

4-15-2006

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### Recommended Citation

Sturgis, Amy H. (2006) "Reimagining Rose: Portrayals of Tolkien's Rosie Cotton in Twenty-First Century Fan Fiction," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 24: No. 3, Article 10.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol24/iss3/10>

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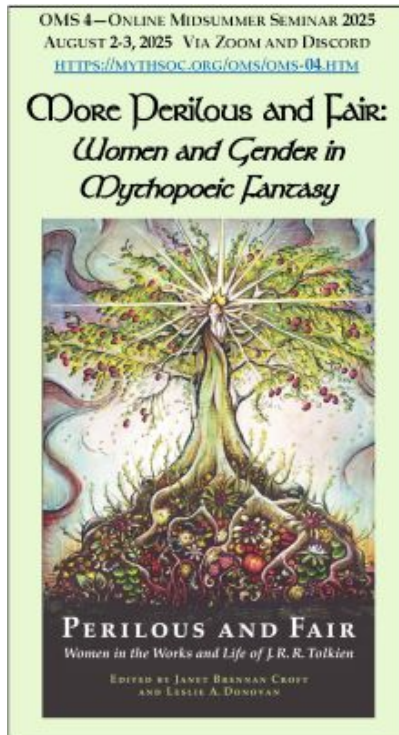
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### Abstract

A study of fanfiction and what it has to say about how an author's works are appropriated and reimagined by his or her readers, looking specifically at several types of fanfiction about Rosie Cotton.

### Additional Keywords

Fanfiction; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Rose Cotton; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Fanfiction

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## Reimagining Rose: Portrayals of Tolkien's Rosie Cotton in Twenty-First Century Fan Fiction

Amy H. Sturgis

### **A**n Incomplete Rose: "Nowhere Elaborated"

When one considers the outstanding heroines of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth, Rosie Cotton may not come immediately to mind. Her competition is daunting, from the regal Galadriel and courageous Éowyn<sup>1</sup> to the exotic Arwen and commanding Melian. For one thing, hobbit women, with the exception of the unsavory though ultimately redeemed Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, seem more noteworthy for their recurring absence than their presence in Tolkien's texts. The mothers, sisters, and future wives of male hobbit protagonists repeatedly appear as faceless names; though Tolkien assures his readers that the Old Took's three daughters were remarkable, their stories, too, are mere ellipses (*Hobbit* 2). Moreover, when Rosie is recalled, it is the idealized memory rather than the flesh-and-blood Shire lass who frequently is valued. Rosie's worth often seems tied to the greatness she inspires in the quest-bound Samwise Gamgee.

Tolkien himself was aware of his loud silence with regard to Rosie Cotton. In a letter to Milton Waldman probably written in 1951, Tolkien describes the Sam-Rosie relationship as a crucial key to the theme of *The Lord of the Rings* despite this lack of exposition:

I think the simple 'rustic' love of Sam and his Rosie (nowhere elaborated) is *absolutely essential* to the study of his (the chief hero's) character, and to the theme of the relation of ordinary life (breathing, eating, working, begetting) and quests, sacrifice, causes, and the 'longing for Elves', and sheer beauty. (*Letters* 161)

For Tolkien, then, Rosie's worth lies not only in the inspiration her existence provides during the quest, but also in the promise of her actions after the Ring's destruction—loving Sam, of course, and also performing her “ordinary life” activities of cooking, homemaking, nurturing, and mothering. Such efforts empower Sam (and through him the Shire) to, in Tolkien's words, breathe, eat, work, and beget. This role makes Rosie more than a mere memory but no less of an ideal. Tolkien's defense of Rosie as an essential ingredient to his message provides the reader with a better understanding of Rosie as a symbol of humble hearth and home, but it fails to offer a deeper appreciation of Rosie as a character and individual.

This incomplete portrait of Rosie Cotton drawn by Tolkien now serves as a challenge to the burgeoning world of Tolkien fan fiction. Fan fiction itself is far from new, of course; one could say that the medieval authors who embellished and explored preexisting Arthurian legends were early, if not the earliest, fan fiction producers. Contemporary fan fiction has been dated back to the publication of the first *Star Trek* fanzine, *Spocknalia*, in 1967 (Verba 1) and ably documented by the likes of Henry Jenkins, Camille Bacon-Smith, Joan Marie Verba, Constance Penley, Cheryl Harris, and Alison Alexander, among others. Tolkien fan fiction likewise has a notable history. One need only to glance over past publications from The Tolkien Society, The American Tolkien Society, and The American Hobbit Association, to name but a few groups, to recognize the ongoing literary impulse to contribute to the landscape of Middle-earth.

Twenty-first century Tolkien fan fiction represents a new incarnation of Tolkien fandom, however. Traditional fan fiction outlets and by-products such as conventions, printed fanzines, and awards continue to thrive, but the Internet also allows online fan fiction archives, discussion boards, lists, blogs, live journals, RPGs (role-playing games), and MUSHs (multi-user shared hallucinations) to flourish, as well. Thanks to the instant accessibility of electronic texts and the widespread popularity of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (2001-2003), multiple generations of fans are now involved together in the production and critique of Tolkien fan fiction.

Journalist Noy Thrupkaew suggests this is a worthy endeavor, since fan fiction authors “have changed TV- and movie-watching”—and,

it seems certain, book-reading—"from a passive act into one that is participatory, allowing the deciphering and creation of meaning" (Thrupkaew). Interestingly enough, as Tolkien fans today strive to alter and add to the lore of Middle-earth, some feel compelled to devote themselves to "the deciphering and creation" of one character in particular: Rosie Cotton.<sup>2</sup> This reimagining of Tolkien's Rose is leading fans on unexpected and illuminating literary quests of their own as they explore diverse terrain from the traditional stability of domesticity to subversive experimentation with sexuality, and from the most dangerous boundaries of the supernatural to the greatest temptations of absolute power.

### **An Unwanted Rose: Slash Fandom**

Not all Tolkien fan fiction, even hobbit-centric fan fiction, examines and uplifts Rosie Cotton as a central character. The tradition of slash, or homoerotic, fan fiction is practically as old as fan fiction itself.<sup>3</sup> Since the debut of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* film, the production of slash fan fiction set in Tolkien's universe has exploded, spawning slash-specific conventions, printed fanzines, and a remarkable amount of online fan fiction.<sup>4</sup> When authors exclusively pair Samwise Gamgee romantically and sexually with Frodo Baggins (or Pippin Took, or Legolas Greenleaf, or another same-sex partner), they by necessity push Rosie Cotton aside.

Many slash writers simply ignore Rosie's existence altogether and thereby avoid the task of explaining away her relationship with Sam. Some authors, however, choose to leave Sam with Rosie in order to contrast Sam's reality, a heterosexual union with her, with his fantasy, a gay union with Frodo. Fan writer Orangeblossom Brambleburr, for instance, recognizes that Sam's love for Rosie is real, and yet it falls short of the grand passion he holds for Frodo. In "Sailing, Sailing, Sailing Over the Sea," Sam looks back on his late wife and notes to Frodo: "My Rosie is gone now. I still feel I gave her less than she deserved; a sweeter and truer wife I could never ask for.... I tried to love her well, to give her every part of me that I had left to give. I wonder by times if that's why we had us such a brood; I could not give her my heart but I could give her my children" (Brambleburr). Here Sam's reflection is poignant, but

hardly tragic, since he not only enjoys a long family life with Rosie, but also anticipates a romantic reunion with Frodo over the sea in the Undying Lands.

Others tell a less satisfying tale. In Hope's<sup>5</sup> "Torn in Two," Sam enjoys an erotic dream about Frodo only to wake and find himself holding Rosie in their marriage bed. The discovery leaves Sam with his "body numb," "unable or unwilling to grip the soft roundness of her hips," distraught and disappointed (Hope, "Torn"). Likewise, in "Footsteps" by Nadja Lee, Sam finds himself able to perform sexually with Rosie only by fantasizing about Frodo in the next bedroom: "Rosie writhes beneath me, but I can't hear her. I am straining for the sound of your breath, moving in time with your blood, knowing that if my eyes could pierce this wall, I would be staring at your face." When he reaches climax Sam finds himself gasping Frodo's name (Lee). In such stories, Rosie acts as the insufficient substitution for, and problematic obstacle to, romance with Frodo. Again she is unrealized as an individual, merely a means to an end – in this case, leading readers to believe that Sam and Frodo are meant to be lifemates.

A few fan fiction writers are even less charitable. In Sahari's "No Lie," for instance, Sam actively rejects Rosie in favor of Frodo, implying that a comparison of the two leaves the hobbit lass sorely wanting:

Well, sir, not to insult her, but Rosie's not the one for me. I know she's sweet on me, or leastways she's sweet on my position here as gardener and the stability it gives, but well, she's not into books much, sir, nor her letters. She can't do more than write her name, and she doesn't want more than that. I don't see spending my life with a girl like that. (Sahari)

To highlight Frodo's intellectual and moral virtues, Sahari uses Rosie as a foil, painting her as ignorant, unambitious, unimaginative, and perhaps even duplicitous about her reasons for pursuing Sam in the first place. If Rosie gains given more attention in such works of slash fan fiction, she nonetheless remains a one-dimensional character, unexamined and ultimately dismissed.<sup>6</sup>

Tolkien slash fan fiction writers, like fan fiction authors in general, are predominantly heterosexual women.<sup>7</sup> This fact alone clearly does not guarantee that they will identify or become creatively involved

with characters of the same gender or sexual orientation.<sup>8</sup> Rosie's lessened role in Sam slash stories reflects only part of the larger tale of Tolkien fan fiction, however. While some authors now are setting Rosie Cotton aside, others are actively, enthusiastically searching for her, rescuing her from the shadows, and drawing her into the spotlight.

### **A Reimagined Rose, Part I: The Paragon**

In her essay "Men Are From Gondor, Women Are From Lothlórien," Anwyn (Cynthia L. McNew) urges modern audiences and particularly women readers not to discount the importance of the conventional feminine sphere or the characters who inhabit it in Tolkien's Middle-earth. She argues that Rosie Cotton, Mrs. Cotton, Mrs. Maggot, Goldberry, and Ioreth, the healing-woman of Gondor are no less heroines for performing "'traditional' female roles of healing, nurturing, and homemaking." It is important, Anwyn writes,

that these stout-hearted women were back of the front lines, not whackin' off Nazgûl heads but healing those who came back the worse for wear, filling up stomachs after a hungry night's work of driving off "ruffians," handing out mushrooms, and being the devoted "girl next door" when Sam returns from "chasing Black Men up mountains." What else would the front lines be fighting for if not so that they could return to these comforting souls in peace? (Anwyn)

Though she does not begrudge more visible and inventive characters such as Galadriel their just praise, Anwyn reminds us that those quite literally behind the scenes likewise should be appreciated.

One movement of Rosie Cotton fan fiction is showing this appreciation through stories exploring the skill, patience, and wisdom of Rosie the healer and helpmeet. Determined to prove "The First and Best Fanclub of Samwise Gamgee," BitofEarth.net, correct in its slogan "Rosie: There's a Reason Sam Picked Cotton" (*BitofEarth*), authors seek to celebrate Rosie not as a domestic ideal, but as a capable and clever three-dimensional hobbit, a believable and humble paragon making her world safe for the Fourth Age.

The foundation of this interpretation of Rosie remains her love for Sam. This love extends beyond mere romantic passion to encompass the deep empathy and fierce loyalty that make Rosie a fitting partner for one of Tolkien's most-loved heroes. Victoria Bitter, in her fan fiction story "Reclamation," shows how Rosie's love embodies the healing and promise of the new age: "There would be no mentions of Rings or Orcs or Black anything in their hole. She would give him six hot meals a day, and he would give her the finest garden in all Hobbiton, a garden bursting with roses, and they would have babies. Round, laughing, lovely, bright-eyed babies... something to turn his heart to the future" (Bitter).

This warmth contrasts sharply with the chilling hatred fostered by Sauron and his One Ring, but Victoria Bitter does not stop there: she goes on to note how Rosie's love, so fertile and joyful and productive, provides more than Frodo's affection, a barren and empty offering that moves Sam to tears. After finding Sam comforting Frodo and mourning over him, "Rosie Cotton was determined now, and there were few things that could stand in the way of a Cotton maid with her mind made up. Certainly odd bachelors with dead eyes and mangled hands didn't stand much chance at all. She would marry Sam Gamgee, and she would give him the love he deserved. She would never see him cry again" (Bitter). "Reclamation" ends with Rosie's vow to herself, a promise Tolkien readers know that she fulfills with a lifetime of devotion and care. By making Rosie the first actor, the one who chooses to pursue her future spouse, Victoria Bitter turns the traditional boy-gets-girl motif on its head, crediting Rosie with the restoration of Sam and ultimately the Shire as a whole.

In fan fiction set after her marriage, then, Rosie's wisdom is shown not only through skill in homemaking and mothering, but also in her sensitive support of a husband who had borne both the One Ring and the Ringbearer. In "Last Night at Bag End," Bluesox stresses the importance of Rosie the comfort-giver: "Sometimes Sam had nightmares that made him wake with a gasp, drenched with icy sweat, clutching at her like a drowning man" (Bluesox). Rosie's commitment to her spouse grants Sam the strength to rebuild the Shire and also gives Frodo the courage, ultimately, to leave it. Bluesox has Frodo admit as much to Rosie when he prepares to embark for the Grey Havens: "I do not think,

however, that I would have the courage to leave Sam at all, if I did not know that you would be here to love him. I'm grateful for that"(Bluesox).

Fans project this empathy into Rosie's future, as well. Paradox, in the fan fiction story "Change of Season," describes the knapsack Sam keeps after the quest as a reminder of the War of the Ring. Rosie recognizes his need to remember but not explain that past, and the unspoken understanding they share about it is a telling reflection of the closeness of their partnership. Of the sack, Paradox writes that the hobbit children "teased their father about it, and asked its purpose ... but Sam merely laughed with good humor and ignored their questioning. Only Rosie had noticed the look in his eye, the light that sparked there, but her wise smile in return gave nothing away"(Paradox).

Rosie's commitment to her home and family is one of both head and heart, and her silent acts of support for Sam seem to hold their world together: "Once in a great while Sam would find the bag on the bed, smelling of sweet herbs and fresh air, and knew that its contents had been washed in cool spring water and packed up once again. His darling Rosie had said not a word, but all was understood between them" (Paradox). Rosie helps her husband preserve his precious memories, but her care replaces what time might have turned bitter, leaving only sweetness behind. Here Rosie's success as a healer and helpmeet exceeds the performance of traditional domestic duties; she rises to personal challenges unique to her time, position, and marriage, and meets them with affection and grace.

Some fan fiction in this movement considers Rosie as an able guardian of not one but two Ringbearers as she cares for Frodo at Bag End before his final journey to the Undying Lands. In Hope's "A Familiar Song," for example, a pregnant Rosie soothes an ill Frodo by holding his hand and singing to him at his bedside. At last the ailing hobbit rouses and asks Rosie where she learned her song:

"My mother taught me," she smiled, lilting rhythm creeping even into her spoken words.

"Did she teach you many things?"

"Only the most important. How to cook. How to run a household. How to take care of a husband and family."

"And what songs to sing them." He smiled weakly—or at least she *thought* he tried to smile—a slight twitching at the corner of his mouth. (Hope, "Familiar")

Although Rosie clearly identifies her duty to family, husband, and master in her words to Frodo, she also articulates a strong sense of individualism, as well. She reminds Frodo that "you don't always need another to sing to—you can sing your own song too" ("Familiar"). Her spirit and self-possession act in concert with her healer's work to strengthen Frodo. In the end the master likens himself to Rosie's unborn child, drawing inspiration and sustenance from Rosie's ability to sing her "own song": "Frodo smiled, seeming to grow stronger by the second, his hands still pressed flat and spread over her belly below hers. 'Sing for me, Rose,' he said. 'For us'" ("Familiar"). Who Rosie is, Hope suggests, changes the lives around her as much as what she does.

Baranduin relates a similar tale in "Tell Me." On the anniversary of the destruction of the Ring, Rosie confronts a weakening Frodo about his need to speak about the horrors he faced during his quest. She summons the courage to say what others will not: "You can't get well if you don't tell anyone but that blasted book" (Baranduin). Though he fights her diagnosis, at last he relents and finds at least a temporary healing by recounting his experience. Rosie becomes a confessor figure in the story, taking Frodo's horrors upon herself in order to give him relief from his suffering. Baranduin describes this Rosie as simultaneously practical, wise, and compassionate: "Rosie laughed (it was laugh or cry and she couldn't afford to cry right now) and stroked his cheek, feeling sharp bones under paper thin skin. She said tenderly, 'Tell me your story'" (Baranduin). By learning of Frodo's travails Rosie also enters the exclusive ranks of those few who know the full story of the journey to Mordor, almost certainly the only non-Fellowship hobbit to do so until Frodo's and Sam's memoirs are finally completed a generation later and given to Rosie's daughter Elanor.

Some fan authors believe that Frodo's debilitation after losing the Ring calls for even more dramatic sacrifices from Rosie. Bill the Pony describes Rosie's death in "Forelithe 1482" and the secrets that come to light on that day. Sam explains to Rosie's firstborn—for the purposes of this tale, the child is Frodo Gamgee, not Elanor—how it came to be that

the long-absent Frodo Baggins is in fact his father. Of Rosie and Frodo, Sam says, "Don't go blaming her for such as you don't understand. He was in pain too bad to bear, and I was away—you've read the book, or heard me read from it often enough, and you've heard me tell of how he was, after. Your mother had a kind heart, lad, and though she loved me, she wouldn't stand by and see him suffer. And what's more, she knew I wouldn't, neither"(Bill the Pony). Bill the Pony presents Rosie's past relationship with Frodo as one of comfort and healing, not passion or lust; moreover, Sam approves of Rosie's "kind heart" and the steps it leads her to take during Frodo's worst suffering. As Sam later explains, he loves his would-be son all the more because of the selflessness and compassion his very existence represents.

"Rosie the Paragon" fan fiction explores many diverse elements of Rosie Cotton the healer and helpmeet, but all the stories share one ingredient in common: the hobbit lass they portray is more than an abstract symbol of domestic bliss. Instead, this three-dimensional Rosie cares for a household that is all the more a challenge due to the needs of her recovering hero-husband and her ailing master, and she makes difficult choices and compromises along the way, buoyed by her compassion and courage. Able to put others' concerns before her own without losing her sense of self, this Rosie bridges the chasm between the world she inherited and the world she wants to see, and she changes the landscape around her through the most personal and traditional of strategies, one life at a time.

## **Reimagined Rose, Part II: The Iconoclast**

The catchphrase coined by Linda Partridge of "No Sex Please—We're Hobbits" has drawn its share of criticism (Partridge). Daniel Timmons, for example, ably defends Tolkien's notion of sensual love in Middle-earth in general and the Shire in particular, declaring it "all in its proper perspective" (Timmons 79). In "Hobbit Sex and Sensuality in *The Lord of the Rings*," Timmons acknowledges the powerful bond uniting Sam and Frodo, and furthermore fails to find any evidence "that Sam and Rose could not share comparable 'depths of passion and spiritual intensity'" (78).

Tyellas, however, suggests that today's readers require more than the lack of proof to the contrary: "Tolkien imagined worlds and epics with sex confined to a respectable margin. But the modern audience cannot" (Tyellas). Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that a second movement in Rosie Cotton fan fiction explores Rosie the sensual hobbit, a character devoted to experimentation in both her sexuality and lifestyle. If Rosie the paragon of domesticity excels because she follows traditional patterns so well, then Rosie the iconoclast shines because she goes where few other hobbits dare to tread, especially in the bedroom.

One form of such fan fiction portrays Rosie as an open-minded wife, able to enjoy a satisfying marriage with Sam while also encouraging his separate liaison with Frodo. "Sam's Rose" by jodancingtree, a winner of the 2003 Mithril Awards for Tolkien Fanfiction in the Best Novel/Serial category, includes Rosie's view on both relationships: "This is your season for the Shire, and for me. Later on will be your season to go after Mr. Frodo. You don't have to choose, Sam, you just have to follow the seasons, one after the other" (jodancingtree).<sup>9</sup>

In Epona's "Old Wounds," Sam explains Rosie's agreement regarding simultaneous affairs to a worried Frodo: "'Rosie an' me, we've talked things over,' he tells me. 'From the beginnin'—that is, when we started up together, she and I—she knew that a part of me would always belong to you, Mr. Frodo, just like another part of me will always belong to her.... So if she were to walk in here right now, she wouldn't see anythin' she wasn't expectin' or approvin' of—d'you see?" (Epona). Unlike the slash stories to which they are related, these tales do not depict any absence of passion or love toward Rosie; on the contrary, Sam simply loves Frodo as well as Rosie, and both of his partners prove willing to share him.

This interpretation of Rosie erases the well-worn trope of a woman who tries to change the man she loves and in its place posits a very contemporary sensibility about sexual relationships and nontraditional unions. Telcontar's "Hope Always" provides another window into such views of the permissive Rosie. When Frodo asks Sam if Rosie objects to their trysts, Sam replies, "'She says she loves me, and she knows I love you, and she says that it would be cruel to try to change that. She said...'" At this Sam paused, and his voice was even rougher with emotion when he continued. 'Rosie said she felt right honored"

(Telcontar). Although at first blush such works may seem to diminish Rosie as Sam's one and only mate, it is significant that these stories place Rosie as an equal to Frodo, both in terms of desirability, since Sam apparently cannot choose between them, and empathy, since neither hobbit asks Sam to make the choice.

Another brand of fan fiction in this movement focuses on Rosie as a woman who explores and celebrates her own sexuality. Thia's "In the Hayloft," for instance, shows an adventurous young Rosie who unabashedly initiates sexual play with hobbit lads. After leading an enjoyable romp with Fredegar Bolger, Rosie encounters Sam exiting the barn in a similar state of disarray to her own, and good-naturedly sets him to rights:

Rosie plucked up the courage, went over to him, and brushed the hay out of his hair.

He blinked at her.

"The hay," Rosie said, pleased with how steady her voice sounded.

Sam blushed even more. "You've a bit sticking out of your waist, yourself," he said politely.

She did. (Thia)

This Rosie is a far cry from Sam's virginal future intended; not only is she unapologetically lustful, but also she is conducting her experimentation with someone other than Sam. By comparing Sam's "sowing of wild oats" with Rosie's, Thia subverts the traditional double standard applied to the sexuality of male and female adolescents and surprises the reader in the process. Because the tale ends with the awkward but friendly exchange between Sam and Rosie, a nod to the couple's future as described by Tolkien, the audience can imagine Sam as the fortunate and grateful recipient of Rosie's sexual expertise in years to come.

Andarta Wildheath plays with the inexperienced bride stereotype in "Newly Wed," which describes Rosie's immediate and thorough transformation from blushing innocent to wanton enthusiast upon marriage to Sam. The author leaves little to the reader's imagination—except, perhaps, the secret to Sam's impressive stamina—as Rosie eagerly embraces such concepts as submission, dominance, and oral sex. In the fourth section of the story, aptly named "Fantasies," Rosie articulates her sensual desires to her husband, including a somewhat

exhibitionist scenario of horseback riding and lovemaking, and makes him a promise: "indulge me my fantasies, husband, and you'll never be an unhappy hobbit, nor I an unhappy wife." Sam, in return, thinks to himself, "I've got meself a lusty little Rose" and "silently blessed his good fortune" (Wildheath).

The Rosie of "Newly Wed" is educated—she quotes Elven endearments during intercourse—as well as independent and strong-willed. Once awakened, she is uninhibited and unabashed in her sexuality. Her adventurousness continually takes Sam by surprise, as when she suggests in section eight of the story that the couple invite Frodo for an intimate three-way encounter. She lists the reasons against such a *ménage à trois*, such as the fact that they "Hardly know each other as husband and wife—don't rightly know what will come of such a suggestion—don't even know if Mr. Frodo would feel comfortable enough to accept—shouldna' be livin' in such a sinful situation—what else, Sam, what else?," but comes to the conclusion that "We aren't like other hobbits" (Wildheath). Sam agrees, increasingly choosing to let Rosie be the instigator and leader in their marriage and sexual lives.

Though "Newly Wed" focuses on Rosie's sexuality, her sensual exploits clearly symbolize Rosie's nature as a whole. The fearlessness, joy, and power she reveals in the bedroom offer a larger commentary on Rosie as a character and a heroine. As Sam grows to know and love her better during their first days as newlyweds, he admits: "'My world's not so evil with you in it, me love.... Yer stronger and braver than I ever thought you were. You would have been a fine companion had you gone with us" (Wildheath). Arguably no other compliment could be greater in Middle-earth, especially as it comes from the lips of one of the Ringbearers himself. The same qualities that make Rosie an ideal lover and wife, Andarta Wildheath suggests, would have made her a worthy companion in the Fellowship of the Ring.

Others make Rosie her own hobbit woman in yet another way. "You Can't Choose Who You Love" by wordweaver ends with Frodo and Sam reuniting beyond the sea and Merry Brandybuck and Pippin Took, also a committed gay couple, adopting Rosie's children and raising them like their own. An independent and unencumbered Rosie Cotton then quite literally rides off into the sunset, "my heart pulling me back to my home, but my mind pushing me forward" (wordweaver). After her failed

experiment of traditional marriage and motherhood, she knows the world is hers to recreate as she wishes, though it is not a world without its tradeoffs and compromises.

Perhaps the most unique and interesting phenomenon in Rosie Cotton fan fiction is the development of the “Pretty Good Year” series.<sup>10</sup> Begun by Mary Borsellino after the debut of Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* film in 2001, “Pretty Good Year” follows a polyamorous arrangement between Rosie, Sam, and Frodo over the year following the end of the War of the Ring. In this universe Rosie loves Sam and Frodo and takes both as de facto husbands. Children follow from this union, and friends and neighbors react differently to the alternative lifestyle Bag End represents. At the core of the series is not the sexual experimentation implicit in the three-way marriage, however, but rather Rosie’s daily challenges of raising the next generation, renewing Sam and the Shire, and restoring the health of Frodo. The series dwells to a surprising degree on domestic concerns—the “Rosie the Paragon” movement has tremendous influence here—and emotional conflicts. In the sequel “West of the Moon,” Frodo chooses to stay with his family rather than depart for the Grey Havens, thus permitting the saga to continue.

Mary Borsellino’s productivity with this series is impressive. To date she has penned in the “Pretty Good Year” canon alone one prologue, forty-three stories, and two sequels with their forty-seven related stories. What possibly is even more compelling, however, is the resonance that this Rosie-centric series has found with other fan fiction authors. At the current time, “Pretty Good Year” has spawned sixteen sequel stories by a total of five guest authors and seventeen contemporary stories, one in six parts, by a total of ten guest authors. The sequel “West of the Moon” has inspired thirty-seven contemporary stories by a total of eight guest authors, seventy-nine “next generation” stories by a total of nine guest authors, and six related stories by a total of three guest authors. The sequel “East of the Sun” has led to four contemporary stories by a total of two guest authors. Additionally, the series as a whole also has prompted seventy-seven other related fictional works such as fairytales, poems, and parodies written by a total of eleven guest authors and set in the “Pretty Good Year” universe. The aforementioned works, along with a related visual art gallery and links

to foreign language translations of "Pretty Good Year" material, all exist on the "Pretty Good Year" website.<sup>11</sup> Yet other spin-off works by "Pretty Good Year" fans published online remain uncollected.

At the heart of "Pretty Good Year" is Rosie's unusual and un-Shire-like dismissal of provincial attitudes and behavior. She finds herself facing a reality unlike any she has been trained to meet—a post-quest, post-war world in which the heroes are wounded and uncertain, and the only weapons against ruin are love and life—and therefore she devises new strategies to meet these challenges. Loving two men instead of one and bearing both of their children follow from this approach. In a sense, Rosie is rebelling against the received Shire wisdom that she cannot do or have it all. Though her lifestyle proves far from easy, Rosie accepts the consequences of her choices and creates a strong family unit in the process. In Mary Borsellino's "Pretty Good Year" story "Proper," Rosie most clearly explains her philosophy (and the main theme of "Pretty Good Year"):

"Sam." Rosie said after a short quiet. "When Frodo's stronger, in a few years perhaps, can we go away? Not forever, a year maybe. Just the four of us, and any more babies I have between now and then. I want Elanor to know there's worlds outside of Hobbiton, that this is one way to live but that Big People and Elves and Dwarves all have their own ways too. Then, even if she never leaves the Shire for the rest of her days, at least she'll know what's out there, that she's allowed to live in whatever way make her happiest. That there's nothing wrong with fairy tales, and no such thing as proper." (Borsellino, "Proper")

The series ends with Mary Borsellino's story "East of the Sun," which tells of Rosie's death. In the tale Rosie's daughters Elanor and Goldilocks, or "Elly" and "Goldy," consider the ending Tolkien leaves his readers in *The Lord of the Rings*: an aged Sam following Frodo across the sea, and a deceased Rosie buried in Hobbiton, forever estranged from the other two hobbits of Bag End. Goldilocks despairs at this final exile for her mother, saying, "She's not with them, Elly, not now and never again" (Borsellino, "East").

"East of the Sun" rescues Rosie from this fate, however, and offers her an inexplicable but assured reunion with her loves, her equals, the two Ringbearers. As Elanor tells her sister, "I don't know how I know

it, Goldy, but the story's all played out in my head. My heart knows it, and it's a happily ever after." At Goldy's insistence that "Nobody gets a happily ever after," Elly replies with the following: "Well, this is so close the difference can't be told, anyway. And that's enough" ("East"). Elanor's pronouncement summarizes the series as a whole: though Rosie's world is not ideal, her love and patience and skill make it seem as close to perfect as possible, a fairytale ending to an epic legend.

This Rosie identifies and exercises her right to choose her own destiny, and she often decides to blaze a new trail rather than follow an easier but less challenging direction. In this unapologetic independence she is the equal of her male companions, and quite often their leader. At the end of the day, she has it all and does it all despite the Shire and its conventions. And this accomplishment, it seems, may be the key to the "Rosie the Iconoclast" movement.

### **A Reimagined Rose, Part III: The Supernatural**

Fan fiction author dana-chan ends her Rosie Cotton story "A Crown of Roses" with the following disclaimer: "That's what this is, then. It's a very drastic alternative universe, and a lot of things happen just because I want them to happen. Hope you have no problems with that."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the members of a third movement in Rosie Cotton fan fiction have no problem with that at all. Writers producing this subgenre of fan fiction recognize that the "Rosie the Paragon" and "Rosie the Iconoclast" models make the character exceptional among her peers, sympathetic and inspirational, but in the final analysis just another hobbit lass. Authors in this movement seek to set Rosie apart not by her actions alone, but also by her very nature. They transform her accordingly.

One example rests with the self-proclaimed PVHF, or Pervy Vampire Hobbit Fanciers (a name chosen in tribute to the PHF, or Pervy Hobbit Fanciers, inspired by Cassandra Claire's fan fiction phenomenon "The Very Secret Diaries" [Claire]). "Pervy Vampire Hobbit Fanciers Anonymous" formed as a group in April of 2002 and created an online list and fiction archive.<sup>13</sup> Though initially devoted to the Fellowship hobbits—Frodo, Sam, Merry Brandybuck, and Pippin Took—members of the group became interested in the idea of Rosie Cotton as a fantastical

creature in her own right. As a result, these fans write stories about Rosie Cotton the vampire hobbit.

The mailing list that to date stands more than a hundred participants strong feeds a fan fiction archive that currently includes fifteen discrete adventures of vampire hobbits.<sup>14</sup> Of these, two depict Rosie as a vampire at the time of or immediately following Tolkien's *War of the Ring* (Borsellino, "Dead Flowers," and *Nightbird*). Another tale leads the reader to believe that Rosie will become a vampire upon the arrival home of the undead Sam and Frodo, who discuss a reunion with her (Borsellino, "Sour Cherry Wine") And yet a fourth story depicts an alternative Tolkien universe in which an unnamed female hobbit flees the Shire to hide her vampiric nature and later discovers that the Fellowship hobbits likewise are children of the night; although she is not identified in the story, it takes little imagination on the reader's part to infer that she is the Rosie Cotton who might have been had her life unfolded differently (Meli).

Such stories elevate the importance of Rosie, giving her the same credibility and voice as her more visible hobbit counterparts. For example, in Mary Borsellino's "Dead Flowers," Rosie begins the narrative of her transformation into a vampire by comparing her recent ordeal with Sam's quest: "You're not the only one who had adventures this year, Samwise" (Borsellino, "Dead"). Instead of being the rapt audience for Sam's tale, Borsellino makes Rosie a fellow adventurer with her own story to relate, one as fantastic and inconceivable as the Fellowship hobbit's, though arguably one leaving her with more unique and powerful gifts even than Sam's box and bit of earth.

Likewise, *Nightbird* in her work of fan fiction imagines Rosie as a member of the exclusive "Little Company" that also includes Sam and Frodo. The circle created by her birth as a vampire—a process in which she is complicit—includes Frodo drinking blood from her wrist and Rosie drinking from Sam's, creating a very visual image of Rosie integrally connected to and equal with Tolkien's two male hobbit protagonists. Frodo's satisfied conclusion that "There is nothing that can keep us apart now" extends the "us" to refer to Rosie as much as to Sam (*Nightbird*). Rosie's resulting life as a vampire provides her extraordinary abilities that distinguish her as a character and individual.

The *Anklebiters!* archive for vampire hobbit stories is not the only online site where the supernatural Rosie resides. In 2002, "The One Ring Challenge," a fan fiction competition, began. The organizer called for writers to address "what if" scenarios based on the premise that different Tolkien characters had gained possession of the One Ring before it was destroyed. Authors responded with works featuring a myriad of Middle-earth personalities from Shelob and Thorin Oakenshield to Tom Bombadil and Gríma Wormtongue. Though the initial phase of the challenge ended on October 31, 2002, new submissions by latecomer writers currently are accepted in the online archive.<sup>15</sup>

Of the fan fiction works gathered to date at The One Ring Challenge archive, fully one third focus on hobbits as potential Ring-wielders and would-be Dark Lords. Interestingly enough, authors cast Rosie Cotton in the lead role more often than Merry and just as often as Pippin, Sam, or even Frodo. Considering the amount of exploration Rosie receives in *The Lord of the Rings* text in comparison to the Fellowship hobbits, it is significant indeed that she receives equal attention with them in this contest. The similarities in these The One Ring Challenge treatments of the supernatural Rosie are likewise of interest.

First, these stories agree that Rosie Cotton would remain in the Shire and reside at Bag End if she acquired the One Ring. Her world involves only hobbits, and rule beyond their borders does not interest her. Second, the stories depict a Rosie who, at varying levels depending on the piece of fiction, does not completely appreciate what the One Ring is when she first possesses it. Third, the stories describe how the Ring works upon Rosie in terms of the perversion of the traditional stereotype of the girl next door and domestic hobbit lass; in effect, the authors take the opportunity afforded by The One Ring Challenge to turn the one-dimensional view of Sam's sweetheart and wife upside down.

For instance, Kate Bolin's "...I Thee Wed" shows a Rosie unmoved by the Ring's promises "of power, of control, of shaping the world in my [Rosie's] image," "of death and murder, and blood upon rocks in a land far away." What ultimately seduces Rosie is the pledge that her "children would be powerful and strong and rule the land wise and fair." Yet this seemingly innocent maternal ambition becomes

twisted, estranging Rosie from her husband, breeding worrisome and frightening progeny. The tale ends with Rosie choosing these sons and daughters—whom she calls “my children,” not “our children”—over Sam, repeating to herself the mantra “My children must survive. My children will rule.” What she has done on behalf of her offspring and their destiny has transformed her into a dark tyrant just as the Ring had planned (Bolin).

In her “A Crown of Roses,” dana-chan chooses to play not on the maternal side of Rosie Cotton but on her sexuality and psychology. Rosie becomes physically involved with both Frodo and Sam. Rather than being an exploited victim of inherently unequal power relationships, however, she is in fact the exploiter, using both hobbits, building something of her own personal harem in the bedrooms of Bag End, and abusing both of “her playthings” in subtle, cruel, sometimes violent ways. Her lack of status does not trouble her; she notes that “*she’s* the Mistress and *that* is where the power lies.” Rumors of her unnatural behavior do not concern her either, since “She liked it when they talked about her.” The Ring twists her inherent insecurity and fear of abandonment, at last mocking her irrationality by telling her “She has a good head on her shoulders. She knows what she’s doing.” Her rule is at once both very personal, limited to owning the Ring and “the men she loves most,” and also transcendent, as she “feels the earth, *is* the earth for one fraction of a moment” (dana-chan).

By undermining the images of the dutiful mother, faithful wife, and proper homemaker, fan fiction authors of participating in Pervy Vampire Hobbits Anonymous or The One Ring Challenge question Tolkien’s incomplete portrait of Rosie Cotton and the stereotypes that it spawns. By conjuring dark and disturbing images of Rosie perverted by the will of the One Ring, or of Rosie transformed into a hobbit vampire, these writers suggest that there is more to Rosie Cotton than perhaps meets the eye, and urge their readers to delve deeper into the meaning and the makings of the hobbit lass from the Shire.

## Conclusion: A Blossoming Rose: “Absolutely Essential”

Rosie Cotton inhabits a unique position among Tolkien creations; her critical importance to the very heart of *The Lord of the Rings*’ message is certain, and yet in the canonical texts she remains something of a cipher, a mystery. Many fan fiction authors—whose burgeoning numbers form an active, creative, and significant cultural force, as scholars now recognize—today feel compelled to add the finishing touches to her otherwise incomplete literary portrait, empowering and elaborating upon her character in the process. For a phenomenon less than two years old, twenty-first century Rosie Cotton fan fiction in its diverse movements promises to provide a wealth of literature and thought regarding the hobbit lass from the Shire. With this endeavor fans are involved in the “deciphering and creation of meaning” not only about Rosie Cotton but also, through her, the very nature of the feminine.

The evolution of the Internet as an efficient and economical tool for the dissemination of written works, and the debut of Peter Jackson’s popular *The Lord of the Rings* films as an inspiration for readers both new to and familiar with Tolkien’s books, surely play their role in the current explosion of Rosie Cotton fan fiction. So, too, do the common understandings of twenty-first century feminism that inform the fans’ processes and products, as these authors spotlight a previously underexplored female character and grant her remarkable credit and control in her own narrative. Whether the paragon of the hearth, the iconoclast of the bedroom, or the agent of the supernatural, this newly reimagined Rose reflects contemporary taste for a three-dimensional, complex heroine at center stage. Though the modern lens at times reworks and reroutes aspects of Tolkien’s myth, fandom’s focus on Rosie Cotton remains an homage to the master, as fan author Mary Borsellino explains:

She [Rosie] represents many of Tolkien’s opinions of women, as well as embodying feminine energy at the culmination of an often wholly masculine narrative. She’s the maiden, mother, and crone, and the goddess and the mortal being. Wartime sweetheart and baby-boom parent, guardian and matron of the Shire-Eden. The end of *Return of*

*the King* is, in many ways, the arrival of the Queen. (Borsellino, "Expecting You")

## Notes

This work has benefited from the comments and suggestions of Kathryn N. McDaniel, Larry M. Hall, Karen H. Sturgis, Grace Walker Monk, and Kristi Lee Brobeck. Any remaining errors belong solely to the author. Portions of this work were presented at Mythcon 34 (25 July 2003).

<sup>1</sup> Grace Walker Monk explores the depth and sensitivity of Tolkien's lead female characters through the case study of Éowyn, and in doing so she refutes critics who challenge Tolkien's abilities to portray three-dimensional women, in her analysis entitled "What Should Be."

<sup>2</sup> For an introduction, see websites such as *Nowhere Elaborated: A Rosie Cotton Website Home Page*, *Sam's Rose Homepage*, and *Why Wait Longer? Home Page*.

<sup>3</sup> The printed fanzine *Spocknalia* ushered in the modern era of fan fiction in 1967, and the first slash fan fiction story to be published in a fanzine was Diane Marchant's "A Fragment Out of Time" in 1974's *Grup III*. Slash may predate even Marchant's story, however, as the slash introduction to the story "The Ring of Shoshern" appears to have been in circulation among fans as early as 1969. See Sinclair, Verba.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see information about the Tolkien slash fan convention *Fellowslash* at *Fellowslash Home Page*. Two representative post-film Tolkien slash fanzines are *Inside A Song* (Resch) and *Vilya* (Williams). The Tolkien slash fan fiction archive *The Library of Moria* maintains a useful introduction to Tolkien slash online at <http://www.libraryofmoria.com/links/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Fan fiction authors' names and/or pseudonyms are used here according to each author's preference.

<sup>6</sup> The pattern is not unique; similar slash treatments of unwanted love interests appear with the character of Arwen in Aragorn slash fan fiction, Celeborn in Galadriel slash fan fiction, and others.

<sup>7</sup> For further analysis of "slashers," see Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 185-222; Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 228-254; Verba, *Boldly Writing*, 19-25 and 39-44; Penley, *NASA/Trek*, 100-147; and Cicioni, "Male Pair-Bonds and Female Desire in Fan Slash Writing."

<sup>8</sup> As Brobeck points out in "Does Gender Matter? Women, Tolkien and the Online Fanfiction Community," authors in Tolkien fandom "are hard to categorize": some "write with their gender in mind, and are acutely aware of relating to Tolkien's few, yet integral, women characters. Other writers, however, distinguish their gender as irrelevant to the creative process[...]."

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see *Mithril Awards for Tolkien Fanfiction Home Page*.

<sup>10</sup> *Pretty Good Year Home Page*.

<sup>11</sup> These figures are accurate as of 21 July 2003.

<sup>12</sup> See the disclaimer for dana-chan. "A Crown of Roses."

<sup>13</sup> See *Perov Vampire Hobbit Fanciers Anonymous List Home Page* and *Anklebiters!: Home of the Vampire Hobbits, Fiction Page*.

<sup>14</sup> These figures are accurate as of 21 July 2003.

<sup>15</sup> *The One Ring Challenge Home Page*.

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