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## On Fairy Stories

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

## On Fairy Stories

*Valerie Rohy (bio)*

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In a recent *New York Times* essay on the appeal of children's books, A. S. Byatt turned from Harry Potter to *The Lord of the Rings*, confessing that "part of the reason I read Tolkien when I'm ill is that there is an almost

total absence of sexuality in his world, which is restful." However curious Byatt's vision of a therapeutic Tolkien, and however wishful her belief in childhood innocence, the notion that there is no sexuality in *The Lord of the Rings* is not hers alone. An early British reviewer complained, "There is not enough awareness of sexuality" (Shippey 132), and a recent reader asserts that the novel lacks "sex, explicit or otherwise" (Curry 13). Adam Mars-Jones concurs, naming "above all, sexuality" as "what is absent from the vision" of the twentieth century's preeminent fantasy novel, while Stephanie Merritt finds that "there is no sex in the book" because Tolkien, in her view, "either ignores or sublimates the business of sexual pursuit and romantic love."<sup>1</sup>

It's not hard to see what they mean. Like its epic sources, *The Lord of the Rings* abandons courtship when battle looms, apparently sublimating sexuality to the greater quest. Although Aragorn and Arwen, Éowyn and Faramir, and Sam and Rosie will eventually wed, their loves fall largely outside the story—outside, that is, the narrative structured by the ring. All three romances seem oddly incomplete, not because they are never finished, but because they are never started; the culmination of each relationship feels arbitrary because so little story has preceded it. Sam's attachment to Rosie Cotton is all marriage and no plot, compressed into the few remaining pages after her very late introduction. Aragorn and Arwen remain separated through the vast middle of the text, their most ardent **[End Page 927]** moment contained in the line "They spoke together" (239; bk. 2, ch. 1); their romance is consigned to the appendices, where the belated courtship follows its own conclusion. The story of Éowyn and Faramir, though more fully narrated, remains the least plausible of the three, as the warlike maiden accedes to her feminine role and the dutiful Faramir, always second to his brother in their father's eyes, finds a bride who takes him as second to Aragorn. Accepting her consolation prize, Éowyn speaks her warmest words to Faramir in the form of renunciation: "No longer do I desire to be a queen" (977; bk. 6, ch. 5).

Still, an attenuated heterosexuality is not an absence of sexuality.

While Byatt and company find no sex in *The Lord of the Rings*, a dissenting opinion, insisting that there is sexuality in the novel, also asks that we recognize much of it as queer. Long before such dissent could be articulated, the conversation about homosexuality and *The Lord of the Rings* was brought into being by an effort to prevent it. In its earliest incarnation, the matter of Tolkien and queer desire can be found in a 1962 review by Edmund Fuller, who proleptically decries an association of the novel with homosexuality that—little did he know—would actually follow: "*The Lord of the Rings* is a fairy tale in the highest aspect of its kind—which requires some discussion. *Fairy* is prominent in the long lexicon of words ruined by the nasty vulgarism of our time—at least in the American culture. It is probably irrecoverable for several generations because it has been made a sniggering, derisive synonym for homosexual" (22).

Whether Fuller means to blame this fairy-fouling "vulgarism" on homosexuals or on those "sniggering, derisive" types who would malign them, his effort to meet linguistic corruption with reparative "discussion" merely enlarges the vulgar tendency—for even prophylactic efforts, where homosexuality is concerned, can spread the linguistic contagion, animating the very suggestions they sought to foreclose. When the discussion of Tolkien and queer love resumes decades later, Fuller's worst fears have been realized: to some readers, at least, *The Lord of the Rings* really is a fairy story.

Before and after Peter Jackson's film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*, readers have neither ignored the tale...

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