

“Queer lodgings”: gender and sexuality in *The Lord of the Rings*

In June 1955 Tolkien sent a letter to the Houghton Mifflin Company, in which he corrected some errors that had appeared in a *New York Times Book Review* article. He noted two criticisms of his work that particularly annoyed him. The first was that it contained no religion. The second was dismissed in parenthesis: the claim that *Lord of the Rings* contained ‘no women’. He thought this ‘does not matter, and is not true anyway’.² There are of course some women in the book, but they are very few and often peripheral to the narrative. This might ‘not matter’ to the author, but it should matter to the critic and historian. What *Lord of the Rings* does contain is an abundance of male characters. It’s a man’s world and most of the central relationships are between men. But if any critic (perhaps W.H. Auden?) had asked if the book contained homosexuals, Tolkien would have certainly answered with astonishment that it did not. This paper is an attempt to explore in detail the representation and relationships of women and men in this novel. There is something ‘queer’ (in both the old and new senses of the term) about this problem. The exclusion of women from the narrative has important implications for the way men are presented. My argument looks both at the conscious intentions of Tolkien, but also at some of the more unintentional meanings present in the text. No author can fully control the ways in which a book is read, and meanings have a habit of slipping in through the back door.

The Lord of the Rings is not an allegory, but it is a myth with a purpose. That purpose cannot wholly be understood without reference to Tolkien’s own beliefs and the culture of which he was a member. This is true of his presentation of both men and women. The inter-war period has generally been seen as a deep trough in the history of feminism. Despite a limited extension of the franchise to women in 1918, there were deep-seated fears that the social and sexual order was under threat. These were times when for conservative minded people the growth of communism and decline of Christianity demanded that traditional order was defended.

Libertarian attitudes to gender and sexuality were held by only a tiny minority. But, at the same time, the inter-war period saw a rejection of the aggressive, masculine and military values of pre-war England. The simple, the ordinary, the decent and

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the quiet were now seen as virtues. England viewed itself as an isolationist and domestic nation. To quote Alison Light: ‘In the ubiquitous appeal of civilian values and pleasures, ... the picture of “the little man”, the suburban husband pottering in his herbaceous borders ... we can discover a considerable sea-change in ideas of national temperament.’³ In other words although inter-war culture was conservative on sexual

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questions, by the standards of pre-war heroic and masculine values, it was rather ‘feminine’.

Tolkien distilled this inter-war culture into the Shire. The home of the hobbits was formed partially from Tolkien’s childhood remembrances of the countryside, from how he saw rural England, and from the values present in the inter-war period.⁴ Hobbits were English people as they liked to see themselves: jovial, kind, and primarily domestic creatures. They revelled in anti-heroic values, and their chief pleasures were food, drink and smoking. They were suspicious and dismissive of anything outside their own narrow existence, and this led them to reject things that could ennoble them. Ted Sandyman scoffs at Sam’s lament that the elves are leaving Middle-earth: ‘I don’t see what it matters to me and you. Let them sail!’⁵ But Tolkien was not uncritical of this projection of

England. He thought that most hobbits possessed a ‘mental myopia which is proud of itself, a smugness ... and cocksureness, and a readiness to measure and sum up all things from a limited experience, largely enshrined in sententious traditional “wisdom”’.⁶ The pleasures of ordinary life could not exist without heroism, as is shown by the fact that the Shire was protected by the Rangers.⁷ Indeed Charles Williams realised this when he said that ‘its centre is not in strife and war and heroism ... but in freedom, peace, ordinary life and good liking.’⁸ Tolkien noted that ‘he agrees that these very things require the existence of a great world outside the Shire - lest they should grow stale by custom and turn into the humdrum.’⁹ Frodo was to transcend the mental backwardness of the Shire (as I show later), but nevertheless for all his criticisms Tolkien saw the Shire as his home country.

The Shire is a traditional sexual order, much as Tolkien thought inter-war England should be. Hobbits invariably married and had many children.¹⁰ The few women we encounter occupy such traditional roles. Mrs. Maggot and Mrs. Cotton are defined by their domestic and familial status. They are hearty homemakers who serve beer and prepare supper for their guests but rarely participate in the narrative. One reader was interested in the fact that Gollum’s family was ‘ruled by a grandmother’, and asked if hobbits possessed a matriarchal family structure.¹¹ Tolkien suggested that this was not the norm. The heads of families were generally male, and although ‘master and mistress had equal status’ they had ‘different functions.’¹² However if the master died first, then the wife assumed headship until her death, when it passed to the eldest male. Tolkien wrote: ‘It could, therefore, happen in various circumstances that a long-lived woman of forceful character remained “head of the family”, until she had full-grown grandchildren.’¹³ The reference to *forceful character* suggests that women were not naturally designed for such a dominant role. This is evident in Lobelia Sackville-Baggins. Whilst she had a commanding presence she was

also an unpleasant character who henpecked her husband. These are standard images of the world turned upside down, the natural order inverted. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis had similar opinions on the place of women in the world. Lewis asked: 'Do you really want a matriarchal world? Do you really like women in authority?'¹⁴ Tolkien, in a letter to his son, argued that men and women were by nature intended for different roles. A married woman quickly settles down into family life.

Modern conditions ... have not changed natural instinct. A man has a life-work, a career... A young woman, even one "economically independent", as they say now (it usually really means economic subservience to male commercial employers instead of to a father or a family), begins to think of the "bottom drawer" and dream of a home, almost at once.¹⁵

This was how Tolkien viewed his own domestic life, and it was how England should be ordered. These beliefs were passed into his depiction of the Shire, in which married women happily occupied private roles. They had no call to the male concerns of the narrative, and so it passes over them silently.

Relationships between men and women outside the Shire are cast in terms of romantic love. Tolkien told his son that the romantic chivalric tradition of love was a noble ideal. 'It idealizes "love" - and as far as it goes can be very good, since it takes in far more than physical pleasure, and enjoins if not purity, at least fidelity, and so self-denial, "service", courtesy, honour, and courage.'¹⁶ Despite some problems this tradition, Tolkien thought it had much to commend it. This language was used in his youthful romantic attachment to Edith. He adopted the role of sentimental lover with her and coated it with 'amatory cliché'. Lúthien was inspired by Edith, suggesting that Tolkien saw himself as Beren, a mere mortal man in awe of his noble and superior elven wife.¹⁷ Although he believed that women were naturally designed for familial and domestic roles, he interpreted his feelings for his wife through the language of romantic love, and projected this onto her. This same language persists in the representation of 'noble' women in his writings, and the response of male characters to them. The place to begin is Luthien. In the final

published version of *The Silmarillion* Beren comes across Lúthien dancing in the woods. 'Then all memory of his pain departed from him, and he fell into an enchantment; for Lúthien was the most beautiful of all the children of Ilúvatar.' Tolkien described her eyes, hair and clothes, and Beren became as 'one that is bound under a spell.' When 'she looked on him, doom fell upon her, and she loved him.'¹⁸ A number of points should be stressed. Firstly, the basic description of women in terms of appearance is conventional and will recur repeatedly. Secondly, the term 'enchanted' is often used to describe the male response to a noble and beautiful woman. And finally there is nothing to indicate what attracted Lúthien to Beren. These themes are repeated in the accounts of Goldberry and Arwen. Goldberry was like a 'fair young elf-queen' who made the hobbits feel 'surprised and awkward'. Frodo felt 'enchanted' by her.¹⁹ Likewise he feels 'surprised and abashed' looking at Arwen.²⁰ Aragorn

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too feels as if he had 'strayed into a dream' on their first meeting. No reason was given for Arwen's attraction to him.²¹ It seems that Tolkien's accounts of the effects of noble women on men follow a similar pattern.

Is this idea of 'enchantment' sexual? Edwin Muir had noted the absence of sexuality in a review, and complained that the characters were all pre-pubescent boys who knew nothing about women. Tolkien snorted: 'Blast Edwin Muir and his delayed adolescence. He is old enough to know better.'²² He told his son that there were three types of male-female relations. The first was purely sexual which was a grave sin, and the second was simple friendliness. In the third a man can be a lover, 'engaging and blending all his affections and powers of mind and body in a complex emotion powerfully coloured and energized by "sex"'. In its highest form this love was also religious. Romantic chivalric love would identify the object of love as a 'guiding star or divinity - of the old fashioned "his divinity" = the woman he loves - the object or reason

of noble conduct.' The danger of this way of thinking was that it turned women who were also fallen into divinities. But when harmonized with religion it could produce the 'highest ideal of love between man and woman.' It was this same ideal which inspired devotion to the Virgin Mary; it was conducted in the same language and with the same emotion.²³ In other words ideal love between men and women was homologous to the love between man and the Virgin Mary. The 'enchantment' felt by male characters in Middle-earth is therefore a mythologised version of the highest form of love. It is religious and yet also contains what we would call sex, although in a non-corrupt form.

This is clearly evident in Galadriel. Many readers saw her as a symbolic Virgin Mary. She was the highest and noblest elf left in Middle-earth and the invocation of her very name inspired many characters in their darkest hours. Tolkien told Father Robert Murray that in his account of her he used 'all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity', which was itself founded on the Virgin Mary.²⁴ Galadriel was both an object of religious devotion and of human love. To some characters this attraction makes her a suspicious character. Eomer thought that 'Few escape her nets, they say ... [perhaps] you also are net-weavers and sorcerers, maybe.'²⁵ Wormtongue called her the 'Sorceress of the Golden Wood ... webs of deceit were ever woven in Dwimordene.'²⁶ This language suggests that Galadriel was thought to use her sexual allure to capture men for her own purpose. One thinks of a black widow spider. But we know that her 'enchantment' is benevolent. It fuses religion and love. The crucial moment for the company is when Galadriel tests them: '[S]he held them with her eyes, and in silence looked searchingly at each of them in turn. None save Legolas and Aragorn could long endure her glance. Sam quickly blushed and hung his head.'²⁷ This is a moment when the divine penetrates the human soul, and only those characters closest to the divine (i.e. Legolas and Aragorn) can bear it for long. But it is significant that this moment is conducted by a female character; it is hard to imagine Tolkien using a male character in this way. It is therefore a gendered moment. Galadriel's physical and mystical beauty are fused together so that the male characters' response is at once divine and emotional. Afterwards the company were

reluctant to say much about their experiences, as if they were private moments between lovers. This is suggested by Sam’s blushing, and his feeling ‘as if I hadn’t got nothing on.’²⁸ Galadriel knows that she has the power to make men desire her. In her fantasy of taking the One Ring she focuses on herself as an object of adoration: ‘And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible ... All shall love me and despair!’ ‘She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful.’²⁹ In other words she would use her power to be universally loved and desired, suggesting that there is a sexual component to how characters responded to her.

Galadriel has a transforming effect on the characters. Faramir says that men who pass through Lorien should ‘look for strange things to follow ... few of old came thence unchanged.’³⁰ This was true of Gimli whose first encounter with Galadriel affected him dramatically, causing him to place his love for her above jewels and gold.³¹ He asks for a strand of her hair, which was a traditional gift between lovers and will ‘call nothing fair, unless it be her gift’. He feels wounded at their parting. ‘Memory is not what the heart desires’, he lamented, again showing that religious transfiguration and human love were blended in his response.³² Sam told Faramir that he also was changed by the experience. ‘Beautiful she is, sir! Lovely! ... Hard as di’monds, soft as moonlight. Warm as sunlight, cold as frost in the stars. [Y]ou could call her perilous, because she’s so strong in herself.’³³ This description uses images of natural beauty to suggest the profundity and emotion of Sam’s experience. In a rejected draft Faramir tells Sam that it sounds like he has been ‘enchanted’.³⁴ Sam agrees that he has. It seems that Tolkien used Galadriel to convey the idea that the highest form of love is at once an experience of the divine but also of purified human desire.

The female counterweight to Galadriel is Shelob. In this ‘female’ character we see the corruption of all that was perfect in Galadriel. The darkness that Shelob represents is the antithesis of Galadriel’s light. It is not merely the absence of light but its negation: it ‘brought blindness not only to the eyes but to the mind, so that even the memory of colours and of forms and of any light faded out of thought. Night always had been, and always would be, and night was all.’³⁵ Only the radiance of Galadriel’s star glass affects the monster, again

drawing a contrast between the two females.³⁶ Just as Galadriel imagined being worshipped if she took the ring and became evil, so Gollum actually ‘bowed down and worshipped [Shelob]’³⁷ Shelob is the lowest form of lust. On a number of occasions she is referred to simply as ‘She’, drawing attention solely to her gender.³⁸ As the hobbits try to escape they find a ‘vast web’, a ‘great grey net’ in their way. This recalls the images used to describe Galadriel by those suspicious of her. Applied to Shelob they are true; for the hobbits are trapped in the power of the monstrous ‘female’. She is ‘bloated’ and ‘fat’ on hate and depravity. This takes a strongly sexualised form: ‘Far and wide her lesser broods, bastards of the miserable mates, her own offspring, that she slew, spread from glen to glen.’³⁹ Her crimes are abominable and include incest, illegitimacy and infanticide, all crimes pertaining to sex. Her lust was to consume the world. In his letter to his son, Tolkien insisted that women’s indulgence in sex alone was brutally depraving

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because it was alien to their nature. Some ‘are actually so depraved as to enjoy “conquests”, or enjoy even the giving of pain - but these are abnormalities.’⁴⁰ Shelob represents these thoughts taken to their limit, a female sexuality run rampant. Her attack on Frodo is a grim perversion of the sex-act, for he lay bound, face upward as she straddled over him. Even her ‘punishment’ has sexual resonances. Sam ran ‘inside the arches of her legs’. ‘Her vast belly was above him with its putrid light, and the stench of it almost smote him down.’ This is an instance of what Natalie Zemon Davis has called ‘women on top’, a reversal of sexual norms, a disruption of the natural order. Following this idea it is Shelob that lowers herself onto Sam’s raised sword. ‘Now splaying her legs she drove her huge bulk down on him’ and ‘thrust herself upon a bitter spike’.⁴¹ The depraved scene ends with an invocation of Galadriel and a hymn to Elbereth, showing that love and light have conquered sex and darkness.

I want now to turn to the triangle of Arwen, Aragorn and Eowyn. The tale

of Aragorn and Arwen is a replay of Beren and Luthien. In both cases the women must make a sacrifice to be with their inferior men. But although Arwen is meant to be a Luthien of the Third Age, her story is a dilution of the original. Luthien defied her father to rescue Beren, and together they journeyed to Angband to take a silaril from Morgoth’s crown. Arwen does nothing and is no part of Aragorn’s struggle.⁴² It is his task to claim his inheritance alone before he can be with her. Part of the explanation is that Arwen did not exist for most of the writing of *Lord of the Rings*. She was invented simply to fulfil the logic of the narrative. A story about the return of a line of kings can hardly end with an unmarried monarch. Arwen was invented to solve this problem, but it was only decided she would marry Aragorn during the writing of ‘The Field of Cormallen’.⁴³ If one wonders why she seems such a shadowy character in the book, it is simply because she did not exist until it was virtually finished.

Eowyn was invented long before Arwen appeared. Her character is complex because of the way that it evolved. Not long after she appears in the drafts it is suggested that she and Aragorn will fall in love.⁴⁴ His first meeting is described thus: ‘Her face was filled with gentle pity, and her eyes shone with unshed tears. So Aragorn saw her for the first time in the light of day, and after she was gone he stood still, looking at the dark doors and taking little heed of other things.’⁴⁵ He is transfixed by her, and there is no suggestion that she is either a troubled or a stern woman at this point. In one scene (which was later rewritten to give a different impression) burgeoning love is suggested by physical contact. As Eowyn serves wine to Aragorn, their eyes meet and their fingers touch. At this point Tolkien thought the two characters would marry. But then he changed his mind, for ‘Aragorn is too old and lordly and grim.’ Evidently he thought Aragorn required someone on his elevated level rather than an (essentially) ordinary woman. Only once the marriage idea was abandoned does Eowyn’s character change: ‘Make Eowyn ... a stern amazon woman. ... Probably [she] should die to avenge or save Theoden.’⁴⁶ Only two roles are conceivable for Eowyn in the narrative: marriage or death. Having rejected the marriage option, Tolkien toyed with the warrior-woman idea, thinking that Eowyn might go openly

to battle, and that there was a precedent for this in the history of Rohan.⁴⁷ However when he returned to the story two years later he had made some decisions. Eowyn's love for Aragorn would remain, but she would be refused even when she begged him to stay or take her with him.⁴⁸ Tolkien also decided that she would go to war in defiance of her king, and disguised as a man, both of which emphasise her transgressions. This adds complexity to Eowyn and is supposed to highlight her despair. But it was still proposed that she die in battle destroying the Witch King. Once this was changed the overall shape of Eowyn was in place.⁴⁹

In the final published version Eowyn is introduced as 'stern as steel'. Aragorn thought her 'fair and cold, like a morning of pale spring that is not yet come to womanhood'.⁵⁰ This suggests that she is troubled; her coldness is meant to indicate that something is wrong. The reference to her youth signals that she is too young for Aragorn. It also suggests that her attraction to him could be seen as a 'crush' rather than genuine love. Aragorn becomes aware of her attraction when she offers him the cup of wine. As he takes it he notices that her hand was trembling: 'his face now was troubled and he did not smile.'⁵¹ When the host leaves Eowyn is dressed in mail and has a sword in front of her and she effectively confesses her love for Aragorn.⁵² The reader is meant to notice that her feelings for Aragorn and her amazonian qualities are connected. When Aragorn returns to Dunharrow, Eowyn's eyes shine when she hears of the slaughter at Helm's Deep, suggesting that her natural womanly role has been disturbed. Her discussion with Aragorn centres on her desire to be a warrior, 'a shieldmaiden and not a dry-nurse?' Her ancestry, she argues, entitles her to fight, and she does not want to be a homemaker. 'Shall I always be left behind when the Riders depart, to mind the house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return.'⁵³ These were the issues raised by early twentieth century feminists. For Tolkien, Eowyn wants to leave her feminine role and take on a male role. She tells Aragorn, 'All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house.' She feared only 'to stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire.'⁵⁴ Although Eowyn is articulating ideas in which women take on different

roles, the reader is meant to feel pity for her, and think with Aragorn that her desires must be the product of a deeply troubled and unhappy mind.

Aragorn's rejection only encourages Eowyn's desire to be a warrior. She wants to achieve glory, but this is forbidden to her as a woman. Therefore she has to become a 'man' and overturn the natural gender roles. Tolkien does not present Eowyn as a liberated woman, but as someone both proud and unhappy. Dernhelm had the 'face of one without hope who goes in search of death.'⁵⁵ At the battle of Pelennor Fields she almost finds it in fulfilling the prophecy that no man may hinder the Witch King. It is interesting that her transformation from Dernhelm into Eowyn is presented as a celebration of the return of femininity: her hair was 'released from its bonds, gleamed with pale gold upon her shoulders.'⁵⁶ Although initially Eowyn was to die for her gender transgressions, Tolkien had decided that her restoration would be a central component of the story. Aragorn, Eomer, and Gandalf discuss the origins of her despair. Aragorn believed that her unhappiness was

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present before he met her, but Eomer disagrees. Gandalf, however, has the answer. Mentally Eowyn possessed the courage of her brother, and she came to resent her role waiting upon an aged king. Although this was her duty it did not seem worthy of her. This view was encouraged by Saruman through Wormtongue, who made her feel dissatisfied with her role: 'all her life seemed shrinking ... a hutch to trammel some wild thing in.'⁵⁷ Given that Saruman is presented in *Lord of the Rings* as a twentieth century progressive, it is fascinating that he is ultimately behind Eowyn's feminism. With this Tolkien clearly stresses that he does not support the feminism espoused by Eowyn. We are told that she will die unless her despair is healed.⁵⁸ Her realisation of her real love for Faramir leads her to embrace her long-forgotten womanly role. She sees in him both a great warrior and also tenderness, and this causes her to doubt her own stern coldness. '[S]omething in her softened, as though a bitter frost were

yielding at the first faint passage of Spring.' The image of thawing represents a return to the feminine. She sheds a tear, and 'her voice was now that of a maiden young and sad.'⁵⁹ Slowly she realises that she truly loves Faramir, and she begins fully to return to her true nature as a woman. Faramir tells her that she loved Aragorn because she wanted renown and glory, and 'to be lifted far above the mean things that crawl on the earth'. Faramir then confesses his love for her and the thawing process is now complete: 'her winter passed, and the sun shone on her.' 'I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren. ... No longer do I desire to be a queen.'⁶⁰ The references to healing and growing show that she has embraced the womanly role assigned for her, and that love and marriage are her destiny. The unnatural feminism which caused her pain and despair has been cured.

It should now be evident how Tolkien mythologised his own views about the place of women in the world. The true love between man and woman was a beautiful and divine ideal, but it did not mean that women should occupy the same roles as men. It is therefore ironic that Eowyn is the most developed female character, for it is her very deviation from her natural role that makes her interesting. The ideal for women was essentially private: marriage and family. It is well known that Tolkien and Lewis were great defenders of a strong separation between the worlds of men and women. Women were fundamentally different from men.⁶¹ Lewis believed, for instance, that women were generally incapable of logic and art (one wonders if he changed his mind when the philosopher and Christian Elizabeth Anscombe destroyed the theological arguments of his *Miracles* with the ideas of Wittgenstein).⁶² Nor were they capable of close friendship, and so it was important that friendship between men excluded women. In part this reflects Tolkien's all-male life at school and at university, and his long interest in clubability, so evident in the Inklings. This was a source of difficulty with his wife, but he thought it important: 'if worth a fight: just insist. Such matters may frequently arise - the glass of beer, the pipe, the non writing of letters, the other friend, etc etc.'⁶³ Tolkien and Lewis believed that male friendship was essential, and this is much in evidence in *Lord of the Rings*.

The history of male friendship is complex and it inevitably raises the question of homosexuality. Close friendship between men was common among all classes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, if only because women were excluded from so many public activities. From the scouts to the public school, from the training club to the pub, these worlds were generally men only. They allowed men to form close personal relationships which otherwise would not be possible. But initially there was no suggestion that male friendship had anything to do with homosexual attachment. Indeed between the Wilde trials and the Second World War, discussion of homosexuality was usually confined to medical and literary circles. Tolkien claimed that at nineteen he had not even heard of the word.⁶⁴ However as the discourse of homosexuality shifted from ‘sinful actions’ to ‘types of person’, a growing suspicion was cast on exclusive male friendship. It was increasingly thought of as leading to homosexuality. Lewis was a leading advocate of male friendship and it is interesting that as he grew older he increasingly felt it necessary to distinguish it from homosexuality. In the *Allegory of Love* he had argued that the deepest worldly emotions in the medieval period were between warrior and warrior. These were, to him, in no sense homosexual. The *Four loves* from 1960 makes this clear. ‘All those hairy toughs of centurions, clinging to one another and begging for last kisses when the Legion was broken up ... all pansies? If you can believe that you can believe anything.’⁶⁵ Because Lewis insists on presenting homosexuality as weak and effeminate, he is able to distinguish it from the manly love and affection of the warriors. But this distinction collapses if we dismiss his crude typology. If we go further and abandon the idea that male homosexuality is a categorically different form of human behaviour which must manifest itself in specific ways, we can argue that what is called homosexual desire can be a part of male friendship. In effect I want to collapse the distinction Lewis was so keen to maintain.

Male friendship was an important mode of expression for men who felt themselves attracted to other men. Homoerotic poetry of the late nineteenth century celebrated friendship between men as the highest form of love. As Paul Fussell has shown, it influenced the poetry of the

First World War. Representations of the tenderness of youth, or bathing soldiers were common during the war, and derived from this poetic tradition. This does not mean that all soldiers who bathed, or all people who wrote poetry describing soldiers bathing were homosexual, but rather that the boundaries between male friendship and homosexuality were somewhat fluid.⁶⁶ Another example of this can be seen in Anglo-Catholicism. It placed great stress on male brotherhood, even setting up quasi-monastic institutions, and consequently appealed to homosexual men. Although it was generally accepted that there was no sanction for sex-acts outside marriage, it was nevertheless possible to celebrate strong and emotional attachments to other men. Kenneth Ingram was an Anglo-Catholic who argued that homosexuality was ‘a romantic cult rather than a physical vice’, although by the 1940s he had decided that sexual acts between men were acceptable as long as both parties were truly in love. He believed that ‘pure love, especially so intense a love as the homogenic attachment, is

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not profane but divine.’⁶⁷ It appears, then, that intense male friendship provided a language through which homosexual men experienced and explained their feelings, even to the extent of elevating them to a divine status. Lewis’s rigid separation between male friendship and homosexual feeling simply cannot historically be maintained. (As a footnote, it is worth noticing that W. H. Auden who was an admirer and defender of *Lord of the Rings*, was also homosexual and an Anglo-Catholic.)

It is unlikely that Tolkien was aware of this side of male friendship. However he believed in the importance of the companionship of men, and it is possible that his experience of serving at the front in the First World War strengthened this. Recent work by Joanna Bourke has stressed that men expected to form

close attachments during war, and often felt that they were fighting it for their comrades. They were in an all-male environment that necessitated taking on roles usually associated with the ‘feminine’, from cooking and sewing to nursing each other. Indeed some soldiers went as far as suggesting that women disrupted this natural male intimacy. Bourke writes: ‘A world of men was opening up, revealing a wide range of roles played by males and exposing the fluidity between masculinity and femininity.’⁶⁸ Tolkien certainly found the company of N.C.O.s and privates more agreeable than that of stiff older officers, and later commented that he believed them ‘so far superior to myself.’⁶⁹ The character of Sam was partly modelled on such soldiers and officers’ servants. In a sense *Lord of the Rings* depicts the male companionship that was made possible during the war. The absence of women means that men have to take their functions. Bourke has argued that in pre-war scouting stories the men and the boys function in all the roles of parent, child and lover, leaving no role for women. The same is evident in *Lord of the Rings*: men take roles that would normally be assigned to women. Domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning are performed, for example, by Sam who sheds tears at having to cast his pans away near Mount Doom.⁷⁰ But Fatty Bolger and Merry also take the domestic roles at Crickhollow, from running the baths to preparing supper.⁷¹ These tasks would normally have been performed by women. The result is that the definition of masculinity is necessarily shifted because of the absence of women.

This is also evident on a deeper level. In a sense the book is a grand coming-of-age story. The early chapters stress the innocence of the hobbits. They are either children set free from their parents, or young adults released from their families or lovers. All their emotional energies are directed inwards. Sam gives no sign that he is missing Rosie. This is simply because she had not been invented when the early chapters were written. The lush descriptions of the landscape create a sense of pastoral innocence, a happiness in each other’s company. The exuberance of bathing at Crickhollow is one example. Another occurs after their release from the barrow-wight when they run naked on the grass and lie in the sunlight ‘with the delight of those who have been wafted suddenly from bitter winter to a friendly clime.’⁷²

These moments of closeness are possible because of the absence of both mothers and lovers; they are moments of male bonding. When the fellowship sets out from Rivendell, a new all-male family structure is created. Gandalf and Aragorn are the parent figures. They are the guides through the quest of life and they offer knowledge and comfort. Gandalf scolds and punishes Pippin in Moria, but later softens his approach and tells him to 'have a sleep, my lad'.⁷³ Aragorn treats Frodo's wounds by Mirromere like any concerned parent. The hobbits are the children of this family. But like any family it is doomed to break up. The 'Breaking of the Fellowship' is caused by the treachery of Boromir, who functions as a duplicitous uncle (a common theme in literature). Aragorn as the parental figure elects to follow Merry and Pippin, and the rest of that part of the story is in part an account of their growing from childhood into manhood. Meanwhile Frodo and Sam are the lovers who leave the family, and the trajectory of their tale is a story of love in the face of adversity rather than of rites of passage.

Before turning to that love story, I want to consider the way Bilbo and Frodo are presented as exceptional hobbits in the Shire. I have stressed above that Tolkien was somewhat critical of the narrow-mindedness and parochialism of the Shire. The hobbits he was interested in transcend this. In 1963 he wrote that, 'We only meet exceptional hobbits in close companionship - those who had a grace or gift: a vision of beauty, and a reverence for things nobler than themselves, at war with their rustic self-satisfaction. Imagine Sam without his education by Bilbo and his fascination with things Elvish! Not difficult. The Cotton family and the Gaffer, when the 'Travellers' return are a sufficient glimpse.'⁷⁴ The four hobbits, and in particular Frodo, are transformed by their experience of nobility and beauty beyond the Shire. In this sense they are superior to and different from ordinary Shire hobbits. It is significant that Sam, Merry and Pippin all become community leaders upon their return. But Frodo does not: 'Though I may come to the Shire, it will not be the same, for I shall not be the same.'⁷⁵ His transformation is so extreme that he cannot settle back into Shire life. The nobility of Frodo has been noticed by Charlotte Spivack, who suggests it is strongly feminine, and that although *Lord of the Rings* lacks female characters, it 'exhibits decidedly "feminine" themes.'⁷⁶

Frodo, she argues, rejects the traditional masculine values of power and technology and therefore undermines patriarchal society. He is a 'feminine' hero. This is a valuable point, particularly when considered alongside how he and Bilbo are perceived by ordinary Shire hobbits. What Spivak sees as 'feminine' Shire hobbits see as 'queer', a term that recurs repeatedly in the early part of the book. Bilbo and Frodo's interest in tales and elves is viewed suspiciously, and the Gaffer worries that his son Sam is spending too much time hearing of such strange things. Sandyman agrees, and says that 'Bag End's a queer place, and its folk are queerer.'⁷⁷ Almost certainly Tolkien was using this word simply to mean something that was odd and best avoided. However it did mean 'homosexual' at the time. (For instance, in T.H. White's *The Witch in the Wood*, Queen Morgause decides that a character is 'queer' because she fails to arouse his interest.) Tolkien's use of 'queer' in relation to Frodo and Bilbo draws attention to their unusual 'feminine' values. It is also interesting that Tolkien decided that these values were incompatible with marriage for the hobbits. Neither has a wife. A

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very early draft had Bilbo running away to get married, but (inevitably, Christopher Tolkien thought) this was soon abandoned.⁷⁸ In *Unfinished tales*, Gandalf explained why he chose Bilbo for the quest to Erebor. '[H]e had never married. He was already growing a bit queer, they said, and went off for days by himself.'⁷⁹ Or in another version: '[H]e had never married. I thought that odd ... I guessed he wanted to remain "unattached" for some reason deep down which he did not understand himself - or would not acknowledge for it alarmed him.'⁸⁰ For Tolkien this 'queerness' derives from a desire to experience nobler and deeper things beyond the Shire, an essentially religious desire. But it is significant that to fulfil these 'feminine' desires Bilbo and Frodo cannot marry, which confirms their 'queerness'. Thus although Tolkien is not suggesting that the hobbits are homosexual, it is

interesting that their desire for greater things is structured in the same way as a male desire for another male. Both are rejected as 'queer' by narrow-minded locals.

The relationship between Frodo and Sam is the emotional centre of the book, because their love is spiritual. After publication Tolkien tried to present this relationship primarily in terms of master and servant. He spoke of Sam's 'service and loyalty to his master' and of the 'devotion of those who perform such service'.⁸¹ But this hardly captures the depth of their relationship. There are two basic reasons for Sam's desire to follow Frodo. The first is his interest in something nobler, expressed in his desire to see elves: 'Elves, sir! I would dearly love to see *them*.' Sam craves some sort of religious experience. The second reason is Frodo himself. He cannot contain himself when he hears Frodo is to leave: 'And that's why I choked: which you heard seemingly. I tried not to, sir, but it burst out of me: I was so upset.'⁸² He bursts into tears of happiness when told he can go. His desire to see elves is fulfilled early on, but he does not wish to turn back: 'I don't know how to say it, but after last night I feel different. I seem to see ahead, in a kind of way. ... I know I can't turn back. It isn't to see Elves now, nor dragons, nor mountains, that I want - I don't rightly know what I want: but I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead, not in the Shire.'⁸³ Sam's quest is bound up with Frodo's. Indeed his task is to love Frodo absolutely, through thick and thin, for only through this can the quest be accomplished. His devotion to Frodo is expressed in quite physical terms. When Frodo talks with Gildor, he 'refused to leave his master ... he came and sat curled up at Frodo's feet.'⁸⁴ On Weathertop he sheds tears of concern for Frodo. When his master wakes in Rivendell, 'he ran to Frodo and took his left hand, awkwardly and shyly. He stroked it gently and then he blushed and turned hastily away.'⁸⁵ That this is a moment of physical intimacy is reinforced by Sam's embarrassment at it. The real bond between the two is developed after the breaking of the fellowship. Sam is deeply upset that Frodo tries to leave without him. He feels it as a moment of rejection, and brushes tears away at the thought. He tells Frodo, 'That's hard, trying to go off without me ... All alone and without me to help you? I couldn't aborne it, it'd have been the death of me'. Frodo tells him it will be his death if he does

come. ‘Not as certain as being left behind’, Sam replies.⁸⁶ He is indifferent to the prospect of death, and his only concern is being with Frodo.

The appearance of Gollum complicates Frodo and Sam’s relationship. Whereas Frodo is able to pity Gollum, Sam cannot. Tolkien thought that this inability to perceive ‘damaged good in the corrupt’ was a major failing. He put this down to Sam’s ‘pride and possessiveness’ of his master.⁸⁷ In other words Sam’s exclusive love and fierce protectiveness of Frodo leads him to view Gollum as a threat. Essentially he is jealous. This is evident in the fact that Frodo and Gollum have a mental connection with each other through being ring-bearers. Sam is excluded from this. During the taming he notices that Frodo appeared as ‘a mighty lord’ and Gollum as ‘a little whining dog.’ ‘Yet the two were in some ways akin and not alien: they could reach one another’s minds.’⁸⁸ Sam was always on the lookout for the worst in Gollum, and hoped to get rid of him. He thought Frodo’s pity for the creature was just a case of blindness caused by kindness, and could not therefore see that this pity was essential to Frodo’s nobility of character, the very thing which Sam loved in him. For instance when Frodo is asleep in Ithilien, Sam noticed ‘a light seemed to be shining faintly within; but now the light was even clearer and stronger. Frodo’s face was peaceful.’ Sam says to himself on seeing this, ‘I love him. He’s like that, and sometimes it shines through, somehow. But I love him whether or no.’⁸⁹ Sam loves Frodo’s pity, charity and humanity, but cannot see that these are the reasons why Frodo treats Gollum as he does. This failure leads, for Tolkien, to the ‘most tragic moment’ in the story.⁹⁰ When Gollum returns down the Cirith Ungol stairs he sees the hobbits together.

And so Gollum found them hours later, when he returned, crawling and creeping down the path out of the gloom ahead. Sam sat propped against the stone, his head drooping 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.⁹¹

It is this vision of love between the two hobbits that could have caused

Gollum’s repentance. The gleam faded from his eyes, and he began to look like the sad old hobbit he really was. ‘[A]nd slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo’s knee - but almost the touch was a caress.’⁹² Love has the power to redeem even Gollum. But Sam awakes and his possessiveness and his jealousy prevent him from seeing what is really happening; he merely sees Gollum ‘pawing at master’. The repentance is ruined by Sam, ironically because of his love for Frodo, the very thing which was about to transform Gollum. From that point onwards there is no hope of repentance, and as Tolkien said, ‘all Frodo’s pity is (in a sense) wasted.’⁹³

Shelob’s Lair could have been avoided but for Sam, and so Frodo’s seeming death and capture is effectively a punishment for Sam’s lack of pity. He is reduced to despair and loss at the thought of Frodo’s death: ‘night came into his heart’.⁹⁴ It is his love (and common sense) which prevents him believing the warrior fantasies the ring confers upon him. By risking himself to rescue his master he atones for his words on the stairs: ‘His love for Frodo rose above all other thoughts, and forgetting his peril he cried aloud: “I’m coming, Mr.

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Frodo!’⁹⁵ The reunion is made poignant by the state to which Frodo has been reduced. He lies naked in a heap of rags emphasising his utter vulnerability. Frodo lies back in ‘Sam’s gentle arms, closing his eyes. ... Sam felt he could sit like that in endless happiness; but it was not allowed.’⁹⁶ This image of exposed, naked bliss makes Sam and Frodo supremely happy, but their danger ensures that it cannot last. Their love is made more moving because when the question of the ring is raised it seems to sunder them. The ring’s effects are selfish, and destructive of love. ‘Sam had changed before [Frodo’s] very eyes into an orc again, leering and pawing at his treasure, a foul little creature with greedy eyes and slobbering mouth. But now the vision had passed. There was Sam kneeling before him, his face wrung with pain, as if he had been stabbed in

the heart; tears welled from his eyes.’⁹⁷ Perhaps more strongly here than anywhere else we feel the evil effects of the ring. The final stages of the journey see the two hobbits drawn closer together, as the task becomes more difficult for Frodo. Finally Sam carries him. This final part of the story is deeply religious; it is about the ideal of love struggling against enormous odds, with only a slim glimmer of hope, and yet conquering. The intimacy and love between Frodo and Sam is the moral and emotional heart of the story which is capable of saving the world from evil, and of regenerating Gollum’s own evil.

Wrapping up the story required a return to ‘normality’. But at the same time Tolkien did not want to abandon the love story between Frodo and Sam. It was too affecting and elevating to be denied. In the earliest projections of the end of the story, before Rosie and Sam’s marriage was conceived, it was thought that ‘Sam and Frodo [would] go into a green land by the Sea.’⁹⁸ (At the end of Forster’s *Maurice* the two male characters retreat from society together and go into the woods). In other words neither would return ‘home’ to the Shire but would go somewhere together and alone. This cuts against what Tolkien said in 1951: ‘I think the simple ‘rustic’ love of Sam and his Rosie (nowhere elaborated) is *absolutely essential* to the study of his ... character.’⁹⁹ Given that Rosie did not exist for most of the writing of Sam’s character this sounds like a retrospective assessment. Nevertheless in the final version it was decided that Sam would return to ‘normal’ life and Frodo would not. This created a dilemma for Sam. When Frodo asks him to move in, he says that ‘I feel torn in two, as you might say’.¹⁰⁰ This is also evident in final passages of the book. Frodo’s decision to leave Middle-earth moves Sam to tears at the thought of losing him. In a letter from 1951 Tolkien described the dilemma of Sam: He ‘has to choose between love of master and of wife.’ Interestingly Tolkien says that Sam’s last words were ‘Well, I’ve come back.’ Christopher Tolkien comments that no draft of the Grey Havens gave that particular reading, which is quite different from ‘Well, I’m back’.¹⁰¹ Whether or not this was merely a mental slip on Tolkien’s part, it cannot but help reinforce the impression that Sam had to make a choice, even if the narrative could hardly end with Rosie and her child being abandoned. But as we know from the Tale of Years,

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ultimately Sam does not have to make a choice between his loves. Rosie dies before Sam, and as his family obligations are now dissolved he too passes into the west. Thus at the very end Sam and Frodo are together again, 'in a green land by the Sea'.

Tolkien's own views of men and women and of love and sex are inscribed on every page of *Lord of the Rings*. Of course he used the whole range of 'northern' mythology available to him in crafting his book, and yet the meanings he gave to this material can only be understood by looking at the culture he inhabited. There is no doubt that *Lord of the Rings* is a religious work. More than that it is a Christian (and Roman Catholic) work.

This lends it both its conservative and radical qualities. On the one hand it lacks female characters and views them in traditionally domestic terms. On the other it embraces a politics of anti-power and anti-technology which have been viewed as deeply feminine. It is a book about the heroic exploits of a world of men, and yet it challenges that very notion of masculinity. Ultimately it is a book about the religious ideal of love. We see this between Aragorn and Arwen, between Faramir and Eowyn, and we see it in Galadriel. But most of all we see it between Frodo and Sam. Their quest is held together by their love and it is an irony (though probably one Tolkien would deny) that the

love which conquers all is the love which dare not speak its name.

With the exception of some very minor revisions this paper is the same as that given at Oxonmoot 1999. Pressures of time have prevented me from embarking on a necessary re-write, so there remain points that I would now wish to qualify. I am grateful to Colin Davey for comments in the initial process of writing, to David Doughan for various useful criticisms, and to Oxonmooters for other comments.

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- 3 Alison Light, *Forever England: femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars* (London, 1991), p. 8.
- 4 Tolkien, Letters, 250, 288
- 5 Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 3rd edition (London, 1983), p. 58
- 6 Tolkien, Letters 329
- 7 Eg, LotR 188.
- 8 Tolkien, Letters, 105
- 9 Tolkien, Letters 105-6
- 10 LotR 19.
- 11 LotR 66; Letters 289-96
- 12 Letters 29
- 13 Letters 293-4.
- 14 Carpenter, *The Inklings* 164
- 15 Letters 50.
- 16 Letters 48-49
- 17 Carpenter, Tolkien, 105.
- 18 *The Silmarillion*, 1st ed, 165.
- 19 LotR 138. Nevertheless Goldberry is still assigned various domestic chores.
- 20 LotR 243.
- 21 LotR, 1095-6, 1098.
- 22 See Carpenter, Tolkien, 226-7; Tolkien, Letters 299-230
- 23 Tolkien, Letters, 48-9
- 24 Tolkien, Letters 172. For Tolkien's difficulties with this identification see Letters, 407. Also, *Unfinished Tales*, pp. 230-2.
- 25 LotR 453
- 26 LotR 536
- 27 LotR 376
- 28 LotR 377
- 29 LotR 385
- 30 LotR 692
- 31 LotR 375
- 32 See LotR 398-9
- 33 LotR 706
- 34 Tolkien, *The War of the Ring*, 163
- 35 LotR, 745.
- 36 LotR, 748
- 37 LotR 750
- 38 LotR, 659
- 39 LotR, 750
- 40 Tolkien, Letters, 50
- 41 See LotR 755-6
- 42 It could therefore be argued that the conjectured expansion of Arwen's role in the forthcoming Peter Jackson film has precedents in the tale of Luthien, and is not out-of-keeping with the spirit of Tolkien's works.
- 43 Sauron Defeated, 52; also *War of the Ring*, 386, 425
- 44 *Treason of Isengard*, 390, 437.
- 45 *Treason of Isengard*, 445
- 46 See *Treason of Isengard* 447-8. After this decision Tolkien considered making Aragorn love Eowyn, and never to marry after her death.
- 47 *War of the Ring*, 243
- 48 *War of the Ring*, 406, 418
- 49 *War of the Ring*, 369
- 50 LotR 537
- 51 LotR 545
- 52 LotR 546
- 53 LotR 815
- 54 LotR 816
- 55 LotR 834
- 56 LotR 874
- 57 LotR 901.
- 58 LotR 901-2
- 59 See LotR 995-6
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- 62 A.N. Wilson, *C.S. Lewis: a biography* (London, 1990), pp. 210-14.
- 63 Carpenter, Tolkien, 159
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- 86 LotR, 426
- 87 LotR, 329
- 88 LotR, 643
- 89 LotR, 678
- 90 Tolkien, Letters, 330
- 91 LotR 741
- 92 LotR 742
- 93 Tolkien, Letters, 330
- 94 LotR, 758
- 95 LotR, 933
- 96 LotR, 945
- 97 LotR 946
- 98 *Treason of Isengard*, 212
- 99 Tolkien, Letters, 161
- 100 LotR, 1062
- 101 Sauron Defeated, 131-2