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Hobbit Sex and Sensuality in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Refutes critics who see no evidence of mature sexuality in Tolkien's Middle-earth by examining the distinction between sex and sensuality, and by describing depictions of romantic and married love in contrast to matelessness.

Additional Keywords

Sexuality in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Hobbits

Hobbit Sex and Sensuality in *The Lord of the Rings*

Daniel Timmons

SEX and Tolkien might appear to be incompatible topics. A stodgy, waist-coated, married, Catholic, Oxford man does not seem consonant with a sweaty body, writhing hips, and orgasmic exhortation. Although Tolkien was a married man and fathered four children, we likely do not conjure up an image of Tolkien and his wife Edith “doing it.” Moreover, given his era and interests, Tolkien certainly never promoted the “free love” concept, despite his popularity among the hippies of the 1960s. Since no overt or implied sex scenes occur in Tolkien’s work, it is natural to place sexual activity and the Middle-earth tales in discrete compartments. Ironically, though, Tolkien’s presumed sexual attitudes have been the focus of some of the most condemnatory criticism. Edwin Muir, Edmund Wilson, and Philip Toynbee decried the supposed infantile nature of Tolkien’s male characters and their view of women with remarks such as “[they] are boys irretrievably, and will *never* come to puberty” (Muir 11; emphasis added). Even more caustically, Catharine Stimpson has declared that Tolkien displays a “childish,” “nasty,” and “evasive” view of sex (20). Both Stimpson and Brenda Partridge read the Shelob episode as a sadistic and violent sexual battle between the feminine figure, the gross spider, and the masculine, the doughty hobbit Sam. Stimpson heatedly claims: “The scene, which has a narrative energy far greater than its function, oozes a distasteful, vengeful quality as the small, but brave, male figure really gets the enormous, stenching bitch-castrator” (19). If such observations are accepted, Tolkien may have been some sort of closet Marquis de Sade!

Beyond the rather bizarre views, such critics ignore or neglect the clear difference between “sex,” that is, carnal desire and intercourse, and “sensuality,” physical attraction linked with psychological bonding. The former is not emphasized in the romance tradition that Tolkien drew on and developed. Sensuality, though, is a major component of romance, a fact Tolkien knew well, attested to by his writings, such as lectures on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and personal letters. In addition to the obvious love stories in Tolkien’s works, such as the tale of Lúthien and Beren, the author does depict the sensuality of his child-like and seemingly sexless hobbits. The intimations of hobbit procreation, awakening attraction for feminine beauty, and subjugation of romantic desires all indicate that Tolkien had ruminated

on the joys and sorrows of sensuality. The hobbits, far from being immature males with rigid bachelor sensibilities, recognize that “coming of age” is inevitable, desirable, and glorious. The sharp distinction between the situations of Sam and Frodo at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* (*Lord*) dramatizes the wondrous pleasure of being “whole” in a loving and sensual union and the poignant melancholy of being mateless on mortal earth.

Before we look at some instances of hobbit sensual awareness, it would be helpful to explore further the critical case against Tolkien on this subject and briefly note the author’s views. At the outset, I made risqué remarks to offer ironic commentary on the tone and tenor of some discussions of Tolkien’s sexual attitudes. An initial question may be, what is all the fuss? Even if Tolkien were prudish or squeamish about sexual matters, why must we see this as a fault of his work? These modernist or post-modernist critics completely disregard the fact that the vast majority of literature displays no sex! Certainly love and sexual desire have been timeless and enduring themes, but the stark implication or plain depiction of sexual acts in literature is relatively recent. As a work of momentous scope and length, *Lord* still leaves out many things that appear in other works. Yet the critical question should be, does Tolkien’s work operate well in its chief literary features, which are related to genre and personal aesthetics? Scrutinizing a work for what it *lacks* should be a subsidiary concern, at best, and possibly irrelevant. So, the critical lament of Brenda Partridge, “No Sex Please—We’re Hobbits,” although witty, is flawed in its very premise.

Even astute critics who support Tolkien’s work (again, the spiders the chief example) find his depiction of female sexuality disappointing. Debbie Sly claims that in “its curious combination of reticence, rhetoric, and revulsion, Tolkien’s attitude is reminiscent of that of another, more influential, portrayer of femininity, Sigmund Freud” (117). Nick Otty, also harping on the Shelob scene as an indicator of Tolkien’s sexual deviance, maintains that into “this figure Tolkien has poured all the attributes of the female that are so prudishly scoured from Galadriel, Arwen, Éowyn, and even Rose Cotton” (176). Besides the critical invective we may ask, what does Otty want? All these females married for love, had devoted husbands, and bore offspring (presuming Éowyn had children). Why is it “prudish” to avoid depicting their sexual activity, which would be wholly discordant with the nature and tone of Tolkien’s work? (Marion Zimmer Bradley astutely touches on similar themes in her landmark essay, “Men, Halflings, and Hero-Worship.”) The obsession of reading the Shelob episode as a sexually violent encounter, rather than as an

archetypal struggle between human and monster, likely reveals more about the decadent social attitudes of the critics, rather than those of Tolkien. A subtext of the fear of female sexual appeal, as ancient as Homer, may exist in the Shelob scene. But to claim that this is the main or dominant impression is clearly disingenuous or perverse.

Partridge's analysis of the Shelob scene is so outlandish that anyone may be reluctant (or "prudish") to recap her argument. A few selections should suffice. After asserting that Tolkien and C. S. Lewis shared homoerotic feelings, which the relationship between Sam and Frodo exhibits (180-87), Partridge sets out to prove, unlike Muir, Wilson, and Toynbee, that the "claim that *The Lord of the Rings* contains no sex must be strongly refuted" (179). She makes valid points that Shelob might parallel Milton's figure Sin and the literary tradition of heroic battles with monstrous females. However, Partridge displays a weird fascination with these issues and reads a sexual metaphor in every aspect of the Shelob episode. Partridge claims that the "web" or "veil" that Sam and Frodo try to "rent" parallels the tearing of the hymen. When the light of the phial "droops," that signals a wavering of Frodo's virility to overcome the female foe. But then Sam, with his phallic sword, takes on Shelob's "soft squelching body," which Partridge asserts "is a metaphor for the female genitals swollen and moist in sexual arousal" (190). Thus, "Sam and Shelob interlocked climax in an orgasm with the male phallus . . ." (191). Well, I think we all have the picture now. The majority of Tolkien readers, who have read the Shelob episode numerous times, probably never once viewed it as a "violent sexual struggle between a man and a woman" (190). Again, beneath the dark Freudian interpretation (Sly's claim of Tolkien might well describe Partridge), perhaps the text does function in the literary tradition of clashes between man and female monsters, with the attendant sexual innuendos. But why go to such lengths to maintain that Tolkien's sexual attitudes must be misogynic and deviant, when he provides female figures living happily in sensual and sexual unions?

For if Partridge wanted insight into Tolkien's view of sex and women, she need not have imagined a submerged homoeroticism between Tolkien and Lewis (or Sam and Frodo) or sadistic tendencies supposedly in the Shelob episode. She simply could have acquired a copy of Tolkien's letters, looked at the index entry for "women" and "marriage" and discovered lengthy comments on the subject. In a letter to his son Michael, Tolkien directly, expansively, and earnestly discusses relations between men and women—including sex! This letter has so many interesting details and fascinating views that another paper would be required for

a proper analysis. A few selections may serve here. First of all, perhaps a chauvinistic and old-fashioned strain runs throughout Tolkien's comments. This outlook may be hardly surprising given his life and interests, though one may still criticize the attitude. Tolkien claims that "in this fallen world the 'friendship' that should be possible between all human beings, is virtually impossible between a man and woman. The devil is endlessly ingenious, and sex is his favourite subject" (*Letters* 48). Such remarks might be worrisome, though some validity in the claim may come from personal experience. Still, nothing hostile towards women appears in the letter. Quite the contrary, in fact. While Tolkien believes women are "fallen beings," in the Biblical sense, just like men, he states their "sexual impulse" makes them "very sympathetic and understanding" to enter into the interests of life—even if their psychological range is smaller than men. This view is not progressive, to be sure. But a common perspective on the nature of human intellect is that men operate more often at the extremes, while women function in between. Furthermore, Tolkien claims that women are "instinctively, when uncorrupt, monogamous" whereas men *are not* by their "very animal nature" (51). Whether one agrees with Tolkien is not the issue here. It is *men* Tolkien views as potential sexual predators, not *women*, which Stimpson, Otty, and Partridge have claimed.

In this letter, Tolkien exhibits none of the "reticence" or "revulsion" toward female sexuality of which some critics have accused him. His comments implore his son, unlike our "modern" fathers, to resist the urge to be blinded by sexual desire, mistaking it for true "love." Tolkien believes, in a sense, all marriages are "mistakes" because obviously a more suitable mate exists out there, somewhere. However, a person's "'real soul mate' is the one," Tolkien asserts, "you are actually married to" (51). Far from being purely idealistic or subtly disgusted about love and sex in the "real world," Tolkien genuinely tries to find a middle ground:

In such a great inevitable love, often love at first sight, we catch a vision, I suppose, of marriage as it should have been in an unfallen world. In this fallen world we have as our only guides, prudence, wisdom (rare in youth, too late in age), a clean heart, and fidelity of *will*. (52)

The chief purpose of the foregoing discussion was not to promote Tolkien's views. In order to recognize this distinction between sex and sensuality, which is vital to see how Tolkien depicts such matters in his fiction, it is necessary to rebut the negative and even defamatory comments. As well, while we cannot always take an author's own words, even in letters, at face value, clearly Tolkien ruminated

about the complex and tragic nature of sexual relations between men and women. Perhaps his view is too antiquated or orthodox. But today's newspapers constantly cite and lament the sorry state of contemporary sexual mores, including multiple marriages and child abandonment. Tolkien's views, stated long before the "sexual revolution," appear extraordinarily prophetic: "[T]he incurably romantic go on looking even in the squalor of the divorce courts" (49).

So, how do these ideas apply to Tolkien's hobbits? Treebeard affectionately calls them "the Hobbit children, / the laughing-folk, the little people" (*Two Towers* 239). Hobbits may be "child-like" but they do not always act as "children." One of the striking things about how Tolkien describes the hobbits is their earthy and sensual nature. In the "Prologue" to *Lord*, the narrator details their generally peaceful, pastoral, quasi-idyllic lifestyle. They are not "warlike" (though doughty if need be), but rather agrarian (developing farms and vineyards), jolly, good-natured, hospitable, and social. True, they have faults, which both Bilbo and Frodo recognize; hobbits in general tend to be provincial and even parochial. But the image of the hobbits, from their communal ways to passion for food and drink, is sensual, which reflects the pastoral tradition in western literature.

These "little people" are not like magical fairies or leprechauns or the goblins of George MacDonald, or even the talking animals of *The Wind and the Willows*. The Shire history, which began when patriarchs Marco and Blanco Falohide obtained permission to lead a great group of their people (*Fellowship of the Ring* 21), has clear Biblical overtones. The high king at Fornost essentially decreed, "Go forth, be fruitful and multiply." Everything connected with the hobbits exhibits fecundity and growth. They accept hard work (though, naturally, with the normal trait of occasional indolence) in order to reap the bounty of their land, raise families, and establish a community. And so, their very nature is the normal awareness of, and delight in, sensual and fertile unions.

Although Tolkien does not initially give us any scenes of hobbit courtship or "love-making," in the traditional pastoral sense, Otty's petty question, "How do these folk reproduce?" (176) appears willfully blind. Without direct evidence to the contrary, why cannot we assume it is in the good, old fashioned way? (I hesitate to make the hobbit/rabbit link, even though that might support my point.) Bilbo's party exhibits a vivid scene of vibrant folk, children, young people, adults, middle-aged and elderly enjoying the festive occasion, delighting in the sensual pleasures: food, entertainment, good fellowship—like a normal human community. We need not wonder how hobbits "reproduce" or whether they have sex or not, anymore

than we wonder how our own communities experience these matters. Granted, Bilbo might be a “confirmed bachelor” (Otty 176), but as the narrator states, “Bilbo and Frodo were as bachelors very exceptional” because most hobbits had “large families” (*Fellowship* 25). Moreover, Bilbo had become enamoured with a non-productive love: the Ring. Part of the insidious nature of the device is to isolate the individual from his community—which invariably includes females and families. Bilbo’s virtually adopting Frodo as a son proves that even the old hobbit can be a father, despite the Ring’s negative influence, rather than a lonely miser. Frodo, as Bilbo’s heir in more ways than one, recognizes how that “Shadow of the Ring” will affect his communal longings:

“I should like to save the Shire, if I could—though there have been times when I thought the inhabitants too stupid and dull for words[. . .]. But I don’t feel that way now. I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable: I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold, even if my feet cannot stand there again.” (92)

These words do not depict a self-centered male egotist who stands above basic family and communal joys. Indeed, Frodo feels “uprooted” (93)—a very telling choice of word. The responsibility of the Ring has cut off his chance at a kind of growth or fertile union enjoyed by the rest of his hobbit kind.

In the journey of Frodo and his hobbit friends, one of their more subtle experiences is the attraction for the feminine. As the quest begins, and in its early stages, Frodo and his companions do appear to be boyish in their imprudence and certain antics, such as choice of “short cuts” and bath time songs. Pippin and Merry are young in hobbit years, but none of the four has come of age, in the sense of acquiring the maturity to see beyond his own personal desires. But the hobbits quickly learn, as their encounters with Gildor and the elves and the Black Riders exhibit. Along with this growing sense of individual prudence and worldly awareness, the hobbits suddenly encounter an efficacy that they had yet to confront before: the physically attractive female. Tolkien describes their initial reactions to Goldberry in clearly sensual terms:

The hobbits looked at her in wonder; and she looked at each of them and smiled. “Fair lady Goldberry!” said Frodo at last, feeling *his heart moved with a joy that he did not understand*. He stood as he had at times stood enchanted by fair elven-voices; but *the spell that was now laid upon him was different: less keen and lofty was the delight, but deeper and nearer to mortal heart; marvellous and yet not strange*. “Fair lady Goldberry!” he said again.

“Now the joy that was hidden in the songs we heard is made plain to me.” [. . .] Suddenly he stopped and stammered, overcome with surprise to hear himself say such things. (171; emphasis added)

This scene may reflect the awakening of the male adolescent desire for the feminine. All the words resonate with the sudden and arresting “first love” that most everyone has experienced. Though linked with physical desire, this feeling transcends mere animalistic instinct. As Tolkien wrote to his son, such scenes are that “vision” of love in an unfallen world. Many critics have seen Bombadil as an Adam figure, whom Glorfindel says was the “First” (348). Goldberry may be like a pre-fallen Eve, and their realm a kind of edenic biosphere. But such associations are not necessary to see the point. The “joy” Frodo “does not understand” but that is still close to his “mortal heart,” “marvellous and yet not strange,” may be sensual desire for feminine love—without the perilous sexual drive that corrupted heroes such as David, Jason, and Lancelot.

When critics, such as Muir and Partridge, read this Goldberry scene and still miss the sensual implications, they again exhibit willful blindness. If Frodo were a prepubescent individual, who thinks females are annoying or have “cooties,” why does Goldberry move him in this manner? Curiously, Partridge also quotes this very scene, yet dismisses it completely, claiming Goldberry is merely a hybrid of the archetypal “distant” female and ordinary housewife (192-93). Tom and Goldberry appear to have traditional roles as far as home duties go, given the era of Tolkien’s world. But the hobbits’ reaction to her is more significant than Goldberry as a non-feminist. As they are about to continue their journey, the hobbits are distressed that they have not bid farewell to Goldberry. Again, her effect on them goes beyond mere politeness to a hostess or maternal figure: “They hastened up the last slope, and stood breathless beside her. [. . .] Goldberry spoke to them and recalled their eyes and thoughts. [. . .] But Frodo found no words to answer” (186). Anyone can play the Brenda Partridge game and read adulterous longings in the hobbits’ reaction, seeing sexual metaphors “hastening up the slope,” becoming “breathless,” and then leaving without a word. But there is no need. Clearly, Tolkien displays an awareness of feminine attractiveness, which reveals the hobbits’ growing maturity.

Other instances exhibit a similar sensual essence in the Goldberry encounter. When Frodo first beholds Arwen in Rivendell, a passionate reaction again appears: “Such loveliness in living thing Frodo had never seen before nor imagined in his

mind" (298). Although Gildor and Elrond inspire reverence in Frodo, his reaction to Arwen displays a clear physical and psychological attraction. After Frodo listens to Bilbo's song about Eärendil, Frodo beholds Arwen in the company of Aragorn and is profoundly moved once more: "[T]he light of her eyes fell on him from afar and pierced his heart" (311). As the Ring-bearer, perhaps Frodo knows, deep down, such love and contentment with a female, which he recognizes in the eyes of Aragorn for Arwen, will never be his own.

The hobbits' encounters with other lovely females also display their developing sensual awareness. In Lórien, they feel the power of Galadriel's intuition and beauty, which unsettles the conservative Sam: "I felt like as if I hadn't got nothing on, and I didn't like it" (464). Frodo's initial reaction to Galadriel is also telling: "[W]hatever came into my mind then I will keep to myself" (465). As "soul-mates," Frodo and Galadriel appear to be a good match: both bear the burden of great responsibility, both understand the attraction and dangers of the Ring, and both wish their homelands to remain as they are. Along with Gimli, Frodo, like a love-struck young man, eats and drinks little at the farewell dinner, "heeding only the beauty of the Lady and her voice" (485). Notice how Tolkien did not write "Galadriel" but "*the Lady*." These instances, as well as the battle scene with Merry and Éowyn (e.g. *Two Towers* 137) or the last meeting of Frodo and Arwen (*Return of the King* 306), exemplify the difference between sex—carnal desire—and sensuality—feminine attraction. The hobbits, like young men gradually maturing, experience sensuality's intoxicating joy and piercing sorrow.

Finally, one of Sam's more noble acts during *Lord* is to subjugate his personal desires to aid Frodo and complete the quest to destroy the Ring. Such sacrifices include, though it has not been emphasized in much commentary on Sam, his desire for a loving union with Rose Cotton. (Again, Bradley's fine discussion is a notable exception.) Unlike some medieval heroes, Sam goes on a quest not for his *lady*, but for the good of his *world*. Although Sam's love for Rose Cotton is not mentioned in the *Fellowship* and *Two Towers*, from the early drafts of *Return* it appears Tolkien always intended to write in a love interest and mate for Sam—and not for Frodo. Critics may feel Tolkien should have developed the Rose subplot more, but Sam's thoughts do stray to her, albeit obliquely, in the darkest moments of their journey to Mount Doom, not unlike a destitute knight (*Return* 253). Although Tolkien might have simply tacked on a love interest for Sam to create some kind of fairy-tale closure, Sam's focus on Frodo and the quest, to exclusion of all other concerns, reflects his vows from the start to "complete a job" (*Fellowship*

33), returning home with Frodo or not at all. The temptations that Sam experiences include the desire to abandon the quest and fulfill personal wishes. In true heroic fashion, Sam acts selflessly and completes the momentous task.

Although Partridge claims that the bond between Sam and Rose “will never reach the depths of passion and spiritual intensity of the relationship of Sam and Frodo” (187), critical obtuseness again appears evident. As Ring-bearers, Sam and Frodo share a bond that perhaps only Bilbo and Gollum can also understand. As well, the support, companionship, and love that Sam and Frodo shared on the quest are hard to match. But where is Partridge’s evidence that Sam and Rose could not share comparable “depths of passion and spiritual intensity?” The appendix account details that Sam and Rose had beautiful children, were honoured by the King, and lived happily in Hobbiton until her death (*Return* 475-76). Only after this sad event did Sam, as a former Ring-bearer, leave Middle-earth for the Blessed Realm. Everything points to Sam’s loving and “spiritual” devotion to his wife.

Furthermore, the one who recognizes this potential in Sam and earnestly supports it is his other “soul-mate”: Frodo. The reason critics like Partridge make all or nothing statements about relationships between men and women is because they do not distinguish between the spiritual bond between two males and the romantic love between a male and a female. Again, they conflate “sex” and “sensuality.” Sam and Frodo have shared a unique bond and perhaps wish it could go on forever. At the end, Sam feels “torn in two” because he would like to stay by Frodo’s side but at the same time he desires to remain in the Shire with his wife and family. Frodo tells Sam “you will be healed,” and “[y]ou were meant to be solid and whole, and you will be” (373). Frodo’s poignant parting words to Sam invoke the joy and unity of having a spouse and children. Frodo may long for these ordinary, yet glorious, mortal blessings too. But it was not meant to be. He says, “[i]t must often be so Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them” (376). No depicted or implied rivalry exists between Frodo and Rose for the love of Sam. Each share a “spiritual” bond, sensual in certain respects, but of a different order and distinctive nature. As Frodo bids farewell to Sam, Merry, and Pippin, he leaves behind not only dear companions and loving friends, but mature males who will go on to marry, raise families, and solidify their communities. One of Frodo’s wounds from his experiences, a sort of metaphorical castration, is that he will never experience such joys available to mortals in Middle-earth.

In the end, readers are unlikely to lament Frodo's fate because he never had a wife or child. No doubt he received healing in the Blessed Realm and, eventually, may have been reunited with Sam. The crucial point is that Tolkien ends his great epic not with a battle won, or heroes celebrating, or a nation cheering. After all the arduous and magnificent deeds of Sam, he relishes not in the accolades achieved nor the honors bestowed. Similar to Ulysses, Sam returns home to his wife. His daughter is placed in his lap and he says, "Well, I'm back" (378). Far from being prudish, squeamish, or deviant about sexual matters, Tolkien has it all in proper perspective. It may be hard to see in a modern or post-modern society that matters of honor, decency, abstinence, and fidelity can still resonate powerfully with readers, while real sexual deviance blights life and literature. As Tolkien has said, if we can catch a "glimpse" of that "vision" of sensual love that stands apart from sexual depravity then perhaps our personal relationships can be fruitful and long-lasting. But one thing appears all too clear: the path of "free love" or heedless lust leads to degradation and despair. Is that what Tolkien's detractors would have us choose?

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