blow is the achievement of medieval northern European literature and anything written in a similar style; such works, without a position in the modern, adult literary canon, are relegated to the world of the child and the childish.

It is interesting that Richardson uses the word "pubescent" to impugn Auden's taste and *The Lord of the Rings*, suggesting something sexually immature about both. Edwin Muir took a similar approach, criticizing what he saw as the adolescence of a work that did not demonstrate much knowledge about women, as if the book were a typical example of the censored medieval tale that was often provided for young readers. Of course, Tolkien bristled at such criticism, which seemed deliberately to ignore such powerful figures in the story as Galadriel, Arwen, and Éowyn—not to mention the monstrous Shelob—as well as more minor female characters such as Goldberry, Rose Cotton, Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, and Ioreth.<sup>4</sup> Also bound up with the perceived sexual immaturity of the child-like medievalized narrative was the misapprehension that the text represented a naive heroism—the stuff of Victorian and Edwardian boys' stories, which, ever since the First World War, had seemed to many to represent

false and inadequate ideals in the light of the realities of modern war. Tolkien notes, "Some critics seem determined to represent me as a simple-minded adolescent, inspired with, say, a With-the-flag-to-Pretoria spirit, and wilfully distort what is said in my tale" (*Letters* 244). Such critics, not being able to see beyond the medievalized heroic narrative that they assumed belonged to an outdated or a childish genre, missed the fact that this story about a war represented the complexity of a twentieth-century writer's experiences, someone who had served in one war and had sent two sons into another. If we, however, are to understand the context in which Tolkien focuses on male friendship, with heterosexual relationships on the periphery, we have to acknowledge the roots of the narrative in his experiences of war, particularly in his memories of the First World War.

Tom Shippey has argued convincingly that *The Lord of the Rings* is a book that attempts to comprehend the evil of war. In his article "Tolkien as a Post-War Writer," Shippey places Tolkien in the context of a group of writers—William Golding, C. S. Lewis, George Orwell, and T. H. White—who were born before the First World War and published their major works after the Second World War, all of them except White having experienced battle firsthand. Shippey argues, "the group of post-war fantasists I have identified was remarkably strongly affected by the major issue of British politics 1900–1950, which was war; and remarkably determined to concentrate on the problem which for them it raised above all: I repeat, the nature and origin of evil" (86). Critics such as W. A. Senior attribute the pervasive sense of loss in Tolkien's work partly to his having lived through the wars. It is especially Tolkien's personal experiences in the First World War that are key to understanding his historical context, according to Brian Rosebury and John Garth. In Rosebury's assessment of Tolkien as a modern writer, he identifies *The Lord of the Rings* as "the last work of First World War literature, published almost forty years after the war ended" (146). John Garth also focuses on the First World War, describing how the experiences of Tolkien and his friends affected what Tolkien was composing at the time and suggesting that the seeds of the *The Lord of the Rings* were sown in 1914, when Tolkien began work on his mythology.

Tolkien did write a good part of *The Lord of the Rings* during the Second World War, when his sons Michael and Christopher were serving in the military, and his letters to them evoke memories of his own war experience. In 1945, for example, he writes to Christopher Tolkien, "I can see clearly now in my mind's eye the old trenches and the squalid houses and the long roads of Artois, and I would visit them again if I could" (*Letters* 111). As early as 1938, Tolkien was

writing to his publisher that in beginning what was to become *The Lord of the Rings*, he felt that "[t]he darkness of the present days has had some effect on it" (*Letters* 41). However, in response to attempts to read the story as an allegory of the Second World War, Tolkien reminds his readers that his war experience goes back to the First War: "One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression; but as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead" (Foreword xix). As John Garth remarks of Tolkien's intentions here, "If you really must look for a meaningful biographical or historical influence, he would appear to be saying, 1914–1918 is where you ought to start" (310). After all, as Tolkien himself points out, it is the direct experience of war "which alone goes really to the heart" (*Letters* 76).

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One could argue that the heart of *The Lord of the Rings* is the relationship between Frodo and Sam. Marion Zimmer Bradley identifies their friendship as the most intense love relationship in the book, akin to classical ideals of friendship in heroic literature (116). Similarly, David M. Craig writes about the love of Frodo and Sam as the "moral and emotional heart of the story" (17), although he suggests the influence of a more modern mode of friendship experienced in the First World War. In order to understand the nature of that ideal of friendship, Craig cites Paul Fussell's classic study of World War I literature, which discusses homoeroticism in war literature. Craig also looks to Joanna Bourke's discussion of men taking on traditionally female domestic and nurturing roles in the First World War as a way of looking at Sam. Craig's discussion goes on to consider the physical intimacy between Frodo and Sam, with the conclusion that "the love which conquers all is the love which dare not speak its name" (18)—though, as Craig states, that conclusion would be something that the conservative Tolkien would most likely deny. Craig's purpose is to view homosexual desire as part of male friendship; as he states, he wants to "collapse the distinction" between the two that some, like C. S. Lewis, were intent on maintaining (15). In doing so, Craig seems to be moving toward a definition of the homosocial continuum, although his conclusion seems somewhat restrictive in suggesting a stable sexual identity for Frodo and Sam as homosexuals. Santanu Das's exploration of male intimacy in the trenches indicates that the situation was far more complex and resistant to categories of sexual identity and gender roles. According to Das, in the unique experi-

ence that was the First World War, "A new world of largely nongenital tactile tenderness was opening up in which pity, thrill, affection, and eroticism are fused and confused depending on the circumstances, degrees of knowledge, normative practices, and sexual orientations, as well as the available models of male-male relationships" (52–53). Sarah Cole reiterates the point: "the spectrum from the homosocial to the homosexual became an axis along which individual identity was imagined during the war, and war literature is rife with contradictions about the status and nature of physical intimacy" ("Modernism" 472). In analyzing examples of same-sex gestures of physical tenderness, particularly the dying kiss—a male-to-male kiss exchanged in moments of extreme danger or near death—Das reveals the difficulties of conceptualizing sexuality and gender in this situation: homoeroticism is not necessarily opposed to heterosexuality; the tender physical gesture is an affirmation of life and a triumph over death that is not necessarily to be equated with eroticism or repressed sexual drives. Das's examples suggest that "to discuss intense same-sex relations during war, we must introduce a different and less distinctly sexualized array of emotional intensities and bodily sensations, a continuum of nongenital tactile tenderness that goes beyond strict gender divisions, sexual binaries, or identity politics" (56). Tolkien's representation of the Frodo-Sam relationship, I would contend, reflects this unique twentieth-century experience of male friendship—an intimacy that includes emotional attachment and gestures of physical tenderness. This relationship does not reduce to "romantic love or friendly affection or homoerotic frisson" but, as Das points out, "with each of these elements there is a distinct overlap, and yet always a distinct difference" (69).

Paul Fussell discusses how the romantic and sentimental male relationships described in World War I are not evident in World War II literature. Fussell asks, "Were writers of the Second War sexually and socially more self-conscious than those of the First? Were they more sensitive to the risks of shame and ridicule?" (280). He implies that the answer is yes, and here we have a clue as to why sexuality in Tolkien's text, or in his own life, was the target of some of his critics. In calling on his experiences of the First World War in the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was writing about male friendship as experienced by many men at the time, but his book was only published years after the Second World War, when male intimacy such as that experienced by Frodo and Sam might have seemed ridiculous, outdated, or, possibly, as in the case of Catharine Stimpson's opinions cited above, sexually inadequate. Since women are not a central concern in most of Frodo and Sam's story, the critics need to make something of the male relationship: one can

ridicule the fact that the story shows a bunch of boys together, as Edwin Muir does, finding this representation of male relationship inadequate without women at the center; or one can belittle the tender feelings that are expressed between characters like Frodo and Sam because they—or Tolkien himself—are not clearly and identifiably homosexual, as Stimpson seems to be doing. It is the indeterminate nature of the homosocial relationship that is unfamiliar and disturbing to some readers, who want to slide their eyes away from what is actually being represented and to ask, usually, for clearly defined, fully formed heterosexual relationships at the center of the narrative.

While Craig points the way to seeing Frodo and Sam's relationship in the context of writing from the front, it is possible to extend his views of the physical and emotional intimacies between those two central characters in the light of World War I writing. Following this line of inquiry, one can see that the bond between Frodo and Sam is represented in ways that are markedly similar to the male friendships described by many British soldiers in the First World War. The paradigm of World War I literature allows us to see more fully how Tolkien is reflecting not the heroic pieties or sexual immaturity of Victorian and Edwardian medieval boys' stories, but the experiences of someone who has known the "animal horror" of trenchlife (*Letters* 72) and whose views of male bonding reflect many of the desires and complexities of living through that crucial moment in the formation of the modern outlook.

To call attention to the ways in which Tolkien's fiction resembles the work of other World War I writers is not to suggest that the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* are meant to be direct parallels of Tolkien and his school friends who served in the war. Nor is the drawing of comparisons meant to reduce the meaning of *The Lord of the Rings* to being merely a disguised story about soldiers in World War I. However, examining Tolkien's statements about his war experiences and comparing his representation of Frodo and Sam to other accounts of the war does help to explain the focus on and the nature of the male relationships in the story. More specifically, Tolkien, like other war writers, deals with male bonding, disillusionment, problems of recognition, the return to domesticity, and the difference between comradeship and friendship under the pressures of battle. His story includes at its climax the ironic turn that characterizes a prevalent attitude about the First World War, but Tolkien also finds a way to express a belief in heroism that the conventional critical paradigm of war writing, in its privileging of the disillusioned soldier, does not acknowledge. This image of the heroic, however, does not involve the traditional male hero leading his men on the field of battle

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in great deeds of arms—that role is left to other secondary characters in the book. Instead, the relationship between Frodo and Sam allows Tolkien to create heroes who accomplish their deeds supported by mutual emotional and physical intimacy.

Achieving this intimacy within larger military groups is not easy, however. Cole provides an interesting insight into the troubled relationship between group solidarity and personal friendship in the First World War. According to Cole, comradeship, "a corporate or group commitment, a relation particular to war and typically described in elevated language" (*Modernism* 145), frequently conflicted with a more personal friendship in men's experiences of World War I. Bourke agrees, citing examples of how, on the one hand, group solidarity was promoted by military institutions that had to motivate a largely civilian army but how, on the other hand, group identity was undermined by elements of military life such as rank, class differences, and allegiances to separate battalions (128–37, 144–70). Among Tolkien's own school friends, one finds the desire to fight alongside each other—G. B. Smith and Tolkien, for example, hoped to join the same battalion (Garth 82, 88)—and the disappointments at not being able to serve together or the repeated attempts to find each other once they were at the front also highlight the ways in which larger group identities did not suffice to replace the personal connections between friends (Garth 178–85). In fact, Tolkien's letters reveal a marked lack of sympathy with his comrades in arms and the military milieu. He admits to his son Michael that "I was very inefficient and unmilitary" (*Letters* 54), and in writing to Christopher, Tolkien describes how he tried to separate himself from his fellow soldiers and his surroundings in order to write his poems and stories "in grimy canteens, at lectures in cold fogs, in huts full of blasphemy and smut, or by candle light in bell-tents, even some down in dug-outs under shell fire. It did not make for efficiency and present-mindedness, of course, and I was not a good officer" (*Letters* 78).

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In *The Lord of the Rings*, the fellowship of the Nine Walkers is a company comprised of volunteers who do want to serve together. Although Elrond does try to impose his opinion about whether Merry and Pippin should be included, he is advised by Gandalf to "trust rather to their friendship" (226; bk. 2, ch. 1) and to let the hobbits go as part of the group. But even this small group is splintered through internal division and by external forces, and though they might long to be reunited, the events of the war of the Ring keep them separated in various different strands of action until the war is over. Their

friendship cannot withstand the circumstances in which they find themselves. Even in larger, successful fighting groups, such as the Riders of Rohan or the armies of Minas Tirith, personal bonds of loyalty and friendship override allegiance to the group. For example, although Beregon is a member of the Third Company of the Citadel, the loyalty that is uppermost in his mind is to Faramir, and he will, in fact, disobey orders in order to save his lord. Merry is moved to offer his service to Théoden and then, also against orders, goes to war with him, taking a stand on the battlefield beside the fallen king. When Éomer and Aragorn leap into action in the fight at Helm's Deep, they draw their swords, proclaiming their personal allegiances to their own homeland or people, not to the army in which they are both fighting: Éomer shouts, "Gúthwinë for the Mark!" and Aragorn, "Andúril for the Dúnedain!" (537; bk. 3, ch. 7). Examples such as these demonstrate how a personal sense of loyalty, as in the medieval bond between lord and retainer, operates even in large, successful armies; in Tolkien's work, the horror of corporate army life, with soldiers deprived of will, obeying orders from anonymous superiors, is to be found among the Orcs and the Uruk-hai. While the language of the Rohirrim, for example, has archaic, epic resonances, including battle poems in alliterative meter modelled on Old English poetry, the cursing and squabbling that goes on in Orcish or Uruk-hai ranks seems very modern by contrast. When Merry and Pippin are taken prisoners, the Orcs and Uruk-hai argue about what is to be done with them, each group claiming "[t]hat's my orders" (448; bk. 3, ch. 3). When someone thinks of searching the prisoners for his own advantage, another sneers, "I may have to report that" (449; bk. 3, ch. 3). With little loyalty or respect for the leaders of their side, and not much reward or trust given to the fighters in return, these scenes bring out the worst in corporate military life, akin to what many experienced in the First World War: disorganization, disagreement, and the physical pain of being forced to follow orders without really knowing the purpose of the action. It is not only Merry and Pippin but the Orcs as well who run with the curses of those in charge ringing in their ears: "By the White Hand! What's the use of sending out mountain-maggots on a trip, only half trained. Run, curse you! Run while night lasts!" (452; bk. 3, ch. 3). Frodo and Sam experience much the same sort of behavior in their encounters with Orcs in the Tower of Cirith Ungol and on the fields of Gorgoroth. In Tolkien's fictional world, then, the impersonal, unheroic, and punitive military life belongs mainly to the Orcs; in real life, however, matters are different, as Tolkien tells his son Christopher in 1944: "Yes, I think the orcs as real a creation as anything in 'realistic' fiction: your vigorous words well describe the tribe; only in real life

they are on both sides, of course," and he adds, "But it does make some difference who are your captains and whether they are orc-like per se!" (*Letters* 82).

Most historians of the war discuss how the conditions that men faced in the First World War, as well as their training in all-male environments, drew them to establish supportive bonds with other men. Although the war created this need for male friendships, it also destroyed them, as Cole points out. The figure of the bereaved friend, then, "becomes a representative of the war *par excellence*" (Cole, *Modernism* 139). War writers also idealized the sacrificed, killed friend, sometimes in homoerotic terms (Fussell 119–20). In many ways, Sam and Frodo come from this mold. Frodo, of course, is the friend who is sacrificed in the struggle. More than any of the other members of the Fellowship, Frodo makes us acutely aware of how he suffers bodily: he is knifed by a Ringwraith, skewered by an Orcchieftain, stung by Shelob, whipped by Orcs, and maimed by Gollum. By the time he gets to Mount Doom, he appears to be dying physically: "Now as the blackness of night returned Frodo sat, his head between his knees, his arms hanging wearily to the ground where his hands lay feebly twitching" (946; bk. 6, ch. 3). Frodo tells Sam that his ordinary physical sensations have been destroyed: "No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me. I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire. I begin to see it even with my waking eyes, and all else fades" (947; bk. 6, ch. 3). The physical pains and the painful memories persist once he returns home. In Frodo's story, the wounded body of the victim of war is kept constantly before us.

The dying, wounded soldier, according to Fussell, could often be idealized as a Christ-like figure who represented the sacrifice of all soldiers. This sacrificial theme is certainly evident in Tolkien's conception of Frodo's ennoblement, of his "sanctification" (*Letters* 234), and his calling to become a providential instrument for good. Gandalf has an early vision of this process when he looks at Frodo recovering from his knife wound in the house of Elrond and sees "just a hint as it were of transparency, about him, and especially about the left hand that lay outside upon the coverlet. . . . 'He may become like a glass filled with a clear light for eyes to see that can'" (223; bk. 2, ch. 1). Verlyn Flieger, in her book *Splintered Light*, discusses the symbolic significance of this light imagery in the context of Tolkien's mythology, indicating how Frodo at this point is beginning to lose his physical self, with the possibility that he will eventually transcend materiality and be remade (155–65). Sam does have the eyes to see this sacrificial, saintly side to Frodo. Contemplating Frodo's face while

he is asleep in Ithilien, Sam acknowledges his love for Frodo and remembers watching over him in Rivendell after he was wounded:

Then as he had kept watch Sam had noticed that at times a light seemed to be shining faintly within; but now the light was even clearer and stronger. Frodo's face was peaceful, the marks of fear and care had left it; but it looked old, old and beautiful, as if the chiselling of the shaping years was now revealed in many fine lines that had before been hidden, though the identity of the face was not changed. Not that Sam Gamgee put it that way to himself. He shook his head, as if finding words useless, and murmured: "I love him. He's like that, and sometimes it shines through, somehow. But I love him, whether or no." (659; bk. 4, ch. 4)

Although Sam responds here to Frodo's otherworldly quality, he does state that he loves him "whether or no"—presumably, he means that he does not need to feel that Frodo is a sacrificial victim in order to love him. And Tolkien does not allow Frodo to become a simple image of the mythical crucified soldier hewn down in the midst of battle either. Frodo survives and returns home, in some ways a diminished being. Throughout his quest, he cannot be seen entirely as a passive victim; he exerts his will to make decisions on the journey and, in the end, most significantly, to claim the Ring. The saintly Frodo, in other words, is a failure—a failure if seen in the light of an absolute ideal, according to Tolkien, but not if one recognizes "the complexity of any given situation in Time, in which an absolute ideal is enmeshed" (*Letters* 326). Tolkien argues in a number of his letters that Frodo deserves to be honored, having done the best that body and will could do under the circumstances. The unexpected actions at the Crack of Doom, though, in which Frodo claims the Ring and Gollum intervenes, demonstrate the characteristic situational irony that Fussell identifies as the dominant paradigm for understanding events in the First World War in which innocence, hope, and stability were subjected to ironic reversals of expectations (7–35). In Tolkien's story, after an almost unimaginably harrowing quest and at the most crucial moment, it is Gollum who ironically ensures the success of the mission, not Frodo.

It has been said before that the Frodo who returns to the Shire is a wounded, war-weary veteran who is not adequately recognized by his society for his efforts. He gradually recedes from active participation in worldly affairs, haunted by memories of the past, occasional regrets for the lost Ring, and self-reproach, which Tolkien sees as "a last flicker of pride: desire to have returned as a 'hero,' not

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content with being a mere instrument of good" (*Letters* 328). Frodo's inability to adapt successfully to civilian life is perhaps best illustrated in the way in which he clings to his friendship with Sam, a remnant of the way of life that defined his war experience. When Bag End is ready to be inhabited once again, Frodo assumes that Sam will move in, and when Sam reveals that he would like to marry Rose Cotton, Frodo immediately suggests that Sam move his wife and his future family into the house with him. When Frodo plans his final journey, he asks Sam to arrange with Rose for some time away from home, "so that you and I can go off together," adding "a little wistfully" that "You can't go far or for a long time now, of course" (1038; bk. 6, ch. 9). Frodo and Sam recreate the early stages of their journey out of Hobbiton, camping in the Green Hills where Sam remembers, "If that isn't the very tree you hid behind when the Black Rider first showed up, Mr. Frodo!" (1039; bk. 6, ch. 9). If we regard Sam in this passage as a veteran who is, in Eric Leed's terms, a liminal figure, someone who has crossed the threshold between peace and war and come back again (194), we can see that Sam is looking at the quest from the vantage point of someone who has already returned; to him, "It seems like a dream now" (1039; bk. 6, ch. 9). Frodo, however, has not fully returned across that threshold; in fact, he is avoiding the crossing by revisiting a past that was defined for him by the relationship with his friend. As in their first journey, they meet Gildor and the elves, and once again, Sam realizes, just as he did the first time, that there is something that he has to do before the end. After his first meeting with Gildor, Sam thought he had to undertake the quest with Frodo; at this second meeting, Sam understands that he must actually complete the full journey, with Frodo departing at the Grey Havens. When Frodo says to Sam, who finally understands the purpose of their trip, "Come now, ride with me!" (1041; bk. 6, ch. 9), Frodo acknowledges that, even until his last moments in Middle-earth, he is intimately bound to his friend.

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In leaving, Frodo fulfills the role of the lost friend in war. The emotional impact of his inability to survive in the world focuses attention back on those who do survive and remember him—on Sam primarily. Throughout her work, Cole discusses how the figure of the bereaved friend comes to define the essence of disillusioned war experience. It is a feeling that Tolkien knew firsthand. When the first of his school friends, Rob Gilson, was killed in action, Tolkien and his remaining friends struggled with their grief and anger, trying to make sense of a world where suddenly, as Tolkien put it, "something has

gone crack" (*Letters* 10). Tolkien reports that he went into the woods near his army camp for two nights in a row to sit and think after he heard the news; similarly, Sam must take time initially to absorb the loss of Frodo: "But to Sam the evening deepened to darkness as he stood at the Haven; and as he looked at the grey sea he saw only a shadow on the waters that was soon lost in the West. There still he stood far into the night, hearing only the sigh and murmur of the waves on the shores of Middle-earth, and the sound of them sank deep into his heart" (1042; bk. 6, ch. 9). Even later in life, Tolkien exhibits the characteristic feelings of bitterness and disillusionment that historians have found to be defining features of the war experience. Tolkien writes of the bitterness of youth in war, of his hatred and distrust of propaganda, of his belief that wars cannot be won. Sam, too, partakes of some of this disillusionment. He is left behind in a disenchanting world that the elves are leaving. He is pained that the Shirefolk do not care to know much about Frodo's deeds or to honor him for them. The Battle of Bywater, a skirmish in which nineteen hobbits are killed, is the limit of their interest—they bury the dead hobbits together, as in a small war cemetery, erect a monument, and construct a roll of names of those who took part, which is memorized by Shire-historians. The striking similarity of these actions to memorial practices after the First World War, combined with their pettiness when placed next to the cosmic and epic struggle with Sauron, seems to be an indictment of the narrow and uncomprehending concerns of civilians who do not understand the realities of war outside the boundaries of their lives. However, Tolkien does not rest with the disillusioned "myth of the war," as Samuel Hynes terms it (215), which defines the canonical modernist version of war literature. Frodo's legacy to Sam is not a vision of a world devoid of meaning. He foretells a full personal and professional life for Sam, including the task of memorializing the past age. Garth cites C. S. Lewis's opinion that *The Lord of the Rings* is "a recall from facile optimism and wailing pessimism alike" (qtd. in Garth 312). In the figure of Sam, Tolkien gives us someone who embodies that midpoint, someone who is not fully defined by bitterness and disillusionment but who is also capable of heroic action and reintegration into society.

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Tolkien once said that he based Sam on the batmen and privates that he knew in the war (Carpenter 89), the kind of men for whom he had a great deal of respect. Historians like Fussell and Adams write about the attachments that developed in officers for

certain men in the lower ranks; Fussell points out that occasionally these "crushes" could work the other way around, from subordinate to superior (Adams 102; Fussell 274). Certainly, the batman-officer relationship was one that could encourage the physical and emotional intimacies that occurred between men in the war. Some of these are documented by Bourke, who describes men cooking and cleaning for each other, dancing together, reading to each other, nursing their friends, sleeping curled up against each other in close quarters (124–32). Although Craig finds that the physical expressions of devotion that Sam shows Frodo are difficult to explain as the result of their master-servant relationship only, when seen in the context of wartime behavior, they are not extraordinary. From the moment that Sam hears that Frodo is to leave the Shire, he demonstrates extreme loyalty and devotion. Craig cites several examples: Sam refuses to leave Frodo's side when they meet the elves in the woods; he chokes with tears when Frodo is stabbed at Weathertop; he runs to Frodo when he awakens in Rivendell and strokes his hand before realizing his embarrassment at the gesture. One could add that, like a good batman, Sam plans what to pack for Frodo and himself; he does the cooking and rations the food and water. Only Sam of all the company knows Frodo well enough to understand what Frodo will be planning to do when they cannot find him at Amon Hen. Their relationship is marked by gestures of physical tenderness and protectiveness, the "tactile tenderness" that Das sees as characteristic of World War I male intimacy. Frodo leans on Sam, who puts his arms around him, as they stop to catch their breath in their run toward the Bridge of Khazad-dûm. After Sam rescues Frodo from the Tower of Cirith Ungol, he tells him to take a turn sleeping and, struggling to stay awake, he takes Frodo's hand while he sits and thinks. The next morning, "They woke together, hand in hand" (932; bk. 6, ch. 2). When Frodo admits to Sam, whom he calls "my dearest hobbit, friend of friends," that all he envisions for them is a one-way trip to Mount Doom, Sam "took his master's hand and bent over it. He did not kiss it, though his tears fell on it" (629; bk. 4, ch. 2). The bond is mutual: creeping their way through Shelob's lair, "Sam left the tunnel-side and shrank towards Frodo, and their hands met and clasped, and so together they still went on" (726; bk. 4, ch. 9). After Sam pours out his story of Gollum's treachery to Frodo, there is only one response Frodo can make: "When he had finished, Frodo said nothing but took Sam's hand and pressed it" (937; bk. 6, ch. 2). Although these are small, private gestures, Tolkien does create one scene of physical affection and protectiveness that more publicly represents the love between the two friends and invests the gesture of a touch with significance. On the stairs of Cirith Ungol, Sam encourages Frodo to

rest while he guards him. We see the scene from Gollum's perspective: "Sam sat propped against the stone, his head dropping sideways and his breathing heavy. In his lap lay Frodo's head, drowned deep in sleep; upon his white forehead lay one of Sam's brown hands, and the other lay softly upon his master's breast. Peace was in both their faces." Gollum is moved to reach out to Frodo; he touches his knee—"almost the touch was a caress"—as if he is trying to reproduce the touch that Sam bestows on Frodo (722; bk. 4, ch. 8). In the past, Gollum had murdered his friend Déagol, whom he called, ironically, "my love" (53; bk. 1, ch. 2); here, he sees the opposite situation in the way that Sam protects Frodo. It is a moment in which Gollum might have found redemption by connecting with the intimate bond that he finds before him, but Sam awakens, suspects Gollum of treachery, and thwarts the possibility. Sam's devotion to Frodo can be seen as admirable, but here in interactions with Gollum it also becomes possessiveness—one can call it jealousy, in fact—and it has destructive effects. The meaningfulness of a tender touch—whether given or attempted—is attested by the fact that Tolkien repeatedly referred to this scene as one of the most moving and tragic moments for him in the entire story (*Letters* 110, 221, 330).

Although Sam is dedicated to Frodo from the beginning of the journey, the focus on their relationship intensifies once they break away from the rest of the company. A turning point occurs when Frodo attempts to leave for Mordor on his own, and Sam catches him. They express the equal importance of each to the other. Sam complains, "All alone and without me to help you? I couldn't have borne it, it'd have been the death of me." Frodo replies, "It would be the death of you to come with me, Sam . . . and I could not have borne that" (409; bk. 2, ch. 10). As Frodo rescues Sam from drowning, he states, "Up you come, Sam my lad!" (408; bk. 2, ch. 10), and he uses the affectionate term "lad" a second time as well, a term that Fussell describes as being "very warm" in its representation of male intimacy (282). Although Frodo still takes the lead at this point, by the end of the journey it is Sam who is more and more in control. The reversal of roles, with Sam leading and Frodo following, is epitomized in a moment that occurs as the two crawl up Mount Doom. Frodo falls after glimpsing the Eye, his hand seeking the Ring uncontrollably: "'Help me, Sam! Help me, Sam! Hold my hand! I can't stop it.' Sam took his master's hands and laid them together, palm to palm, and kissed them; and then he held them gently between his own" (953; bk. 6, ch. 3). Of course, the gesture can be seen as one way in which Sam can simply stop Frodo from putting on the Ring. In another way, Sam seems to be placing Frodo's hands in a prayer position, perhaps as a way of warding off evil impulses. But the move-

ment in which one person offers his hands, laid palm to palm, to another, who places his own hands around them, is a specific gesture that was used in the medieval ritual of paying homage to one's lord. In this case, Frodo, as the one whose hands are placed together, takes the position of the vassal who offers his loyalty and service to the lord, and Sam, the one who places his hands over the other's, takes the position of the lord who receives the homage and vows to protect his vassal in return. It is striking that similar scenes could take place in courtly love situations that imitated this feudal custom—a male lover could offer homage to his sovereign lady with the same gesture. In some senses, Frodo is like the prostrate lover and like the vassal—he offers control of himself and his life to someone whom he acknowledges as a superior, and to someone whom he acknowledges to be his love. Whichever way one sees the ritual, Sam accepts the homage and, with his kiss, in effect promises love and protection in return.

Master and servant, officer and batman—these analogous relationships can be overlaid with another: lord and retainer. In some aspects of his behavior, as George Clark points out, Sam is reminiscent of traditional heroic warriors: at the Council of Elrond, he in effect takes a vow, though not formally stated, to die with Frodo if necessary on the quest, and he dreams of having his deeds recorded in songs. In other ways, too, Sam takes on heroic features. After Frodo has been injured at Weathertop, and Strider startles the company, "Sam drew his sword and stood over Frodo" in the classic pose of a warrior defending his fallen lord (198; bk. 1, ch. 12). At the doors of Moria, it is Sam who jumps to Frodo's defense to save him from the tentacles dragging him into the pool by slashing at them with his knife, while the others stand watching in stunned horror. This loyalty and courage is tested to the extreme on Mount Doom as Sam, pushed to the limits of physical endurance, carries Frodo up the mountain, where in traditional heroic fashion, even though the task seems hopeless of success, "His will was set, and only death would break it" (950; bk. 6, ch. 3). It is significant, however, that all of Sam's heroic moments exist primarily to enable Frodo to complete his quest and not to gain personal glory for himself.

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Bourke documents how in returning to civilian life and domesticity, the majority of servicemen sought out heterosexual relationships, leaving behind the world in which male bonds were primary (153–70). Tolkien himself had a wife and child waiting for him by the end of the war, although the academic world he inhabited allowed

him to continue fostering male friendships in a way that other servicemen might not have been able to or have been interested in. Sam, the plain but heroic soldier, does not repudiate his friendship with Frodo, but he also wants to reintegrate into Shire society, which includes marrying Rose Cotton. Perhaps it was marriage to Rose that he was thinking about when Galadriel tempts each member of the fellowship with an alternative to the quest. Sam blushes and admits, "She seemed to be looking inside me and asking me what I would do if she gave me the chance of flying back home to the Shire to a nice little hole with—with a bit of garden of my own" (360; bk. 2, ch. 7). Rose does become an admitted part of his desires a couple of times on the slopes of Mount Doom, when Sam longs for the Shire again. Each time he remembers not only Rose but other people as well: "I would dearly like to see Bywater again, and Rosie Cotton and her brothers, and the Gaffer and Marigold and all" (944; bk. 6, ch. 3), and at another moment, his memories include "Jolly Cotton and Tom and Nibs, and their sister Rosie" (948–49; bk. 6, ch. 3). Rose is part of the fabric of Shire life, not the exclusive focus of Sam's desires, when he thinks of home, even though she seems to come more to the forefront of Sam's thoughts the closer he gets to the Shire. Back in Rivendell, Sam blushes again when Bilbo gives him a bag of gold in case he wants to get married after he returns to Hobbiton. Once Sam is back in the Shire, he is anxious about Rose's safety, and Farmer Cotton recognizes Sam's obvious interest in his daughter, as does Frodo, apparently, when he praises Sam's deeds in front of Rose in order to make Sam look impressive to her. Tolkien emphasizes the need for Rose's part of the story: "I think the simple 'rustic' love of Sam and his Rosie (nowhere elaborated) is *absolutely essential* to the study of his (the chief hero's) character, and to the theme of the relation of ordinary life (breathing, eating, working, begetting) and quests, sacrifice, causes, and the 'longing for Elves,' and sheer beauty" (*Letters* 161).

Yet Tolkien suggests that male friendship belongs to the nobler part of life. He explains in a letter to his son Michael that true friendship is only possible between men, since sex almost inevitably gets in the way if men and women think that they can be friends; men have their careers and friendships, which distinguish their lives from women's (*Letters* 48–50). *The Lord of the Rings* focuses on the extraordinary quest, the higher motives that enable and dignify the ordinary breathing, eating, working, and begetting, the ordinary life that men and women share. It should not be surprising, then, that a female hobbit like Rose is mainly peripheral to the action but essential in her presence. Tolkien once wrote, "without the high and noble the simple and vulgar is utterly mean; and without the simple and

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ordinary the noble and heroic is meaningless" (*Letters* 160). To make meaning out of the events of the war, Frodo's noble sacrifice has to become part of ordinary life. Because Frodo is too damaged to return to a peaceful existence, however, that task of integration is given to Sam. While Frodo still has a claim on Sam's friendship, Sam is "torn in two" (1036, 1038; bk. 6, ch. 9); Frodo's presence is an unsettling reminder of the disruptive force of war that hampers Sam's full return to ordinary life. Sam is only made "one and whole" when he can incorporate Frodo's life into his own. Frodo enables him to do this by making Sam his heir: "[A]ll that I had and might have had I leave to you," Frodo states (1041; bk. 6, ch. 9), in effect bequeathing his life to Sam. Sam's final crossing of the threshold between war and peace occurs at the end of the story, when Sam literally steps back into Bag End as its heir, at the same time metaphorically stepping back into ordinary life. This return can only happen once his extraordinary friendship with Frodo becomes internalized as a memory, to be kept alive, as Frodo suggests, in the reading of the Red Book and in the telling of stories. It is only then that Sam's quest is over and he can announce, "Well, I'm back" (1043; bk. 6, ch. 9).

An extraordinary scene such as the one in the Tower of Cirith Ungol in which Sam embraces Frodo, lying naked in a heap of rags while Frodo rests contentedly in his arms, would be unlikely to occur in ordinary Shire life in peacetime. It is only the extreme circumstances in which war has placed the two friends that such physical intimacy develops. Given Tolkien's conservative Christian views about the corrupt, fallen world marked by sexual sin, it is also extremely unlikely that he would consider representing consciously in his fiction the possibility of sexual desire between men.<sup>5</sup> But what Tolkien cannot contemplate, many of his contemporary readers can, and it is to the current reception of the Frodo and Sam relationship that I would like now to turn.

It would be unusual for a reader to experience *The Lord of the Rings* only as a printed text at the current time. The films by Peter Jackson, the extended DVD versions of the films, the DVD commentaries and other publicity, and a prolific amount of fan fiction, art, and discussion on the Internet comprise the complex intertextuality of the story for many people. Clearly, the contemporary audience is responding in various ways to aspects of Tolkien's work, and one of the features that has caused some debate and given rise to a creative outburst is the nature of the friendships that the story represents. Fifty years after *The Lord of the Rings* was first published, the homosocial relationship of Frodo and Sam has become the ground for challenging ideas about both male and female sexuality and gender roles.

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Although Jackson thought of the Frodo-Sam relationship as being like that of an officer and his batman, the films play down the class difference between Frodo and Sam. Sam does not call Frodo "master" as he does in the book, although Gollum frequently does in the films, making Gollum seem more like a servant of the Ring through his subjection to Frodo. The films also downplay the physical gestures of intimacy between Frodo and Sam—hearty hugs and slaps on the back replace the tender hand-holding that occurs in the books, with the exception of the scene in Rivendell where Sam rushes in to see Frodo awake and recovering. As in the book, Sam strokes Frodo's hand—although in the film he is too busy talking to Frodo to appear shy about doing so, with the result that the gesture may still be overlooked by the audience. The DVD commentary reveals that the actor Ian McKellen, who plays Gandalf, suggested to Sean Astin that he take Elijah Wood's hand because, according to McKellen, "I thought anyone who knew the book would care about the deep friendship, often of an innocently physical nature, and that that might be missed by two resolutely heterosexual actors who mightn't appreciate that gay people like myself saw in a touch something perhaps more meaningful than others might." McKellen's comments suggest that the tactile tenderness that was extraordinarily meaningful for Tolkien is no longer a guaranteed part of the repertoire of heterosexual males, although it may be a significant gesture for those who identify as homosexual.

The film replaces the loving gestures of the book with a sturdier image, that of a hand held out to help a friend in need. We focus on the image of Frodo's hand reaching down for Sam when he is drowning near the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, an image that is mirrored in *The Return of the King* when Sam offers Frodo a hand up on their way to Mount Doom and when he reaches for Frodo, who is hanging from the precipice in the Crack of Doom. It is one of the film's dominant images of friendship (repeated by Galadriel who offers her hand to Frodo in a vision), but it lacks the tenderness that the book's gestures have. Nevertheless, the film offers other indicators of emotional connections. The hobbits in the film tend to be more emotional than the others in the fellowship: after the fall of Gandalf, they weep; Frodo and Sam embrace near the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*; several times in the films, Sam looks at Frodo with an unquestionable expression of love; in Shelob's lair, when Sam thinks that Frodo is dead, and on Mount Doom, Sam takes Frodo in his arms for a few moments. At the Grey Havens, the hobbits cry, hug each other, and Frodo kisses, not all of the hobbits as in the book, but at least Sam. Here, the kiss appears to be a ceremonial kiss on the forehead such as the one Galadriel gave Frodo when she

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bade him farewell in Lothlórien in the first film. At that time, one ringbearer, Galadriel, was acknowledging another ringbearer, Frodo; at the end of the last film, Frodo is, in a sense, acknowledging Sam as one in the company of ringbearers, as well as giving him the equivalent of the dying kiss that Santanu writes about (shared as well by Aragorn and Boromir in the first film).

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When compared to the book, the films reduce the physical intimacy between Frodo and Sam; nevertheless, by current standards they still convey the strength of feeling between the two friends and provide a convincing portrait of all of the hobbits as unabashedly emotional. Even this representation of male friendship, which does not go as far as Tolkien's, can evoke discomfort and commentary. In speaking to television show interviewer Charlie Rose, Sean Astin talked about the reported sniggering of young men in movie theaters during the emotionally charged scenes between Frodo and Sam in *The Return of the King*. Astin acknowledges the challenge posed by the Frodo-Sam relationship to traditional Western views of masculinity. In Astin's opinion, the men were made uncomfortable because in spite of their cynicism, "some real tenderness broke through." On the other hand, the Frodo-Sam relationship is enthusiastically embraced by other audiences, most noticeably by women in the fan community who enjoy seeing men represented as physically affectionate. For example, the website *Frodo and Sam.net* collects tributes from fans celebrating their appreciation of the two hobbits and their friendship. The essay, "One Step More: The Heroism of Frodo Baggins," by Connie Marie Anderson delineates how Frodo is different from the typical movie action hero. This challenge to traditional masculine roles is seen as taking place on both the fictional and real levels. For example, another essayist on the same website, Aion, writes about her love of "Frolijah," a conflation of Frodo and the actor who plays him, Elijah Wood. Such a superimposition is encouraged by the DVD commentaries in which, for example, a feature on "The Fellowship of the Cast" casts the actors in real-life roles similar to their fictional ones—Sean Astin, for example, acting as a big brother to Elijah Wood and taking care of him, as Sam does for Frodo. Posters on websites such as the *Bag End Inn* and *The One Ring.net* collect pictures of the actors in and out of costume; these pictures are usually posted by women, who comment on the attractiveness of the men and eagerly share pictures of the actors being physically affectionate with each other. In a report on a fan convention posted on *The One Ring.net*, Cheshire Cat commented on an appearance by

Elijah Wood and Sean Astin: "They talked about the 'gay Hobbit' rumours at which point Sean grabbed Elijah and whisked him off his feet and gave him a big smacker on the lips (with his hand in the way at the time! But it looked very funny indeed) . . . these guys are completely comfortable with each other. They hug and touch without any inhibitions. They are a joy to watch." Here, the kiss is only mimed, but the commentator is not looking for a representation of a gay relationship; she does enjoy, however, the displays of affection between the two men.<sup>6</sup>

The *Bag End Inn*, however, is one website that declares itself to be a "Queer-Friendly Site" with a special Ring and rainbow flag logo and a page announcing its political stance (MsAllegro, "Queer-Friendly Site") . On websites such as this one, in other words, the queering of traditional masculinity is primarily the domain of women, who look to Tolkien's characters and the actors as represented in the DVD commentaries and in their publicity as the basis for explorations of sexuality and masculinity. In an essay posted on the *Bag End Inn* site, the owner, MsAllegro, expresses the way in which the friendship between Frodo and Sam challenges contemporary notions about masculinity: "It's about time Western (especially American) culture realized that love and devotion to a friend, or even romantic love, is not an unmasculine characteristic, or something to be derided. . . . Would that many young men in our culture today understood this as easily and clearly, and embraced the love they have for their friends, regardless of how that love manifests itself, instead of fearing it" (MsAllegro, "Were They . . .").

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Tolkien's Secondary World has provided fans with a creative space in which to explore further the characters and situations that he writes about, and the amount of fan fiction and fan art that is posted on the Internet is ample evidence that Middle-earth encourages productive engagement with the story. Fan fiction of all kinds often represents the emotional bond between Frodo and Sam, but the greatest exploration of the possibilities in their friendship occurs in the genre known as "slash," which pushes the homosocial into the realm of the sexual.

The classic studies of media fandom and slash fiction by Camille Bacon-Smith and Henry Jenkins have revealed that slash, often written by women, posits a sexual and romantic relationship between two male characters usually appearing in a television show or a movie. In the jargon of fandom, the pairing is indicated with a slash, as in Kirk/Spock, hence the name of the genre. According to Bacon-Smith

and Jenkins, slash originated with Kirk/Spock stories based on the first Star Trek series. The stories were photocopied and passed from one fan community to another, often at fan conventions. Since then, however, slash has burgeoned on the internet, readily available to anyone with a computer connection. *The Lord of the Rings* has elicited thousands of stories based on the actors playing Tolkien's characters (RPS or "real person slash") or on the fictional characters themselves (FPS or "fictional person slash"). Existing on the fringes of copyright law, fan fiction writers cannot sell their stories, which come with disclaimers stating that they acknowledge the copyrights and are writing only out of respect for the original.<sup>7</sup> As with most internet posters, fan fiction writers typically use pseudonyms so that their real identities are unknown.

In *Lord of the Rings* slash, writers may represent various sexual practices and a vast array of sexual pairings (or groupings). The characters may be based on Tolkien's creatures in any of his texts; occasionally, the writers include original characters as well. As with other types of fan fiction, *Lord of the Rings* slash ranges hugely in quality. One can find many stories with no distinct sense of character and an inept handling of diction that exist only for the sake of quickly delineating a sex scene. Occasionally, however, one does find writers who are immersed in Tolkien's Secondary World, respecting the mythology he created while exploring emotional and sexual aspects of that world that they find implicit in the original material. In this regard, *Lord of the Rings* slash is fairly unusual in that writers may base aspects of their stories on written texts rather than just on the films, even though no *Lord of the Rings* slash sites predate the Peter Jackson films, as far as I know, and most slash fiction imagines the characters as they are represented by the actors in the film: Frodo is usually dark-haired, blue-eyed, and slender; Sam golden-haired and sturdier, clearly referring to images of Elijah Wood and Sean Astin rather than to the hobbits as described by Tolkien.<sup>8</sup> Although one can find hobbit slash that deals in all kinds of sexual practices, the majority of Frodo/Sam stories incorporate a sexual element as an expression of a strong, romantic love between the two males. In some of the best examples of the genre, usually found on peer-reviewed websites such as the *Henneth Annûn Story Archive* and the *West of the Moon* archive, the stories skilfully interweave elements of Tolkien's text and technique while exploring interpretive possibilities.

Some fictions attempt to fill in the social and psychological story for Frodo and Sam before the events of *The Lord of the Rings*, usually as an exploration of the possible origins of the bond between the two friends. In slash terminology, these are often labeled as "angst" or "first-time" stories. "Heat Wave" by Teasel not only establishes a

relationship between Frodo and Sam prior to the quest, but also explains their need to be together by extending Tolkien's mythology of the Ring's power. The heat wave creating a drought in the Shire is attributed to the Ring's awakening once it is inherited by Frodo. Sam's declaration of love stills the power of the Ring. An erotic bathing scene in which the emotional drought of Frodo's personal life is ended leads, just as the hobbits are heading into Frodo's bedroom, to the coming of the west wind and clouds of rain to rejuvenate the Shire. Sam's love is the saving grace for Frodo and for the land.

"Falling into the Sky," by Elanor Gardner is a fairly typical example of "first-time" slash that imagines the angst of Frodo as he desires Sam but is afraid to reveal his attraction to him. Using imagery derived from Tolkien, the writer describes Sam as a gardener, speaking his love through planting flowers in the earth for Frodo. Frodo, as the scholarly, elvish sort, is identified with imagery of the stars and the sea. Eventually, after the two reveal their desire for each other, the controlling imagery of the piece becomes part of the descriptions of their lovemaking. At one point, the less experienced Sam suddenly switches positions by lying on top of Frodo, with the result that he becomes part of the starry landscape that Frodo loves so much: "Then suddenly Frodo was on his back and Sam suspended above him, holding himself up on both hands, gazing down at him. Frodo saw that the moon had set and the stars were a field of gold blooms in a vast landscape of midnight behind Sam's head. And Sam's eyes looked like two more stars above him" (Gardner). Sam, the down-to-earth hobbit, needs to have Frodo on the ground: "I can't. It's too much. The sky above you. I need you on the earth. I need to keep you on the earth'. . . Then he wove Frodo's hands into his and held them gently in the grass on either side of Frodo's head, and began to move" (Gardner). Although the story does include a tender kiss on the hand, a gesture that one might find in Tolkien's story, the tactile tenderness in slash most certainly *does* become genital.

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Many slash stories, unlike the films, tackle the class difference between Frodo and Sam, exploring ways in which a sexual relationship might be affected by inequalities in social and political power. "For a Star and a Half" and its sequel "Winnow and Rhyme" by Cara Loup, for example, not only include what is a conventional scene in which Frodo tries to convince Sam to stop calling him "Mr. Frodo" or "sir" once they become lovers, but they also imagine how Sam's father and how Frodo's friends would react to a situation that they

see as being, essentially, the local squire dallying with one of his servants. In addition, these stories explore the way in which Frodo's and Sam's social positions affect their behaviors and assumptions as lovers. Perhaps in no other slash story, however, are the political, economic, and sexual aspects of hobbit society more fully imagined and delineated than in "Legacy" and "On Merry Yule" by Anglachel. In the essay "Writing a Green Sun," the author explains that she wanted to go beyond "simply writing sex scenes or descriptions of angst" in order to understand sexuality in a society in which a post-Freudian homosexuality could not exist. Conducting a detailed demographic analysis of three hobbit generations based on Tolkien's appendices, the author develops a vision of probable sexualities in such a society, placing Bilbo's and Frodo's sexual choices in a far more complex political context than one finds in most slash fictions.

Some authors explore the possibility of a postwar sexual relationship that develops between Frodo and Sam as a result of their ordeal. For this type of story, the conventional slash subgenre known as the hurt-comfort story, in which one of the lovers is physically hurt and has to be cared for by the other, finds a ready-made situation in Tolkien's suffering Frodo. Stories such as "Comfort" by Bill the Pony and "Field of Cormallen" by Elenya posit the beginning of a sexual affair after the Ring is destroyed while Sam comforts the wounded Frodo who is having nightmare visions of his ordeal. In "Comfort," by the time Sam says, "Just you lie easy, Mr. Frodo, and let your Sam take care of you," his role as Frodo's friend and comforter has taken an explicitly sexual turn. In "Field of Cormallen," Sam thinks back to moments taken from Tolkien's book—such as when he declared "I love him, whether or no" (659; bk. 6, ch. 11) and when he suggested that Frodo rest his head on his lap on the stairs to Cirith Ungol—and these emotionally charged moments in Tolkien's story become the basis for establishing Sam's more fully realized sexual desires. The hurt-comfort theme easily extends to Frodo's return to the Shire, where Tolkien briefly describes bouts of illness that Frodo suffers, only in some slash stories it is both Rose and Sam who provide the comfort. In "Pretty Good Year," author Mary Borsellino writes a series of vignettes imagining a shared, nonpossessive love and sexual life among the threesome in which Sam and Rose worry a great deal about Frodo's health and happiness. "All That I Had" by Elenya provides an intensely detailed psychological exploration of Frodo's wounded state once he returns to the Shire, which manifests itself for a time as impotence, one of the symptoms of his inability to adapt to his old life. In this story as well, Rose agrees not only to marry Sam, but also to share him sexually with Frodo.

Slash fiction has the potential to explore any variety of relationships imaginable by the authors, but probably in the majority of Frodo/Sam stories, the friendship that Tolkien describes in his text, which is reflected to some extent in the film version, provides the inspiration for contemporary slash writers to insist on a sexual relationship between the two. Readers and critics of fan fiction debate the possible intentions and effects of slash: in treating homosexual relationships as a given, the genre is sometimes seen as a positive step toward the acceptance of gay sexuality (Jenkins 221). On the other hand, critics argue that the heterosexual women who mainly write in the genre are less concerned with issues of gay identity and more with expressing their own sexual desires through their identification with attractive male characters who are more interesting than the women usually represented in their source texts (Bacon-Smith 238–52). Some slash writers insist that it is not identification with male characters that they find erotically exciting but the ability to manipulate and to "watch" them (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins). A full discussion of the types of slash and the motivations of the writers and readers is not possible here, but it is worth noting that a strong, continuing element in the genre is the challenge that it provides to conventional Western masculinity. Jenkins, in discussing barriers that prevent men from expressing themselves emotionally or physically with other men, states, "Slash is what happens when you take away those barriers and imagine what a new kind of male friendship might look like" (Green, Jenkins, and Jenkins).

Many Tolkien fans object to slash, sometimes out of their own belief that homosexual relationships are immoral and/or because they believe that Tolkien would find homosexual relationships immoral; others object simply because they find that representations of homosexuality betray the intent of the original story. In most of these cases, the borderline between the homosocial and the homosexual is clearly demarcated and policed. One could argue, perhaps, that slash retains that border as well, only it exists on the other side, the homosexual end of the continuum. It is possible that slash in its rewriting of Tolkien's story gives us another version of the Stimpson-style critique that Tolkien is not homosexual enough. In that case, one could say that slash actually restricts the possibilities in the homosocial continuum for various degrees of emotional and erotic expression such as Tolkien described. On the other hand, one could argue that slash, by removing Tolkien's belief in the inherent sinfulness of sexuality, liberates the homosocial relationships he describes so that they can be fully expressed sexually.

Whatever one decides about slash, what is clear in examining the reception of Tolkien's representation of the Frodo and Sam story

is that styles of friendship are to a large extent historically and culturally determined. *The Lord of the Rings* shows us a kind of male intimacy that flourished in the extraordinary circumstances of the First World War. Out of that experience, Tolkien created the friendship between Frodo and Sam, a relationship that has been variously misunderstood, ridiculed, cherished, or elaborated by a vast readership across historical and cultural divides. Whether readers experience the Frodo and Sam relationship through the books, films, or fan fiction, it is undeniable that Tolkien's portrait of the two friends has the power to provoke an active engagement with the story that can lead to a questioning of ideas about adult male and female sexuality, heroic masculinity, and the possibilities for male intimacy.

## Notes

I am grateful for helpful suggestions by Mary McGillivray and Geoffrey Kerson, who read an earlier version of this essay. I would also like to acknowledge the support of a Mount Saint Vincent University Research Grant.

1. The quotation in the title is from chapter 9 of "Falling into the Sky" by Elanor Gardner. This line, or ones very similar to it, can be found at climactic moments in many a Frodo/Sam slash fiction.
2. Geoff Pevere's article is a comic version of the kind of commentary about the male-centered story that appeared in many newspapers and entertainment reports. Gossip reporter Ted Casablanca in his online and television features "The Awful Truth" seemed particularly to enjoy playing up the hobbit actors' "nooky-loving ways" with each other; his job, of course, being to feed gossip about the actors' sexuality.
3. Verlyn Flieger discusses how Tolkien addresses Andrew Lang's theories about folklore, as well as those of Müller and Dasent, in "'There Would Always Be a Fairy-Tale': J. R. R. Tolkien and the Folklore Controversy." Included is a discussion of Lang's idea that fairy tales are appropriate reading material for children (28). I discuss Lang's "survivals" theory and its effect on the translation of folktales for children in "The 'Savage' and the 'Civilized': Andrew Lang's Representation of the Child and the Translation of Folklore." For examples of how one medieval text, *Beowulf*, was adapted for children in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, see Smol, "Heroic Ideology and the Children's *Beowulf*."
4. A discussion of female characters in the story is beyond the scope of this article. For a review of recent criticism on the active roles women play in Tolkien's work, see Leslie Donovan, who reviews some of the criticism and discusses key female characters in *The Lord of the Rings* as Valkyrie figures.

5. Although Tolkien spent most of his life in predominantly male societies such as King Edward's School and Oxford, cultivating friendships in all-male social groups like the T.C.B.S. and the Inklings, he claimed, according to his biographer Humphrey Carpenter, that he did not even know the word "homosexuality" at the age of nineteen (53). Before entering the war, Tolkien and his T.C.B.S. friends dedicated themselves to moral and spiritual reform through their artistic endeavours. As Garth points out, one could describe their method and mission in Tolkien's words, "song and holiness" (qtd. in Garth 107).
6. Heterosexual women dominate discussions of sexuality in *The Lord of the Rings* on well-known websites such as *The One Ring.net* and on many Internet blogs. Some commentary does exist from an explicitly gay perspective, however. For example, an article by Roger Kaufman in *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* discusses Frodo, Sam, and Gollum as gay archetypes, concluding that "Each of us can embark on our own psychological version of this journey in order to become more whole, self-actualized, and liberated, thereby modeling a new way of gay being and becoming for a deeply troubled and hateful world desperately in need of a more authentically loving alternative" (33). In a more lighthearted vein, the *Advocate* published a brief feature, "The Gay Guide to Middle-earth," in which Bruce C. Steele highlights points of interest in the Peter Jackson films for gay and lesbian audiences, including "same-sex smooching," and "fidelity to the end" in Frodo and Sam's relationship ("What do you call a Boston marriage in Elvish?").
7. Simone Murray provides an interesting analysis of the way in which New Line has taken a collaborative rather than oppositional approach to Tolkien fandom, employing various strategies to secure fan allegiance, including relaxed policies about fan fiction and fan art that uses New Line content. Murray's article argues for cultural studies of fandom to shift away from valorizing fan agency to considering the relationship between fandom and corporate media structures.
8. *Lord of the Rings* fan fiction did exist before the release of the Peter Jackson films, according to a personal communication by Lisa Williams, who has been active in various fandoms for over fifteen years. Although she reports that she never found any *Lord of the Rings* slash in the prefilm years, she points out, "There's no telling how much was circulated among very small groups or was tucked away in dresser drawers and not circulated at all . . . until a decade or so ago, slash was still more or less 'underground' and not always easy to find even if you knew what you were looking for, especially in smaller fandoms."

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