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## Friendship and Hierarchy in Tolkien and Lewis

by Grace Tiffany

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In many friendships between pairs of fictional characters in the fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, the authors lay stress on a status difference—on one friend's superiority in some prior way, that is, arising out of and implicit in his formal role as master, king, lord, or husband. Yet in most cases this hierarchical difference becomes blurred for readers, who see the pair of friends functioning in the story as moral and intellectual equals or, in more than one case, the underling surpassing his or her "superior" in either intellect, moral caliber, or both. Is either Tolkien or Lewis, then, critiquing "degree"—the hierarchical friendship model—as inadequate to contain the energies, affections, and purpose of genuine friendship?

Well—not really. In fact, both authors' commitment to a status system ordering human relationships is rooted in the poetic traditions of Anglo-Saxon epic and late-medieval chivalric romance, and those roots remain, challenged but not undercut by the more modern portrayals of friendship that also emerge in the fictions. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien manages to have it two ways, taking his Shire characters on a medieval adventure where at least two of them exchange the roles of friend-equals for the more hallowed mythic identities of friend-retainers. But the adventure is temporary, bounded by the border between the fairytale domain of elves and dwarves and the more modern land of the hobbits, and left behind upon the "halflings" return home. By the end of the last book, they are masterless hobbits, back in a Shire that is so latter-day in comparison to the rest of Middle Earth that we almost expect Toad to come rattling past Bag End in a motorcar. Here, friends stand on a more or less equal social footing.

C. S. Lewis undertakes the more difficult task of justifying asymmetrical friendship even outside the medievaesque bounds of

his Narnia, in the modern world. He does this even while showing and directly addressing the friends' paradoxical moral and intellectual equality, or even sometimes the superiority of the formal inferior. His prose and his adult fiction provide a rationale for such hierarchical friendship, arguing the importance even among friends of play-acting the roles of superior and inferior. What is most difficult and (to be blunt) annoying for most modern Lewis enthusiasts is his arguments' indebtedness to a classical/medieval view of the sexes, wherein women in those rare male-female friendships are, despite their apparent equality, divinely designated for roles of subservience. Unlike Tolkien, Lewis explicitly argues the validity of such unequal friendships outside the realm of Faerie, where they are less easily accepted by readers. He is brave—though not necessarily successful.

As medievalists, both Tolkien and Lewis were familiar with but departed significantly from the classic Aristotelian teaching that true friendship, or *philia*, is impossible between those of unequal social status. While in his *Ethics* Aristotle defines “complete friendship” as a shared love of the good (Book 8, 159b15), he sees such friendship as possible only between social equals. Thus complete friendship is distinct from the unequal friendship “that corresponds to superiority, e.g. of a father towards his son, and . . . of an older person towards a younger, of a man towards a woman, and of any sort of ruler towards the one he rules” (Book 9, 1158b5). To Aristotle such friendships are unbalanced, in that the inferior friend has more to gain from the friendship than does the superior. “Each does not get the same thing from the other” (1158b5).

As a relation bounded by a pair's social or family connection and mutually focused one on the other, “unequal” friendship in Aristotle differs from asymmetrical friendship in the epic and romance traditions so important to Tolkien and Lewis. For both “unequal” and “equal” friendships in Anglo-Saxon and later medieval literature are not about the friends themselves but about something outside them both: a mutually accepted moral code, a spiritual endeavor, an interest, a quest. The lost lord lamented by the Wanderer in the Anglo-Saxon poem is his “gold-wine,” or “gold-friend” (line 23), in a connection valued not just for the rewards given by lord to thane, but for the honorable behavior which elicits the reward, a mode of living which friendship with his “lord of rings” inspires. In Arthurian romance the bond between king and knight involves a commitment on both sides to the Chivalric Code, which orients each “friend” towards Christian virtue, indeed towards Christ himself. The knight's duty is thus not

only to serve his lord but—according to an ethic which Sir Philip Sidney would call “*architectonike*” (940), the structuring of all one’s actions toward a virtuous goal—to serve truth, justice, charity, and humility. Thus Sir Gawain’s shame at having imperfectly fulfilled his obligation to King Arthur when he contended with the Green Knight in the king’s stead is that he, Gawain, was “tainted by untruth” during the ordeal, even though Arthur himself finds the knight’s duty perfectly discharged (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 1. 2509).

The model for such hierarchical medieval friendship, in which an inferior is bound in love to his superior by the service of both to a greater good, is Christ’s bond with his disciples, whom Christ called *filia*, his friends. Christ’s followers are friends rather than servants in that they share with Christ the higher spiritual reality—the knowledge of God—that calls forth their service. “Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you” (John 16:15).

Lewis’s embrace of this notion of friendship is famously articulated in his “Friendship” chapter in *The Four Loves*, where he writes, “the very condition of having friends is that we should want something else. . . . Friendship must be about something” (66-67). While Aristotle used the phrase “fellow voyagers” to describe one species of incomplete friends—those whose connection is bounded by the extent of a physical journey—Lewis and Tolkien saw the voyage or journey as the medium and metaphor for profound friendships that cut across social or domestic ranks. Friends who journey together in the service of something more important than their private interests are what Lewis calls “fellow travelers” (*The Four Loves*, 67). It’s true that Tolkien finds the journey itself more romantic than does Lewis (who, in *The Great Divorce*, makes fun of the idea that “travel[ing] hopefully” is better than actually reaching one’s destination [40]). The hobbit friends in *The Lord of the Rings* begin with a level of friendship that seems to celebrate journeying, and the mere pleasure of road companionship, for its own sake. “*The Road goes ever on and on,*” Frodo sings early on in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (with a capital “R” for “Road”). He adds, “Bilbo . . . used often to say there was only one Road; that it was like a great river; its springs were at every doorstep” (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, 110).

But soon enough the Road unites the hobbits and the rest of their fellowship in a purposeful journey toward a destination (Mordor) and a defined heroic action (the unmaking of the ring)—and friendship is

sealed in common purpose. In *The Lord of the Rings*, friendship is *about* redeeming Middle Earth from darkness by defeating Sauron. Likewise, in Lewis's Narnia Chronicles, the English children's friendship is *about* reaching Narnia and, finally, knowing Aslan. Among all groups of friends in these works, the assumption of hierarchically distinct roles is necessary to and, in fact, prompted by the larger moral purpose that calls forth the friendship.

In Tolkien, two friendships involving hobbits illustrate this point. The first and most obvious is that of Frodo and Sam. In the Shire, Sam is a hired gardener—he “work[s] for” Mr. Baggins—whose service to Frodo on the ring-quest is directly precipitated by his devotion, not to his employer, but to the elvish world of Faerie in which he discovers Frodo is involved. Caught covertly listening to Gandalf's and Frodo's entrancing discussion of a struggle between good elves and evil orcs well beyond the ordinary Shire, he is chosen by Gandalf to be Frodo's companion. Gandalf chooses Sam because Sam loves elves. “Couldn't you take me to see Elves, sir, when you go?” (*Fellowship*, 98). But on the road, and especially near its end, their friendship—begun by a longing for an otherworld which Frodo, in fact, does *not* exactly share—matures into a shared commitment to fulfill the quest of destroying the ring. That this commitment underlies the friendship rather than the other way around is clear from Sam's assumption of the burden of the quest when he thinks Frodo lies dead in Shelob's lair. Once he's discovered that Frodo is in fact alive, he fights his way back to him, serving him in the manner of a medieval retainer so that they may return to the task as a pair. In this and after this, the pair seem well balanced in terms of virtue.

Frodo surpasses Sam in charity, pitying Sméagol, who follows them, even while Sam treats Sméagol with utter hostility. Yet Sam shows exceeding love and care to Frodo as well as singleness of moral purpose, while Frodo, at the last moment, tries to acquire for himself the ring's power and is saved from doing so only by poor Sméagol's biting teeth. In Mordor, at least as often as Frodo, Sam has been the pair's leader. Yet the ring's destruction, when it is finally complete, is marked not by a gesture suggestive of the pair's equal partnership, like an embrace, but by this: “Master!’ cried Sam, and fell upon his knees” (*The Return of the King*, 276). This reverential action seals them in the roles of master and servant—or perhaps it is more fitting to say, lord and thane.

Sam's assumption of the role of thane to Frodo's lord is a mythic enhancement and deepening of their old relationship of employer and

hired help back in the Shire. But *The Lord of the Rings* offers a second instance of the thane-lord friendship which grows entirely from the “heroic adventure” conditions of the hobbits’ journey, and which ends, like a dream, with that adventure’s completion. That is the feudal bond between Merry and King Théoden.

In *The Return of the King*, Merry adopts heroic language to “lay the sword of Meriadoc of the Shire” on Théoden’s lap, and is made by the king “esquire of Rohan of the household of Meduseld” (59). What might be called the adventure-temporary nature of this otherwise lifelong *comitatus* commitment is signaled by Théoden’s verbal response to Merry’s pledge: their bond will endure “for a little while” (59). During this while, their connection transforms Merry from exotic traveler to sworn subject. At the Pelennor Fields, dazed, wounded, and afraid, he reminds himself that he is “King’s man! King’s man!” Dutifully remaining by his master’s side amid the tumult of battle, he discharges his duty by stabbing the monster who slays his gold-friend. He is Wiglaf to Théoden’s Beowulf—or, more accurately, an assistant or sub-thane to Éowyn’s Wiglaf. Merry has served as something like a squire to “Dernhelm”—who is, of course, Éowyn in disguise—and as Éowyn deals the Chief Ringwraith his chief death-blow, avenging the death of *her* lord and kinsman, Merry assists them both from below. The three friends, separate in status, are united in duty—in the great, compelling task of quelling the monster, an act which is part of the still larger goal of destroying the ring.

Like that of Sam, Merry’s service to the goal that united the Fellowship of the Ring has issued directly from his performance of the role of social inferior in a hierarchical bond that joins thane, a higher “thane” (Éowyn), and a king. Yet for both Sam and Merry, the relation smacks of the fantastic, the imaginary, the heroic—the adventure-temporary. After Théoden’s death, Merry (of course) seeks out no second lord to serve but goes back to hanging out with Pippin, another masterless hobbit. The two buddies return home, and eventually become the dudes of the Shire. “The two young Travellers cut a great dash . . . with their songs and their tales and their finery, and their wonderful parties” (*The Return of the King*, 377). As for Sam, though he remains subservient to “Mr. Frodo,” the heroic quality of the pair’s friendship dwindles and dissipates upon their return to their home country of clocks and umbrellas. In the Shire Frodo is not lord or master but deputy mayor, and Sam, with his eventual family, is Frodo’s helpful housemate. In Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, profoundly hierarchical friendship is the stuff of heroic and temporary adventure.

It arises out of extraordinary conditions that compel characters' dangerous commitment to a virtuous quest, and with the quest it ends.

Unlike Tolkien, C. S. Lewis presents and defends hierarchical friendship in normal everyday life. This is so in both his children's and adult fiction as well as in his prose writings. This isn't to say that in Lewis, hierarchical friendship is the only or even the most important kind. But Lewis's belief in a neo-platonic universe, in which all things are ranked according to their proximity to God, leads him to justify the maintenance of hierarchy in bonds between certain kinds of friends. In the Narnia books, the younger children defer to and are led by Peter, their elder, and by Susan (until Susan goes bad). Even when Lucy proves privy to knowledge and wisdom which the others don't see, their blindness is accounted by the elders a failure of leadership. "I apologize for not believing you," Peter says humbly at once, when the group first finds itself in Narnia. Then Peter proceeds to take charge of their adventure (they'll "go and explore the wood, of course" [*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, 51] ). Such unequal roles in friendship between older and younger—between more and less experienced—children are so natural and practical that Lewis nowhere bothers to defend them and (I would venture to say) readers don't especially mark them. And Lewis sidesteps the whole troublesome question of gender and rank among the Pevensy children by making the eldest child male. Yet elsewhere he justifies the hierarchical distinction between males and females purely on the basis of sex difference, specifically when he discusses husbands' lordship over wives. In doing so, he invokes terms drawn not just from Ephesians but from art.

In *The Four Loves*, Lewis defines friendship, we recall, as "fellow voyag[ing]," as well as a bond based on "common interest" (61); in the same chapter he also acknowledges that one can marry one's friend (67), although his subsequent description of most women's ignorance [73] suggests that the odds for doing this aren't good. Still, Lewis's infamous complaint that in his own contemporary society, due to their disparate educations, "The women are to [men] as children are to adults" (73) at least argues no natural intellectual inferiority in women. Hence, in order to explain and uphold the Biblical teaching that wives must "submit [them]selves to [their] husbands, as unto the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22), must, like Tolkien, find justification in fiction or fantasy. Unlike Tolkien, however, Lewis finds the roles afforded by fantasy to be permanently or at least recurrently sustainable, even in our workaday lives, since they require and enable us to participate in the deep metaphysical reality to which fiction gives access.

Hence to Lewis, heterosexual sex is (among other things) a “human participation . . . in the marriage of Sky-Father and Earth-Mother” (*The Four Loves*, 98). He imagines feminine sexual submission in terms drawn from poetry, drama, and opera. Love between marital friends is a “mystery play or ritual” (103), and lovers may “sing like Papageno and Papagena” (99). Erotic behavior contains “sub-plot and antimasque” as well as serious poetry (102). Thus men and women play unequal but complementary roles in erotic relationship. The roles are not ultimately false, as they connect the human partners to a real spirit world which Lewis sees as containing masculine and feminine energies, complementary “natural forces of life and fertility” (98). In his science fiction trilogy, Lewis imagines not just earth but the non-human cosmos as masculine, like Mars (Malacandra), or feminine, like Venus (Perelandra). (That in observable nature the male is frequently dominated by the female seems to have escaped Lewis’s notice!)

But what about the other parts of marriage? Are the roles of submission and mastership called forth by *filia* as well as by *eros*? Indeed, Lewis’s fiction if not his prose suggests this extension. In *That Hideous Strength*, the highly educated Jane Studdock begins to see that the “invasion of her own being in marriage” is in fact “the lowest, the first, and the easiest form of some shocking contact with reality” (312). Her teacher Ransom agrees, telling her the souls of women who choose to live independently, apart from men, must still “meet something far more masculine, higher up, to which they must make a yet deeper surrender” (312). God is masculine. Jane’s return (after an estrangement) and her submission to her partner and potential friend, her husband Mark, is an aspect of her Christian conversion, which is a necessary submission to something larger and “so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it” (313). No equal partner, the feminine is fundamentally, transcendently, and naturally inferior to the masculine. It follows that in all areas of marital friendship, wifely submission to masculine leadership, though a kind of courtly game, is also a serious spiritual requirement.

The puzzlement Lewis felt regarding the experience of intellectual friendship with women—his difficulty, given his reverence for scripture and for myth, in according the egalitarian status he found in friendships with males to heterogenous or co-ed friend-relationships—is evident in his fiction. In *The Magician’s Nephew*, Lewis simply plucks a cabbie and his wife from turn-of-the-century London—a town presumably full of troublesome suffragettes—and deposits the pair in the medievaesque fantasy world of Narnia, where different gender

statuses obtain—or are being created. Aslan asks the cabbie, not the wife, if they are willing to be the Adam and Eve of this world, and though the cabbie does ask his spouse for some confirmation of his acquiescence (“I’d do my best, wouldn’t we, Nellie?”), her voice in answer is never heard (139). Her agreement is apparently not required, any more than is Eve’s in *Paradise Lost*. (Actually, it is considerably less required than is Eve’s in *Paradise Lost*.)

The realistic setting of Lewis’s adult novel *That Hideous Strength* offers its author no easy recourse to the social or domestic hierarchies of myth or fairytale—despite Lewis’s subtling the book “A Modern Fairytale for Grownups”—and in this story Lewis clearly struggles explicitly to justify the Christian requirement of wifely submission among even intellectually equal marriage partners—that is, between spouses who are or may be friends as well as lovers. Jane Studdock quite reasonably wonders, “Supposing all those people who . . . had infuriatingly found her sweet and fresh when she wanted them to find her also interesting and important, had all along been simply right and perceived the sort of thing she was? . . . For one moment she had a ridiculous and scorching vision of a world in which God Himself would never understand, never take her with full seriousness” (315). Rather than an intellectual resolution to this worried thought, Jane receives, right after she thinks it, a vague “religious experience” which at least temporarily quells her doubts (316).

We readers haven’t had the religious experience, so our doubts remain. Lewis allows them to do so. *Lewis* takes Jane seriously. He himself has failed to resolve, in this novel, the question of why men’s female intellectual equals should not assume the practical status of equal friends in a marital partnership. Still, he deserves credit for so clearly understanding, articulating, and sympathizing with the obvious feminine objection. Despite his infamous impatience with women who get in the way of masculine friendships, he proves genuinely more interested than Tolkien in literary explorations of friendship *between* the sexes.

It’s not my intent here to investigate the complicated connections between Lewis’s fictional male-female friendships and those he entertained in his own life. It is worthwhile, however, to note that he found his views on the nearer resemblance to Godhood of masculinity roundly challenged when he finally did marry his friend. George M. Marsden suggests that had Lewis lived longer, his views on the essential differences between men and women would have continued to evolve. I think such evolution would have been the

likelier result of Joy Davidman's living longer. It was while he was forming an intimate friendship with her that he created what Andrew Lazo right calls his "most complex character" (142), Orual, the first-person narrator of *Till We Have Faces* (published in 1956). Perhaps Davidman's society provoked Lewis's observation, made to a friend in 1956, that he actually didn't like either the "ultra-feminine" or the "ultra-masculine," but preferred "people" (quoted in Lazo, 142). Unless Lewis was saying he preferred people to God—though this is possible—the comment suggests a somewhat modified view of the deity, as no longer strictly gendered. It is wonderful to consider Lewis's experience of friendship with women—or at least with one woman—expanding his understanding of the fuller nature of the ultimate Person and Friend.

A passage in one of Lewis's letters reveals him in one such possibly transformational moment. In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis records that Joy Davidman disliked his congratulating her on her masculine qualities by asking him how he would like it if she complimented him on his feminine ones. Her reply, which gave him pause, offered a view of gender differences as fundamentally complementary *and* existing on the same plane of value. On the surface Davidman's comment seemed to denigrate "feminine qualities" in comparison to masculine ones—surely Lewis wouldn't want to be called feminine!—and perhaps that is how he took it. But her comment suggests that the word "masculine" is no less insulting when inappropriately applied. In defending her femininity, it isn't likely, given what we know of Joy Davidman, that she was claiming only the attributes Lewis associated, mythically, with women: sweetness and acquiescence as opposed to interestingness and intellectual rigor. She seems rather to have been resisting the artificial gendering of any of these human qualities. Lewis's great friendship with Davidman demonstrated the truth of his earlier observation: in the end, the "ultra-masculine" and "ultra-feminine" are more abstract, less real, than the friend beside you.

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