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 **"Oh... oh... Frodo!": Readings of Male Intimacy in The Lord of the Rings**

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**"Oh... Oh... Frodo!":**

Readings of Male Intimacy in *The Lord Of The Rings*<sup>1</sup>

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

The questioning of sexuality in Tolkien's story has intensified now that reception of the text has become complicated by the intertexts of the Peter Jackson films, the extended DVD versions of the films along with their commentaries, and the enormous outpouring of fan fiction and fan art that has been posted on the Internet. **[End Page 949]** Some entertainment reporters, who do not always distinguish between the characters in the film or the actors themselves, have enjoyed insinuating that the hobbits are gay.<sup>2</sup> While the screenwriters and the actors explain that the films intend to show the deepest friendship between characters (and the DVD commentaries insist on the real-life fellowship among the actors), many fans have seized on the representation of that fellowship—in film, DVD commentary, book version, or a conflation of all of these—and have rewritten Tolkien's story as an explicitly sexual one through the genre of slash fiction.

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

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

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