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Author’s note:

The following is the text of a talk given at the Tolkien 2005 conference held at Aston University, Birmingham UK, August 11-15, 2005. The talk was subsequently published in *The Ring Goes Ever On: Proceedings of the Tolkien 2005 Conference: 50 Years of The Lord of the Rings*. Ed. Sarah Wells. 2 vols. Coventry, UK: The Tolkien Society, 2008. I. 320-26. However, the publication of the proceedings – an immense job with two volumes of contributions -- did not include for my paper a list of references or two endnotes that should have corresponded to endnote numbers in the text; as well, the published paper retained a couple of typographical errors. In the text that follows, the Endnotes and a Works Cited page have been added, and any typographical errors, I hope, have been corrected. Otherwise, the text is the same as that published; the page numbers of the published text are placed in square brackets, as is any note that I have added since the printing of the proceedings.

The conference proceedings can be ordered from the Tolkien Society at www.tolkienesociety.org.

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[Note on the abstracts

The published text includes a long abstract (on page 320) that was actually the original paper proposal. That abstract is reprinted after the new, more concise abstract that follows.

Abstract (not printed in the proceedings)

My paper explores continuities in the institution of male friendship from the Middle Ages to the First World War and then looks at contemporary explorations and understandings of the central male friendship in *The Lord of the Rings*, that of Frodo and Sam. I look at some examples of medieval forerunners before examining the nature of male friendship in World War One through the perspectives of critics such as Sarah Cole, Santanu Das, Joanna Bourke, and Allen Frantzen. I focus my discussion of *The Lord of the Rings* on the Cirith Ungol scene, in which Frodo and Sam sleep together, and on the Mount Doom scene, in which Frodo asks Sam to hold his hands, a gesture that I argue mimics the medieval ritual of swearing fealty to a lord. I then examine the contemporary reception of the Frodo – Sam relationship in the Peter Jackson films and in reactions to them. I conclude by considering slash fan fiction and its version of male friendship.]

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Male Friendship in *The Lord of the Rings*: Medievalism, the First World War, and Contemporary Rewritings

Anna Smol

ABSTRACT

Tom Shippey has convincingly argued that Tolkien is one of a group of fantasy writers who were attempting to deal with the problems of evil raised by their experiences of war. John Garth in his *Tolkien and the Great War* has recently provided an in-depth exploration of the influences of the First World War on Tolkien's view of himself as a writer and on his earliest works. In the last chapter of that book, Garth looks forward to some of the ways in which the War might have helped to shape *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien himself reminds his readers of the lasting effects of the war, writing in his *Letters* that it is the direct experience of war "which alone goes really to the heart" (*Letters* 76).

One could argue that the heart of *The Lord of the Rings* is the relationship between Frodo and Sam, and it is that male friendship that I would like to focus on in my presentation. Marion Zimmer Bradley identifies their friendship as the most intense love relationship in the book, akin to classical ideals of friendship in heroic literature, while David Craig in a fairly recent *Mallorn* article suggests a more modern mode of friendship experienced in the First World War, comparing the bond between Frodo and Sam to the homoerotic relationships represented by some First World War writers. Craig's conclusion is that the Frodo-Sam relationship is basically a homosexual one, but I would like to modify this view by looking at recent work by First World War historians and literary critics such as Paul Fussell, Joanna Bourke, Sarah Cole, and Santanu Das to suggest that the concept of sexuality and gender in this situation was not as clearly defined as Craig indicates. I would like to present this research about male friendships in the First World War and to discuss how Tolkien's work reflects what we see in other writers who represented their experiences in the First War: their disillusionment, the problem of lack of recognition, the return to domesticity after the War, and the often described tender physical gestures of intimacy that defy conventional, contemporary western categories of sexual identity and expectations of masculine behaviour.

Most of the young men who served in the First World War would have been brought up on books that presented a turn-of-the-century medievalist vision of chivalry and heroism. Tolkien, of course, had a firsthand knowledge of medieval texts which also provided him with a vision of male friendship, and I would like to discuss the way in which Tolkien rewrites medieval heroism and medieval gestures of relationship in a couple of significant scenes, particularly on the stair to Cirith Ungol and on Mount Doom.

After discussing Tolkien's representation of male friendship in the context of World War One trench literature and medieval literature, I would like to consider in the final part of

my paper the contemporary reaction to the Frodo–Sam relationship in the Peter Jackson films and in fan fiction. Even though the films avoid depicting certain scenes in the books, they have elicited all kinds of commentary about the sexuality of Frodo and Sam (or the actors who play them). From audience members sniggering in the movie theatres to entertainment reporters asking if the hobbits are gay, the story has evoked an interest in the male friendship of Frodo and Sam. Perhaps the most extreme example of such attention is in the highly controversial subcategory of fan fiction called slash, which posits a sexual and romantic relationship between two male characters. I would like to conclude my paper with a consideration of Frodo and Sam slash fiction, which has exploded on the Internet in recent years, commenting on the varied intentions and the effects of slash as a contemporary response to the kind of male friendship that Tolkien represented in his portrayal of Frodo and Sam.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Smol teaches English at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, where she specializes in medieval literature. She has published articles on Tolkien, Old English poetry, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medievalism, and children's literature.

I would like to begin this discussion of male friendship with several glimpses into the Middle Ages. Let's take as our first example a public occasion that might have occurred in the later medieval era, a ceremony in which a vassal swears an oath of fealty to his lord. In this ritual, a man would first kneel before his lord and put his hands together, palm to palm, in what we would now recognize as the Christian gesture of prayer. The lord would put his hands over the vassal's hands, exerting some pressure to show his dominance. The relationship would be sealed with a kiss of the hands by the vassal.

A precursor of this ritual might have been the basis for my next example, the private memories of the speaker in an Old English poem called "The Wanderer," written down in a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon manuscript. In this poem, a lonely exile remembers the joys of his past life, and the central image in his reminiscences is how, as he says, "in his mind it seems that he embraces / And kisses his liege Lord, and on his knee/ Lays hand and head" (Hamer 176-177). What very likely could have been a public demonstration of loyalty is transformed in this poem into a private image that focuses on the gestures of touch signifying the relationship between the two men.

In a third glimpse from the medieval period, we can turn to Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *History of the Kings of Britain*. In one chapter of this book, King Cadwallo is lying on a river bank with his nephew Brian while a conference about

dividing the kingship is taking place. Geoffrey describes the scene in this way:

they started to hold a conference beside the River Douglas and the wiser among their counsellors conferred together as to what could best be done. Over on the other side of the river Cadwallo lay with his head on the lap of a certain nephew of his, whom they called Brian. Messengers came to announce the arguments which had been put forward on this side and that. At this Brian burst out weeping, and the tears which flowed from his eyes dripped down in such a way that they besprinkled the King's face and beard. (269)

It is not only the tears of the young man Brian that we might note in this scene – tears caused by the prospect of his uncle and king being betrayed and losing his honour – but also the casual way in which the historian mentions that one man was lying “on the bosom” of the other that might catch our attention here. In fact, the posture of the two is enough to merit a commentary by one scholar, J.S.P. Tatlock, who cites a number of such scenes in medieval texts and explains that one of the reasons for the practice of one man sleeping in the lap of another was for protection against attack by enemies (356).

Any reader of *The Lord of the Rings* will recognize moments such as these medieval ones in which two males rest on each other, or hold hands, or bestow a kiss, and it is not hard to find other examples from medieval literature of two men sharing a relationship characterized by loyalty and physical gestures of closeness or affection. In the *Song of Roland* just before his own death, Roland seeks out his best friend Oliver on the battlefield, embracing his dead friend and shedding tears over him. In *Beowulf*, the hero is accompanied in his last battle by his loyal retainer Wiglaf, who fights at his side and later tends to the dying hero, offering us an image of the loyal warrior pierced with sorrow trying to revive the king with some drops of water.

Of course, Tolkien knew such stories as a professional medievalist, but concepts of medieval heroism and chivalry were also a familiar part of Victorian and Edwardian culture when Tolkien was growing up, and these medieval ideals were firmly embedded, for example, in literature for and about boys, who were frequently urged to look to knighthood as a model for their behaviour and attitudes. These boys who grew into young men at the time of the First World War shipped out to the Front trained in ideals of chivalric honour and bravery. Their educations, combined with conditions in the trenches, resulted in a brand of male

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friendship that shares some features with the medieval examples I have given you, particularly in the way close bonds between men were marked by tender gestures of affection.

What I would like to focus on today is how Tolkien's representation of male friendship, particularly between Frodo and Sam, is typical of how many soldiers at the Front described their relationships with other men. This version of male friendship shares some

features with medieval forerunners, and I will be looking at how Tolkien rewrites some medieval gestures in *The Lord of the Rings*. But I also want to glance at how Tolkien's representation of male friendship has been rewritten in Peter Jackson's film trilogy and by fan fiction writers. Looked at from this angle, Tolkien's vision of male friendship highlights for us ways in which we in mainstream North American and British culture have in some ways a narrower view of the possibilities of male friendship compared to the past.

I think you will recognize the problem that I am talking about. We could say that just as Roland has his Oliver, and Beowulf has his Wiglaf, Frodo has his Sam. But how many of us have been in theatres where an image of Frodo in Sam's arms has elicited uncomfortable sniggering or even explicit comments like "are they gay?" Certainly, movie reviewers and entertainment reporters felt compelled to ask that question often as Peter Jackson's trilogy appeared on screen. And that is not the first time an unease about the possible sexuality of such a relationship has arisen, whether in Tolkien's war story or in other tales. Tolkien's friend C.S. Lewis objected rather vociferously to suggestions that ancient and medieval warrior bonds were necessarily homosexual in nature. In his essay "Friendship," published in 1960, Lewis states: "Kisses, tears and embraces are not in themselves evidence of homosexuality. The implications would be, if nothing else, too comic. Hrothgar embracing Beowulf, Johnson embracing Boswell (a pretty flagrantly heterosexual couple) and all those hairy old toughs of centurions in Tacitus, 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" (93). However, Lewis does not deny that homosexuality, what he calls "abnormal Eros," might have crept into war-like societies as a "contamination" (to use his word again) in certain cultures in which women were largely absent. In this one point I am in agreement with C.S. Lewis when he says: "On a broad historical view it is, of course, not the demonstrative gestures of Friendship among our ancestors but the absence of such gestures in our own society that calls for some special explanation. We, not they, are out of step"(94).

In order to get back in step with some of these demonstrative gestures of friendship and to recover their meaning, I would like at this point to look at ways in which the Frodo and Sam relationship reflects a mode of British male friendship that intensified in the First World War. Critics like Tom Shippey and John Garth have argued convincingly that Tolkien's experiences in the First World War had a considerable influence on his writing, and I think that we can outline ways in which Tolkien represents in Frodo and Sam personal aspects of experiencing war. Like other war writers, Tolkien deals with male bonding, issues of disillusionment, problems of recognition, and the return to domesticity. He also represents his two main characters as having a close emotional bond, like that developed by many soldiers, demonstrated by tender gestures of affection.¹

While Tolkien does give voice to a medieval style of heroism in his descriptions of combat and certain fighting groups, he also represents some twentieth-century aspects of the modern soldier in war. The language of the Rohirrim, for example, has archaic, epic

resonances, but the squabbling that goes on in Orcish or Uruk-hai ranks seems very modern by contrast. “That’s my orders” (*Two Towers* 48) or “I may have to report that” (*Two Towers* 49) are typical of the sneering that we hear. These scenes highlight the worst in corporate military life; with no loyalty between lord and retainer as a cohesive force, all that we see in such scenes are soldiers forced into action against their will in order to obey orders that come down to them from anonymous superiors. Rather than such forced group solidarity, soldiers like Tolkien looked for personal friendships, such as that shared between Frodo and Sam, to sustain them. According to Paul Fussell’s classic study of war literature, war writers idealized the sacrificed, killed friend (119-20), a role that Frodo certainly fits. We watch his physical sacrifice as his body suffers the wounds of every major encounter: he is knifed by a Ringwraith, skewered by an orc-chieftain, stung by Shelob, whipped by orcs, and maimed by Gollum. Sacrifice is inherent in Tolkien’s conception of Frodo’s ennoblement, of his “sanctification” (*Letters* 234), a quality that Sam does recognize. But Tolkien does not allow Frodo to become a simple stereotype of the mythical crucified soldier of the First World War. After all, Frodo survives and returns home, in some ways a

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diminished being, for, at the end of his quest, of course, he does claim the Ring. And Gollum’s unexpected intervention at the Crack of Doom is characteristic of the situational irony that Fussell identifies as the dominant way in which men came to understand events in the First World War (7-35).

I think that we can look at the Frodo who returns to the Shire as a wounded, war-weary veteran who is not adequately recognized by his society for his efforts and who is unable to adapt successfully to civilian life. Frodo clings to his friendship with Sam, expecting to go on with Sam at his side as if they are still on their quest. He eagerly invites Sam to move his future wife and family into Bag End with him. When Frodo plans his final journey to the Grey Haven, he asks Sam to arrange with Rosie for some time away from home, “so that you and I can go off together,” he says “a little wistfully” (*Return of the King* 306). By this point, Sam can be seen as a veteran who has crossed the threshold between peace and war and returned fairly happily. Frodo, however, has not fully returned across that threshold. When Frodo says to Sam, “Come now, ride with me!” (*Return of the King* 309), he is in effect saying that he wants to have his friend by his side in what will be equivalent to his death scene.

Historians of World War One literature comment on how the figure of the bereaved friend comes to define the essence of disillusioned war experience. Sam partakes of some of this typical disillusionment. He is left behind in a disenchanted world that the elves are leaving. He is pained that the Shirefolk do not honour Frodo adequately for his deeds. Their understanding cannot seem to extend beyond the Battle of Bywater, a skirmish in which nineteen hobbits are killed. But this Shire understanding of the War of the Ring compared to the vision that the reader has been given of the epic struggle against Sauron reveals the enormous gulf between civilians who have little direct experience of war and those who have survived the worst of it. Tolkien, however, does not rest with the

disillusionment that defines much of the modernist version of war literature. Frodo's legacy to Sam includes a prophesy of a full personal and social life for Sam, who is capable of heroic action and reintegration into society.

Tolkien once wrote, "without the simple and ordinary the noble and heroic is meaningless" (*Letters* 160). To make meaning out of the events of the war, Sam must integrate Frodo's noble sacrifice into a peaceful, ordinary life. Frodo's claim on Sam's friendship leaves Sam feeling "torn in two" (*Return of the King* 304, 306); Frodo's presence hampers Sam's full and final return to ordinary life. Sam is only made "one and whole" when he can incorporate Frodo's noble life and heroic sacrifice into his own life, which Frodo enables him to do by, in effect, bequeathing his life to Sam: "All that I had and might have had I leave to you," Frodo states (*Return of the King* 309). When Sam literally steps back into Bag End as its heir, he also metaphorically steps back into ordinary life. That is when his quest is over and he can announce, "Well, I'm back" (*Return of the King* 311).

Tolkien had 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. Certainly, the batman-officer relationship was one that could encourage a strong personal bond between men in the war, and it is the way in which that bond was often expressed that offers us the greatest challenges in understanding gestures of friendship out of step with our own. Paul Fussell discusses the romantic feelings that sometimes developed between officers and their batmen, identifying a strong homoeroticism in such friendships. More recently, literary critics and historians have looked closely at these personal relationships that do not easily fit into our conventional ideas about gender and sexuality. Critic Sarah Cole finds that "the spectrum from the homosocial to the homosexual became an axis along which individual identity was imagined during the war" (472), and Santanu Das concludes that we have to start thinking in terms of a "continuum" that "goes beyond strict gender divisions, sexual binaries, or identity politics" (56) in order to understand the gestures of friendship shared by men in the trenches. Historian Joanna Bourke helps us to imagine the situations that men found themselves in, which promoted male camaraderie and which often challenged traditional masculine roles: cooking and cleaning for each other, playing sports together, dancing together for entertainment, sleeping curled up against each other in close quarters, bathing together, and sometimes even exchanging intimate gestures such as kisses. Santanu Das cites one letter from the trenches written in 1916 by a Lieutenant Frank Cocker to his fiancée Evelyn describing the way in which he and another straight friend, Charlie, exchanged kisses. Frank writes:

As we arrived at the barn-door he said, "Just a moment, Frank, before we go in I've something else to give you, – put that light out." I put the lamp out and into my pocket, wondering what was coming. Then I felt an arm round my neck, and the dear lad kissed me once – "that's from Evelyn" ... he said; then he kissed me

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again and said, “that’s from your Mother.” I returned his tender salute and said, “that’s from me.” There we were, two men, like a couple of girls, – but then, there was no one about, and the matter was a sacred one between us, – and you. (qtd in Das 51)

Das finds in this encounter a merging of “maternal empathy, heterosexual romance, and homoerotic frisson” (52) and he goes on to discuss how “norms of tactile contact between men changed profoundly [in the war]....to a new level of intimacy and intensity....”(52). Das does not see eroticism as the “founding impulse”(69) behind these gestures of friendship, although he says that it may or may not have played a part. What Das very precisely terms “non-genital tactile tenderness” (56) seems to have been elicited by the extreme conditions near danger and death that the men were subjected to.

I am sure that we all recognize this kind of tenderness in the Frodo and Sam friendship, and a number of instances occur in the books in which the two hold hands, or embrace, or kiss each other. There is one scene that Tolkien repeatedly said he found to be one of the most moving and tragic ones in the tale, and I would like to pause to look at it here, since it embodies many of the qualities of these trench friendships: the scene on the stairs to Cirith Ungol, in which Sam invites Frodo to rest on his lap. We see the image through Gollum’s eyes: “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” (403). In this image of Frodo and Sam, the focus is on the gesture of touch, the two bodies completely relaxed against each other in deep sleep, and on the placement of gentle hands. Consider also how Sam wakes Frodo up in this scene of physical and emotional intimacy. Tolkien writes: “Gently he smoothed the hair back from Frodo’s brow, and bending down spoke softly to him. ‘Wake up, Mr Frodo! Wake up!’ Frodo stirred and opened his eyes, and smiled, seeing Sam’s face bending over him” (404). A similar moment could be imagined taking place between a parent waking a child, or between two lovers, or, if we keep in mind the work of World War One scholars, between two soldiers in the trenches – soldiers of any and all possible sexual orientations.

But, you might be thinking, what about that medieval example of King Cadwallo resting on his nephew Brian that I began with in this talk? Couldn’t that be a forerunner of the Cirith Ungol scene? Or couldn’t an example like the one I cited from “The Wanderer,” in which the touching of hands and head on another man’s knees forms a pleasant memory of a past relationship – couldn’t that be analogous to this moment of peace between Frodo and Sam? Although I do believe that the totality of any historical moment is unique, we can still find elements in that historical moment that are shared by other people in other times. And without a doubt, we can find some continuity in the institution of male friendship in the Middle Ages and in the early twentieth century, two specific points in history that Tolkien occupied either literally or intellectually. Allen Frantzen is one medievalist who has discussed male relations in literature and in texts regulating sexual behaviour in the Anglo-Saxon period in his book *Before the Closet*. Frantzen uses the image of the shadow to define how, in his view, same-sex desire exists in relation to

heterosexual norms: an object in the foreground always casts a shadow – a shadow, in contouring the object, enables us to see that object. Shadows also add nuances to the surfaces of an object. According to Frantzen, in our culture, heterosexuality is the dominant object in the spotlight, but always belonging to it is same-sex desire, its shadow. Like some of the World War One critics I've cited, Frantzen does not want to deny the possibility that gestures between men could be meaningful, that they could have an erotic significance – they are the shadows, if we look for them – but he explains that generally, “These nonsexual intramale acts....took place within an institution of male friendship, defined by the bonds between a Lord and his retainer, that the culture authorized and indeed valorised” (107).

One scene on Mount Doom, for example, can be read in the context of both medieval and early twentieth-century friendship. Frodo falls after glimpsing the Eye, his hand seeking the Ring uncontrollably. Tolkien describes the moment: “‘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” (*Return of the King* 220). You can read the scene as one soldier coming to his companion's aid in another of those gentle handholding scenes we find in the book. But the gesture in which Sam holds Frodo's hands, laid palm to palm, is, as I mentioned earlier, a specific gesture that was part of the medieval ritual of paying homage to one's lord. Tolkien rewrites that gesture in a way that is particularly relevant to this point in the quest. Although Frodo starts off as the socially superior member of the couple, and Sam's loyalty is certainly directed at Frodo who is his “master,” in this scene it is Frodo who takes the position of the vassal

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whose hands are placed together and enclosed by another's hands. Sam acts as the lord who receives the homage and vows to protect his vassal in return. This moment of “tactile tenderness” suggests a rise in social position in which Sam will become the master of Bag End and the “chief hero” as Tolkien called him (*Letters* 161). But even so, it is Sam who kisses the clasped pair of hands, as the vassal would do, not the lord, and he does not exert pressure in holding Frodo's hands to demonstrate his dominant position. The power in that friendship does not, then, move from Frodo to Sam; it is a reciprocal exchange in which Frodo acknowledges the need for Sam's leadership and protection, and Sam acknowledges his willingness to be both vassal and lord. The seamless convergence of medieval and modern elements in this scene speaks to the continuity of institutions and practices associated with male bonding for centuries.

But, can we speak of such continuity into the twenty-first century? If we look at contemporary rewritings of *The Lord of the Rings* in Peter Jackson's films and in fan fiction, we'll see varied responses to these gestures of friendship. Jackson does not film the Cirith Ungol scene as written in the book; he does not film scenes of gentle handholding along with kissing, such as we find on numerous occasions in the text. I feel quite secure in venturing the guess that such scenes embodied on screen would read overwhelmingly as images of same-sex desire and that corporate interests in making a

Hollywood blockbuster would not be pleased. Instead, the films develop their own visual language to signify bonds of friendship, often in the form of a strong hand held out to help a friend. Still, these images, along with others in which Sam holds Frodo or looks at him with undeniable expressions of affection, are enough to elicit from audiences responses ranging from discomfort to erotic excitement. Just about the only time we see a gentle handholding scene in the films is when Sam rushes in to find Frodo awake in Rivendell, and even then the moment could be easily missed, since it is not the focus of the scene. Ian McKellen, the actor who plays Gandalf and someone who is known as a gay activist, claims on the DVD commentary that he urged Sean Astin to take Elijah Wood's hand in this scene. 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 recognizes that two "resolutely heterosexual actors" would not be likely to include tender handholding as part of their repertoire of intramale gestures. McKellen's intervention in the scene brings back into view a flicker of the shadow, we might say, using Frantzen's image, that you can see if you are looking for it.

Slash fan fiction writers take the eroticism of such scenes right out of the shadows and place it in the spotlight. As you all probably know, slash is a controversial genre of fan fiction which rewrites the friendship between male characters from a television show, film, or book into an explicitly sexual relationship. What started as a transgressive form of fan publication in 1970s Star Trek fandom has since exploded in the Internet age into multiple fandoms and thousands of easily accessible websites, some of them archiving hundreds of stories varying hugely in quality – but I think it is important to note that that quality does extend to include well written, well researched stories. I do think that a lot more research is needed in order to understand the distinctive features of different communities of fans and of different fan fiction preferences within specific communities, but in any case, the research that does exist indicates that most slash is written by heterosexual, middle-class women.² The reasons why some women readers and writers are attracted to slash are varied and complex – and I certainly can't provide any final statements about this phenomenon, especially not in a short talk. But I can suggest a couple of points to consider about what a typical Frodo / Sam slash story does. First of all, I think that good slash writers are excellent close readers. If same-sex desire is the shadow that provides nuances on the object in the spotlight, then a skilful slash writer will find every shadowy nuance in Tolkien's story and create something out of that. A kiss on the hand, Sam waking Frodo up, Frodo resting in Sam's arms – any of these moments that appear in Tolkien's work can and have become the basis for stories that identify the erotic potential of the scene – but then, of course, slash writers continue from there to fulfill that potential in a fully realized sexual scene.

Another feature of Frodo / Sam slash is that it almost always addresses the difference in social class between Frodo and Sam (something that the Jackson movies downplay). The appeal in slash is, I think, that love can overcome any perceived barriers. Typical Frodo / Sam slash asks the question how Frodo and Sam, as lovers, have to adjust their behaviours – Sam, with a lifetime of his Gaffer's training to mind his place, and Frodo

with the privileges of being master of Bag End. A conventional element in many a Frodo / Sam slash fiction involves Frodo trying to convince Sam to stop calling him “sir” or “Mr. Frodo” in the bedroom. It’s easy to see why heterosexual women who have inherited traditional romance paradigms and gender roles

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would be interested in the negotiations around power and the attempt to establish equality in Frodo and Sam’s relationship. What slash writers are playing with, of course, is the relationship Tolkien has given us, something akin to an officer and his batman, or a lord and his vassal, or a master and his servant. Isn’t the handholding scene on Mount Doom doing something similar? – negotiating an equality between Frodo and Sam that goes beyond their class status and usual social roles?

Right now, I can only make two contradictory conclusions about what slash does. Here’s one possibility. In positing a sexual relationship between two male friends, slash actually restricts the imagination of male friendships such as those which existed in the Middle Ages and in the First War, friendships which, for the most part, did not end in sexual behaviours. Slash, one could say, upholds a contemporary heterosexual / homosexual divide which still keeps us out of step with older modes of male friendship.

Or, here is another possibility. Perhaps slash does something else. In putting same-sex relations in the spotlight, it sends heterosexuality into the shadows. If the spotlight shows us an idealized vision of masculinity – tender, loyal, sharing power – then its shadow is everything that the spotlight is not. Shadowing the male friendships in slash is the awareness that contemporary masculinity, at least in some people’s eyes, needs rethinking.

Whatever one concludes about slash, one has to admit that it is certainly one of the ways in which readers enter into a creative and imaginative relationship with Tolkien’s story. At the heart of that story is the friendship between Frodo and Sam, a relationship created partly out of Tolkien’s knowledge of medieval literature and his experiences in modern life. That friendship, called the “moral and emotional heart of the story” (Craig 17), reveals to us the nature of male friendship in the past, speaks to us about the limitations of male intimacy in the present, and challenges us to imagine the possibilities for male friendship in the future.

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[The publication of this talk in the proceedings of the Tolkien 2005 conference did not include the endnotes for the talk. They are provided here.]

Endnotes

This research was funded by a Mount Saint Vincent University Research Grant.

- 1 Further details about how friendships in *The Lord of the Rings* resemble male friendships in World War One are included in my article, “ ‘Oh...oh...Frodo!’: Readings of Male Intimacy in *The Lord of the Rings*.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 50.4 (2004): 949-979. The full text is available in Project Muse and also on my personal website at <<http://faculty.msvu.ca/asmol/research.htm>> .
- 2 Two of the earliest books published in the field of fan fiction studies are *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* by Henry Jenkins and *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* by Camille Bacon-Smith. These studies were written about pre-Internet fan fiction, but new research is now emerging about fan fiction in a digital age. More recent books include *Cyberspaces of their Own* by Rhiannon Bury, *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context* by Sheenagh Pugh, and *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse.

[The publication of this talk in the proceedings of the Tolkien 2005 conference did not include the Works Cited page. It is provided here.]

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